

Haiti Seen Through My Lens

A photo essay exploring the beauty and complexity in my backyard

Most days, I spend my time crunching numbers and staring at an Excel spreadsheet as the project manager for Partners In Health's CDC/PEPFAR grant in Haiti, my home country. I spend half of my time in the capital of Port-au-Prince and the other half traveling throughout the country to check on the progress of HIV and tuberculosis work supported by *Zanmi Lasante*, as PIH is known locally.

I grew up in a privileged community in the urban, upper middle class neighborhood of Petion-Ville, along the eastern hills bordering Port-au-Prince. But I've come to know rural Haiti more intimately over the course of my five years working with PIH. In my free time, I slip away to document the beauty and complexity of my home country as an amateur photographer.

The following selection of images are aesthetically pleasing, but they also hold deeper meaning about socioeconomic struggle, well-intentioned foreign aid gone astray, and the fluidity and arbitrary nature of borders. These images reveal slices of everyday life in Haiti that most outside observers, I'd wager, have never seen. Welcome to Haiti.



The “Jalouzi” slum surrounding the commune of Petion-Ville, known as the “Beverly Hills” of Port-au-Prince. This picture shows the total disregard for proper building codes, as each one of these houses is at risk of damage and collapse in the event of another earthquake. Also, as part of a wider campaign for attracting tourists, the previous government had many of the houses on the left painted, mostly without their authorization. The houses on the right popped up within the past seven years and remain unpainted. They reflect the rapid migration of Haitians from rural to urban centers as people look for employment and a better way of life. Notice the larger houses higher up the hill looking down on the poorly constructed homes.



Known as the “pleasure” city, St. Marc is home to many young people and has become a hotspot for HIV infection. After the earthquake, the city saw a rise in its population, either from Haitians fleeing the capital’s congested streets or from people living in rural areas seeking the nearest urban center to do commerce. This rise in urbanization has resulted in the construction of new brick and mortar convenience stores, or “boutiks,” that don’t adhere to proper building codes. Above, one such boutik shows graffiti the local government uses to mark buildings for demolition.



A man from the Dominican Republic watches in the distance as food is grilled over a fire pit in Belladere, a community where PIH works near the border between Haiti and the Dominican Republic. Haitian and Dominican border patrol officers also await nearby. Tensions have been rising between the two countries over immigration following a 2013 Dominican court ruling stripped more than 200,000 Dominicans of Haitian descent of their citizenship.



This rubble in Savanette is all that remains of what Haitians call a “white elephant” project, whereby the government engages on a project only to abandon it before it is finished. After the earthquake, such projects were ubiquitous in Haiti (including in the health sector) because of the large amount of donor funding channeled into the country. This was meant to be a professional development center, but is now mostly frequented by cattle.



Manoushka (seated, right) with her three daughters: Cidor (from left, 5 years old), Cassandra (center, 1 1/2 years old), and Manoushka (right, 7 years old). They are visiting PIH's clinic in LasCahobas for Cassandra's follow-up malnutrition appointment. Chronic malnutrition is rampant in Haiti, where half of the rural population has suffered some form of food insecurity.



Soccer is a powerful unifier. Whether an impromptu game or a World Cup match watched by millions across the globe, soccer creates a sense of solidarity that transcends race, gender, and socioeconomic boundaries. This field sits directly across from the PIH-supported Hospital Sainte Therese in Hinche and is multipurpose. During the day, it serves as the landing strip for small airplanes arriving in Hinche and as a space for raising cattle; in the afternoon, it changes into a huge soccer field with multiple games going on simultaneously.



Dr. Charles Patrick Almazor (right), PIH's former director of clinical programs in Haiti, prepares the LasCahobas monitoring and evaluation team for a visit from funders. Because of the clinic's proximity to the Dominican Republic, many HIV-positive patients on treatment who start feeling better cross the border in search of a better life. This migration of Haitians to the Dominican Republic (and more recently to Chile) poses significant challenges from a program management perspective. Most of them return to the clinic for treatment, because they start getting sick again, have been discriminated against abroad, or cannot find work in another country.



On off hours, colleagues got together to relax and enjoy the local beer, Prestige, at La Saveur in Mirebalais the week before Christmas. This very popular restaurant, despite using decorations, adornments, and attractive lights to lure customers, was relatively empty. Business was so bad, during a normally busy holiday season, that the owner kept the generator off to save fuel and only turned it on once he saw customers coming. This is a testament to the difficulties faced by local businesses in small cities and the declining purchasing power of Haitians outside of the capital. The majority of all formal economic activity remains concentrated in Port-au-Prince.



Battery-powered Haitian roulette near Hotel de la Place in Jacmel. Gambling and lotteries are extremely popular in Haiti and have become more so since the 2010 earthquake.



A young boy taking part in Kanaval celebrations in Jacmel.





A local “rasin” musical group performs with rara horns made out of plastic pipes in Kabik. Despite the rise in popularity of this music style that started in Haiti more than 30 years ago, many think it’s a dying form that has given way to more contemporary styles like “konpa” and the more recent “raboday.”



A speedboat cuts through waves at Labadie, Cap Haitien. Because of the beach's crystal blue water, Labadie attracts thousands of tourists up to six times each week along Haiti's northern coast. As part of a contract between the Haitian government and Royal Caribbean cruise lines, the latter has exclusive rights to this piece of paradise. Up until 2009, travelers were never told they were in Haiti, likely to avoid anxiety about potential exposure to what they know of Haiti—violence, misery, and vodou. This place looks like one of Dubai's manmade islands, equipped with a giant zipline, restaurants, bars, and small tropical huts. It is completely fenced off from the reality of my country.



[Ryan Jiha](#) Follow PIH-er based in Haiti. Coffee addict. July 20, 2018