

My name is Kurtis Lush and for the past several years I have dedicated myself, through my work, academic and travel experiences, to understanding the realities of poverty worldwide. There is no country in this world that has intrigued me more than Haiti. From hearing about it for the first time in a Rayjon elementary school presentation to spending my university days researching and writing papers about the past and current struggles of the Haitian people, there was no other country I wanted to visit more than Haiti. As much as I wanted to go there, life took me on a different path. I worked in Africa on a start-up project, traveled through regions of Europe and Asia and came home to continue the work I am currently doing in combating local poverty and homelessness at The Inn of the Good Shepherd.

In March, thanks to the awareness experiences offered through Rayjon, I was finally able to live my dream and visit Haiti. As we landed in Port-au-Prince and loaded our bus to St. Marc, I kept my eyes glued to the action of life in Haiti and looked for aspects to compare the country to other developing nations I have visited. I was seeing a lively hustle economy where basic public infrastructure, such as a transit system or shopping centers, did not exist; instead, people informally made a society based off of what they had and what they could do. Tap-taps (trucks turned into buses) filled the streets and were jammed with people transiting across the city. Clothing items for sale were hanging on random property walls for display and people were running from car to car trying to sell their items to potential customers. While I continued to compare things I was currently seeing to past experiences, it quickly became clear that Haiti was not like any other developing country I had previously visited.

Two seemingly contradicting themes emerged as the week unfolded. Haiti has many one-of-a-kind traits that are not well-known off the island and yet, due to numerous well known events which have devastated Haiti's development, the country is considered the poorest in the Western hemisphere. Our group, which comprised of families and people with differing backgrounds, including teachers, nurses, social workers and high school students, all came on this awareness experience to try and begin to understand both sides of Haiti. We were able to do just that thanks to great planning by the Rayjon group leaders, who led excursions that led to meaningful discussions and debates, and thanks to the incredible hospitality and openness of the Haitians we came to meet, especially the local Rayjon staff.

Our awareness experience allowed us to experience and learn firsthand some of the incredible things about Haiti, including its unique culture, landscape and history. We were able to learn about the resiliency of the Haitian people, both in the past and present, as they became the world's first black colony to abolish slavery and to become independent from colonial rule. We were able to enjoy the beautifully unique blend of African and Caribbean culture in things such as the country's food, religion, art and music while learning about Haitian opposition to colonial cultural influences, especially language. We rode through varying climates and landscapes comprising of ocean views, forests, deserts, rice fields, and mountains. We were able to ask Haitians, through local translators, questions to further our understanding of the daily lives and traditions of these people.

Understanding Haiti's culture and its people gave us the opportunity to further understand the harsher realities of Haiti; however, it was hard, even with all the things we learned, to fully grasp what

we were seeing. Our bus trips and hikes through rural mountainside villages, where there is limited access to basic necessities such as education, water, healthcare and shelter, highlighted the struggles of rural poverty. An unexpected overnight rainstorm, during our Cap Haitian visit, led to an unforgettable morning drive where we witnessed flooding in the slums and panic from locals as they worked to bail water out of their homes and protect themselves from the dangers lurking in the water. Destruction from the 2010 earthquake, including neighbourhoods with buildings in ruins and the tent homes outside them, were still evident in the city of Port-au-Prince; however, the severe poverty that plagues the city, including pollution, homelessness, hunger and child malnutrition, was there prior to the disaster and has since intensified. At one point or another, every member of our group was left teary eyed and speechless... How can so much misfortune continue to plague this country?

While deeply moved by the images we will never be able to erase from our memories, we left Haiti feeling that there is hope and, while happening slowly, there is progress. You see it in the eyes of a 55 year old lady who, for the first time in her life, is learning how to write her name. You experience it in visiting nurseries and schools where staff members are tirelessly working to make sure that children get the nutrients and education they need to become the leaders of tomorrow's Haiti. You can hear it from local Haitians, who have the option and means to live abroad but are proud to call Haiti home and aim to put their time and money into the country. You can feel it in the rebuilt parts of Port-au-Prince. Through programs that enable and empower locals to lead societal change, such as Rayjon, there is hope that tomorrow's Haiti can develop into a country that all citizens can enjoy and succeed in. In all my time in poverty studies I have never had a week quite like this and I know that a return to Haiti is not a question of if but when.

