

People don't realise we have places like this in Haiti," says Jeff, my dive instructor, as we glide into the cove. We're surrounded by clear, warm water, just off the forested island of La Gonâve. It's beautiful, and if there are any other tourists out here, they're well disguised as local fishermen. Jeff's right: people don't know places like this exist in Haiti. But that's an understatement. Beyond the 2010 earthquake, cholera, poverty and political instability, I'm not sure people know Haiti "exists" at all.

A lilting tune comes on the boat's radio. It's the former Haitian pop superstar Sweet Micky. He now goes by the name of Michel Martelly, and he's the country's president. It's like Cliff Richard moving into No 10, and entirely in keeping with this most contradictory of destinations. The former Sweet Micky is confident that he can create half a million jobs by turning his benighted nation into a tourism destination to rival the neighbouring Dominican Republic. He clearly relishes a challenge.

There's a long way to go. Western-standard hotel rooms are expensive and hard to find, and the Foreign Office warns of high levels of crime. But it

wasn't always like this. In its heyday, Haiti hosted jet-setters from Marlon Brando and the Rat Pack to Mick Jagger. Now the government has managed to convince a clutch of adventurous UK travel companies that it's time to return, and there's a range of tours on offer for next year. So, is it worth it? I hitched a ride to find out.

My near-namesake Graham Greene, who set his 1966 novel *The Comedians* here, hit the nail on the head when he described Haiti as "beautiful and bedevilled". The former is quickly apparent. Haiti is the Caribbean's most mountainous country — the Creole name "Ayiti" means "land of mountains" — its peaks providing a

Voodoo you love

Haiti's transformation from trouble spot to hotspot requires powerful magic. Graeme Green falls under its spell

Home guard
The Citadelle Henri Christophe, or Laferrière, was built to keep the French out of Haiti

scenic backdrop as well as excellent hiking. It has a thriving art scene, fascinating history (this was the world's first black republic), sunshine without the tourist crowds and the Citadelle Laferrière, an imposing mountaintop fortress in the north, which some call the eighth wonder of the world. Not forgetting some fine rum.

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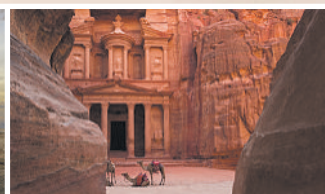


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Graeme Green; Getty

All tours begin in the capital. Fringed by green peaks, the sprawling metropolis of Port-au-Prince is incredibly colourful, with brightly painted buildings and the local “tap-tap” taxi trucks — so called for the way passengers indicate their approaching stop — decorated with evangelical Christian messages and pictures of pop stars.

At the Presse Café, in Pétienville, where the local house band, Ju Kann (Creole for “sugar-cane juice” or “rum”), play infectious, jazzy *konpa*, rum is drunk and the men lead the women expertly and elegantly around the floor with merengue-like moves.

In the markets, women sell piles of clothes or fruit from makeshift stalls flanked by the rubble remnants of the earthquake. As Jean-Cyril Pressoir, a local operator, tells me: “Haiti doesn’t feel sorry for itself.” Buildings are being reconstructed, including the National Palace. And the destroyed Marché en Fer (Iron Market) is open for business again.

There are signs of resilience, too, in local art communities. I visit Atis Rezistans, a ghetto area taken over by sculptures made from recycled street materials. Dolls’ heads, skulls and even penises feature strongly in a strange, sometimes macabre jumble of sex and death. “There is not just trouble in Haiti,” says the community artist

Romel Jean Pierre, who leads me through the alleyways. “There is art. There is culture. There is a story.”

In another art district, Noailles, I meet Jean-Baptiste Jean-Joseph. In his studio, he makes meticulously beaded flags that sell for up to £4,000. He’s also a priest of vodou — Haitian

voodoo — a national religion brought from Africa by slaves. Practising it isn’t the shameful secret it used to be. “People think vodou is only bad or evil,” Jean-Joseph says as he shows me around the temple behind his studio, knocking on doors to announce himself to spirits before entering. “But there’s a lot of

Caribbean dreams
From top left, papier-mâché masks and sculptures line the streets; welcome to Atis Rezistans, the arty quarter of Port-au-Prince; and fishing boats hauled out on Anse-à-Foleur beach

good in vodou. There are spirits of love and sharing. Vodou is good, wise, pure.”

A short flight next morning takes us to the town of Cap-Haïtien, in the north, where Christopher Columbus established a settlement. I hike up the steep path to the Citadelle Laferrière, also known as Citadelle Henri Christophe, after the former slave and leader of the revolution who built it in 1805. It is the largest of 22 mountaintop forts. Iron and bronze cannon still point out of windows, and there are fantastic views on three sides of tumbling green peaks and, to the north, Cap-Haïtien, where the streets are lined with colourful shops, watch-menders and old men playing dice.

But what about the beaches — the cornerstone of any respectable Caribbean destination? I visit the Moulin Sur Mer resort, on the west coast, built on an 18th-century sugar plantation, where I spend the day diving in largely unexplored waters. Haiti doesn’t have

THE BRIEF

Graeme Green was a guest of G Adventures, which has a 10-day Highlights of Haiti group tour from £1,359pp, excluding flights. The next departure is on February 21 (0844 272 2040, gadventures.co.uk). His flights were provided by American Airlines, which has returns from Heathrow to Port-au-Prince, via Miami or New York, from £790pp (020 7660 2300, aa.com). He was also a guest of Moulin Sur Mer and Marina Blue, which offer two-night stay-and-dive packages, including two dives and the Kay Piat hike, from £274pp (00 509 3701 1918, moulinsurmer.com).

Or try Undiscovered Destinations (0191 296 2674, undiscovered-destinations.com), or Wild Frontiers (020 7736 3968, wildfrontierstravel.com). For more on Haiti, visit experiencehaiti.org.



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