

Blanc ... Blanc ... and the road to Bon Bon

For those who have.  
For those who have not.

For those who never will (travel to Bon Bon).

For no good reason — I am one of a few that feels an over inflated sense of entitlement to jump on one of the HMI motorbikes that is usually left in the depot. I do so to explore the countryside, to meet our Haitian brothers and sisters. Each time I do, I am rewarded. So this pattern repeats itself on every trip.

Today was particularly hot, no wind, uncomfortably humid — so I was easily convinced to throw a day bag on my back and go. Having been to Haiti enough times, I wasn't surprised to find the battery on the 'moto' was dead. Regular maintenance on equipment can occasionally be a source of some frustration, but luckily a rolling start on a motorbike pointing downhill is not a challenge.

The road to Bon Bon from Numero Deux is about seven, maybe eight miles, but those who have travelled any Haitian roads know, it isn't how FAR that matters.

The familiar faces of Numero Deux turn from what they are doing to see me as I pass by. They call my name, "Brooan ... Brooan ..." I am touched they remember. I could not care about the pronunciation — it is a kind greeting and I am grateful.

I pass the pig on the left, he is sitting in the mud puddle that has been created by the women washing clothes, he is just past the ring on the other side of the dirt road where the chickens fight at night. I wave to the women washing clothes at the fountain; they all smile and wave back. The basins will soon be emptied and the clean, wet clothing will replace the soapy water. These basins will be balanced atop their heads while walking home — they will fail to realize how remarkable this is.

The young people in orange shirts with blue shorts and skirts are coming out of school. They are blissfully disinterested in anything other than themselves — just like every other teenager in the world.

I pass the washout in the road, a deeper V cutting into the already narrow road with every passing season. Pipes carrying the water to Jérémie are now exposed, from here you can see the deep ravine being carved into the earth every rainy season.

I haven't yet shifted out of 2nd gear.

The large concrete block wall on the right side of the road — the one with the red gates — it is open. I slow to look inside; there is nothing to see; just piles of gravel.

The man with the bowed legs is walking in front of me — his dark shirt is made darker from the dirt, his oversized pants are tied over at his waist as he slides his broken sandals along the ground

to keep them on his feet. Woven into his fingers are the four legs of two chickens — swaying — they are upside down, resigned to their fate.

An old log has fallen on the runway detour cut-off and is now partially blocked, it too has been unfortunately sculpted by the rain. Now only a motorbike can pass over without difficulty.

I can shift into 3rd, the road is smooth, not pavement smooth, but Haiti smooth — the kind of smooth I like. Pebbles in the gravel under the tires are being thrown, the heat of the sun being cooled by the wind.

The aroma of burning coal used to boil oil for deep fried meat patties is now familiar to me. This roadside food stand is tucked into the corner of the airstrip entrance. This food stand is larger than most. You could easily fit 10, maybe 15 people under it, but today three men are standing in front of the stick building wrapped in tin.

One of them is shouting at two men on the other side of the road, these men are also standing under another stick building wrapped in tin, it is much smaller.

The armed guard in the tower watches me as I pass. I wonder if he could answer my question, ‘how many soldiers are stationed in the UN Compound?’ We often pass heavily armed soldiers travelling in the comfortable seats that have been bolted to the back of the small white pick-up trucks. These soldiers come from around the world. One could easily conclude they have nothing in particular to do, but I will not ...

I slow to listen to the music; the freshly painted bright orange Magazin (store) that sells cold prestige to hot Haitians is always busy. The music fades as I slowly come to the beginning of the runway.

Two ladies are washing clothes using the water that is spraying out of the broken pipe. It has been broken for years, maybe it is supposed to be that way? Later this afternoon they will walk to their stone and mud homes that are still damaged from the hurricane ... The hurricane that was two years ago.

Drifting to the left side of the road, giving room to the elderly lady wearing a baseball cap, she has hard wrinkled hands, a faded pink shirt with the buttons done up to her neck, and a brown knitted skirt hanging just below her knees. The mule, her mule, is burdened with charbon (coal), a necessity in this country that is carried to and from on anything that has feet or wheels.

Without shifting gears I manage the fork in the road, right not left — everyone knows Debaross and Matineau are to the left. The last time I chose left, Bobby Barrilleaux and I had to walk the distance from Martineau to Numero Deux on foot, travelling what would be a ‘regular road,’ we broke the steering column on the ‘mule’ (this one had wheels). Neither of us was prepared to complain about the 45-minute walk to Numero Deux, knowing that the 90-year-old lady with the grey brimmed hat and tight curls walks this path every morning to be at mass at 6 am.

The road to the right needs repair.

“Blanc ... Blanc ...,” I hear in the distance. It begins!

Blanc is the term Haitians use to describe us — white.  
It isn't derogatory — it is just a word — a word they use.

A man with a machete in his left hand waits for me to pass the narrow dry (slightly higher) path around the puddle that stretches across the road. He acknowledges me with his left hand, a lift of the blade.

A large pile of charbon packed in rugged white bags each the size of large duffel bag is not so neatly stacked on the side of the road. Each of the bags will fetch about 750 Haitian Goude. I guess it to be about 26,000 Goude's worth lying there unattended.  
It won't be long before it is not there..

We don't usually see a market stand this far down the road, fashioned out of two- to three-inch wide trimmed branches tied together and stands about four feet tall. It is holding items like soap, creams even some first aid supplies to be sold to passersby. Curious!

The first hill is paved and the paving ends before you reach the bottom. This has formed a washed out rutted scabble of etched sandstone. It is difficult to find a suitable path. Large loose stones fall away under the tires. I am in first gear!

At the lowest point of this incline you reach Ravine Sable. The Sand River is fitting, as it is dry most of the time. I have only ever seen water flow through this narrow river once. This is for most of us, the end of the road.

A well at this point offers water when the river doesn't. We don't usually travel beyond this point, why would you when you have an angel that sings to you when you visit. Sadly Jonas wasn't there today. Jonas is blind — he must be 19 or 20 now — blinded as a young boy by an act of kindness gone horribly wrong.

It begins again.

“Blanc ... Blanc ...,” the further we go, the less we are recognized. Brooan isn't known here.

“Blanc ... Blanc ...,” the young boys yell as I politely reply, “Bonswa ...”

“Mwen Bezwen manje,” they say. “I need food!!”

My heart breaks again!! Is this the 14th or 15th time today?

I have brought nothing — I know better!! Never leave without something! That was a mistake.

The horn sounds off, turning my attention. A ‘considerably’ overloaded delivery truck rocks and sways and bounces down the rocky hill/road. It's really neither, and more likely the terrain that the Moon rover would have been tested on!!

Still in first gear, I slowly give way to the Kamyon (BIG truck). The horn again!! Always horns — it is a form of communication that I have not yet deciphered!! Three men wave to me, they are sitting on top of this unstable load. Is it loaded with coal, and ... chairs? Yes, wooden chairs?? curious!!

The man standing on the side rail holding onto the driver's door says something that I do not understand. I politely reply, "Bonswa." I am convinced he was angry at me for something. HIS use of 'Blanc' didn't have the same innocent tone the young boys at the river had.

Still in first gear!!

I am reminded of the words Rudy Soignet told me when we were here together a few years ago.

People would pay dollars for the privilege of riding motorbikes around this place. They would love the challenge. This rocky, washed out hill heading away from Ravine Sable was all the brochure would say it was!!

Small family gardens intrigue me the most. Where there is no simple source of water to drink, plants grow. I am humbled by the effort it must take to deliver water by hand to these small plants that nourish these families. I pass by several well-tended gardens before the next paved hill. Someone at some point wisely and generously decided this hill as it would become impassable with time and paving was the only way to remain for the community beyond to remain connected to Jeremie.

When you are blessed with a breathtaking view of the Caribbean Sea, when it is framed by coconut trees and brilliant greenery in the foreground, and — as if by chance — a boat with radiant white sails fully open, you stop!!!

How difficult it must be to carve a road horizontally through the side of a mountain, how beautiful it is when you are given a chance to travel across this same road.

Haitian Chickens are EVERYWHERE! How do the Haitians know which chicken belongs to which family?

These chickens walk with a confidence that is not matched in the rest of the animal kingdom. When crossing the road, they so rarely scurry to avoid being hit, but they steadily and slowly strut just out of the way of oncoming traffic. It's true... ask anyone.

"Blanc ...!!" This time from an older man.

"Kisa ou Genyen," what do you have?

I stop! And politely answer as I always do, "Bonswa." This time quickly looking at Google translate.

“Mwen pa gen anyen,” good day, I have nothing. I smile and pull away, praying that simple conversation would appease him.

He did smile as I pulled away. I don't think I offended him, though I know I disappointed him.

“Blanc ... Blanc ...” more!! The children appear from behind the trees that act as fences that separate their homes from the road.

“Blanc ... Blanc ...” they say again. I stop. These children surround me. They just want to touch my legs. I imagine them saying, “does a white person's skin feel different than mine?” I hope the answer they have is ... ‘no, it feels the same.’ Curious?

I have travelled five miles, maybe six. For sure I didn't reach Bon Bon. I was told there is a beach there. I don't see a beach — I was still on the side of a mountain.

My back is sore; the engine on the motorbike is hot!

Bon Bon will have to wait — for now ...

The journey is the destination ...

— Brian Schmidt