

The Arrival at Toussaint Louverture International Airport in Port-au-Prince

It is always a pleasant surprise to arrive in the remodeled airport in Port-au-Prince, the capital of Haiti, and be greeted by a steel band, playing Calypso music. And the posters are enticing about what blessings this country does have to share. Of note is the bottom left photo that I possibly recognize from one of our boat rides to Dame-Marie just off the western coast.



One of our choke points is always customs at the airport. There are taxes to be paid on the supplies and medications we bring, and it is always unscripted what happens when we meet with the local officials. We were most fortunate this time that Pierre's contacts in the Ministry of Health allowed us to be taken to the Diplomatic Lounge where our baggage and supplies were cleared without incident or delay.



(L-R) Sophia Lopez RN and Mohammed Timur Ahsan EMT arriving at the Diplomatic Lounge



(L-R Blue Shirts) Pamela Yates RN, Brenda Tenney CMO, Kathleen O'Hara, Sophia Lopez RN, Kathy Aries RN, Ian Tenney HFD Chief, Melissa Ouellette RN and Mohammed Timur Ahsan EMT with diplomatic employee and Jocelyne Belizaire, who facilitates our arrival process

Some of our team members enjoyed their first taste of Haitian coffee and camaraderie with the government officials. And we just missed seeing the new President of Haiti, Jovenel Moise, who was expected in the Diplomatic Lounge soon after our departure.

The Journey

As our prior readers are aware, a most difficult part of our trip is the round trip overland travel between Port-au-Prince and our fishing village of Dame-Marie. It is about 329 kilometers or 204 miles, which is about the distance from Hartford, CT, to New York City. Here are a few views of one of the switchbacks we have to cross and the solo road across Haiti that follows the local rivers.



This trip followed three days of severe rains in the mountainous areas of Haiti and the road conditions were so bad that it took 13+ hours on our return trip to Port-au-Prince – 2+ hours more than usual. The roads were treacherous and the curbsides were littered with the wreckage of heavy trucks that couldn't make the grades.





Sometimes it seems almost surreal – like taking part in a classic Mad Max movie. There were three new heavy vehicles added to these Wastelands and the burned out, stripped down hulks lining the mountainside are skeleton memorials to the difficulties faced when traveling in this country. I have yet to see a tow truck in my six years of service in Haiti, and heavy equipment is as rare as a unicorn, which means your truck has little chance of being fixed or rehabilitated -- just salvaged by you or your neighbor.

So we are very careful with our choice of overland vehicle – no longer traveling in an old yellow school bus with the road showing through the rusted floor, as we did years ago in the Dominican Republic. And only professional drivers from a reliable company recommended by our benefactor (and bus rider) Monsieur Pierre Antoine. Here is our luxury tour bus, and best friend on the road, in which the team can “relax”.

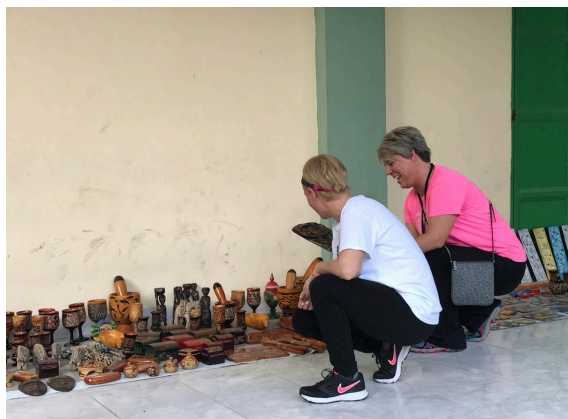


Left - Sitting (L-R) Pierre Antoine, Marie Yolaine Chery MD, Benouchea Pierre MD, Esther Antoine-Dardignac MD, Melissa Ouellette RN, Sophia Lopez RN and Anne D’Orvilliers

Left - Standing (L-R) Reginald Paul Cadet MD, Pamela Yates RN, Brenda Tenney CMO, Ian Tenney HFD Chief, Djovensky Mathurin MD, Michael R. Bourque MD, Mohammed Timur Ahsan EMT, Kathleen O’Hara and Kathy Aries RN

Planes are faster, boats are slower, but both have limitations in costs, time and the amount of surgical supplies that can be brought. We have tried them all, but for now the overland bus is what we must use, so we break up this 13-hour penance, with an overnight at a Catholic retreat center in Les (Aux) Cayes, a midpoint city. We have been traveling since early the night before from Saint Francis Hospital & Medical Center in Hartford, CT, so this stop also allows us to acclimate to the heat and conditions in Haiti before we are expected to begin our week of service.

An enterprising young Haitian, who lives in Les Cayes and previously would drive all the way to Dame-Marie, now knows our travel schedule and brings his Haitian handmade gift items on his motorcycle to the retreat center for our perusal before our leaving for the final hours on the bus to Dame-Marie and continuation of our travel adventure.



Left - (L-R) Melissa Ouellette RN and Pamela Yates deciding on items to purchase

After our first flat tire was fixed without incident, we noticed that the driver was worried about his low fuel tank gauge. And obviously gas stations are few and far between and there is no AAA to call. But miraculously around a turn...a fuel truck appeared on a level piece of road with its own flat tire and a tank full of petrol. Hasty bargaining was done and then fuel was siphoned from one tank to another.



A fortunate turn of fate...or maybe not? It was only about a half hour later that the bus engine started knocking and struggling up the inclines. Water in the gas! Like a lemonade stand in the middle of the desert, caveat emptor (buyer beware)!! And the sign on the back of the tanker did warn us after all!!!

A lot of time spent on this tale so far has been about our travels. But this part of the trip is very unpredictable and risks are involved, so it is important for our potential future missionaries that read these adventures to understand that this service involves a degree of difficulty that cannot be disregarded. That said, I have been riding these roads for the last six years, and we take every precaution for the safety and wellbeing of our team. And these unexpected occurrences are part of the experience when you serve in Haiti.

In addition, sometimes this rugged journey (which can register 35,000 steps on a FitBit) defies the usual medications that we may take to prevent motion sickness. But IV fluids and rest usually restore everyone to tiptop health again. Thank you Kathleen O'Hara for your positive attitude despite this early event and Sophia Lopez RN for your gracious service to one of our mission family members.



(L-R) Kathleen O'Hara and Sophia Lopez RN

The Service

Once in Dame-Marie, everyone quickly got to his or her assigned task, and empty rooms quickly became specialized areas of care...



Pre-Op
(L-R) Ian Tenney and Brenda Tenney



Post-Op
(L-R) Kathleen O'Hara and Pamela Yates RN

...and the grace of helping those with medical issues began.



Melissa Ouellette RN and Pamela Yates RN seeing
to patients who were patiently waiting



Some problems were more obvious than others --
young patient (middle) with ear keloid

In the aftermath of Hurricane Matthew, the destruction of the major supply of local food is showing itself in the failure of the youngest to grow and thrive. Here a father is tending to his twins who were in the nursery and very much in need of nutritional support.



Several patients we met early on had medical conditions that would sadly shorten their lives without modern care and medications.



(L-R) Young woman with Stage 3 ovarian cancer being told by Dr. Glavylove Joseph (OB-GYN) where she needed to go in Port-au-Prince to get medical care from a specialist



A mother (standing) with her daughter (seated), a new mother with postpartum myocardopathy, a rare complication causing heart failure and an abdomen full of fluid

Both patients could not afford to travel to the available specialists we were able to find, or pay for medical treatment or the room and board that would be required while receiving treatment. So although we could not help them medically, we were able to provide funding needed for them to travel and receive treatment.

For everyone that we could not help, however, there were handfuls of those we could. And our patients come in all sizes and ages. Here Anne D'Orvilliers is comforting one of our younger patients dressed in her Sunday finest.



The Progress and Rewards

Life is harsh here, and until our arrival, 5+ years ago, there were not many reasons for smiles and laughter.

The delivery room in Dame-Marie is a far cry from the supportive atmosphere of our labor and delivery and postpartum areas in the US. Yet this room is still a place of safety for our young mothers-to-be from the mountains who have only the alternative of a dirt floor without running water, without electricity, and without the benefit of trained medical staff by their side. But with everyone's continued support and donations, this area is on our list to be redone to a more welcoming place with privacy and more equipment.



Delivery room in Dame-Marie

For our newest team members, however, these great contrasts between the medical comforts provided in the US and the reality of the barebones that exist in Dame-Marie is one of the culture shocks that they have to process and deal with emotionally. Laughter and camaraderie are how many of us cope. How can you not smile at these lighter moments?



The joy seen on the faces of our pediatric patients from a simple gift of sunglasses



The otherworld-like moments that you just can't make up...
two chickens I met coming out of the Hospital Administration office

And yes, there are French fries in Dame-Marie made especially for us by our local cooks. And they do a fabulous job of nourishing our spirits while we serve long hours helping our sisters and brothers at the hospital.



(L-R) Martine and Kathy Aries
RN with the French fries

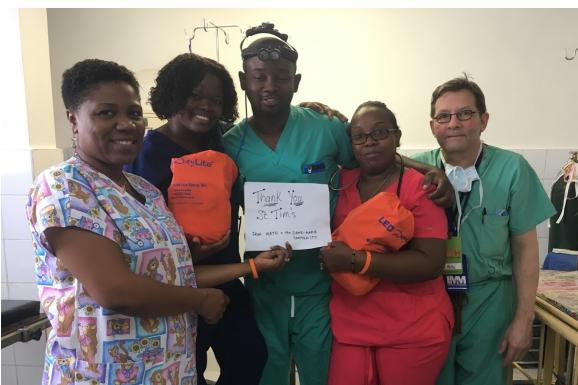


Dinner waiting on us from
another day in the OR running
very late



Eating and reviewing the day's cases,
while also planning for tomorrow's
miracles of better health

On this trip we had special donated gifts of surgical headlamps for the staff to use when we are not there. Thank you to the generous donors at The Church of St. Timothy in West Hartford, CT, who made these life saving gifts possible.



(L-R) Drs. Marie Yolaine Chery, Benoucheca Pierre, Glavylove Joseph, Esther Antoine-Dardignac, and Michael R. Bourque with gift of surgical headlamps

And we have come to treasure our growing number of outstanding Haitian medical, dental and nursing staff that has joined our service.



(L-R) Esther Antoine-Dardignac MD, Marie Yolaine Chery MD, Tellus Cazeau MD, Djovensky Mathurin MD, Reginald Paul Cadet MD and Benoucheca Pierre MD at the mission house

(L-R) Reginald Paul Cadet MD, Anne D'Orvilliers, Djovensky Mathurin MD and Sophia Lopez RN in the operating room anteroom

Our field hospital functions in five adjoining rooms, each less than a half-minute's walk from each other, and not the segregated buildings and locked secure wards we function in at home. And I am convinced that life-altering memories are part of this Dame-Marie mission experience because everyone is working right next door to activities and specialties they have never before experienced.

The miracle of new life is a special gift that most medical personnel do not get to see up close and in all its rawness, and you can see how the magic that holding new life that you helped arrive safely invigorates our team members.



(L-R) Sophia Lopez RN and Mohammed Timur Ahsan EMT before the delivery (above) and after (below)



Mohammed Timur Ahsan EMT



Kathleen O'Hara



Melissa Ouellette RN

The Return Home

Too soon the week is over, and we must return to our over-scheduled and much more complicated lives. Having left Dame-Marie at 07:00 am and enduring the 13+ hour bus ride back to Port-au-Prince, we are thankful to arrive at our usual rest stop, Wall's International Guest House, in Port-au-Prince, which allows us to be nearer the airport and insure our being able to make the early return flight to the US on Saturday.





(L-R) Mohammed Timur Ahsan EMT, Sophia Lopez RN, Ian Tenney HFD Chief, Brenda Tenney CMO, Kathleen O'Hara, Pamela Yates RN, Anne D'Orvilliers, Michael R. Bourque MD and Kathy Aries RN

But back in Dame Marie, the oceanfront not destroyed by the Hurricane continues its daily rhythms, the church choir practices, and the church, that gives the town its name, keeps silent watch over our sisters and brothers until we can return to bring more help to these gracious and deserving people.



Thank you for reading and special thanks to all who help us serve those with few blessings. Whether you are on the ground in Haiti, at home with the myriad support tasks or helping recruit or raise dollars, you are all making a difference that could not have been imagined 5+ years ago.

God Bless,

Michael R Bourque MD

Medical Director for MATH Dame-Marie