

Spring Break Immersion: Discovering the Truth About Haiti

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If you remember last year's newsletter around this time, you will remember that I traveled to Brazil for a spring break mission trip. This year, I traveled to Haiti for an unforgettable cultural experience with 10 other Saint Vincent students and the coordinators Jessica Adams and Dr. Richard Gosser. I am so thankful for everyone who made the trip possible. It is so hard to capture what I saw, felt and experienced, so I will take you on a journey through my journal and try to bring the pictures to life.

Saturday, Feb. 28

We left Saint Vincent at 2:30 a.m. I am now in the Pittsburgh airport pondering this journey to Haiti. I can't believe the time has come, and I am only a few hours away from being in another country. So, what do I expect to see in Haiti? I envision flying into a city where I see lots of color in a variety of different places. I expect to see old, dilapidated shacks and dirt roads. I am not sure if I am prepared for what I am about to see. I am somewhat scared and nervous. I am also very excited. What if I hate the food? I am such a picky eater. Why do I worry so much?



I am in the airplane headed to New York. It is almost 6 a.m., and I didn't sleep at all last night. I hope I am more awake toward the end of this flight so I don't miss my first impression of Haiti. Here we come!

The sky is so bright and the clouds are so beautiful. We are less than an hour away. I am not sure what to think. Is this really happening? As soon as we fly down past the clouds to our destination, there it will be: no turning back. I feel that our travel has gone by so fast.

As soon as we enter the airport in Haiti, we are welcomed by a group of Haitians playing joyful music. When we stepped outside and breathed our first breath of fresh air, it was an instant heat wave. We all piled in a van and headed to our guest house for the night. We passed by palm trees, women carrying baskets and a variety of items on their heads, vehicles with colorful designs, people washing clothes in the streets and others selling fruit, clothes and all sorts of items alongside the roads. I was right about my prediction of seeing color everywhere. We arrived at the Matthew 25 guest house and carried our bags to our rooftop cabins. I tried my first Coca Cola with sugarcane, and it was delicious. We all climbed down from the roof to play Frisbee in a dirt field next to our living quarters. I found a button on the ground, and if you know about my button collection, you will understand that this brought a smile to my face. It is about 81 degrees and sunny, and we are enjoying the light breeze. This heat seems surreal because just about 12 hours ago I was surrounded by snow and cold weather.

For dinner, we had chicken, rice, salad and bread. The facility has a gift shop with homemade metal wall hangings, purses, jewelry, wooden bowls and figurines. I love all of the creativity and color. I am exhausted but excited for tomorrow.

Sunday, March 1

This morning, I woke up at 6 a.m. to loud music coming from a distance. I was immediately informed that the water pump where we were staying stopped working, so we had to bathe with a bucket of water. This was



definitely a cultural immersion experience. For breakfast, we had coffee, a roll, mango and eggs. It is a beautiful day.

We walked a block and a half to an outdoor Mass. Everyone was dressed nicely, and the women all had unique hairstyles. The Mass was mostly in French and Creole, so I couldn't understand it, but I did recognize some of the important parts. They collected money for their building fund because, after the earthquake a few years ago, everything was destroyed. Everyone came together at a devastating time to celebrate Mass wherever they could, and now they are trying to build a new church. After the Mass, they invited all of the visitors up to the front to say who we were and where we were from. I felt so welcomed.

We all packed our things again, strapped our suitcases to the top of our tap tap (basically a large van) and squeezed together for our ride to Lamardelle. We traveled for an hour or two through the streets of Haiti and passed by thousands of people along the streets. There was so much commotion and so much to see. As we got closer to our destination, the view of the mountains in the distance was breathtaking. The roads were quite bumpy, but I surprisingly did not get motion sickness. We finally arrived at our guesthouse in Lamardelle. There was a large gazebo for meals, a pool and nice little rooms to stay in for the next four days. The Duncan family lives here and owns the property that has a school called FEJ (Fondation Enfant Jesus) with 500 children. There is also a church and a clinic on site that provides care for patients daily. For lunch we had turkey sandwiches and papaya.

We walked around the area and saw the old orphanage/crèche that is currently being turned into a vocational school for women. I found another button on the dirt road. There are colorful flowers and a beautiful mountain view. We also saw chickens, goats and a donkey. When we came back around, the gate to the community was locked. We tried tapping on the metal gate, but no one came. One of our students eventually



climbed over and unlocked the gate. We all went swimming and enjoyed the peacefulness of the night. Tomorrow the work starts. I am ready for whatever comes our way.

For dinner, we had delicious chicken with rice and beans, plantains (basically fried potato bites) and vanilla cake. Afterward, everyone in our group reflected on why they chose to come to Haiti. We all played the game Heads Up and shared in some laughter. The acting, singing and impersonations were pretty hilarious. We had a wonderful night together.

Monday, March 2

Some of us woke up at 5:30 a.m. to watch the sunrise. Breakfast consisted of coffee, toast, eggs and a banana. We went straight to work sanding, priming and painting three rooms beside the church that are going to be the guest house for a visiting priest. It was exhausting and extremely dusty, but we all worked well together and had a good time. I have never drunk so much water in one day.

For lunch, we had coleslaw, tuna, a roll, plantains and watermelon. I am quite surprised at how much I enjoy the food. I looked across the gazebo and was shocked to see two men butchering a goat: The same goat some of us took pictures with the day before. Members of the Duncan family arrived because a funeral service is being held tomorrow for Mrs. Duncan, the founder of this amazing facility that helps so many people in Haiti. We went back to work, and there were some kids who kept coming around and wanted to take pictures with us. They were so adorable, and even though I could hardly understand them, a smile spoke 1,000 words.

I went for a short walk by myself and ran into two kids that I saw earlier while we were painting. They handed me a mango and communicated to me how to eat it. The one boy asked if he could have my water bottle, shoes and a flashlight. This was so eye opening to me. I did not know what to do. I felt so bad for these kids who had dirty clothes and ripped sandals.



For dinner, we had pasta with sauce and soup with dumplings, carrots and yes, fresh goat meat! It was surprisingly good. There was a full moon, and the sky was like nothing I had ever seen before. There is relaxing music playing that is setting the mood. The Haitians are so kind and friendly. So far, all I can say in creole is “good morning” (bonshu) and “thank you” (messi). The little Haitian kids knew some English, so that made it easier to communicate.

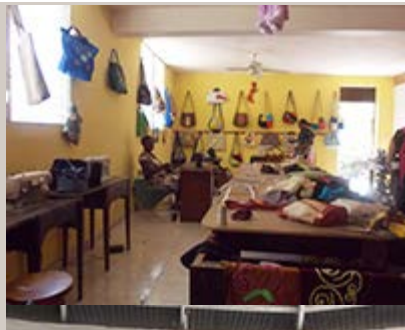
Tuesday, March 3

Today we had pancakes for breakfast. Then, we all went to the funeral Mass for Mrs. Duncan. There were hundreds of people who gathered together and almost 200 kids dressed alike in jeans and their blue school shirts. The little girl in front of me kept smiling at me. I tried my best to sing along during Mass but it was hard to follow.

For lunch, I had rice with beans, goat meat, chicken and french fries. We painted for the rest of the afternoon, and one of the little boys who I met the day before, Lukson, took my camera and took some photos and videos of himself singing. Some of the girls taught him the alphabet, numbers and months in English. He was a fast learner. After we cleaned up, I took a short nap, and we all hung around the pool. For dinner, we had macaroni and cheese and an interesting veggie puree that looked like gravy. We played Catch Phrase and enjoyed another beautiful evening together.

Wednesday, March 4

Today for breakfast we had eggs, toast and bananas. I worked with a few girls painting an outside section of the wall. Today we had an opportunity to see the facilities filled with people. We walked to the school and saw the kids in class. They were so cute and kept calling out that we were white. I just really want to hold some of the kids and give them all of my love. I hope we have an opportunity for that while I am here. I found a third button below a rock.



We walked over to the clinic and saw some of the rooms where they deliver babies, take blood work, do tests, etc. We also walked over to see the open building that is being turned into a school for women. Next to that was another small building that is used to teach the women how to sew. There were bags and purses lining the walls. We walked back over to the gazebo and had rice, carrots, beans and chicken for lunch. It was one of my favorite meals so far. I played Frisbee with some of the guys, and eventually two young boys joined us. They were surprisingly good. For dinner, I tried red beets for the first time. We also had delicious mashed potatoes with corn, meat and cheese. We had vanilla cake and brownies for dessert. Our group conversation got deep when we started talking about what we liked and disliked about love. We played a few games and headed off to bed.

Thursday, March 5

Today may have been my favorite and most memorable day in Haiti. In the morning, we all piled up clothes and other items that we wanted to leave behind for someone to use. After breakfast, we all packed up our bags and piled into the tap tap. We rode for about two hours to an orphanage. To get there, we drove up a tall, bumpy mountain, and the view was incredible. When we arrived at the orphanage, I did not know what to expect. When we walked in, there were two tables lined with young children. We met a man and woman who were there visiting an adorable little boy named Woodley, whom they were in the process of adopting. I asked if it was all right to pick up and hold the kids and was excited when I was told that I could. I picked up a little girl and was caught off guard when I realized there was poop coming out of her diaper and onto the sleeve of my shirt. How is that for a cultural experience? I did not mind at all because I have grown up with nieces and nephews since I was 10 years old, and nothing really fazes me anymore. I picked up another little boy and eventually rocked him to sleep. I discovered a nursery in the other room and went through trying to hold as many babies as I could. I was filled with so much happiness just being able to look into their eyes



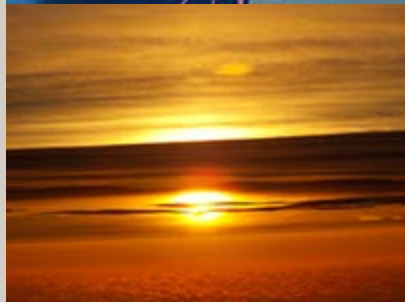
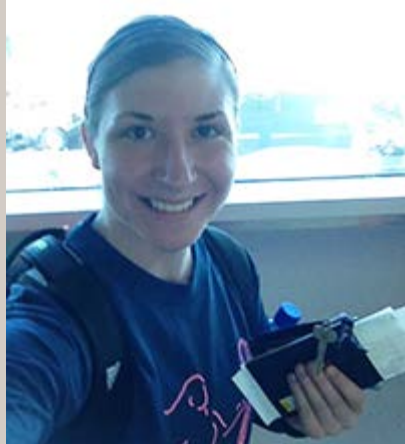
and give them as much love as I could. They were so adorable, and I wanted to take them all home with me. When I went outside to a small play area, three little girls attacked me with their hugs. They took a few photos with me, and I felt so blessed to be with them.

After we left the orphanage, we went to Gina's house for lunch. Gina is the daughter-in-law of Mrs. Duncan, and she and her husband run the orphanage. She talked about an illness that she had gone through and God's call for her to do this mission. She mentioned that love and faith are one and the same. It was such a beautiful witness.

We all rode back to the Matthew 25 house where we stayed on our first night in Haiti. On our way back, we stopped at an overlook that showed an amazing view of Port Au Prince. There were different vendors there who tried to sell us things and continued poking their hands through the windows as we drove away. By the time we got back, I was very exhausted. We had lasagna for dinner and went around the table saying what we all enjoyed about each other.

Friday, March 6

Today was such a busy day: our last full day in Haiti. We started the day with breakfast. I had cornflakes, mango and coffee. We left around 6 a.m. in the tap tap of our driver, Lord. We traveled to St. Damien's where we had Mass in an outdoor chapel with Fr. Rich, a priest who went to school and became a doctor in his 40s because he wanted to help those who were suffering in Haiti. The stained glass windows were so beautiful, and we all sat on a bench that wrapped around the inside of the chapel. This Mass, along with most, is also for honoring those who have died. Three bodies rest in the middle of the floor in boxes with coverings over them. After Mass, we went over to the hospital and had espresso with Fr. Rich. We sat around a conference table and talked to a man about the hospital. While at the hospital, we got a tour and walked by rooms of people. I saw the tiniest premature baby ever.



We drove to a restaurant for dinner. It is the site of an old sugar cane refinery and there was cool equipment lining the property. We saw geckos and a peacock. I had a delicious pineapple smoothie and ate chicken with rice. We then rode to a preschool. The kids were so happy to see us and got out so much energy through singing and dancing before their meal was served. One little boy wanted to see my camera and wouldn't stop poking me. I helped to feed an adorable little girl. After the kids were done eating, we drove by a small market with so many different crafts. We had a chance to visit Lord's home, which was basically a tiny shed that was for him, his wife and his three kids. I was so shocked at the living conditions. After the earthquake, he said that all that they had to sleep on was a slab of concrete.

We went out to dinner at a place called Koyokos that had live music. We all ended up on the stage and were dancing to one of the songs. We all crammed into a small vehicle, and it was so hot. It was such a wonderful day to conclude our time in Haiti.

Saturday, March 7

We headed back toward home, and the last sight from the airplane was a beautiful sunset. It was the perfect ending to an amazing journey.

