

## LaSER Haiti 2016 – Trip Report

In Summer 2015 a group of young women started thinking about how to create their own incredible journey. In the autumn of 2016 we can reflect back on a wonderful journey of discovery, personal development and friendship with some amazing memories.



Two group leaders working with nine leaders, young leaders and members of the senior section aged 18-25 we journeyed off to Haiti this summer. Working with local volunteers through a small community charity, Clean Water for La Vallee, we fitted water filters, delivered Train the Trainer sessions with local teachers and children in water, sanitation and hygiene, ran a summer camp and planted coffee trees.

We started in Port au Prince, the capital of Haiti which was rocked by a huge earthquake in 2010. Evidence of the earthquake and the aftermath is still visible, with temporary housing still widely used and damaged public amenities stretched past capacity. With the numerous strains on resources the city has not recovered financially or managed to build the housing needed for people to live in since the devastation. However, the lasting impression is of a busy and bustling city with plenty to see and plenty of people to meet! We explored local markets and visited the oldest hotel in the city which is a beautiful construction dating from colonial times.







We headed into La Vallée, a big mountainous region south of Port au Prince for the major part of our trip. The landscape is dominated by farms and small holdings which are cut into the steep hills to maximise use of the land - the locals move about these pieces of land with a deftness of movement we were not able to replicate!



During our time in La Vallée we worked with Clean Water for La Vallée to install water filters and train teachers and pupils about safe water usage. This was incredibly rewarding and we met so many inspiring people including Kervins, Bethilde and Faradia pictured here. Together we also painted a mural to continue reminding children about the importance of clean water and to leave a memory of our visit with them.







We also worked with Clean Water La Vallée to plant coffee tree seeds as part of their reforestation project. This programme helps farmers include trees on their land which improves surrounding environment, particularly the quality of the soil, which allows farmers to grow better crops and to diversify they produce and create a sustainable income. As many families grow food to eat or sell every scrap of land is valuable and must be used to support the family. Coffee, bananas and cocoa are the best trees for this in La Vallée and we worked in the reforestation nursery to prepare seeds and re-plant saplings which would be given to local farmers.



While planting seeds we discovered a group of local Scouts who were also volunteering in the nursery. What luck! They immediately invited us along to their next meeting and we agreed to share activities from both sides as a cultural exchange. It was great fun and the friendship continued throughout our stay with several shared sessions.





Throughout our trip the people we met were incredibly welcoming and wanted to show us more of Haiti. We were very lucky to take a day trip to the idyllic Basin Bleu waterfall, which was like taking a step into paradise!



Halfway through our stay in La Vallée we took a one-night break and travelled a short distance to Jacmel on the coast. The small town is famous for its street art and we were given a walking tour of some of the highlights. We then spent the night in a lovely locally owned hotel on the beach, where we enjoyed an amazing thunderstorm whilst safely sitting under some huge palm-thatched umbrellas. We were also treated to cultural evenings with dancing, music and theatre skits. The Haitian dancers have amazing skill and rhythm and although we tried our best to join in and copy their moves we were sadly unable to match their talents!!





During the summer many Haitian children spend time playing and entertaining themselves, just like they do here in the UK. This is a great time to provide extra activities where they are safe and can socialise and learn throughout the summer. We were able to deliver a five day summer programme at a local school where we delivered a craft, a sport and a literacy session each day. We also included games and activities about clean water and health.



Clean Water for La Vallée is a community led initiative and they have fantastic links in the communities of La Vallée. This enables the charity's committee to understand the specific challenges the local people are facing and to react in whichever way best suits need and people. This includes supporting education programmes to underpin their clean water in school initiative. Their expansion to include reforestation within their remit has occurred through community feedback, as deforestation for crops and domestic wood use has significantly reduced the rainfall in the country, which is compounding the issues of water shortage and contamination and leading to smaller crops and economic hardships.

Concordia, a national partner of Girlguiding, facilitated the partnership with Clean Water for La Vallée and co-ordinated the trip and the necessary preparation.

Both Concordia and Clean Water for La Vallée made our lives so much easier and were integral to our feeling of friendship and warmth with the people we met in Haiti.



During the planning stage we worked with Concordia to identify the focus of our volunteer work and to design an itinerary that would allow the group to experience the reality of Haiti and meet people who are focussed on improving communities at a grass roots level. This was a major incentive for partnering with Clean Water for La Vallée, we really wanted to see how, and be part of, community action that has a lasting positive impact. Even in the short time we were in Ridoré and the surrounding communities it was clear to see that the personal investments of time, skills and willingness to work together has created a close knit family working towards lasting and sustainable change. It is hard to describe how completely overwhelmed we were by individual people's determination to work together to identify community needs and take action to create a legacy of hope. When it was time to head back to Port au Prince it was tearful good bye.

For course, by the end of our stay in La Vallée we were looking forward to a few days of relaxation. It had been a full on couple of weeks and we needed to take some time out to decompress and take in all we had experienced. After an overnight stay in Port au Prince we headed to the stunning Wahoo Bay for some much needed fun. It was the perfect end to an experience of a lifetime.







Being a part of LaSER Haiti 2016 was a journey of extreme contrasts: it has given us all a better insight into the lives of people living in abject poverty. We are more aware of the circumstances around poverty and the direct impact poverty has on real people. We saw, without the filter of a television or news article, how lack of natural resources and an unstable government can have devastating consequences for communities, and at times this was incredibly hard to see and reconcile why this is still allowed to happen in 2016. But, we also met with people who had visions of a different Haiti. Where communities are able to provide clean water and enough food for the people living in there. Where there is access to healthcare and affordable education for all children. Where the environment is protected and nurtured and able to provide for future generations. It was incredible and humbling to see how they are making these visions a reality and we hope to be able to support them through future LaSER trips to achieve their aims.

