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## **Tourism can help Haiti return to its halcyon days**



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Haiti proclaimed its independence in 1804, the first country in Latin America and the Caribbean to do so. Despite having to pay an extortionate independence fee, equivalent to \$21bn (£14bn) in today's money, it was a relatively prosperous and peaceful place to live.

Indeed, most Haitians had a decent life before the 1960s, when the country could have been likened to Canada and Australia in terms of human development indices.

Along with pre-revolutionary Cuba, Haiti was the tourist destination of choice in the 1950s, attracting jetsetters and wealthy travellers from the US and Europe. It was the place to see and be seen.

Over the past 60 years the situation has deteriorated. Most people I meet think the situation here is desperate, but I tell them I believe there is a lot of hope for Haiti because we got into this difficult situation a relatively short time ago. If you look at the history of other rich countries, you will discover that although they spent much longer in difficulty, they managed to fix their problems, and Haitians will do the same.

The 2010 earthquake was a wake-up call for Haitians, including 2 million in the diaspora, to take control and restore the country to how it was three years ago – or, better yet, to the halcyon days of the 1950s.

One of the key ways I believe that Haitians can trigger redevelopment is through tourism, particularly eco or boutique packages for those wanting to experience something different. We have a small amount of passing trade through international cruise ships, but this is of no

benefit to Haiti or its people as such excursions are controlled by the cruise liner companies and elites.

The ministry of tourism is rebranding Haiti as a holiday destination, with the strapline: "Haiti – experience it". And last year the country received 950,000 tourists (mainly from cruise ships) compared with 4.5 million in the Dominican Republic, but I know we have the potential to attract at least double that.

If we can bring more funds into the country, the hope is that this can be used to improve infrastructure, create jobs, and support some of the most vulnerable people.

Haiti is a hospitable place where we enjoy life, even when things are difficult. If visitors started to come and praised the small progress we have made, it might drive some communities and leaders to take pride in their nation and really work together to attract greater numbers of tourists.

Haitians are not a lazy people waiting for others to support them. While here, you will experience a vibrant, busy, resilient country, where people are looking for a better life, working hard, and committed to seeking opportunities around every corner.

We are tired of reading in the newspapers that there is no hope for us. Some of those articles are depressing and have pushed some professionals to consider leaving.

The good news is that some sectors seem to understand the challenges of attracting tourists and are working together.

Admittedly, there are some problems Haitians cannot deny, including the food crisis in pockets of the island, but there is another side to the coin: the island is one of the safest places in the Americas, in terms of drugs and crime, and we are blessed with some of the Caribbean's most beautiful beaches and unspoilt countryside.

There are countless places visitors can enjoy authentic Haitian music, from classical to grassroots folklore (*rara*), as well as one of the finest cuisines in the Caribbean, incorporating French and African influences alongside native Taíno and Spanish culinary techniques.

We tend to use a lot of different vegetables and meat then combine them with peppers to add flavour and a bit of a kick. And if you visited one of Christian Aid's local Haitian partners, such as Koral (*Konbit pou ranfòse aksyon lokal*, or Gathering for the strengthening of local actions) and Veterimed, you might also get to taste our farmers' famous organic yoghurt or cheese.

Haitians are busy preparing for the vibrant three-day carnival of flowers in Port-au-Prince on 28 July. The last carnival we hosted was in Cap-Haïtien at the same time as the Rio carnival, and it attracted more than 500,000 people.

Carnival is a traditional part of Haitian culture, and when discussing with some friends who are regular participants, I realised that for them it was a great psychosocial way to heal and renew.

Some argue that the government could better use the funds for education or the environment, but I hope to attend the carnival this year for the first time to take some photos with my daughters.

So go and see the Haiti tourism Facebook page and get a new sense of the country. The images represent the undimmed hope and light that Haitians would like to shine above our struggles to make the country a wonderful place to live and to visit again.

I cannot say visitors will find the place to be perfect and polished, but I am sure they will enjoy their stay and make plans to come again. If you are unable to stop by, maybe just take a little time to think positively about the future for Haiti and its citizens. Experience it. Not easy, right? But you can.