

## **Diary - Research trip Haiti Earthship School**

**Location: La Gonave, Haiti.**

**Research trip dates: October 31 - November 03, 2020**

**Research done by Phil Basehart and Deborah Binder.**

### October 31: Arrival in Haiti

Phil and I arrived in Port Au Prince on an easy 2-hour flight from Florida. The flight was busy and buzzing with an excited crowd of Haitians, giving us a little taste of what to expect already. Upon arrival at the airport in PortAuPrince, we paid a \$10 arrival fee, and then lined up for immigration. The immigration hall was quite busy and after a one hour wait to reach the desks, some people in line started getting a little bit impatient and the hall was filled with voices of frustrated Haitians, urging to get through the immigration process and probably be reunited with their loved ones.

While we were waiting, an airport staff member took everyone's temperature and recorded every party's name on a list for COVID regulation purposes. Since Phil and I were traveling together, his name was recorded on the list and for me she just wrote "+ husband"...

The immigration process itself was easy, requiring the usual fingerprint donation. A Haitian address and phone number was required.

We then proceeded to pick up our luggage, aided by a friendly Haitian who, once we identified and had our suitcases proclaimed that "he was now done" and demanded a tip. Luckily he was not offended by us not finding that tip justified.

Once outside the airport building, about 100 Haitians came running up to us offering to carry our luggage, drive us to our hotel, or be our guide in the city. Most of them just went to my "wife" Phil, so I did not get hassled too much, but in any case everyone is very friendly and polite. Vladimir, who had worked with Earthship before in Haiti ever since 2010 found us immediately, and took us to a prearranged taxi with which we drove the short 5 minute journey to the adjacent local airport.

Our host, Kelly, was unfortunately delayed because of technical problems with her flight from the US, so Vlad, Phil and I decided to fly over to La Gonave early since we did not have to wait for her. At the airport terminal both our luggage and ourselves were weighed on a scale to determine if we were light enough for a small airplane, while a couple of friendly Haitians offered us their art for sale.

After about an hour waiting in the very clean and comfortable waiting lounge, we were taken to our 5 seater plane, and the friendly MAF pilot and copilot made us feel welcome and took us on our short 17 minute flight across the ocean to La Gonave. It was a real treat to be able to see the landscape and architecture of Haiti from above. The ride was smooth and so was the landing on the short and sandy runway in La Gonave Islands.

The incredibly welcoming crew from Pi Gwo Byen, Kelly's organization and school, were already awaiting us at the airport and somehow managed to take all three of us and our luggage on two small "moto-taxis" to our destination. We traveled on dirt roads through the town of Anse-a-Galets, a buzzing town of 60,000 inhabitants that immediately felt friendly and full of everything we needed - small hardware stores, supermarkets, piles of sand and gravel on the side of the road and incredibly beautiful and well-dressed locals minding their own every day business.

When we arrived in Pi Gwo Byen and went through the big gate to enter the compound, we were both blown away by the beauty and tranquility of where we had just arrived. A perfectly flat and prepared site to the right for the school we will build with a bunch of tires just waiting for us, a



pavilion and a beautiful shaded area to the left with a number of big trees, and then of course the perfectly blue and still ocean lying just in front of us...

Once we snapped out of our daze, we put our things away and started inspecting the property, the site, and the materials that were there. Vladimir had already transported 1000 tires to the site, some bottles were there and the camp site was pretty much ready to be used. Some of the school kids came to greet us, and the never after ending exchange of Creole and English started right there.

After a quick lunch (local chicken with fried plantains and salad) we got to work with a friendly group of school children and the local crew. Phil started laying out the building with the older crew (Kaba, Milite, James, Vlad...) and I started sorting tires with some of the local children who were very excited to help us and did a great job. Phil and the crew laid out the building, pulled and secured stringlines to mark the most important measurements and determined the center and exact locations of each of the rooms and bathrooms. We then laid out the first course of tires for three of the rooms - leaving the last room and bathrooms open for access with materials.

When we were done in the afternoon we all went for a well deserved swim in the ocean together.

After a rinse and a change, Vladimir and Kaba took us to the public plaza - 5 minute walk away - and to the VIP section of a local restaurant called "Never Give Up VIP" for a Prestige, a local very good beer. Later we had local bread and avocado for dinner in front of the ocean.

#### November 1st: Sorting tires and more

We started the day with Haitian coffee (black sweetened coffee that is very good) and started sorting the 1000 tires on site with the same crew we had the day before. This was a great opportunity for us to learn tire sizes in Creole and for them in English. A lot of the tires were full of mosquitoes that the local children would kindly and immediately kill when they would see them land on us.

Once done (took us about three hours with the crew), we walked through the neighborhood to a sand and gravel provider to check out the quality of the gravel we needed to pound the two first courses of tires with, since we could not do much more without gravel. Just as we got back, Kelly, our host arrived, and after introductions were done and we explained how welcome her team had made us feel, we went for a little town tour to check out some of the accommodation options available.

Hotels are surprisingly expensive in Anse-a-Galets and completely out of proportion in comparison with the cost of everything else, since they are usually geared towards people on vacation or members from international charity groups. Also, the Haitian Gourd just went up in value, meaning that the cost is almost double for anyone exchanging US Dollars to Gourds, which is the case for many locals who are financially supported by relatives living in the US.

The walk was also a good way of getting to know the town a little more and seeing what is available and we were able to find some good gravel and securing it for the next morning. Kelly, our host, is well known and respected by many people in the town as her organization has been doing an incredible job over the last decade providing a school for local children that would usually not have the opportunity to go to school at all.



After our successful walking tour and happy despite our mosquito bites and sunburns, we ended the day by visiting the restaurant next door to the property called Destiny. Later that night, Phil and I walked to the public plaza just by ourselves for some street food.

### November 2nd: Starting the building!

After a morning swim in the ocean, we all went to a small site 5 minutes away from the job site (it seems like everything here is 5 minutes walking distance) where some of the local crew were already shoveling gravel from the side of the road into a small dump truck. We proceeded to help them - Phil more than myself as the local crew did not really trust me with a shovel - and ended up taking three truck loads back to site. What a great morning work out.

Invincible Phil then immediately started pounding the first course of tires of the first room with the local crew while Kelly and I headed in and out to scout for materials, tools, hotel rooms and dirt. With the bad exchange rate, finding dirt that is affordable seems to be a challenge more than anything else. The hardware stores are able to provide most of what is needed, and trash is abundant on the island since there is no garbage pickup service. The school that we will build in January uses dry garbage for insulation - as well as bottles for walls -, literally consuming tons and tons of garbage. We are hoping that this will show locals a different way of processing their garbage.

In the meantime, Phil was able to teach the local crew how to pound a tire with gravel, and Kelly and I were astounded by how much they got done given the heat, sun and humidity that day. The construction of the new Pi Gwo Bjen school has officially started!! This will make such a huge difference to so many children, their futures, and generations to come!

When we last got back, we all went for the usual well deserved swim and headed out to a local bbq place that evening guided by our incredible hosts Kelly and Kaba.

### November 3rd: Departure

Early in the morning our wonderful hosts took us to the small airport and we flew out, seeing the site one last time from the air before going back to our international flights.

We cannot wait to come back with a group of students and crew and make this long awaited and much needed school a reality. What a wonderful project.

To support this project or join us in January, please visit [www.biotectureplanetearth.org/haiti](http://www.biotectureplanetearth.org/haiti).