

Thursday, August 27, 1991

(S.F. 70, R. 50, *13A, R.W.G. 10A) ** 7B



travel

Iris Jones

The tap taps

Amid the tropics of Haiti, art cruises by on 4 wheels

By Yvette Cardozo
special writer

AMOND THE few adventures left in this semi-civilized world is a ride on a Haitian tap tap.

A tap tap is Haiti's answer to Greyhound, but it's more than just a bus. It is a palette for budding Haitian artists and a slice of Haitian life.

During my recent trip to Haiti, I decided a tap tap would not only get me cheaply from Cap-Haitien to Port-au-Prince, but also would spare me the usual tourist traps.

It was 7 a.m. when my friend and I found ourselves standing with our luggage in the middle of a muddy street in Cap-Haitien on Haiti's north coast.

Along the curb stood half a dozen standard vans and small flatbed trucks of indeterminate vintage, their paint jobs long ago blurred by mud and potholes.

Upon the flatbeds, each driver had painstakingly hammered a rectangle of wood, furnished with crude, thinly padded benches. A few of the newer ones had standard van seats.

WE CHOSE a vehicle that was slightly shinier than the rest, a Toyota pickup whose driver wanted \$4 apiece for the trip.

We were apprehensive about letting go of our luggage until we saw the stiff-legged fellow with folded arms standing on the roof. One look at his face and we decided nobody was going to mess with the luggage. Rooftop guards are standard practice here.

What makes these little buses stand out is the artwork upon their sides. Tap taps are like fingerprints; no two are alike.

Ours was a profusion of hot, strong color — fiery reds, deep purples, bright yellows. There were curtains painted on the windshield. The hucups were a primary swirl of red, yellow and blue. Upon each front door was a portrait of Moses, eyes blazing, with the 10 Commandments in his arms. The sides of the pickup bore scenes from the Haitian countryside.

The back end showed some kind of disaster — people stumbling through the turbid waters of a river and crawling up the banks.

The artwork was primitive but showed real talent on tap taps. Few tap tap owners these days do their own designs. It's become almost a specialty.

The buses all have names. Ours was "Lange du Ciel" — Angel of the Sky. One was called Deliverance, another was Discipline, and a third was Bath Sheba. My favorite was Shad Rack.

IT IS SAID tap taps began appearing just after World War II. They've always been rattlers, barely sputtering along on faith. Hence the name "tap tap." Supposedly, that's after the sound of their vintage engines. "Tap tap" is also local slang for hurry up, so the choice of origins is yours.

We were told it was to be a five-hour ride. Why then, I wondered, did one woman come equipped with food for two days — and a flashlight?

There are some tricks to riding tap taps. Pay the driver more and he'll let you sit up front, where it is cooler and more comfortable. If you've already missed the choice perch, buy two seats in back. With luck, you'll wind up with space for one and a half.

Remember the car stuffing contests of the 1950s? Add a couple of chickens, a goat or two and some errant furniture.

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Haitian artist Alix Beaujour (left) decorated the van in the style of Haitian "tap taps."

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