

Haiti Outreach Trips to Pignon, Haiti

This is a detailed description of most group trips to Haiti conducted by Haiti Outreach. Please read this over thoroughly; many of your questions will be answered by doing so. You will have a pre-trip orientation where all of these topics will be discussed in greater detail. Thank you for your interest in traveling to Haiti with Haiti Outreach.

Background

The country of Haiti is the poorest in the western hemisphere and one of the poorest and most densely populated countries in the world. While only the size of Maryland (about one-eighth the size of Minnesota), Haiti has approximately 9.6 million people (nearly double the 5.2 million population of Minnesota). Haiti means “high place” in the native Arawak language and is about 70% mountainous. Most of the people are subsistence farmers who live on their own little plot of land and try to grow enough food to feed themselves and their families. In the towns and cities in Haiti the poverty and high unemployment is very evident as well. The roads are in very poor condition, and there is very little electricity or other infrastructure.

A trip to Haiti can be a life-altering experience. For those travelers who have not been to a “third world” country, the living conditions can be surprising or even shocking. To Americans, it can, be challenging at times. Nevertheless, you are likely to find that in the rural area and small town where we spend most of our time, the living conditions are marginally improved and the people are very friendly and relaxed. Time seems to slow down, and the beauty of the country and the people is evident.

All of our trips are guided by an experienced American who has been to Haiti many times before. We also have an American country director who lives there and many Haitians on our staff who are friendly and helpful. We are very conscious about safety, and by following a few very simple rules, you should have no problems or concerns during your trip. Passports are required to travel to Haiti and often take up to 8 weeks to obtain if you do not already have one.

Traveling

Most group trips to Haiti last about 7 - 9 days and usually range in size from 8 – 12 people; however, it is possible to accommodate up to 16 people. Trips are intended for adults and older teenagers. Because the trip and living conditions can be challenging for younger children, we generally do not advise that they travel to Haiti. Young teens should most likely be accompanied by one of their parents. High school students who have experience traveling or camping without their parents are generally fine by themselves.

In most cases, we take a jet plane to the capital city, Port-au-Prince, in one day and spend the night at a motel near the airport. The following day we proceed to Pignon by taking a smaller propeller plane, landing on their grass strip. Once in Pignon, we will walk to places or travel by pickup truck. When traveling by truck, most of the group stand in the back, holding on to secure bars. A few travelers usually can travel inside the cab.

Accommodations

In Pignon, you will be staying at the Haiti Outreach “Kay Visite” (pronounced ki ve-zeh-tay), Haitian Creole for “Guest House” which was built in 2008-2009. The Kay Visite has eight guest

rooms, each with its own separate bathroom with a shower and two to four single beds. There is a kitchen and dining area, a living room/gathering area, and patio areas. It is located on our property near the airport, adjacent to our headquarters building, and within walking distance to the town of Pignon.

Haitian cooks prepare three meals a day for the guests. The rules and regulations for the Kay Visite will be reviewed during your trip orientation and again the first day you will be staying there. It is important to remember that conservation of water and electricity is very important in a country where few people have these luxuries. Bed and bath linens will be furnished and washed approximately once a week.

The Haiti Outreach headquarters building is a short walking distance from the airport and houses our offices and work/storage space for our equipment and vehicles. It also houses the Fonkoze Bank for the local people and the MAF (Mission Aviation Fellowship) travel office.

The Vision, Mission and Projects of Haiti Outreach

The vision of Haiti Outreach is “For Haiti to Become a Developed Country”, with clean water and sanitation, sufficient food and medical care, and educational and economic opportunities for the people. Our mission is “ To collaborate with the people of Haiti to build and maintain community-initiated projects that advance their development.” Started in 1997, we strive to have all of our projects be based on sustainability by the Haitian people themselves. You will learn some of the history of Haiti and why it’s been so difficult to create long term, sustainable projects.

Our donated funds are used for many things, including employing about 22 people to run our operation in Haiti. We provide advice, technical support, teach organizational and management skills, and pay for project materials when the community simply cannot afford them. We also have motorcycles, a variety of trucks, ATV’s, and three well drilling rigs that we use and maintain in order to do our community development work. These donations enable us to do this work.

Our principal project focus is clean water. We have drilled wells and built water systems benefiting over 110,000 people. Two decades ago the only water source for villagers in this region of Haiti would have been a few rivers. Most people would walk miles for water... water that was dirty and contaminated. Water-borne diseases killed many people, especially children who have little immunity. Much of our work in Pignon and the surrounding area has been to drill community wells and help build basic water systems that do not require electricity for villages.

In addition to our clean water projects, we have also helped two communities build and furnish public schools and completed an addition to one of them. We paid the start-up costs for the Fonkoze Bank to come to Pignon, which has now given micro-loans totaling over \$500,000 to local women, with a 99% payback record. We have brought over 300 travelers to Haiti who have built school desks, painted schools, and helped build houses for deserving families who are selected by community leaders.

Work Projects for Traveler Groups

Typically, travelers participate in a small work project for the week they are in Haiti. The projects vary depending on the skills, funding, trip length and community requests. As much as possible we try to select projects where travelers will work along side Haitians.

The traveler groups should be self-funding, meaning if there are materials needed to create the project, the group will raise the funds for that project ahead of time. An example would be the building of a new home. The cost for the materials is around \$4000 US. The group should raise that money and donate it to Haiti Outreach. We will then arrange for the purchase of all the materials and hire a mason and carpenter to make sure the house is constructed properly. It takes about two weeks to build a home there, and so usually the group will only do the first or second half of that home building process.

In addition to working on a specific project, travelers will also experience how Haitians live, our community development projects, and the town, including churches, schools, businesses, the market, etc.

The People of Haiti

The people in Haiti are typically quite happy, kind, friendly, curious and humble. Most work very hard, just to have enough to eat and drink every day. The language spoken is Haitian Creole, which is rooted in the French language. Because Haiti was a French colony, French is the “official” language and taught in school. Some people will speak some English – especially the students - and they will certainly want to speak with you.

Generally, without electricity, people are awake at sunrise and go to sleep shortly after sunset. Although Haiti is tropical, there is no “siesta” as in Central American nations. People work straight through the day. While most Haitians eat one meal a day, some people you will meet may not even eat daily.

As you truck down the roads, you might hear young children yell out, “Blanc, blanc” (White, white!)... and “Give me one dollar!”. In rural Haiti they do not see Caucasian people often, and young children will sometimes wave as you pass by. Wave back! As difficult and not compassionate as it will initially seem, **please do not, at any time, give anyone money or items**. We will talk about this in more detail below, during the orientation, and once we are in Haiti. The main reason is that it is disrespectful to the Haitian people. Haitians work very, very hard for their money. Just giving money away diminishes the value of their work. Your actions can be resented, especially by adults, even if you mean to be helpful.

Haitian Money

Generally speaking, you will not have to deal with Haitian money. There will be few opportunities to spend money, and when you do, American dollars are welcomed by merchants. Usually on the last day, we invite women in the area to bring their crafts for a small scale market of our own near the Kai Visite.

But for your information, the money of Haiti is called gourdes (rhymes with “foods” and no “r” is pronounced). Five gourdes make a Haitian “dollar”. However, there is not a Haitian “dollar” bill, except a five gourde bill. They will speak about prices in both gourdes and dollars, so you must clarify Haitian dollars or US dollars. There is a big difference. Currently, one American

dollar is equal to about 8 Haitian dollars. That makes the Haitian dollar roughly equal to a dime, which makes one gourde equal to about two cents.

Medical

A trip to Haiti can be physically taxing at times. Everyone is responsible for his or her own well-being. Therefore, if you have any concerns about your ability to travel on such a trip, you should consult your physician and inform us about those concerns. On your trip application, there is a page relating to medical issues. No shots are required to go to Haiti, but many travelers choose to be inoculated or take pills for various potential diseases that are more common in a tropical climate. Haiti Outreach does not officially give medical advice, so you are asked to consult your family physician and do what you both decide is prudent.

Trip And Emergency Evacuation Insurance

Haiti Outreach does not require trip or emergency medical insurance. However, travelers are encouraged to check with their local travel agency or on the Internet and decide for themselves if they want this kind of insurance for the various possible events that could occur on a trip. If you choose to get insurance, it is recommended to do so at least two weeks prior to your trip.

The Weather, Clothing, Things to bring

You will be provided with a recommended packing list, which will be discussed at your orientation meeting. Haiti is located at 18° north latitude – a tropical location. However, where you will be working is on a plateau situated between mountain ranges and about 1,000 ft above sea level. Therefore, depending on the time of year, daytime temperatures will range from 80 - 95° but nights are usually pleasantly cool. A sweatshirt and long pants can sometimes feel more comfortable in the evenings and should definitely be brought. You may wear shorts and t-shirts for working, unless your team leader says otherwise (sometimes our projects are located in areas where there may be brambles or thorns – long legged pants might be more appropriate).

A hat is recommended, as are sunglasses. Take along and use sun block. The sun is more intense here than in the U.S. and it is very easy to burn without this protection. It is also recommended that you bring a pair of work gloves. Bring a flashlight and extra batteries! Warm water should be available for showering at the Kai Visite

Remember your medications. Comfortable work shoes or sneakers work best. Bring along some food supplements, like granola bars, and a few bottles of water or plastic water containers that would be sufficient for 4 hours of your water needs when working. Potable water will be available for refills and drinking, but not all public water is drinkable by Americans. You will receive three delicious meals a day, but sometimes it's nice to snack on something at a project when working.

Conduct

Please remember that you are a guest in a foreign country, representing Haiti Outreach and the United States of America. Please be aware of your behavior and how you conduct yourself. We do not want to be “ugly” Americans. Our dress and behavior should be fairly conservative, in keeping with theirs. As already mentioned, Guest House rules will be discussed in detail when you first arrive.

Important Guest Behavior

For many guests, there is a great desire to give candy, money, or other "gifts" to children and adults. As mentioned before, this is not acceptable behavior. **It is disrespectful to our Haitian hosts. It also goes against the Haiti Outreach vision and mission, teaches recipients to beg, and is very unfair to give to some who beg and not to others who know it is not right to beg. Whether you are alone or with others, DO NOT give anything tangible to children or adults, although the temptation is huge to do so.** It may be possible to bring items to donate to an orphanage or school. This will be discussed at your orientation. But please remember, if some child or adult on the street or at your work place asks you for something like your gloves, your shoes, candy, etc., all you have to say, politely, is "no". This does NOT mean you cannot talk or be friendly with people. Not at all. The best thing is to just say "no" and then continue to talk or interact as though that was done and you move on to the next topic. We also do not want you to leave anything like gloves, shoes or clothes and not bring them back with you. This is a burden for us to deal with, and we request you do not leave anything behind.

As you walk around in town, you will find that some young men will approach you for a variety of reasons. Often, they try to sell you something, like a necklace or painting. It is best to be very honest with your interaction. If you aren't interested, just say you are not interested. And be consistent with that response to everyone who asks. If you are interested, then know two things:

- they will be very persistent until you buy, because for them it is money, and you expressed interest.

- know that you will have a chance, like mentioned before, on the last day to purchase many kinds of crafts, souvenirs, etc.

Our recommendation, so that they don't hang around and ask you the same questions every day to get you to buy that day, is to tell them that only on the last day will you be interested in buying anything – tell them to wait until then and not ask you every day or you won't buy. Be polite but firm, consistent and certain in what you say.

They also may approach you to be friendly and talk, all of which is fine. Know that SOME may have another agenda – to tell you their story, get your sympathy, and then soon they will ask for your email address or even your phone number. If they do that, ultimately they will hope that you give them money or things, or support them in some way. So have your eyes wide open. We recommend you do NOT give out your email address or phone number - unless you really have an honest commitment to stay in communication and KNOW that you will be contacted by them and asked for things, probably over and over. If you don't want that, don't do it. Don't think you have to give that information out to "be friendly". It is not fair to them to string them along. They know what they are after and assume you are interested if you respond. The Haiti Outreach approach is to help entire communities and not single out individuals arbitrarily, or to reward the most persistent. That is why we do COMMUNITY water projects and PUBLIC school projects – to help everyone and not just a "chosen" few.

Safety

Many people ask about how safe it is to travel to Haiti. We will discuss this at your orientation meeting and when we are in Haiti as well. Here is some basic information. First, we are aware that the U.S. State Department's web site lists Haiti as a "travel warning" country. It has done so for many years. And the UN does have about 9,000 troops stationed throughout the country, including a small force in Pignon, to keep the peace. While we do not want to say that this warning is inappropriate or wrong, we do tell people the following:

- we have full-time staff and modern communications that help us be very aware of what is going on in the country; if we are aware of any possible threat to any travelers because of any circumstances, we will exercise caution and do what is safe, not bring a group into the country, etc.
- we spend very little time in Port-au-Prince where most crime or disruptions occur
- we do have rules about wandering off on your own that we enforce
- we bring many groups to Haiti every year and have done so for many years, so we have a lot of experience in knowing what to do and not do; none of our travelers has ever been assaulted or had a crime committed against them
- Haiti, just like the United States, has criminals; we use common sense and ask our travelers to do the same, just as you would here, regarding your own safety
- we will do everything in our power to ensure your complete safety and enjoyment.

In Conclusion

Before we conduct a group trip, we usually have a group orientation meeting to provide basic information about Haiti Outreach and your trip, to go over the plans and answer questions, and to make sure everyone is prepared to go. If at any time you have any questions, you only need to call the Haiti Outreach office at 612-929-1122 and speak with Dale Snyder, Executive Director.

Thank you for your interest in taking a trip to Haiti with Haiti Outreach. We look forward to taking you on a trip you will always remember.