

Over the mountains, through the forest

Continued from preceding page

ture on the roof. Then paint it like an Easter egg and you've got the picture of your average tap tap.

At the city gates, a uniformed policeman stopped the bus and asked us something. Since we speak neither French nor the locally-brewed Creole, we never did find out what he wanted. But he seemed satisfied when we pulled out our pink tourist cards. Except for that one spot, police along the road did nothing more than wave.

Suddenly, an unfinished bridge loomed into view. Without breaking speed, our little truck rumbled down the bank and sank floorboard deep into the water. Several hundred yards later, we lunged up the other bank and went on our way.

AS THE MILES UNFOLDED, so did the face of rural Haiti. The land is a curious mixture of lush tropics and parched desert. Mud-walled huts were roofed with palm thatch. Mango trees grew between the houses; lines of well-trained cactus took the place of fences.

At the roadside, in the shade of trees, sat women and children near mats piled high with mangoes. Besides them stood gallon jars of light-brown paste. It was peanut butter — Haitian style with lots of spice.

People along the road shouted. Others waved. When we stopped scant minutes in tiny crossroad towns, friends passed packages to riders. Riders passed packages to friends. And sellers with fruit or bright pink soda pop hovered around the windows.

The streets were lined with piles of wares for sale — row upon row of plastic sandals, straw hats, silverware, enamel pots. Corn dried in the sun.

Among the crush of goods and people, a few stood out: a little girl with her head held high beneath a giant basket of charcoal, a wrinkled old woman huddled over piles of bread, a stringy-armed man with a freshly killed pig on his back, trying to maneuver his load through the crowd.

All too soon, we would start and the town was behind us.

Sometimes we would overtake another tap tap. Could we pass on the row mountain roads? The drivers were

very careful, understandable when one considers that the tap tap driver is also owner. He is jockeying his life's investment through a country where the average annual wage is \$130.

BEYOND THE FIRST CROP of mountains south of Cap-Haitien, the land turns to dust. The bananas and papaya, the lush greenness and red clay soil give way to cream sand and cactus trees whose fuzzy trunks are topped with spine-studded plates for leaves. Vast forests of these strange trees line the roads. The scrubby mountains look like the American southwest.

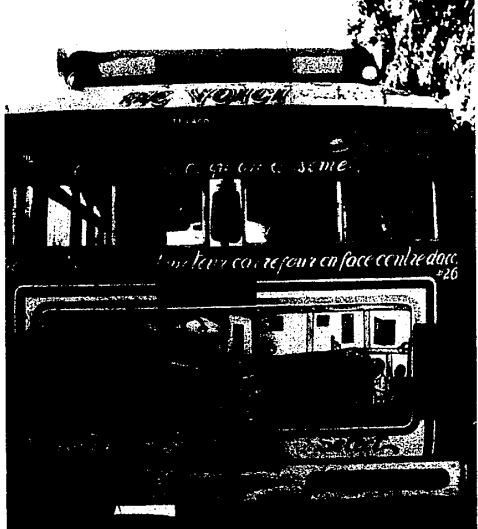
The desert is broken often by unexpected green, by a vest-pocket rain forest or a couple square miles of rice paddies. Eventually, we broke through the

last mountain pass and came back down to the sea. The mud-walled huts drew closer and closer together. There was a brick-walled building. Then two. And finally, we plunged back into urban life at the outskirts of Port au Prince.

This was not our first tap tap ride in Haiti. Like everybody else around, we took to hopping them for the 30-mile

trip from our resort to town. We learned the hard way, that it's best to use paper money. American quarters — though worth one and a half paper gourds — are exactly the size and feel of a Haitian coin worth pennies.

There are far kinder things to do to one's body than spend half a day in a tap tap. But it would be a shame to miss the adventure.



Haiti's moving art is a colorful display of imagination displayed on trucks and buses. Artists say the best way to hide dents and scratches is to make them part of the scenes.

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