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Postcard from...Jamaica

A new gastronomic tour reveals a country that is about far more than rum and jerk chicken



There's nothing regal about Kingston's Coronation Market, which honours King George VI in name only and has been a cornerstone of the Jamaican capital for almost 80 years. Plunging into this chaotic warren of overlaid stalls and ever-hopeful hagglers, I find its engaging kerfuffle seems as much about the scene as the selling, with porters shoving ancient carts past burly ladies bartering over yams and old boys listening to the cricket beside a fiery pyramid of Scotch bonnet peppers.

A stranger might find this hot and crowded swirl of reggae beats and ganja-scented reverie daunting, but fortunately I'm in a small group chaperoned by Lynda Lee Burks, a sparky American who fell in love with this charismatic island many moons ago and who now leads expert tours into its most secret corners. This one is called "Jamaica on a Platter" and billed as a weekend quest "to find the best Blue Mountain coffee, rum and cuisine [Jamaica](#) has to offer".

Insider it certainly is. At one point Burks directs our minivan through the streets of downtown searching for an elusive office block offering “Life Management Services”. Here in a small back-room kitchen we discover Nick Davis, a British chocolatier who returned to the homeland of his parents a decade ago and now runs an artisanal bean-to-bar enterprise called One One Cacao. It’s a surprise when he informs us that there’s only one other chocolate producer on this huge and fertile island (virtually all its cocoa is exported), but Davis’s initiative is typical of a growing sense that it’s high time Jamaican food moved “beyond jerk”.

There is much for gastronomes to enjoy. At Devon House, a stately mansion built in 1881 by George Stiebel, Jamaica’s first black millionaire, we snack on excellent patties with fillings that include shrimp, goat, callaloo or lobster. In neighbouring I-Scream the myriad ice cream flavours stretch from soursop to stout with an optional topping of “sour worms”.



A dish at the Strawberry Hill Hotel in Irish Town

When we visit Coffee Traders, an industrial unit that roasts the much-lauded Jamaica Blue Mountain Coffee, we don white coats and hairnets for a factory tour rich with ambrosial aromas and learn why it pays to buy a pack labelled “100 per cent” rather than a blend, which need only contain a fifth of that amount to carry this premium name.

A fitting place to savour this sublime brew is on the veranda of the Strawberry Hill Hotel in Irish Town, which serves as a majestic base camp for our foodie forays. Perched high in the Blue Mountains at 3,100ft, this all-white wooden ensemble was bought by Jamaican music producer Chris Blackwell in 1974 and includes a glistening Gold Room filled with awards. Breakfast features classic dishes such as ackee and salt fish, while at dinner a prize dessert is a rum cake drenched in Blackwell's own "black gold" blend of the spirit.

As Burks' tour reveals, the Blue Mountains have plenty to interest visitors who like to get beyond Jamaica's beach resorts. Three years ago these mighty peaks were awarded World Heritage status, and in March an inaugural Jamaica Blue Mountain Coffee Festival was held in the expansive parade ground at Newcastle, a military base established in the 1840s by the British army on account of the healthy climate. There is now a Jamaica Blue Mountain Culinary Trail that pulls together a mix of coffee estates, small-scale accommodation and gastronomic stops. This includes gems like EITS Cafe, an endearingly free-form restaurant and guesthouse with a battered 1964 Morris Oxford at the entrance. The name stands for Europe In The Summer, an enchanted place in the eyes of owner Michael Fox, whose signature dish of a whole chicken roasted inside an oil drum with jerk and paprika gets Kingston's cool crowd haring up here every weekend.



A room at the hotel

There are also secret places to which Burks has privileged access, such as the evocative Heritage Gardens at Cold Spring, where she demonstrates how coffee was farmed here in the mid-18th century, and the thoroughly remote and lofty Clifton Mount Estate, which is set on the slopes of Catherine's Peak at 4,300ft. Dating from 1751, this is the oldest functioning coffee estate on Jamaica and reached via a winding single-lane road that climbs through the clouds as if bound for heaven. Here we have special permission to nose around its historic house and then picnic in its splendid gardens.

As we munch chicken sandwiches amid the vivid flora and panoramic vistas, it is hard to believe the frenzy of Kingston is just an hour's drive away. In 1872, when the Victorian adventurer and botanical artist Marianne North stayed at Clifton, she was enraptured by its gorgeous lilies, ferns and hummingbirds, and the steep hillsides covered with coffee bushes that she dubbed "an ill-regulated shrub" with berries the locals had to "humour" and pick continually. Nothing has changed, but as our delicious and delving weekend reveals, the Blue Mountains now offer much more than the terroir of a celebrated drink.

Details

Nigel Tisdall was a guest of Strawberry Hill Hotel (strawberryhillhotel.com). "Jamaica on a Platter" packages are available on the last weekend of the month and cost \$1,450 per person for three nights including accommodation, breakfast, a welcome dinner and guided tours.