

## A Tourist in Haiti

by Larry O'Connor

FROM THE HOTEL balcony I can see the pool. It's wide and whitewashed with metal frames of chaise lounges arranged in the sun on the far side. The shady poolside bar sits unattended, and I can see, if I crane my neck, that there's not a single bottle of booze behind it. The lounge frames are flecked in rust.

Dr. Philipot, a character in Graham Greene's novel, *The Comedians*, died in this pool. And from his suite at poolside the cartoonist Charles Addams drew the twisted spires and hemorrhoidal doodads of this most gingerbread of places, the Hotel Oloffson. There are other places to stay in Haiti, but none in Port-au-Prince with such history—and secure gates to keep beggars and thieves out.

Beyond the sweet-smelling lane of bougainvillaea and mango trees, stands the six-foot wall topped with razor wire and the new wrought-iron gates. The manager of the Oloffson says the gates came in a dream. A peasant saw in a vision the great black liberator, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, in a plume hat and shiny tunic on a black stallion.

"Go to the city and have a gate erected at the hotel," the ghost of Dessalines declared. The peasant then made his pilgrimage to the hotel, and the manager, no scoffer at visions, had a foundry pour the molds that afternoon. The gates were up by the end of the week.

I've decided not to fool with visions either, and have vowed to remain behind the gates until my departure date. I had planned to stay in Haiti for ten days for the travel guide com-

pany I work for, but I changed my ticket and am leaving tomorrow, three days early. For half my stay I've been holed up here, reading *The Comedians* and doodling in a journal, taking to heart a line from the guide I'm updating: "Indeed it's possible to spend the rest of your time basking and relaxing and forgetting that the world outside exists." It's one of the few lines I'm not thinking of rewriting.

The work has not gone well. It's almost impossible to get through to hotel owners and restaurateurs: telephone lines constantly go dead; taxis get caught in hours-long traffic jams. Nobody goes out at night. At sundown, journalists, mission workers, and other fun seeking hotel guests all converge at the Oloffson bar because of the curfew. So the last few nights I've taken my lists of hotels and restaurants into the bar. The first night two English travel agents hopped like country rabbits about the low-slung wicker seats and glass tables, snapping photos of Trevor, the curly-haired journalist from the *Guardian* and his entourage of fresh-faced admirers, while mission workers from Barbados, St. Martinique, and Pittsburgh sipped frosted drinks, grumbling of their supervisors. One night it seemed every other person was a restaurateur or an employee of the ministry of tourism, so I got some work done.

"What became of the Pétionville espresso bar that opened in 1989?" I asked. "Does it still take American Express? Has the adjoining fitness club kept its discount rates on Thursdays?"

The next day I changed my ticket. I'd like to write more in my journal, but I'm finding it hard to keep my eyes open. For almost a week now I've slept very little. A man no one ever sees stays in his room twenty-four hours a day, with CNN blaring at top volume. ("CRITICS SAY, PURE COUNTRY IS PURE GOLD" ... "HAVE YOU DRIVEN A FORD, LATELY?") It's said

he's the only one in the hotel who hasn't cut a deal with the manager and is paying full price, so he can do as he pleases. If not for the empty bottles of Guinness and half-eaten, white-bread sandwiches on a china dish that appear every day, I'd think the room had in it only a television. It's less distracting being on the porch than in my room because the walls hold the mystical property of amplifying sounds. When this wing of the hotel was once a hospital, babies of Haitian men, voodoo priests, were born here. Loa, voodoo gods, visited. I'm in Number Nine, the mystery man several rooms away, is in Number Five. I can tell by the way Larry King is breathing that the TV host is coming off a cold.

It was on the second day that I'd met Johnson. Travel books published decades ago say that most Haitians are mahogany-colored. They're not, but Johnson is. He was respectably dressed in dark blue polyester pants and a buttoned-down shirt.

"Listen, my friend," he said, looking me over as I climbed down the hotel steps and beckoning me to come close, "Mr. Graham Greene was a friend of mine. Like that," and crossed two bony fingers.

Johnson said he would take me around.

"Do you want the one- or two-part tour?" he asked.

"What's the difference?"

"In the one-part tour I'll take you to the poorest of the poor, Cité Soleil, City of Sun."

"What's the second part?"

"Where they dump the bodies." I said no to a visit to the body dumping ground, but I felt I had to see Cité Soleil. It's called the City of Sun because there is no escape from the punishing heat. Years ago the last trees were cut down for fuel. The main road into the City of Sun is a wide, dirt track the color of black water, with open sewers on either side. Stores that line

the track are nothing but weathered planks nailed together, topped by tin roofs. Men, women and children stand idly about, or stroll aimlessly, smoothing the ash-colored road with their bare feet.

When I went there with Johnson I saw a man gasping for breath, dragging a cart full of sticks, not for fuel but for rebuilding shanties that fall down when the rains come. The shanties, built one upon the other, extend for what looks like miles along the foul-smelling shoreline.

As my guide steered me down a path toward the shore, a hooker in a pale blue dress shrieked like a mad woman and rushed toward me. Johnson stepped quickly between us and pushed her hard in the chest, but not before she pulled at my shirt, then chased me like a scrawny chicken.

"One Dollar! One Dollar!" the hooker screamed. Later she climbed to a tin roof so that she could lift her skirt and better display herself. "Five Dollars! Five Dollars! Together!" Johnson pushed me in the middle of the back, told me to hurry on by.

"She's crazy," he said, contemptuously. "Crazy from the sun."

Later a man slipped through the crowd and took me by the arm. His touch was light and gentle.

"Come to my place, sir, and meet my wife," the man said. I said no, claiming appointments. I felt a twinge in my side, thought of my own wife and child. His shirt and trousers were old and torn in places, but I noticed the buttons were in place, his fly and snaps neatly tailored. In my hand he pressed a folded card, written in English by a nurse who had once treated him, imploring mercy from medical professionals to help him if they can. When I gave it back to him, he coughed and coughed.

Johnson jerked his head, leading me away. He wanted five

dollars for a Guinness so I gave it to him and he ran off. Standing alone in Cité Soleil, I watched as naked children pushed sticks into mounds of dirt near open, standing pools of sewage. I saw a boy fall out of the back of a little public bus and in the fetal position hit the pavement with a thud. He scrambled to his feet, and ran off as if unhurt. A pig rooted through an open sewer. At the wharf, gangs of dark men waded in the surf with white industrial buckets, scooping up crustaceans. Through broken planks in the wharf I could see men walking barefoot beneath me, combing the wooden pillars below for signs of life.