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(Arrival form into Haiti.)

After being on the island for nearly two years, I finally made the journey to Haiti, and crossing the border into Jimaní, Haiti I received my first stamp in my new passport. It's significant to me that the first stamp in my new passport represents the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere. To me, it was a great challenge to travel to there, to go to a hard place, an uncomfortable place, and a very dangerous place. I believe that at our core, the big decisions we make hold great significance, and we often mark our experiences with placeholders that help us remember how we arrived at those

decisions and what they really meant to us. This is one of the many things that this first stamp in the new passport means for me.* Let me explain . . .



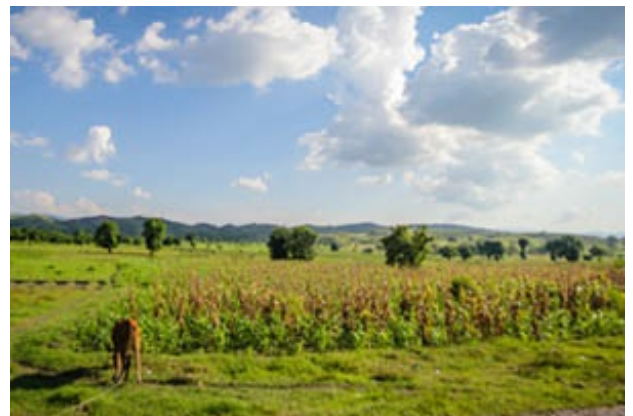
(The Haitian border crossing in Jimaní.)

Maybe some of you have been to Haiti, and have traveled there with relative ease, so hearing that I call the place dangerous may strike you as odd, especially knowing that I was only in Haiti for less than a week, but let's be honest here, it's not a destination for a weekend getaway. My purpose was to join a HOPE International trip to look at our savings groups we helped to start with Esperanza Internacional throughout the country.

I took the bus from Santo Domingo and after nine hours through strange and unfamiliar territory including a three hour stop at the border I finally made it to Port Au Prince. Arriving in the capital, I was happy to be outside, only to be greeted by a noisy street full of commerce, people yelling, and traffic zipping down the roadway. I didn't have the slightest idea where I was, and neither of my cell phones worked. Still, I knew I had a small plan. Fortunately, after a

short while, familiar faces showed up, Dan Williams, who speaks Creole, and Clint Barnes, also serving with HOPE arrived to the bus station. After two years being on the other side of the island, and nine hours on a bus, I made it to my destination. This stamp* is for persistent courage.

From my arrival to the next four days, I had many wonderful experiences in Haiti. So often, we can get caught up in the stigma or label of a country or a people. We tend to associate Haiti with extreme poverty and general disorder. They haven't recovered from the earthquake in 2010, and indeed even before the earthquake there was a tremendous lack of infrastructure. Sadly, there are people still living in tents in communities that look like tent cities. For awhile, the threat of cholera was spread all over the news as thousands of people had died from an easily preventable disease. But should we let



(Haiti is a beautiful country.)

an image like that define the entire state of the country, or its people? Threats to health and safety can be scary and overwhelming, and we can let the overrule other significant details.

What's important to know though, is that there always has been, and still is, an incredible amount of beauty in the nature of the Haitian people and in their country. We cannot overlook the presence of wonderful things simply because of some negative stereotypes. Indeed, that became abundantly clear on a visit to a savings group in the



(The beauty of youth.)

small village of Sodo. We felt like we were a world away from some of the chaos of the capital. Look at this picture here to the above and to the right, and realize that this is still Haiti. This stamp* is for modest tranquility.

A daughter of one of the leaders of a savings groups kept inching her way toward me as I was snapping pictures of the meeting. At first, she was extremely shy towards the camera. She hid behind the wall of her home, but as time went on, she not only loved seeing her picture on the camera, but to bring other people into the activity as well. It was clear she had a natural gift for leadership and an affinity for connecting people. Pretty soon, she had gathered by the side of her house almost every neighborhood kid in the local vicinity. She even helped

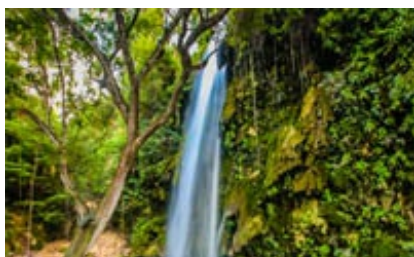
me set up the groups. I appreciated her art direction, but more so the way she was able to persuade others with her smile. I asked her to smile for the camera, but she couldn't keep a straight face! Neither could I. This stamp* is for infectious laughter.

As we began to hear the stories from two leaders displayed below, my picture of Haiti became brighter and brighter. These were two strong leaders. Men who were dedicated to their family, to their community, to their church. They exuded strength and determination, efficacy and pride. When we asked them what were there desires for the savings group that HOPE and Esperanza helped them start, they asked for more educational materials. They asked for direction and wisdom. They asked for prayer. Ready and capable men. Men willing to accept responsibility and carry out the plans for something they believed in. This stamp* is for persevering honor.



(Strong leaders of the Sodo community.)

We left Sodo on a high note, commenting on how kind and generous the local people were. As we were admiring the natural landscape leaving town, some of the locals asked us if we had seen their waterfall. "A waterfall?" We asked, stumped by such a suggestion (turns out, the name "Sodo" means "waterfall" in Creole). Making a u-turn we zipped back into town and following the directions and hand gestures we made our way to the top of a fairly large hill on one side of the community. They had set up a small entrance to guide visitors to the attraction. We jumped off the truck and sped down the newly constructed pathway to find the source of the sound of falling water, and we were overjoyed to find not just one, but two active waterfalls. This stamp* is for hidden beauty.



I noticed that my view of Haiti and my preconceptions were fading away and new ones were being ushered forth like the morning sunrise. I was happy and refreshed to see so much goodness and light in a country that has had such a dark history. It was like hearing a song reach the bridge (the musical term for a transitional section taking the listeners into a the final chorus) and break into new verses, filled with hope, a joyous melody, and believe me, the Haitians are excellent singers!



(Waterfall in Sodo, Haiti.)

Our final stop in our HOPE trip was to visit a small community outside the town of Belladare. There we were to visit a savings group that had been together for over a year and had enough deposits to make loans to members. I had to take a moment and think about what was happening. In the small outcropping of a large town that had no commercial banks, here was a group of committed believers that had been gathering together saving their money together and now loaning it to each other.

It was an organic savings and loan organization. In the absence of structure and institution, here were individuals moving forward in their lives. This stamp* is for quiet, powerful growth.



(Savings and Credit Association.)

When someone asks you whether you'd like to walk 15 minutes into town on a dimly, or non-lit road, to get some Haitian street food when you're experiencing an extremely intense headache, verging migraine, what do you say? I said, "Heck yes." I wouldn't miss it, I couldn't miss it. After coming this far, I wasn't going to let a crushing pain behind my eyes stop me. A minute into the walk, the road turned eerie and calm.

Houses looked like mirages with small candles lighting up their facade, and other pedestrians walked past us like

ghosts. We arrived to the center of the town among yet more ancient relics of a town that "once was" with its dilapidated castles reminding us of an earlier age. Inside the cavernous building, many Haitians could be heard laughing, singing and telling stories to their neighbors. Without light, there was still life. After getting food, our friend encouraged us to take motorcycles back to the guesthouse. Now that dark road back took on a new form as viewed from a single headlight. This stamp* is for every-ready adventure.



(The entrance to Bealladare, Haiti.)

In my experience, it has been true that every time I come back to the States, I feel the culture shock. "Reverse culture shock" as it's called, hits me harder than going to a foreign

country, because when I go I expect everything to be strange, but not when I return. No, home is a familiar place, and it should feel familiar in the heart and in the head, and I never expected to feel the reverse shock upon crossing back into the Dominican Republic from Haiti. But I did.

Traveling from the Haiti, a nation trying to make its way out of serious infrastructure problems, I was so surprised to achievements of modernity in the DR: stores, churches, paved roads, cars, and trucks and things that go; so much order and organization. I saw Dominicans; now friends and neighbors. I heard songs blasting through speakers; the latest hits emanating from car stereos. I smelled cooking food; and I knew just what I had longed to eat. This stamp* is for home sweet home.



(Home sweet, Dominican home.)

Throughout my journey overseas the past two years, I know that God's continued plan has been to redeem all that seems dark, broken, and disheartened. That was always His plan, and

when He sent His son Jesus to this Earth, He brought the light of salvation to us, and showed us in living flesh that God wanted to put right all that was wrong through the sacrifice of His own son. He fulfilled a promise and brought hope to what seemed hopeless. Throughout my journey, I have had these consistent reminders that God has a way of breaking assumptions, preconceptions, and stereotypes. He did this in my journey, He did this for my experience Haiti, and I know He will continue to work to set things right. This stamp* is for redemption.

"When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." (John 8:12 NIV)

I pray you would see the New Light that shines forth and redeems the darkness. May God give you a reminder to carry with you on your journey.

Blessings to you and your family,
-Aaron

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