



This was my first time traveling internationally alone, with a group of strangers. I was nervous. I didn't know what to expect. Growing up, all I knew of Haiti was the earthquake, the poverty, what they show you on the news; the negative.

We got off the plane in Port-Au-Prince and were met with the warm, humid air and a live band playing Kompa music with string instruments, drums and maracas. Their smiles were warm and their presence inviting. I was immediately comforted by their welcome address for a foreigner in their country.

We got in line at customs, we paid our tourist fee, and we went downstairs to grab our bags. Each one of us pushing a cart, in a single file line, to get out the doors quickly and easily.

There were more people in the airport than I had ever seen before. You stepped outside and the warm sun shown on your face, and you started to take in the smells of Haiti. It is indescribable. But when you experience it, it feels like coming home.

The first day was overwhelming. We drove through the streets of Port-Au-Prince and immediately saw the poverty, the broken buildings, the trash piled up or burning, the massive amounts of people everywhere, the markets overflowing.

You didn't know what to think. You processed.

But the people, oh the people. So warm and inviting. Smiling at you, asking how you are, welcoming you to their country.

That first night we drove all the way to Jacmel. Though the distance between Port-Au-Prince and Jacmel is not far, the road is mostly on the mountain and can take anywhere from 2 1/2 hours to 5 hours depending on traffic. We wound our way up, down and through the mountain and took in our first glimpses of the incredible, unreal beauty of Ayiti Cheri.

My eyes were glued to the windows as we watched the sun set over the mountains. There is a Haitian Proverb that says, "Deye Mon, Gen Mon" which translates to "Mountains Beyond Mountains". As you take in the views, you can see where this comes from. The mountains seem endless. Not just in the landscape, but in what the Haitian population has had to face throughout their entire lives.

The second day of my first trip was the day I fell completely in love with Ayiti Cheri.

We traveled in a large tap-tap up the unpaved roads of the mountain passing from Jacmel to Seguin. We traveled through Peredo, Marigot, Fond Jean Noel and many other small communities on the mountain roads.

We bonded with our new Haitian friends in the tap-tap, having sing-alongs with the speaker they had brought with us,

bouncing back and forth through the rocky road. Forming new friendships, learning new language, and being introduced to our first encounter of the deep warmth that people can bring.

When we got to Seguin, we were immediately welcomed by hugs, new hands to hold, and big brown eyes looking up at us.

It was something I had never experienced in my entire life, and yet it felt like I was meant to arrive all along. It made me realize that love is

the universal language of the world. Though I did not know kreol at the time, we could communicate immediately.

These people take root so deeply in your heart. I realized I had just stepped into a piece of my purpose.

There are not enough words to explain what that first week on the island taught me. It brought new life to my bones, and showed me that the world is a whole lot bigger than I was ever taught to believe. It created in me a new passion for life, for learning, and for growing. It taught me that we should not take what we see on the news as factual evidence of a place, or her people. Go to that country, for yourself.

Go into the communities there, and see that people are people everywhere. They are warm and inviting and they want to show you that the story being written in their country is not what you see on the news.

Through the kindness of the people of Ayiti Cheri, I found a new home. One where all people are accepted, loved and shown grace. A piece of me was missing before I stepped foot on Haitian soil, and I can say that I am eternally grateful for what Haiti has done in my life.

Fast forward almost 5 years, and I am more in love with Haiti than ever.

That first trip in October 2014 started me on a path of changing my entire life; opening my eyes to the world around me. I am continuing to learn about the magic that lies within the streets, the palms, the waves, and the mountains of Ayiti Cheri.

But I can say, it is forever a part of me, now. ■

SEE YOU AT BEL BAGAY LAKAY FESTIVAL

SATURDAY JULY 27 (6PM to 11PM) AND

SUNDAY JULY 28 (11AM to 10 PM)