

DAY TRIP BLUE MOUNTAINS

A Steaming-Hot Cup of Jamaica

THEY TOLD ME THE hike to the top of the Craighton Estate coffee plantation was easy and quick. So naturally, I wore open-toed mules with three-inch heels.

Bad idea.

True, it takes only 20 minutes to hike from Craighton's historic great house upward through the coffee fields to the picturesque gazebo at the plantation's summit. Better yet, there are steps built into the hillside. But the altitude steals your breath, and the morning sun is relentless through the fabled Blue Mountain haze. Near-daily showers nurture riotous foliage to the point where



The historic great house at Craighton Estate

moss and weeds sometimes obscure the sturdy wooden steps.

"Please ... slow ... down," my friend Kate huffed from behind, "so I can catch you if you fall." I skidded my way up the slippery path, determined not to lose sight of our host, Alton. Trailing far behind was Mark Hylton, the ever-mellow owner of Real Jamaica Tours, taking his time to enjoy the views from 3,000 feet.

Although Blue Mountain coffee is famous, few people venture into the mountains to see it in its

natural state. The drive is as perilous as it is stunning — not to be braved in a chintzy rental car. But Mark had navigated the crumbling one-lane with familiarity and impressive focus, leaving us free to gape at waterfalls, shacks perched precariously over crumbling 200-foot cliffs, and dreadlocked children carrying wicked-looking bamboo shafts on their shoulders, single-file, like Vikings hauling longboats. (Jamaicans use bamboo to make everything from river rafts to guitars.) The misty-blue dreamscape of the mountains seemed a world away from Kingston.

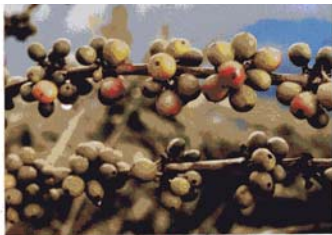
Craighton's lookout spot is at 3,150 feet, smack-dab in the center of the government-delineated Blue Mountain Region, near the Strawberry Hill resort. Shiny coffee plants laden with fat, ripe "cherries" cluster on hillsides that drop away into the mist, bordered by wild jungle. Far, far down, a green patchwork surrounds Kingston's urban expanse. From the lookout's gazebo, the hazy, overgrown valleys and distant peaks recall *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, but instead of



Widang's temples, a charming white dollhouse is snuggled into a faraway ridge. It looks like a stage prop, but it's actually St. Mark's Anglican Church ("Craighton Church" to locals).

Having survived the hike and gloried in the views, we return to the great house — a beautifully restored, 200-year-old Georgian summer home fronted by a manicured lawn — all fired up to taste the coffee. But not yet: *Before drink, Grauboppen, you must learn about beans.*

According to Alton, there are reasons Jamaican Blue Mountain coffee is among the world's most expensive (the Japanese pay up to \$25 a cup). For starters, idiosyncratic weather; hot in the morning, rainy by afternoon, chilly at sundown. The Blue Mountain microclimate prompts the budding coffee cherries to constantly expand and contract, so they take in more oxygen



The secret's in the climate: Blue Mountain beans, bound for glory

and nutrients. Then there's the hillside soil: For harvest workers, it's treacherous; for coffee, it's Mother Earth's finest. There's also the effect of "wet processing," which some consider primitive but purists see as painstaking. Every step — harvesting, washing, sun-drying, sorting — is done by hand.

Let's not forget the magic word: *scarcity*. Only half a percent of the world's coffee comes from Jamaica, and the Japanese import 85 percent of the true Blue Mountain stuff. You can't buy Craighton

coffee in the States or even elsewhere in Jamaica.

Keeping this in mind, we sipped our (rich, non-acidic, oval-finish) brew samples with reverence, glorying in the ritual and the mystery, and forgiving the fact that the stuff is really not all that caffeinated.

"Really, Alton, what makes it so special?" I persisted.

"To learn that, you have to go into the mist," he answered. "The catch is: Once you do, you never come out."

— Lena Katz

Real Jamaica's tours of Craighton Estate depart from Ocho Rios (\$70 per person round-trip) or Montego Bay (\$85) at 7:30 a.m. Tips require a minimum of six guests and last nine to 10 hours, with optional side trips in Kingston. Real Jamaica Tours: 876-469-4242. Craighton Estate: craightonestate.com.