

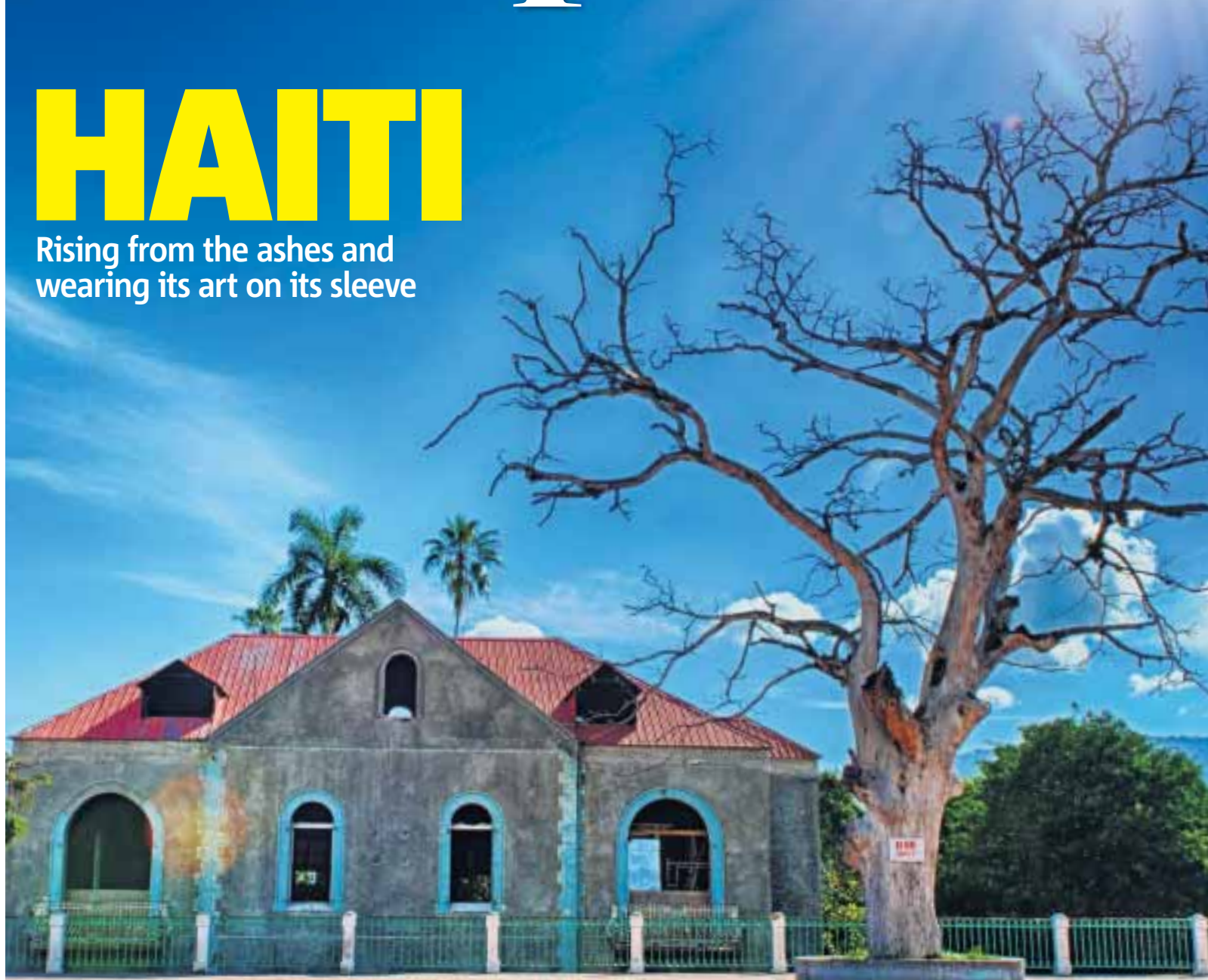
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Escape

HAITI

Rising from the ashes and wearing its art on its sleeve



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Escape cover story

ART THOU HAITI?

Five years after a devastating earthquake ravaged Haiti, the Caribbean country is on a mission to woo back tourists through its unusual arts scene. By *Patrick Welch*

AS far as tropical getaways go, Cormier Plage ticks all the right boxes. I'm by the beach, rum punch in hand, plate of lobster in front of me, palm trees crackling in the breeze and waves lapping on the sand. It couldn't be much more of a Caribbean idyll, really. Except I'm in Haiti. Surprised? Perhaps you shouldn't be.

Up until the 1950s, Haiti, along with neighbouring Cuba, was the go-to destination for the European and American jetset, but the following 30 years of dictatorships and 2010's earthquake put paid to all that, and the majority of foreigners left here are missionaries, NGO workers or UN staff.

But that might be about to change. I'm on a newly launched tour of the island with adventure travel operator G Adventures, taking in the capital, Port-au-Prince, as well as the seaside towns of Jacmel and Cap-Haitien. We hike up to the breathtaking hilltop fortress, La Citadelle Laferrière, drink sugar cane rum straight from a bubbling distillery and dive off a jungle waterfall at Bassin Bleu. So far, so wonderfully Caribbean.

And then there's the art. Haitian handicrafts have long been commercially successful, at least locally. The papier-mâché masks and bowls you find in Jacmel, the country's arts centre, get sold all over the Caribbean, passed off as local work, but now Haitian artists are starting to exhibit on the international scene too.

We head to a slum off Port-au-Prince's Grand Rue, which is home to Atis Rezistans, a collective of sculptors. Part sea of shacks, part open-air gallery, the slum was home to les tourneurs (woodworkers) before branching out into metal 20 or so years ago. It's home to 25 artists and people trudge through with scrap – car parts, broken street furniture – while chickens and cats wander around under the searing midday sun. You can't help but notice the phallic imagery in the work as well as one material that stands out among the metal and wood: human skulls.

Local artist Romel Jean Pierre, 22, tells me that it's not about being macabre: 'We get revolutions, earthquakes and political trouble, so themes of death and regeneration are appropriate.' Half an hour later, as if to prove the point, another painter in a nearby studio, Don Carmelo, 38,

shows me the fingers he lost saving a child in the earthquake.

Dark or not, the work here is creating a buzz abroad. Romel showed at Art Basel

Miami in 2011, a piece from this tangle of shacks just fetched £12,000 in London and two of Atis Rezistans' collective are currently in Paris at a Haitian Contemporary art show at the Grand Palais.

Another big influence is Vodou, one of Haiti's two official religions. Derived from Catholicism and the

religions that slaves brought from West Africa, it was renamed Vodoodoo by Hollywood, who went to town on its sinister side. Presumably, scriptwriters were taking their cues from the sort of Vodou-inspired art we see later in Port-au-Prince's Marché-en-fer metal market: mutilated children's dolls in bottles and a two-headed statue of a knight for \$600 (£380).

Later, in another artistic enclave, Noailles, near Port-au-Prince, we meet artist Jean Baptiste Jean-Joseph, who is a Houngan or Vodou priest. He shows us his beautiful embroidered flags representing Vodou spirits that have fetched several thousand pounds in Europe, before explaining that Vodou isn't the black magic cult that the likes of

films like Live And Let Die would have you believe. People use Vodou to heal, prosper and move forward, he says. It's celebratory and accepting religion with joyous ceremonies that can last 15 days.

It's intriguing stuff and makes you feel about a million miles away from the all-inclusive holiday resorts. Nevertheless, I'm told that Hilton and Marriott are opening hotels here in the next two years and Carnival Cruise Lines is investing £45million in the region. Great news, surely, but it will be a while before Haiti can compete for the crowds. So the truly adventurous – and the art collectors – should get there quick.

The best time to visit is in the dry season from November to March when the mercury hovers around 26 degrees.



Clockwise from top: A Haiti hotel; Jacmel town; graffiti in Jacmel; red snapper; Patrick Welch tries rum tasting; Bassin Bleu waterfall



A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO HAITI

WHAT AND WHERE
A country of 10.5million people, which shares a border with the Dominican Republic to the east. Under French rule it was the jewel of the Caribbean, producing half the world's coffee and 40 per cent of its sugar before declaring independence in 1804.

HEALTH AND SAFETY
Roads aren't great and there's still visible damage from the earthquake, but Haiti is now one of the safest countries in the Americas in terms of crime. Stick to bottled water, though, and protect yourself against cholera and malaria.

GETTING AROUND
You'll be taking buses and tap-taps – colourful, hand-painted trucks that serve as transport all over the country. Even the longest journeys won't cost more than \$15 (£9). Hire cars are available too, for the foolhardy.

