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## Voodoo and the Caribbean's best party

Contributed by asap  
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There's much more to Haiti than coups and civil unrest. PAISLEY DODDS on deep-fried pork, rum punches and some of the richest culture in the Caribbean. Second in a 10-part series on correspondents' favorite places.

"You're going to Haiti on vacation?" a bemused friend asks.

It's a normal reaction. Haiti is not for the timid or fainthearted, but for people seeking a road less traveled, it can offer a magical Caribbean holiday.

Nestled on the western edge of Hispaniola -- the island it shares with the Dominican Republic -- Haiti has idyllic beaches, romantic gingerbread hotels, delicious food, vibrant night life and a rich history influenced by Voodoo.

According to legend, a slave named Boukman gathered followers in a northern forest and sacrificed a wild boar to the Voodoo spirits to win the country's independence from France. In 1804, after a successful slave rebellion, Haiti became the first black republic.

This supernatural aura surrounds everything in Haiti, from politics to music and art. But the ethereal glow is at its brightest during Day of the Dead celebrations, when revelers commune with the spirits at Port-au-Prince's main cemetery or up the road at The Olaffen Hotel, a palatial wooden hotel where guests sip potent rum sours on its wraparound verandah or doze in antique four-poster beds perched on several of the rooms' private balconies.

Richard Morse, lead singer of the band RAM, runs the hotel. It was made famous in Graham Greene's "The Comedians," which tells a wry and dark tale about Francois "Papa Doc" Duvalier's 29-year dictatorship in Haiti.

The hotel was built at the end of the 19th century by the Sam family, who lived there until 1915 when President Guillaume Sam was dragged into the street, shot and dismembered by a mob. Its tainted past hasn't fazed visitors, but the sprawling hotel inspires the imagination.

At October's end, the hotel grounds transform into an eerie party where Morse's band bangs out its Voodoo rhythms and crowds of locals, expatriates and wayward travelers dress as Baron Samedi, the guardian of the dead, in top hats and purple scarves, swaying to drumbeats and intoxicated by clouds of smoke and Vetiver oil being burned in lanterns dangling from trees.

Watch RAM perform live at a concert in Haiti.

If you can't make it around Halloween or beginning of November, RAM plays every Thursday night. Cancellations,

however, have occurred during revolts and curfews.

## PARTIES AND PORK

"Everybody loves a good party, and some people think ours is the best in the Caribbean," says Morse, whose mother is a famous Haitian singer and whose father was an American scientist. "It's a total release."

For a taste of real Voodoo -- an official religion sanctioned by the government -- tourists can sample the country's annual ceremonies.

Saut d'Eau in the south -- and on the way to the laid-back coastal art enclave of Jacmel -- offers visitors a chance to strip off old clothes and routines in July, bathe in a waterfall and pay homage to Erzulie, the equivalent of the Virgin Mary in Voodoo.

Many Haitians believe that in the mid-1800s, an image of the Virgin appeared near the waterfalls of Saut d'Eau. Visitors who make the journey by truck, bus, donkey, horse, or on foot -- a 40-mile trip from Port-au-Prince that takes five hours by car -- shouldn't be scared. Haitians, who come from the western hemisphere's poorest nation, have more pressing concerns than cursing tourists.

On the way out of the capital to reach Saut d'Eau is a mandatory diversion for non-vegetarians who have a penchant for pork. One of Haiti's staple meals is fried plantains, cabbage soaked in vinegar and hot peppers and griot (GREE-oh), delicious deep-fried marinated pork medallions.

A generous helping of this can be had in Kenscoff. That's a 30-minute drive north of Petionville, a suburb of the capital, Port-au-Prince. For less than \$5, women will fill your plate with mouth-watering morsels while you stand in the cool mountain air.

If you fear stomach problems, you probably shouldn't be in Haiti.

## FORTRESSES, BEACHES AND SHOPS

The beach at Cormier, a former colonial plantation, just a few miles west of Cap-Haitien. (asap/Jean-Cyril Pressoir)

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Some tourists ask about Haiti's safety after its history of political turmoil.

While Haiti has seen more than 30 violent overthrows of governments since its independence \_ most recently when rebels ousted former President Jean-Bertrand Aristide a second time and drove him into exile in South Africa -- its elections this year have returned calm to many parts of the country, most notably to the north.

From Cormier Plage, the hotel staff can arrange for a cheap boat to Labadie Beach, a pristine white sand beach with turquoise waters and ruins of an old sugar plantation that locals say once operated as a brothel for sailors.

Be sure to ask what days the beach is free of cruise ship tourists. Royal Caribbean brings thousands of tourists to the beach for day trips.

In the opposite direction, the folks at Cormier Plage can also arrange for a day trip to the Citadelle, a 19th century fortress built by King Henri Christophe to defend against invaders and perched on the sides of steep cliffs.

While it is one of the largest fortresses in western hemisphere, it is said that more than 20,000 people died to build it. Visitors can ride horses or donkeys up the steep pathway. Walking takes about 45 minutes.

Nearby is Sans Souci, Christophe's royal palace. Although it was partially destroyed in an 1842 earthquake, it still draws crowds to its lush surroundings.

Good shopping can be found up north, but the best is in Port-au-Prince and Petionville, where tourists can peruse galleries for Haiti's well-known artists. Other unique purchases include flags depicting the pantheon of Voodoo spirits and sequined sunglasses cases. Haitian artists are also known for their metal work; sculptures and lanterns are a particularly good find.

For the more adventurous, the Port-au-Prince market offers authentic Voodoo dolls and potions. Be sure to ask for Houngan, or witch doctor, if you have any special requests.

## RUM PUNCHES BY THE SEA

North of the capital, Port-au-Prince, is Haiti's second largest city, Cap-Haitien.

This dilapidated city whose French colonial buildings resemble old New Orleans provides a good base for exploring the country's northern treasures.

The Roi Christophe -- a colonial hotel with a tropical courtyard -- and the Mont Joli are two affordable hotels oozing with charm. Small restaurants and bars on the waterfront offer grilled lobster and the slow, deliberate beats of kompa music -- not to be missed if you're with a date.

From Cap-Haitien, hotels can arrange translators and transportation to four of the north's treasures -- Cormier Plage, the Citadelle fort and its nearby palace of Sans Souci and Labadie Beach.

Cormier Plage is a relaxing and cheap retreat with wonderful beachside rooms and an open-air restaurant that specializes in fresh seafood. Lobsters can be had for about \$9. Franklin, the soft-spoken bartender makes some of the best rum punches under the sun. Purists can sample Barbancourt rum one of the world's finest rums and one of the few Haitian institutions that have survived hurricanes, coups and desperate economic times. Start with the five star and ice.

Jean-Claude Dicquemare, a Frenchman who worked with famed explorer Jacques-Yves Cousteau, now runs the Cormier Plage resort. Dicquemare came to Haiti in 1974, married a Haitian woman and fell in love with the country.

"Thirty years ago you had many tourists coming to Haiti, from the states, from Europe, from Italy. But now because of the situation ... you just have to wait and see," Dicquemare said. "Haiti is a beautiful country and has to start getting tourism."

The 74-year-old still takes guests diving. He says he'll never leave his adopted country.

"I'm going to die here," he said. "I've got the sea, I've got my boat, I've got my beautiful wife. What more could I ask for?"

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