

SEASONS GREETINGS!
Greetings from St. Vincent!

Actually, it should be Seasons Greetings since this should arrive sometime between Christmas and the new year. We are most excited and pleased to be living here and we're anxious to tell you of it. But first we need to bring everyone up to date on our adventures in the West Indies.....

We arrived in Miami full of promise of philanthropic doings in Peace Corps. We soon realized that there was a heck of lot more to the P.C. than "good works". Just being a member of the great Government machine was strain and education itself. We began and ended each session (it seemed) with mounds of paperwork. Most of it was necessary such as forms to receive our living allowance, immunizations and visas. But it still was a general hassle. We were anxious to get ON WITH IT. The paperwork was just another barrier to fulfilling our dreams of volunteerism. We spent three seemingly endless days in the Howard Johnsons in Miami (and a bit of a culture shock Miami is, too) and flew out to Jamaica on the 28th of October. Our immunizations still stung our arms, but our minds were on training in Sligo ville. The drive from the airport into Kingston was an eye-opener. I was ready for poverty and a dirty environment but I had U.S. standards in mind. It was at that point that I began to think seriously about my Peace Corps commitment. I was a bit put off by adapting to that lifestyle but the pool and sun beckoned and I put it aside.

In Jamaica, we lived with host families while we trained in Sligoville. Our particular family lived in Spanish Town which was about 20 miles from Kingston and 15 miles from Sligoville. I began to question this 'modest' standard of living when I saw the Mercedes Benz parked in the carport. But, Jamaica is a land of contradiction, and cold water showers (we were fortunate to have running water), different levels of sanitation, no refrigeration, and a host of other 'little things' soon reminded us that we were indeed a long way from America. The tin and wood lean-to's existed a few hundred yards from a mansion (which were easily equivalent or surpassed those in the states). The finest home would discharge waste water into an open ditch. It was these differences which came together to form the 'culture shock' we all felt from time to time. Our training centered on how to deal with 'culture shock' how to communicate effectively and how to create change in our respective island environment. Actually, it was not so much as how to create change, but rather to make us aware of how our presence would change and influence the residents and how to use that to benefit both yourselves and the island. We got the sneaking suspicion that there was more to this Peace Corps thing than met the eye. By the time I left, I had a totally different attitude toward this rather nebulous thing called Peace Corps. In our training lingo, I learned to deal with ambiguity.

There was much more to Jamaica than just our training. There were trips to the market which is quite an experience, trips on the local buses which was an exercise in sardine-packing (when they say there is always room for TWO more you had better well BELIEVE it!). Trips to Port Antonio (beautiful and tranquil) and to Ocho Rios (tourist city...). Generally we got out and about as much as time and \$15.00/day would allow. Though we were in Jamaica during the World Music Festival in Montego Bay, Deb and I never went though many of our peers did. We forged many friendships and experienced many kindnesses (like the couple in our group from Oregon who bought us dinner for our 1st anniversary) but Jamaica,

Though beautiful, still wasn't the place for us to put down our roots. It may have been due to the fact that our host family in Jamaica was not very hospitable. Or perhaps it was the heat and mosquitos. Whatever the reason was, we were glad to be leaving Jamaica. On December 2, I practically ran to the plane.

It was quite a beautiful flight that night. A full moon shone out over the Caribbean Sea and we watched cities of the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands (U.S.) pass below. We landed briefly in Antigua and got our first glimpse of how clean the Eastern Caribbean Islands were. We arrived in Bridgetown at about Ten PM. Our accommodations were 'sparse' to say the most but the town in general was clean and the beach and oceans beautiful. After a quick swearing in ceremony amid many dignitaries and media, we were zipped back to our guest house for a final nite in Barbados. Saturday we sauntered off the island on small but trustworthy LIAT airlines and arrived in Kingstown, St. Vincent in about 45 minutes. St. Vincent is 96 miles west of Barbados.

Since that time (just two days now) we've had time to check out Kingstown. It's a beautiful seaside city (but I would call it a village by its construction and population). Directly across the bay is Bequia an island (much smaller than St. Vincent) about 9 miles from here which is prized for its white sand beaches (St. Vincent has black sand). St. Vincent has an active volcano which erupted in 1979 and has been relatively quiet since. The volcano is some 15 miles north of here. Hurricanes have not been a major problem though they had one come past in '78 (I think)...

The particulars of E.C. living are some what the same and somewhat different than the usual stereotypes. There is running water which is scarce in rural areas. Likewise with electricity (except Jamaica electricity was more intermittent). Plenty of cars (many of which are brand new!). Houses in Jamaica were mostly of concrete block construction but St. Vincent seems to have many houses of wood. Generally they are very 'openly' built. That is to say that some houses have no back doors, just open breezeways. Most homes have louvered openings or open, decorative blocks which always allow air (and mosquitos) into the house. In essence E.C. living is outdoor living, indoors. Fortunately, St. Vincent seems not to have the major mosquito problem that we had in Spanish Town. We are also in the cool but still wet season here. Things should dry up and remain cool until about May. Then it heats up and pours. We couldn't have arrived, weather-wise, at a better time.

But we do miss the snow and the dramatic change in season we had in the states. Mostly, we miss being with family at this "family" time of year. Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Years as well as my birthday and Debs and my anniversary all occurred since we left the states in Oct. We are very anxious to be home for NEXT X-mas. We're saving our pennies already... We have yet to select a church.

There are no Lutherans (or, at least Lutheran Churches) and Kingstown has an Anglican, Catholic and Methodist Church. We'll attend all and settle in soon. We miss that community we left behind at Zion in Salt Lake. You know, we already saw Mormon missionaries here in Kingstown? They are very active. It's a peculiar way to feel 'at home' again. We hope they won't find out we're from Salt Lake....

For those who wish to write and do not already have our address: Pete & Debbie Helgren, C/O U.S. Peace Corps, P.O. Box 884, Kingstown, St. Vincent, West Indies. We welcome all writers and visitors (if you've a mind to).

Please forgive the atrocious spelling errors. And good things to all... God Bless you all in the Joyous Birth of HIS Son, Jesus Christ. We hope this season brings you more than you could ever wish for. We certainly have gotten it here. And, we MISS you all.

OOPSS... ran out of space at the close so will include a very rough map of where we are. Again , we love and miss you all.

Under The Mercy,

Lee & Debbie

