

Colbeck Castle to become Heritage park

The three-storey brick-and-stone Colbeck Castle that lies in ruins in Old Harbour, St Catherine has a rustic, fairy-tale inspiring charm that rivals the romanticism of France's chateaux, Germany's schlosser, Ireland's caisleán, Spain's castillos.

It is a virtual stumble-upon. Two minutes off the main road to the community of Colbeck, along a densely overgrown dirt path is where you'll find it, in the midst of acres and acres of wild shrubs. The rectangular structure, with its rows of superimposed arches, was built between 1670 and 1673 by English army colonel John Colbeck. It was declared a national monument in 1990 and is in the care of the Jamaica National Heritage Trust (JNHT). But Colbeck Castle isn't the only one of its kind in the island. There are three similar properties -- Edinburgh Castle in St Ann, Stewart Castle in Trelawny, and Stokes Hall Great House in St Thomas -- all of which the JNHT is in the process of developing as heritage tourism sites. The plan, the agency says, is to develop each site into a heritage park with each being part of a wider thrust dubbed "Castling across Jamaica". "They are not close to each other but we want to create a link between them. We want to package them as a tour where we would be seeking to tell the history of each one," says JNHT head, Laleta Davis-Mattis. Colbeck, for example, will be landscaped, and paving stones encircling the main building, park benches and antique lamps will be put in. Four buildings at each corner of the property will be restored and will be used as cafés and/or craft and gift shops. The castle itself remains in ruins but some reinforcement of certain sections will be done. Storyboards detailing the castle's history, and an artist's impression of the structure before it began to deteriorate will also be features of Colbeck. Once complete, it will be used for a range of events, from picnics and Sunday evening family outings, to weddings. But the works -- which will be done on a phased basis and for which there is as yet no set timeline -- will be costly. Estate management and business development manager at the Trust, Volney Boswell, said that a May 2009 estimate for restoring one of the outer buildings was \$2.25 million. In addition to that, he said the estimate for supplying electricity is \$1.3 million and the landscaping quotation is \$7 million. Cost notwithstanding, Davis-Mattis says the project must go on, for "we believe that if sites have been declared national heritage sites, we have a fundamental responsibility to keep them in a manner in keeping with the mission vested in us, and to do less would be an affront". "We want to make it sustainable and the only way to do that is to make it earn," added Boswell. "There is significant potential there to make the Jamaican people aware of our awesome history and to earn from it in terms of tourism."