

January 2008 Haiti Trip

Bonjour,

We're back from another successful, tiring, rewarding medical mission trip to Haiti, and we'd like to thank everyone who supported us with medical supplies, funds and especially prayers. Every trip to Haiti is unique, yet many things seem to be constant - the hunger, poverty and disease that we encounter, the love and faith of the Haitian people, and the joy of reunion with our Haitian friends. If you'd like to see some great photos, taken by Sam (and others), go to <http://gallery.mac.com/sam.owen1> and click on Haiti 2008.

We had an especially large group of people on this trip - 17 - and most were off to Haiti for their first time. The trip got off to a rocky start, on January 17th, as we learned that our scheduled departure from Colorado Springs would be altered - our plane would be arriving too late to make the connection in Dallas, so as many people as possible were moved onto an earlier flight. Only 4 of us, Janet, Marti, Linda and myself stayed behind for the later flight. Once again, American Airlines was wonderful - all 80 bags, many nearing the 100 pound limit, were checked through to Port-au-Prince with no extra charge.

After saying goodbye to the rest of the team, we waited for our flight - it turned out to be not so late and when we landed in Dallas, the rest of the team was still waiting to board the next flight to Miami. Unfortunately, there was no room on that flight for the 4 of us, so once again we said goodbye and settled into the airport hotel. Next morning, we flew on to Miami and caught the next flight to Port-au-Prince. By the time we landed in Haiti, the rest of the team had moved on to the Hotel Montana, but we were eventually reunited in time for an evening meal. As usual, getting our meds through customs was a chore, but Fr. Kesner eventually made it happen.

On Saturday, the 19th, we headed down the hill to rendezvous with our camion, which was a backup for one that had broken down. This one was a little smaller and our 80 bags and 20 mattress pads filled it to the top of the rails - the passengers on the camion would have a great view, but would also be holding on to their precarious perch with both hands. Port-au-Prince seemed both the same - congestion, charcoal smoke, noise - yet different - most of the traffic lights were working, traffic cops and U.N. troupes were everywhere and the streets were 'clean'. The first-timers, as well as us, got an eyeful as we drove by the outskirts of City Soleil, drove along the river/dump and headed out to the country side.

Once again, I was driving the 2nd Montero as we headed out towards Petit Trou. The by-pass around Carrefour was almost completely paved and we made great time getting to Leogane, where we stopped at the Hospital to pick up 2 student nurses who would be working with us throughout the week ahead. Unfortunately, the hospital has fallen into general disrepair and disuse - we used to send our 'emergency' cases there, but not on this trip. The road from there to Miragoane was also in great shape and again we made great time - the beautiful views of the Caribbean belied the poverty that we were driving through. After Miragoane, we stopped to eat our sandwiches along side the road and then continued on to Petit Trou - the dirt road was ruddy and became worse as we drove (ahhh, we were coming home). None of the rivers were high, so driving through them wasn't a problem, and the bridge that had been swept away a couple of years ago had been replaced, much to our surprise.

Arriving at Petit Trou, we were greeted by old and new friends and using the headlights of the Montero's, we got our tents up in time for supper, cooked by an old friend, Jeannine and her wonderful kitchen crew - the food was really good on this trip.

Sunday: Next morning, we attended the service at St. Paul's, celebrating the Feast of St. Paul. The church was packed, many guest priests were on hand, including Janet and Fr. Ed., and we had our own Deacon Maureen. One of the Haitian priests, Fr. Noe, was from Cap Haitien - I had been in the Episcopal church there but hadn't met him - Janet struck up a long conversation with him and they became fast friends. Many parts of the service, including the Hymns, were very familiar, even though they were in a foreign tongue. The usual offering procession was a joy to behold with all of the young and not-so young participants dancing up the center aisle with their gifts from the land. The sermon was pretty much a mystery to us non-French speaking folk, although it was clearly a message about Saul/Paul and his conversion.

Sunday afternoon found many of the team setting up the pharmacy and the clinic, and we got our first clear hint that things would be different from the previous several years - surprise, surprise. We would be working without Haitian or Cuban doctors, and with our large team, we would have plenty of help supporting the 2 doctors, 1 PA, and the nurses. So, some of us took the opportunity to head to the 'beach' (coral cliff) and admire the blue water or jump in to cool off.

One other problem reared its head during our first 2 nights at St. Paul's and after a near revolt, Fr. Kesner resolved it for us. Seems that the house next door had become a sort of disco/dance hall and they boomed out their music until 2:00pm each night - I think the people in Miragoane could hear it, too.

Anyway, Fr. Kesner got them to discontinue while we were sleeping in our tents for the rest of the week and we only had to deal with the continual noise of dogs, roosters and donkeys.

Monday - Friday: Our daily routine started out with 7:00 Centering Prayer, 7:30 Morning Prayer, 8:00 breakfast and then Marti and I were off to Petit Trou to pick up the interpreters - Pierre, Mario, Jean Pierre, Samuel - and our daily bread. The clinic generally started by 8:30-9:00 am, and everyday we had emergency cases - burned babies, starving families suffering from severe malnutrition, a cancer patient (eventually sent off to Cange and Dr. Paul Farmer), a baby sent to Port-au-Prince with hydrocephalus, etc. These cases usually tied up one or two of our medical staff for most of the morning. Our medical supplies were much more abundant than the previous two years, although surely not up to U.S. standards - but then what is - a major part of the Haiti experience is coming to terms with an entirely different culture and way of living, and the enormous near-universal suffering of the Haitian people.

We also experienced much joy throughout this week. The school with its 700+ students was wonderful, and watching the cooks prepare the enormous mid-day meal of beans and rice reassured us that many things around St. Paul's were improving. One day, as I helped lug heavy duffel bags of Health Kits up to the school, I had one of those moments of epiphany. I was watching the school staff pass out the kits and, as usual, was surrounded by a crowd of preschoolers. As they touched my skin and hair, and played with my watch and camera, I happened to say 'oui' to someone and a darling little girl just threw her head back and laughed with abandon. Every time I said 'oui', same result.

In a country of so many hardships, I'd found a child experiencing as much joy at the moment as any child anywhere in the world. I later found her eating beans and rice and said my usual 'oui' - same result.

Part of my job was again driving - we ferried a burn baby back and forth to her home, and Janet became a Haitian driver (chauffeur fou) as a result of these trips. On Wednesday, Fr. Ed, Janet and I drove the little girl with hydrocephalus to Miragoane, where she and her mother and brother could catch a bus to Port-au-Prince. Jean Well and the camion driver went along with us - to buy parts for the camion and to help us buy supplies for the kitchen. On our way back, we stopped at a restaurant/hotel along the water and had lunch, treating both Jean Well and the driver, who later said that it was one of the most precious moments of his life.

The clinic generally wrapped up after 5:00pm and Marti and I, and often a nurse or two, would ferry the interpreters, etc., back to Petit Trou. We did our usual evening house calls and drove back to St. Paul's in the dark, for a wonderful supper. One evening, Mario coaxed us into driving out to the Petit Trou water supply - Cindy was with us, as well. The drive was absolutely beautiful and harrowing and we got to see where and how many of our rural patients were living.

By the end of the week, we'd seen nearly 800 patients (not counting many of the school kids), treated hundreds of cases of scabbies, worms, ear infections, head aches, tummy aches, infections, malaria, 'women's complaints', etc., and had provided some comfort to those who we could do nothing else for. We gathered around a grandmother to pray for her dying grandchild (starvation), we provided transportation or funds and referrals for people destined for Port-au-Prince or Cange, and hopefully we offered love, hope and joy to everyone we worked with and met.

Friday afternoon, we celebrated with our Haitian helpers as we gave them our thanks as well as their weekly pay. Its always a bitter-sweet time - joy and sadness and withdrawal.

Saturday: We started off with Morning Prayer and a trip to pick up one of the burn babies, followed by breakfast and then we broke down the pharmacy and clinic. After lunch there were numerous trips into Petit Trou for touristy things - visiting the sad medical clinic, the wonderful Catholic Church with the Christopher Columbus' alter, the bustling market and the swimming hole/cemetery. By the end of the day, most of the team was experiencing sadness and stress as our time at Petit Trou/St. Paul was winding down. We had one last wonderful meal, spent some personal time with special friends and retired to our tents for our last night there.

Sunday: By 8:30am we'd all had breakfast, packed up all of our tents and belongings, loaded the camion and said our goodbyes - we should be back at the Hotel Montana in plenty of time. Oh well. The camion was having problems and couldn't do any better than 29 mph (later on the good roads, that is). So the 30 minute drive to Anse-a-Veau took 60 minutes, the 2 hour trip to Miragoane took 3.5 hours, etc. And then came the 'Bridge at Petit Rivieres' sounds like a movie, huh?). Some of us had just visited a brand new, lovely clinic just outside of Petit Riviers - really looked state of the art from the outside. We caught up with the camion at the bridge, which is really two broken concrete slabs which meet in the river - usually not a problem. However, a west-bound camion had broken down, blocking the bridge and our camion tried to drive through the river and up over the bank. A couple of hours later, after the other camion was fixed and gone, and after purchasing rocks from the neighborhood rock dealer, our camion made it up the bank and we were on our way.

After stopping off in Leogane to drop off the nurses we left the camion to make its way and dashed to Port-au-Prince. It seems that the beginning of Carnival would be closing down the streets and the camion is no longer allowed up the hill to the hotel.

That drive up through Port-au-Prince, trying to keep up with Fr. Kesner and avoiding imminent disaster is probably the high point (NOT) of the trip for me and my fellow passengers. We did manage to make it 'home' successfully, and Fr. Kesner then made 2 additional trips to the camion to pick up passengers and luggage. Hot showers, air conditioning, the restaurant and quiet rooms with comfortable beds - ahhh!

Monday: A day of relaxing, touring Port-au-Prince, visiting the Cathedral and The Big Mango(formerly Pierre-Pierre's) Art Gallery. Janet and I took Perrin to the Episcopal Hostel and met some wonderful people there. Our friend Daniel, at the Montana gift store, told us that although things are looking better on the surface, the misery and unrest is beginning to intensify. That evening, as most of us were wearing down, we voted to have our celebration dinner at the Hotel Montana, instead of going out. The food and company were good and for most of us the night was short.

Tuesday: Nothing but a long trip home. Marti had lined up some great taxi drivers and they got us to the airport and through customs with with ease. On to Miami and through Customs, wait, wait, wait, on to Dallas, run to the next plane, and home to Colorado Springs. From there, we divided up the luggage, said our good byes and headed home.

Once again, Janet and I want to thank everyone who helped us with this trip in all your various and special ways. It was another uniquely successful trip - as usual, the blessings that we received from our trip partners and our Haitian friends were awesome, and we know that in return we impacted the lives of many people who are living daily on the edge of despair.

God Bless,
Ron and Janet Fulmer