

CARIBBEAN
HAITI



MICHAEL BERTRAND/The Patriot Ledger

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From the air, Haiti is a mass of brown. Tiny shacks cling to rocky hillsides.

As far as you can see, the country is a series of peaks, one after the next.

Kathy Comito, the administrator of St. Boniface Hospital in Fond des Blancs, likes to quote an old Haitian saying: "Behind every mountain is another mountain."

It refers to the country's topography, but it also means that behind every problem another problem waits.

From the moment you step off the plane, Port-au-Prince is an assault on your senses. The air inside the airport feels heavy and smells of sweat.

The women's bathroom is hidden behind a maze of construction. A woman leads you there, through a closed door and past two construction workers not doing much of anything.

The bathroom floor is sticky and wet. When you turn on the faucet, nothing comes out.

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The drive through Port-au-Prince is slow, full of starts and stops.

A group of Haitian children stare when a car with four white Americans drives by. One starts yelling "blancs." The others chime in.

Nannette Canniff, a Randolph woman who has traveled this route dozens of times before, explains that the word literally means white, but Haitians use it to refer to all foreigners. Black Americans traveling with her in the past have been called "blancs," too.

You stare out the window, trying to take it all in, but there's too much to see. Buses and trucks are painted in psychedelic colors. Each has a message painted across the front, like "Merci Jesus."

Rivers of muddy brown water and sewage flow between buildings. A pile of trash on the street stands at least 2 feet tall. Stuck in the middle of such a scene is an Internet cafe.

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The road opens up outside Port-au-Prince, but the pavement is dotted with potholes 3 feet wide and a half-foot deep.

You stop in a village and the driver, Jean David Edume, disappears to buy cold drinks.

As you sit waiting, several women approach with metal trays of what look to be miniature hot dogs balanced on their heads. Everywhere in Haiti, women and even children carry baskets, jars, bottles and bales on their heads. It is as if the law of gravity doesn't apply.

Edume returns with Cokes, in old-fashioned glass bottles. You can't take the bottles with you in Haiti, so you gulp down the soda and get back on the road.

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More than four hours after leaving the airport, the car turns onto a dirt road that slices through Fond des Blancs, where you'll be staying.

Like in Port-au-Prince, poverty is everywhere, but it seems softer here.

Men with old faces wield 3-foot-long machetes. One man, sweat beaming from his face in the afternoon sun, hacks away at a tree 15 inches in diameter. He stops to rest occasionally, then resumes his work. Finally, the tree falls.

Canniff and Father Gerald Osterman, a Catholic priest who has been visiting Haiti for 20 years, reach out the window, wave and wish "bon soir" to everyone who passes by. People look up, smile and wave back. Soon, you're waving, too.

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The car pulls up to a gate at St. Boniface Hospital. A security guard slides the barrier open, revealing a simple concrete building.

You climb the stairs to a residence above the hospital where you'll be staying. It's clean and modern, with tile floors and bright white walls.

After a dinner of rice and beans, a woman knocks on the door. She explains that she wants to make sweet potato bread for one of the doctors. She has the ingredients, but nowhere to bake. The hospital has one of the few ovens in the entire area.

Later that night, a cacophony of sounds fills the air. Donkeys bray and chickens cluck. Dogs howl in response. Mixed in with the noises is the sound of a crying baby in the hospital.

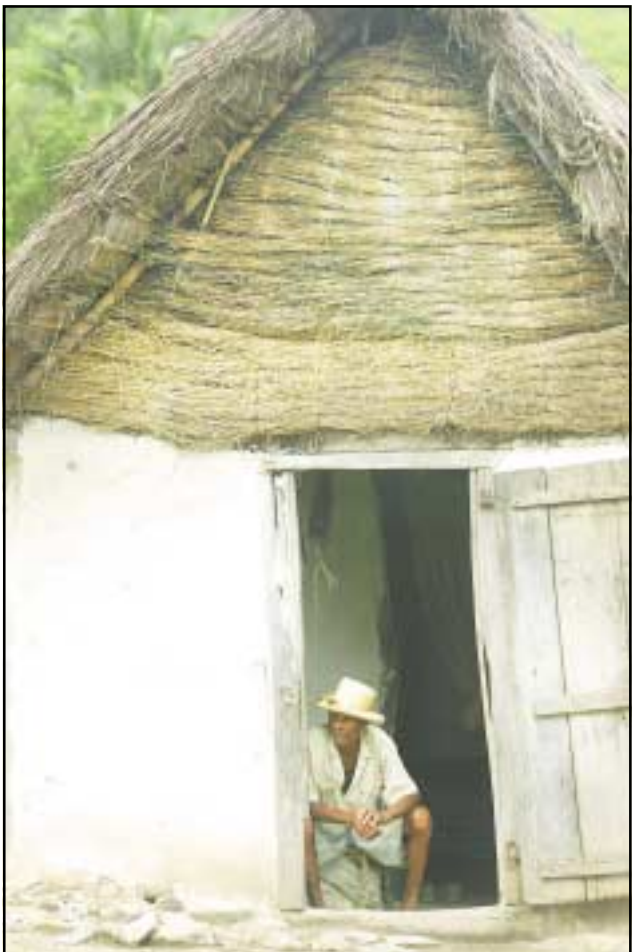


■ A Fond des Blancs cemetery at sunrise is a reminder that death visits often and early here.

Stark faces in a barren land called **HAITI**



■ A sick woman lies in the mud hut she shares with eight family members. The St. Boniface Haiti Foundation is paying to build them a new house. About 80 percent of Haitians live in abject poverty.



■ Mud huts with thatch roofs dot the landscape in Fond des Blancs, but offer little protection against wind and rain.



■ A man heads to work at daybreak. Nearly 70 percent of Haitians depend on agriculture for their livelihoods.