

Appleton Estate in Jamaica is a rum-lover's paradise

The pilgrimage to Appleton Estate in the south of Jamaica is less about what there is to see there, but more about what you can drink.

Rum has been made on the estate since the 18th century and tens of thousands of people make the journey each year to visit the home of their favourite spirit. The estate is located in the verdant Nassau Valley in the mountains of St. Elizabeth Parish and is a day trip that can be taken from places like Montego Bay, Ochos Rios or Negril. Guests who come for the tour get to visit the distillery and the warehouse where they age the rum. They can also stay for lunch and, of course, sample the many products that Appleton sells and can buy bottles to take home with them as souvenirs. For true Appleton connoisseurs, there is even a special rum that is only available at the estate and cannot be purchased anywhere else. As the cane juice is heated, it is transformed into a molasses and brown sugar mixture. So where does rum come from? It starts with sugar cane and on the tour you'll learn about how the estate's microclimate and geography makes it the perfect place to grow cane plants. It's from the juice of the sugar cane that the rum starts. It's extracted, then boiled and reduced until it becomes brown sugar and molasses. The brown sugar is sold to the Jamaican government for export and the molasses is treated with a special yeast that in order to ferment it. When you visit the distillery, you see the massive copper stills that are used to boil off the alcohol to extract it from water and other impurities. This process is repeated several times in order to concentrate the alcohol and lower the water and impurity content. The process takes time, but there is also a fractionation column that Appleton uses to purify the alcohol more quickly, but it's said that the flavour is not as good as that which is distilled in the copper boilers. The ageing room that contains oak barrels of rum is where the transformation of the spirit takes place. The next stop on the tour is the ageing warehouse. This is where the true magic begins. The distillate is stored in large, oak barrels and left in the warehouse to age. The wood provides tannins, flavonoids and other chemicals that provide the colour and flavour that rum drinkers know and love. The warehouse is one of three that Appleton has in Jamaica and it is the smallest, although when you peer down the dim hall between the storage rows, you see just how vast it is. It's not unlike the scale of the warehouse in the closing scene from the first Indiana Jones movie. Because the oak of the storage barrels is porous, over time a certain percentage of the contents evaporate. Because of that Appleton combines barrels of the same vintage in order to keep them full. Because barrels can be aged for more than 20 years, you might start with 10 barrels at the beginning and have only half that number, or even fewer, by the time the rum is ready to be sold. That wastage is part of the reason for the premium prices consumers pay for aged rums. When it is time to bottle the rum, Appleton's master blender mixes the contents of different barrels and vintages to create the final product. The age of the rum on the bottle represents the youngest vintage blended within. In general, as the rum ages, the darker and more flavourful it gets. Visitors get to finish their tour by sampling the many types and ages of drinks Appleton sells, from the youngest, clear rum to the oldest, darkest vintage along with a variety of flavoured rums they offer. Visitors to Appleton get to sample their rum products. There's no pressure to buy anything, but it's rare that visitors don't leave without a bottle or two to bring home as souvenirs. Because it's quite a trek to get to Appleton, many tourists combine their visit with an outing to nearby YS Falls, a scenic spot where you can soak in the water, inner tube or zipline across the river and through the trees.