

Taking Haiti's Citadelle means a long, hard climb

But it's not exactly a lonely one



1-of-a-kind traveler
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contributing travel editor

One boy held the reins of the horse.

"My name is Tony, missus."

Another boy held the tail.

"Me Louis. My name is Louis." "Only we missus. No other boys. We your boys." "Lean forward when we go uphill."

I leaned forward over the horse's neck — his name was Passion — and

held on tight as we began the tortuous ride up the steep rocky trail to the Citadelle. The horses came from the town of Milot, a 30-minute drive by jeep from the foot of the mountain. Tony and Louis will lead me on horseback for another 30 minutes up the steep switchback trail to the fort rising out of the mountaintop above us.

I could see the other riders disappearing around a sharp bend and reappearing again higher up. Below, to the left, mountains fell away in green splendor to a misted peaked horizon and the sea.

There are officially two boys to walk in front of and behind each horse, but soon Philippe appeared at my side, reaching out his hand to keep me safely in the saddle.

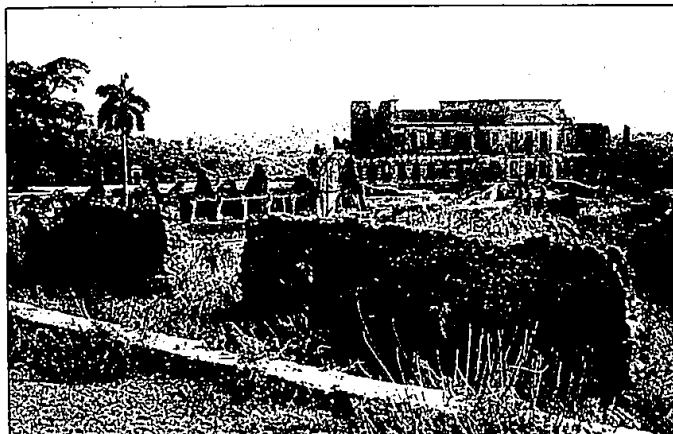
TO PUT THIS rocky mountain ride in perspective, imagine the north coast of Haiti, with cruise ships moored off Cape Haitien, a paved road running black through sugar-cane fields, and this rocky trail zigzagging up the side of the steep mountain.

The Citadelle is a favorite side trip for cruise ship passengers, but you may wonder what you got yourself into when their half-hour climb up an ancient roadbed plied with holes. Our group started with three jeeps: one had a flat, one got stuck in a hole, but we all made it eventually.

The road seemed deserted, but whenever we stopped, women and children came out of the trees to sell us trinkets. "My name is Linda, missus, you remember, I your friend." I picked Joseph-of-the-sad-face, in self-defense. He had a flute clutched in either hand. The jeep started again, and Joseph followed on foot.

Most of the feet that mounted this road in the 19th century were former black slaves who had overthrown the plantation system by 1804 but did not necessarily free themselves from tyranny. Henry Christophe, who was once one of them, became the king of northern Haiti, built San Souci Palace at the foot of the mountain, and the Citadelle on the top. Our guide told us that thousands of people died carrying materials up that tortuous slope.

"Lean forward, missus, we go uphill." Of course, we were always



photos by IRIS SANDERSON JONES

Haiti's black slaves overthrew their French masters in 1804, only to be enslaved by one of their own, Henry Christophe, who built San Souci Pal-

ace (above) at the foot of the mountain that holds the Citadelle.

going uphill, Passion and I struggling up the mountain path towards King Christophe's folly. When the riders ahead were too slow, Tony gave a shout and rushed me past them, my camera swinging from my neck, my hands clutching the saddle, and Philippe reaching up every moment or two to touch my elbow.

They all wanted tips, of course, including Etienne-of-the-toothless-grin, the man who picked Tony and Louis for me out of the melee of boys and horses in the parking lot. But these boys are earning their living.

"What will you do when you finish school, Philippe?"

"Do nothing. When you finish school here, you no get job, do nothing."

The rules of the ride are that you tip them, three to five dollars each, but only after they bring you down from the mountain. As we neared the top, the vertical stone wall soaring above us, Tony and Louis, sweating by now in their clean, white short-sleeved shirts, got me ready for the next move.

"It is custom you buy boys drink at the top." They had certainly earned it. I was too much of a careful, suspicious tourist in that situation, however. I foolishly insisted on buying the drinks myself instead of letting them do it. They could have bought the drinks for 50 cents instead of a dollar a bottle and kept the change.

We toured the Citadelle, of course, Etienne at my side, climbing stone stairways past long-dead cannons and stopping briefly at King Christophe's burial place. The King's concrete memorial was made a century after he died. When he suffered a stroke getting off his horse, he was so hated that nobody would pick him up.

As we came down the mountain trail, Passion's hooves sliding on loose rocks, the boys yelled "lean back, missus," and I let out an occasional cowboy whoop to celebrate the descent.

I tipped them at the parking lot, five dollars for Tony, five for Louis, "we your boys," three dollars for Philippe and five dollars for Etienne-of-the-toothless-grin.

The souvenir sellers converged: beads, small carved statues, polished mahogany bowls, Haitian paintings, and, of course, Joseph the flute-

maker. "My name is Joseph, missus, make nice flutes, you remember my name. Buy flutes when you come down." Both flutes worked perfectly when he sold them to me, but I haven't been able to get a sound out of them since.

We jeep-bumped downhill to Milot and walked through the ruins of San Souci Palace. There was one more boy in my life, Marcel, who took two days

to carve the chess table he sold me for seven dollars.

There's a lot of history on that hill, and you walk gingerly for awhile, rubbing your horseback-riding muscles, after you get back to a cold drink and a shower at the Mont Joli Hotel in Cap-Haïtien. But the muscle ache and the history fade from your mind soon enough. What you remember are Tony, Louis, Philippe, Etienne, Marcel, Joseph and a little horse called Passion.



Joseph, one of the many trinket sellers waiting for tourists at the bottom of the Citadelle, demonstrates his specialty — a homemade flute.



Today tourists tackle the climb to the Citadelle by horseback for fun, but in the 1800s thousands of people died in the process of building the fortress on its lofty perch.



The roads leading up the Citadelle are as rocky as they are steep.

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