



WORDS HANNAH BRANDLER

PICTURED: Fields of sugarcane against the backdrop of Mount Kanlaon
RIGHT: Hacienda Santa Rosalia

SUGARLANDIA SPIRIT

We discover the roots of the rum trade in the Philippines and the magical lands beyond

The active volcano at the heart of the island offers fertile, nutrient-packed soil

For those that haven't yet spotted the lively Don Papa Rum bottle on supermarket shelves (or heard of Negros Occidental), Diageo's €260 million acquisition in March 2023

Sugarlandia sounds like something out of a fairytale. The mythical setting of Willy Wonka's chocolate factory, perhaps. Turns out, it's the Filipino nickname for Negros Occidental, a province on the Philippines' fourth largest island, Negros.

It doesn't take long to understand the basis for its nickname. Our drive from Bacolod-Silay Airport takes us through endless fields of *cara morada* (purple) sugarcane – the key ingredient in rum production – while tropical rain beats down on thriving plantations.

The area isn't well known on a global stage, and the tourism industry needs development, with few big-name hotels. But that might all be set to change. I've travelled to Sugarlandia to learn about the region's burgeoning rum trade, which along with its white sand beaches and friendly people, is putting this destination firmly on the map.

Rum production here started in the 19th century, but has recently piqued the interest of the global market thanks to the acquisition of the premium-aged, small batch Don Papa Rum by multinational drinks' giant, Diageo – the company behind brands such as Johnnie Walker, Smirnoff, Baileys and Guinness.

"They went further south and saw the volcanic soil. They started with two hectares of cane and expanded. Once successful in introducing premium quality brown sugar, more locals joined in setting up plantations," he adds. Gaston was joined by British vice-consul Nicholas Loney in exporting the product, and the industry exploded during the American colonial period in the first half of the 20th century. From then on, Negros Occidental was known as the sugar bowl of the Philippines and today produces more than half of the country's sugar.

will certainly boost both the brand and destination's exposure.

LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

Aside from the tropical climate, Negros Occidental's topography is also conducive to the cultivation of sugarcane. The active Mount Kanlaon volcano at the heart of the island – which recently hit headlines after erupting in early June – offers fertile, nutrient-packed soil, while large swathes of flat land allow for unbroken farming.

"The initial attempt to start the industry in Luzon [the country's largest island] did not prosper



Joey speaks to us at Hacienda Santa Rosalia, the frozen-in-time ancestral home of the Gaston family located in Manapla. The open-plan mansion showcases 1930s furniture, antique curiosities, black and white portraits and an incredibly detailed concentric family tree. "We update it every three years, when we have a reunion and see how we're all related. It's a way to remember our roots," he adds.

The grounds also house the Hacienda Crafts shop that empowers the local community by employing artisans to create beautiful woven furnishings.

A TASTE OF THE PLACE

Over the course of the next few days, we swap history lessons for an immersion into the rum landscape. First up is a hard-hat ride on the Don Papa Rum-liveried steam train through the plantations, where we stop off to chew on stringy raw sugarcane.

Later, we watch as treacly 'black gold' molasses magically transforms into powdered

sugar, before clambering over mountains of sugar sacks in a dark warehouse – at this point, I really did feel like a character in Willy Wonka ready to meet my sticky end.

Of course, there was plenty of rum tasting along the way – it's part of the brief, after all. We kicked it off by relishing Don Papa on the rocks, with notes of spiced vanilla, honey and candied fruits, but got more creative throughout our stay. Cue rum-spiked coconuts on the beach, a Daiquiri concoction and, my personal favourite, the Darker Don – a highball cocktail featuring ginger beer, mint and lime (sublime!).

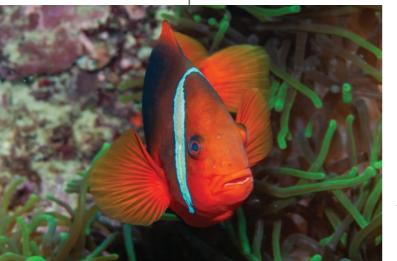
Fuelled with the elixir of adventure, we head to another ancestral mansion (and tourist attraction), the Lacson Ruins, colloquially known as the Taj Mahal of Negros Occidental. →

LEISURE



The dilapidated, fire-ravaged structure provides an unforgettable backdrop for a rum-filled fiesta, where masked dancers in carnival-like multi-coloured garb perform. The thrilling spectacle is an homage to the MassKara Festival, which takes place in nearby Bacolod every October. I pinch myself to make sure it's not a dream (though the rum has somewhat numbed the sensation).

These vibrant Filipino customs and culture form the basis of Don Papa Rum's branding, too. Bottles are adorned in mystical labels depicting fascinating creatures, jungle-like motifs and the namesake hero himself – Papa Icio, a leading figure during the late 19th-century Philippine revolution.



CONSERVATION STATION
On our last day in Negros, we set off to discover the mystical lands on the bottles. Believe it or not, the Philippines is made up of more than 7,640 islands, grouped into three major island chains – Luzon, the Visayas and Mindanao. Not all are inhabited and some are run by NGOs as eco-tourist destinations.

Danjugan, located off the coast of Cauayan in Negros, is an example of the latter. The 43-hectare island

was once a threatened and overfished area, but now falls under the protection of the Philippine Reef and Rainforest Conservation Foundation (a partner of Don Papa Rum) that promotes environmental education and wildlife conservation. Less than 10 per cent of the rainforest-covered island is developed and scientists have registered a total of 244 coral species, 572 fish, 17 mangroves, 74 birds, ten bat species, ten types of butterfly and two sea turtle species – with new discoveries every year.

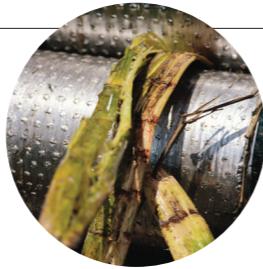
As such, visitors are expected to respect the

low-impact and low-volume philosophy of the island (the saying goes: "Take nothing but photos, leave nothing but bubbles and kill nothing but time") and book onto various packages that fund the operations to safeguard the island and employ members of the community. These range from three-hour guided tours (PHP1,500; £20) to day trips (PHP2,500; £34) and overnight stays (PHP3,500; £47).

After a picturesque 30-minute boat transfer from Punta Balata resort, we spend the day at the off-grid island, enjoying a buffet of local produce before kayaking and

PRODUCTION OF DON PAPA RUM

■ Farmers in Negros hand-cut every sugar cane, as per tradition, with the harvest season taking place between October and May.



■ The cane is brought to the sugar mill. It is crushed, ground and boiled into a deep, dark molasses known as 'black gold'.



■ The molasses is fermented at Bago Distillery, column distilled and reduced to 63.5% ABV with spring mountain water from Mount Kanlaon.



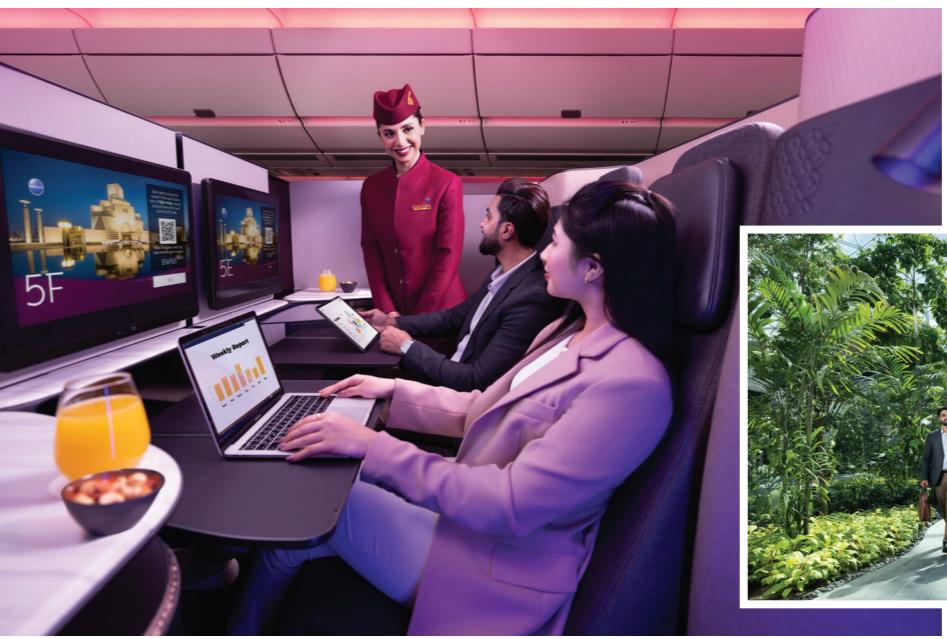
■ Finally, it is transferred to American oak ex-Bourbon barrels, which makes the liquid golden amber and produces light vanilla notes.



■ Barrels are then selected and blended by Don Papa's master blender, and reduced to 40% ABV with spring water. These are then chilled, filtered and bottled in Manila.

THIS PAGE FROM TOP:
White sandy beaches on Danjugan island, and its beautiful, vibrant marine life

trekking across the 1.5-kilometre-long island. I even have my very first experience of snorkelling in these waters, which has likely spoilt any future dives. The crystal waters are brightened by baby starfish, deep blue anemone, cute clownfish and flourishing coral. Later that day, we swap luminescent marine life for a dark and eerie cave, where fruit bats hang from the textured terrain like fossilised mammals, and camouflaged contorted pythons are on the prowl. It seems Sugarlandia is a magical place after all. **ST**



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