

The Experience of a Life Time: Reflections on cruising into history 2004

Written by Dr. Ron Daniels

Wednesday, 02 September 2009 14:47

Five years ago, August 14-21, more than 500 African Americans, Haitian Americans and Friends of Haiti set sail from the Port of Miami on Royal Caribbean Cruise Line's Navigator of the Seas for an extraordinary journey -- Cruising Into History, a Caribbean Pilgrimage to commemorate the 200th Anniversary of the Haitian Revolution, which produced the first Black Republic in this hemisphere. The vision and mission of this remarkable Pilgrimage was to lift the veil of ignorance and misconceptions surrounding Haiti by exposing the participants to the rich history, culture and heritage of a much maligned people and nation.

In that vein, a major goal of Cruising into History (CIH) was to promote cultural/historical tourism as a vehicle for economic development for Haiti. As a veteran social/political activist and organizer, CIH was one of the most challenging and rewarding experiences of my life.

I have a deep and abiding passion for Haiti because of the phenomenal achievement of the Haitian revolutionaries in creating the first Black Republic in this hemisphere - the first time an enslaved people achieved such a feat in the history of the world. This improbable Revolution was consummated at the height of the holocaust of enslavement and the trans-Atlantic slave trade. It also coincided with the propagation of the myth of white supremacy. Time and time again, I have stated that Haiti was stigmatized, isolated, marginalized, subjugated, impoverished -- punished for shattering the myth of white supremacy. It is my conviction that people of African descent and people of conscience/goodwill everywhere owe a special debt to Haiti.

Using CIH as a vehicle/hook, the commemoration of the Bicentennial of the Haitian Revolution offered an excellent opportunity to conduct a massive campaign to educate people about Haiti's incredible history and contributions to the world. Being an ambitious thinker, the original goal was to mobilize thousands of people to travel to Haiti to visit the Citadel, the magnificent mountaintop fortress built by King Henri Christophe after the Revolution to deter or defeat future invasions of Haiti. The Citadel is located in the northern part of the country in Milot near Cap Haitien. The problem was the lack of enough quality hotel rooms in the region to accommodate a large number of visitors. As a cruise lover, it occurred to me that the solution was to make a cruise ship the hotel! Hence was born the idea of Cruising into History!

Since Royal Caribbean International (RCI) is the only cruise line that travels to Haiti, HSP entered into discussions with them to provide a ship for the Pilgrimage. We were in the process of developing a positive working relationship with RCI, however, initially top brass from the company had great skepticism about the feasibility of CIH. Indeed, in my first conversation with their designated representative, she must have thought I was insane as I glibly articulated my dream of chartering two cruise ships to take upwards of 6,000 people to Haiti to visit the Citadel [in retrospect the idea was a bit delusional]. But once RCI was convinced that CIH was a worthy project, whatever the size, they made every effort to ensure its success. Ultimately we agreed that a half ship or 1,500 people was a more reasonable and attainable goal.

Given the negative images people have about Haiti, even recruiting that number was no small undertaking. To educate the public about the history and culture of Haiti and recruit participants for CIH, HSP launched a multi-pronged public relations campaign. Marc Morial the outgoing Mayor of New Orleans, who is of Haitian descent, agreed to be Honorary Chairman of CIH.

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Danny Glover graciously accepted the position of Ambassador-at-Large. Bev Smith came on board as the official voice for the Pilgrimage via the American Urban Radio Networks. In short order a number of high profile leaders and personalities signed on as Special Guests - Susan Taylor, Sonia Sanchez, Haki Madhubuti, George Fraser, Congress Members, John Conyers, Sheila Jackson-Lee and Maxine Waters and the legendary Katherine Dunham, to mention a few. RCI hosted receptions on its ships in Miami, New Orleans and New York to promote CIH. Special events were held in numerous cities across the country culminated with a seven city tour by Dr. Ron Daniels and Leslie Voltaire, Minister for Haitians Living Abroad, with stops in New York, Boston, Pittsburgh, Detroit, Chicago, Atlanta and Fort Lauderdale. Even if the Cruise had never happened, millions of African Americans and other people of African descent learned more about Haiti than ever before as a result of the public relations campaign.

CIH almost didn't happen. January 1, 2004, I had the privilege of attending Haiti's Bicentennial Celebration at the National Palace in Port Au Prince along with Danny Glover and Herb Boyd.

Tensions and conflicts inside the country were very much in evidence on this memorable occasion. In late February, after months of internal strife, Haiti was in turmoil after the U.S. orchestrated ouster of President Jean Bertrand Aristide. It was simply not safe to travel to any part of Haiti. In addition, there was the political question as to whether CIH might be viewed as an endorsement of the U.S. and U.N. installed Interim Government. Unfortunately, contracts with the cruise line had already been signed and more than 500 people had paid for their reservation. No doubt hundreds more would have signed on but were frightened away by the insurrection. Danny Glover and Sonia Sanchez withdrew from participating in CIH out of concern that the Pilgrimage would be viewed as condoning the Interim Government and by extension the ouster of President Aristide.

It was a painful moment of crisis, personally and institutionally. To address the concerns, a compromise was reached where it was agreed that the visit to Haiti would not include entering the country to visit the Citadel. Instead, CIH would be welcomed at Labadee by the Local Development Committee of Milot, our partners on the ground in Haiti, and local artists and musicians with no role or support from the Interim Government. After the U.S. sent troops to re-establish order, the situation calmed down sufficiently for CIH to continue.

Under these conditions, CIH set forth on what would still be a once in a life time experience. The itinerary included stops in Nassau, Bahamas, St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands, San Juan, Puerto Rico and the climatic stopover at Labadee in Haiti. At every port we were welcomed by officials of Government and leaders from the community. In a very moving gesture, Danny Glover met the group in Nassau to state his emphatic opposition to the ouster of President Aristide and share his decision to withdraw from participating in CIH. Congresswoman Donna Christian Christiansen welcomed us in St. Thomas and local musicians treated us to a superb cultural performance. In San Juan, members of the group participated in an African Heritage Tour. As we moved from port to port, onboard the ship there was an incredible series of educational seminars, cultural performances and films as the group bonded in preparation for touching the soil of Haiti.

When we landed at Labadee, we were greeted by the Local Development Committee of Milot.

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The compromise was extremely disappointing to the Committee and the residents of the region who had been preparing for months to greet their Haitian American and African American sisters and brothers. Scores of vendors had purchased wares anticipating an opportunity to do a banner day of business.

From our perspective the compromise was the best we could make of a bad situation. After some heartfelt explanations, the Welcome Ceremony complete with Haitian drummers and dancers proceeded. We pledged to repay the losses incurred by the vendors who had invested their precious monies (many bought wares with their children's tuition for school). Equally important, HSP pledged to focus its humanitarian and developmental support efforts on Milot and to assist the population to transform the town into a Mecca for cultural/historical tourism and people based economic development for the area/region. As evidence of our commitment, HSP promised to lead a Pilgrimage to the Citadel in 2006, the 200th Anniversary of the construction of this spectacular fortress. It was at the moment on the beach in Labadee that HSP's Model City Initiative for Milot was born.

Back on the ship, participants made generous contributions to assist HSP to repay the vendors and begin the process of creating an infrastructure for economic development in Milot. In 2006, HSP kept its promise by sponsoring the first annual Pilgrimage to the Citadel. This was followed by another Pilgrimage in 2007. As we prepare for the Third Annual Pilgrimage to the Citadel, October 8-12 of this year, it is useful to remember that the incredible education and organizing around CIH in 2004, with all its challenges, has born tremendous fruit. The once relatively obscure town of Milot is now a focal point of national and international attention as the Citadel is rapidly emerging as the face of cultural/historical tourism for the first Black Republic in this hemisphere. I would like to believe that Cruising into History and HSP's Pilgrimages to the Citadel have made a modest contribution to the new promise on the horizon for the first Black Republic in this hemisphere!

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