

# Looking Out for Their Own Skin

## Haiti: Don't cry for the 'repugnant' rich

**I**F YOU'RE YOUNG, RICH, LIGHT-SKINNED and Haitian, Wahoo Bay is the place to be. It's easy to forget that this charming resort lies on the north coast of the most miserable island in the Western Hemisphere. Jet Skis make lazy figure eights in the Caribbean waters, and the resort's dining room is always crowded with preening youths. Four-wheel-drive vehicles jam the parking lot—Haiti's elite managed to stockpile plenty of fuel before the United Nations declared an international oil embargo last spring. If they run out of gas, the lines are terribly long at the filling station. Very unpleasant. But of course, the chauffeur will go.

It's no wonder Western diplomats like to refer to these people as the "MREs"—the Morally Repugnant Elite. But even the MREs are suffering these days from an anxious sense of *fin de siècle*. President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, deposed nearly two years ago in a violent army coup, is due to return by Oct. 30. That doesn't spell the end of Haiti's upper crust, which has survived wars, coups and invasions and always managed to cling to its privileges, somehow. Aristide, himself a dark-skinned scion of Haiti's tiny middle class, knows he has to court the elite. He's chosen one of their number, a wealthy printing-plant owner named Robert Malval, to be interim prime minister. But Aristide is also a rabble-rousing democrat who once told his followers, "Every time you feel the heat of the street . . . look into the eyes of the people who have possibilities, and ask them, 'Why is it like this?'"

By American standards the MREs live pretty well, but by Haitian standards they live like royalty. Their forefathers arrived in Haiti from Europe, the Middle East and Jamaica during the past hundred years and became the country's merchants and industrial owners. Under Papa and Baby Doc, the infamous Duvaliers *père et fils* whose reign of terror spanned 30 years, the tycoon class was ordered to make money and stay out of politics. Fear of retribution still silences those members of the elite who are troubled by Haiti's glaring injustices. But under Duvalier, the MREs prospered. They attended the University of Miami and l'Université de



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Paris. They built homes in chic Pétienville, perched above the dirty capital. They played the commodities market and learned to distinguish a Bordeaux from a merlot. They're *cosmopolites* of a sort: multilingual cable-TV watchers and consumers of fresh *baguettes*. These people made weight-loss remedies popular in a country plagued by hunger. But Papa and Baby Doc also decided to keep them in line by creating a class of their own Duvalierists: a swelling corps of poor blacks who filled the ranks of the bureaucracy, the Parliament and the army.

The Duvalierists are the thugs who pulled off the 1991 coup, and MREs blame them for the international embargo that's crimping their lifestyle. Of course, the elite have found ways around the hardships. When the roads turned to mud, they drove Jeeps. When the phone system broke down, they used walkie-talkies. But even for Haiti's privileged class, the international embargo has gotten to be a downright drag. The resort at Wahoo Bay is nice, but MREs are used to summer-

**Worlds apart:** Preening at Wahoo beach, slumming in Port-au-Prince

ing abroad, away from the heat and dust of Haiti. Now plane tickets have gotten too expensive and visas are harder to come by. The country's hospitals are in such poor shape that the elite have to get medevaced to Miami in an emergency. "We are at a crossroads," says Prime Minister-designate Malval. "If we don't begin to modernize, we won't have a country left to live in."

Most MREs are grudgingly reconciled to the idea of Aristide's return, though they certainly don't trust him. Hardest of all was absorbing the notion that the United States was actually backing this left-wing populist president. It took the National Security Council, the Pentagon and congressional officials to convince one group of leading MREs last February. "Their mouths were hanging open," says a Haitian who helped set up the meetings. Of course, Bill Clinton made the bad medicine easier to swallow when he pledged last month to provide \$37.5 million as part of a five-year international reconstruction fund and to send at least 300 American security advisers as part of a U.N. contingent.

As Aristide's return draws nearer, the atmosphere in Port-au-Prince grows more tense. The Duvalierists know their days are numbered, and their army officers and government bureaucrats are seizing a last opportunity to shake down some bribes. "They are trying to squeeze the last few cents," says one leading businessman. Haiti's spoiled elite are the only ones with pennies to spare. But they'll get through these troubled times. They always do.

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