

The Gazette

As Haiti rebuilds, what it needs is tourism dollars



By Martine St-Victor
December 30, 2011

CAP HAÏTIEN – I landed here in Haiti’s second-biggest city, land of my ancestors, on a hot day wearing Chuck Taylors and aviator Ray-Bans. I was home away from home.

I hadn’t been here since a few months before the 2010 earthquake. Since then, I had been scratching to come back for many reasons, but mostly because my memories of Haiti had nothing to do with the images of desperation and crumbled monuments that we all saw after that catastrophe.

Yes, there has been a disaster. But now, there’s reconstruction. And there’s buzz. Designer Donna Karan has been here many times in the past two years, working with artisans and making beautiful jewelry and fashion. Actor Ben Stiller just signed a deal with mobile telecommunication mogul Digicel to build eight schools. Former U.S. president Bill Clinton has been here so many times he says he’s now addicted to Haitian coffee – and why wouldn’t he be? Haitian coffee is delicious, and eventually Starbucks will make a note of that.

Sean Penn, Maria Bello, Oprah Winfrey and other stars have all been here recently, making a difference and making Haiti look like a busy night at Mr. Chow’s. As a publicist, I recognize these might be PR moves. Or not. Either way, motive matters little: I’m just happy these celebrities make the trip, as they usually do so with media in tow. I don’t want Haiti to be forgotten. And if that means having People magazine around, then so be it.

Cap-Haïtien – or Okap, as it is known in Creole – is in the north of Haiti. It is rich in history and in culture. Its beaches, like Cormier and Labadie, will make you forget political turmoil and economic crisis. But mostly it is the Capois who will win you over. This simple and

authentic city has an “it” factor that, along with all the tourism development being planned, will make you come back.

You know who is rumoured to be coming to Cap-Haïtien in a few days? Robert De Niro. The thespian and man behind many some of the coolest spots and events in Gotham is now thinking of opening a hotel here and – well, if he can do in Cap-Haïtien what he’s done in TriBeCa post 9/11, sign me up!

President Michel Martelly has a slogan: “Haiti’s open for business.” And it is. Business includes tourism. The beaches here are pristine. The food is delicious. The art is breathtaking. The culture is rich. And you already know about the people, because if you live in Quebec, you have at least one friend of Haitian origin.

The naysayers will remind you there has been violence here. And there has, just like in Mexico, Jamaica and the Dominican Republic. That hasn’t stopped people from going to Cancun, Ocho Rios and Punta Cana, has it?

Giving money to a non-governmental organization working in Haiti helps. It really does.

But so will your tourist dollars.