

Harper's BAZAAR

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Beyond the beaches: a cultural guide to Jamaica

It's time to rethink your perceptions of Jamrock



As the northern hemisphere whimpers its way through the winter, there is an island so bright and colourful that even the iridescent feathered hummingbirds blend into the background. These are animals that have been furnished with a peacock-like coat so luminescent it changes colour from angle to angle – Prada and Dior would kill to dream up something so visually impressive – but, here, they just blithely form part of the vista. Jamaica simply doesn't do grey.

Palm trees peg powdery beaches, dotted with scruffy green and red fishermen boats. Music reverberates round the mountains and the air vibrates with the lilt of reggae, dancehall and calypso. Even the local dialect Patois sounds like song. People walk slower by day, and dance longer into the night. They smile more. Jamaica is where people come, as its most famous resident once sung, "to feel alright" – and, truly, it's a challenge not to.



Jamaica, reachable from the UK via BA in 10 hours, has long been a stalwart of Caribbean tourism – and it’s an industry that’s on the up. In over a decade, the number of annual visitors have quadrupled. The island is best known for its unique alchemy of verdant scenery and perfect beaches, but Jamaica is more than just a pretty face. Its food, music, art and attitude make it a cultural destination – and Kingston, in particular, a hive of creativity and vibrancy.



Beyond the sunshine and shorelines, Jamaica is a complex and fascinating place – one whose cultural influence has arguably been overlooked thanks to inaccurate and often outdated crime statistics. As with any country, there are areas to be wary of, but for the most part, Jamaica is a hugely hospitable place brimming with social consciousness and vitality. There are few nations that are as expressive, nor as entrepreneurial – the success of its Blue Mountain coffee and Rasta tours are testament to the latter. There can be few islands that have left such a strong cultural legacy.

MUSIC

The most famous of Jamaica's cultural legacies is of reggae. Born in Trench Town in the 1960s, the melodic sound is the island's soundtrack. In November 2018, the UN added the genre to its list of international cultural treasures worthy of protection and promotion. While to most tourists reggae offers a way of unwinding on the beach (it has been said that the genre's soothing nature comes from its repetitive pulse which replicates the human heartbeat), reggae was originally intended as a protest against social injustice and a voice for the disadvantaged.

Given today's political uncertainty, a genre that demands we "get up, stand up for your rights" seems ever relevant. It's also closely affiliated with Rastafarianism, a religious and social movement established in 1930s Jamaica that focuses on love, unity and positivity – even Rasta language upholds these principles. For example, "Hello" is not used because it is made up of two words with negative connotations – "Hell" and "Low" – which is why "respect" is adopted as an alternative greeting. A lot of reggae is a musical version of Rasta values.



Start by booking a tour of [Trench Town Culture Yard](#), where it all began and where Bob Marley, Peter Tosh and Bunny Wailer lived. It was also here that Marley met his mentor Tata Ford who taught him how to play guitar. Book a tour via [Vibzen](#) with knowledgeable local Rasta Carlo Less, whose strong ties with the Kingston community make him a perfect guide. You'll see the small tenement where Marley lived and grew up, while learning about the history of the district and what made it such a mecca for musical creativity. Kingston feels like a giant open-air Bob Marley museum, with colourful murals of his likeness and graffiti tributes of his lyrics covered walls of shops, homes and hotels. The point to recognise about Marley is that he was far beyond simply a guitar-

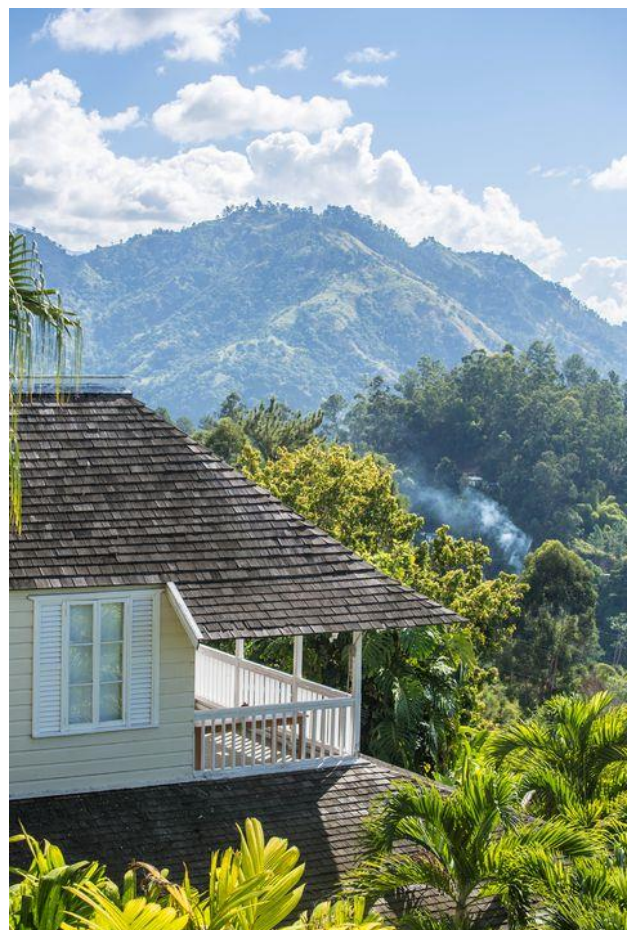
playing singer – he was an activist who united political parties and warring gangs. He was a voice of hope and optimism in what was then a seemingly hopelessly poor, conflicted Kingston. It's hard to imagine a current musician capable of driving a political ceasefire, if only temporarily.

"Bob Marley was more than a man with a guitar – he was an activist who united warring gangs"

The singer's adult home has been transformed into a two-floor museum, which invites visitors to immerse themselves in his remarkable legacy. On his birthday on 6 February, the space hosts a mini festival with live artists playing reggae and market stalls selling wood carvings, colourful knitwear and jerk chicken. Also, worth exploring are Kingston's numerous recording studios – Tuff Gong, Treasure Isle and Horace Andy's intimate recording space all offer an insight into what it means to make Jamaican reggae today, its history and sociological significance. Again, Vibzen offers music-focused tours. You'll return with a newfound appreciation of reggae and a playlist of Jamaican artists to bring sunshine once you've arrived back in the UK.

Hotels with a musical twist

Unsurprisingly, a number of hotels reflect Jamaica's musical influence. Strawberry Hill, which is nestled high in the extraordinarily beautiful Blue Mountains overlooking Kingston, is owned by Island Records founder Chris Blackwell. This secluded, tranquil spot was where Marley recovered after being shot in 1976 and his choice proves he was a man of good taste. The air is different up here, clearer, cooler, calmer.



Each cottage in the resort is nestled within the curves of the mountains, enveloped by velvety, towering plants that creep round the balconies overlooking the sort of soothing view that instantly calms the mind. The rooms are simply, yet stylishly decorated with four-poster beds shrouded in muslin curtains that point towards the French doors that give rise to impressive sunrises. These are elegant treehouses for lost boys and girls seeking peace amid nature.



A bar and restaurant weaves round the central part of the property, serving mouth-wateringly good shrimp curry and oxtail shepherd's pie to a soundtrack of Jamaican reggae. The piece de la resistance is its infinity pool which looks down over the rolling green mountains and Kingston below. Make sure you seek out hotel manager Diana Marley, whose colourful stories and experiences of Jamaica (and some of its most famous residents) will stay in your mind long after you've left the island.



About two-and-a-half hours over the Blue Mountains perched high in the hills sits Geejam, the brain child of music producer Jon Baker. This secluded resort hidden in an Eden-like rainforest near Port Antonio started life as a music studio, attracting stars such as Rihanna, No Doubt, Harry Styles, Amy Winehouse, Florence and the Machine, John Legend and Drake. Over the years, with the help of music veteran Steve Beaver, Geejam expanded, opening cabins in the folds of the hillside greenery and three state of the art expansive villas, each boasting jawdropping views, stylish mid-century furniture and enviable record collections for all those late nights dancing round your private pool.



"Music reverberates round the mountains"

Beyonce and Jay-Z recently stayed in the most high-spec property called Cocosan, which comes with a chef and drivers. Earlier this year, the resort featured on The Times' list of 10 coolest hotels in the world – and it's not hard to see why. Sipping a Ting-a-ling (Appleton rum and a grapefruit-based fizzy drink called Ting) in the alfresco restaurant and bar overlooking the tropical forest and sea, while plush speakers play reggae and dancehall, it's hard to feel anything less than a rock star on holiday.

FOOD

Jamaican cuisine is influenced by its multicultural settlers, spanning indigenous tribes to Indian, African, Spanish and Chinese. Dishes tend to be spiced and a bottle of hot sauce features on most tables. Scotch bonnet, one of the hottest peppers on the planet, is added to a lot of dishes so make sure you have a can of chilled Red Stripe on standby. Rastafarianism has also made a big impact on the way Jamaicans eat – consider Ital the original veganism, but without the sanctimonious preaching. The idea is to increase livity or life energy, so meat, fish and dairy is avoided in strict Rastas.



Start the day with a cup of Blue Mountain coffee, rated among the best and rarest in the world. Outside of the island, it's expensive – 125g in Whittards will set you back £25 – so it's worth bulk-buying here. So what makes it so special? For the expert story, book a plantation tour on [Craighton Estate](#) where coffee aficionados' will learn about the history and process behind Blue Mountain's finest beans, before a walk around this historic working coffee farm. The shortened layman's explanation is that the Blue Mountains, its volcanic, rich soil, regular rainfall and cloud cover create the Claridge's of the coffee-making world; conditions just don't get better than this. Demand is high because it tastes so good, but supply is low because space on the Blue Mountains is limited.

Jamaica's most famous culinary classic, jerk chicken – chicken rubbed and marinated in spices and smoked traditionally over pimento wood – and you don't need to go to high-end restaurants to try the good stuff. Roadside cafes (we tried Fyah Side Jerk and Barin Clarendon on the way to Treasure Beach, which was full of locals and beautifully spiced chicken) can be just as good as sit-down restaurants, although [Pepperwood Jerk Centre](#) – formerly called Scotchies – is a Kingston institution worth trying. In an assuming location just off a carpark, you'll order your food through a window, and will sit in sheltered

huts on wooden tables. It's a rustic setting, but popular with locals due to the quality of its perfectly seasoned dishes.

"Consider Ital the original veganism - the Rastas were first to the party"

For a more picturesque restaurant that serves outstanding jerk, travel up the winding roads of the Blue Mountains to Eits Café. Popular with Kingston locals at the weekends, Eits serves homegrown

vegetables from the family farm to diners in a small undercover area flanked by towering plants and luscious greenery. If you can't be bothered with the journey back down, there are also hotel rooms to rest your head and make the most of views.

You'll want to try Jamaica's National Dish, which is eaten at breakfast - saltfish and ackee. The latter is a fruit that looks and tastes like a buttery scrambled egg and is mixed with saltfish, onions, Scotch Bonnet peppers, tomatoes, and spices, and sometimes served with plantain or dumplings. The best we tried was at Smurf's Café on Treasure Beach, a colourful outdoor dining spot known for its top-level breakfasts where musicians often play reggae on the dry grass below.

No trip the island would complete without a plate of curry goat and, for the best on the island, visit Belinda's Riverside Restaurant. Dining destinations don't get much better than this, nor is the journey there as utterly sublime. Book a rafting trip down the Rio Grande near Port Antonio where a captain will punt you down the river for 45 minutes to Belinda's, who cooks flavour-heavy, mouthwatering curry goat and jerk chicken from inside a palm-tree covered outdoor hut on the riverbank. Presentation is rustic, but you'll soon forget about that once you've tried the food itself and lose yourself in the peaceful atmosphere. The rocky valleys provide the shade and the cool, clear river the perfect place to swim afterwards. A floating bar that travels up and down the river serves beers and rum punch to wash it all down with.

Patties are also a popular lunchtime snack worth trying and originally introduced after the Cornish pasty impressively made its way over to the Caribbean. Unlike its Cornish counterpart, the suet-like pastry is flakier. It's spicy and traditionally filled with ground beef although fillings also include chicken, pork, lamb, ackee, cheese shrimp and lobster. Again, you don't have to spend much to eat the best on show – fast food chain Juici Patties so some of the tastiest. In terms of snacks, head to the roadsides near the village of Middle Quarters in the parish of St Elizabeth for excellent fresh pepper shrimp, caught from the neighbouring Black River and cooked with Scotch Pepper. Visitors can buy by the bag either to eat in the car on route to your next destination or take to your villa to cook with.



If you're searching for the perfect drinking spot, Jamaica is not short of options. Nightlife takes place within pared-down roadside or beach bars, where sound systems blare out music until the early hours, but few can be as scenic or as unforgettable as Pelican Bar. Over the last 15 years, Pelican has won a reputation as being the coolest bar in the world – and you'd be bold to argue.

It was created by a fisherman called Floyd back in 2001 who, after deciding that it was too far to travel to the shore for a cold bottle of Red Stripe after a long day fishing, decided to build his own watering hole on a sandbank in the sea. To get there, visitors travel by boat on turquoise waters where you may or may not see dolphins. Once you arrive, the options are beer, rum punch and freshly caught lobster if you get hungry and a reggae soundtrack. Understandably given its scenic position and paradise-like atmosphere, Pelican has become popular with tourists, but locals still come in their droves. Never will you want to get stranded more than here.

A word on the herb

There is no way of talking about the culture about of Jamaica without mentioning its predisposition for cannabis, or the herb/ganja as it's fondly called on the island. First things first, not everyone does it, although if someone asks you if you smoke, they're not talking about cigarettes. It's primarily a Rasta tradition and thought to bring about a heightened sense of spiritualism and inner peace – it's considered sacred rooted in the understanding that the plant apparently grew on the grave of King Solomon. The way Christians drink wine at Communion is the way Rastas smoke weed. Whereas Europeans might bring a bottle of wine to a friend's house for dinner, Rastas will bring a bag of the herb. It is also a very different product to the cannabis smoked in the UK, the latter of which is stronger because of the chemicals that are used to grow it under artificial light. In Jamaica, cannabis is a plant that grows naturally by roadsides and in fields.

ART

Jamaica's art goes back to the indigenous Taino Indians, who created zemis, carvings of their gods, for spiritual reasons. Today, Jamaica's art scene is on the rise, which is unsurprising given how expressive Jamaicans are. The National Gallery of Jamaica is the island's largest gallery with a mix of ancient artefacts and contemporary works by rising artists.



However, street art is one of the most pervasive forms of the medium in Jamaica, and the easiest way of tapping into the island's psyche. Case in point is art-covered Fleet Street in Kingston, which is a must-see. A social intervention project masterminded by a French visitor called Marianna Farag, who came to Kingston holiday from New York and decided to stay, Fleet Street is an impoverished district now festooned in murals and graffiti created by local and international artists.

The Paint Jamaica team started by asking residents what issues mattered to them and what form of Jamaican life and philosophy they wanted to see represented in art form, and then set about recruiting artists to make their stories and beliefs a reality. The results are a rainbow of positivity – this is graffiti at its most uplifting and thought-provoking. All slogans and phrases imbue Rasta principles – unity, equality and one love. What was an abandoned warehouse in the middle of the street is now covered in art – children play sports there in the afternoons and adults can partake in yoga and workout classes.

Also, part of the project is Life Yard, which was conceived by a group of Rastas – an inner-city community found through a palm tree-covered alley off Fleet Street. A restaurant serves classic Jamaican dishes, while a pared down bar serves cold beers. A small urban farm grows food for the neighbouring school, and workshops and musical performances are held for local children, who also

use the outdoor space as somewhere to do their homework. The idea is to give the young an opportunity to experience culture through art, education and agriculture, and it's been widely praised for doing so. From a tourist perspective, it's hard not to be swept up by the cheering, upbeat sensibility of Life Yard. There's also the opportunity to buy locally-made arts and crafts, from beaded necklaces or calabash bowls.

For a hotel with a distinctly artistic appeal, head to Jakes on Treasure Beach about three hours from Kingston airport. Having first opened as a restaurant in 1991, Jakes has cultivated a reputation as a vibrant bohemian abode with a customer base including Kate Moss, Joni Mitchell and Ursula Andress. Unlike other desirable resorts, Jakes exudes warmth and friendliness from its every pore. Its rooms are colourfully, but simply decorated, with tropical flowers laid on the bed. Its photogenic ocean front bungalows are designed in the style of Gaudi and each looks like the shells that you'll find on the neighbouring beaches; colourful glass bottles are embedded within the walls and bedhead like precious stones - this is what it's like to sleep in technicolour.



The bungalows are so close to the sea that the noise of the waves will send you to sleep at night and wake you up in the morning. Some evenings, the ocean soundtrack will sound so loud, you'll wonder if the waves are creeping inside your room. The bathroom is entirely outside; choose between a roll top bath or a power shower. Privacy is not an issue, each bungalow comes with its own private veranda and some with their own rooftop, perfect for watching the sunrise and set. Although there is no immediately accessible beach (the nearest are five mins walk away), there is a shared saltwater pool overlooking the sea and a small jetty from which you can fish if you feel so inclined.



Jakes is a lynchpin of the community; its restaurant uses locally sourced ingredients (its saltfish and ackee is to die for) and its alfresco bar popular among locals, who use it as a prime spot to play dominos. Make sure you explore the local fishing village, from its beach bars to gift shops – we'd recommend Callaloo Butik where embroidered cushions and hand-painted dishes sit alongside paintings by local artists. Laidback restaurant Jack Spratt runs movies nights every Thursday where visitors and locals watch cult Jamaican movies for free. This is authentic Jamaica, free from high-rise resorts or hoards of tourists. Not even the most stressed out city dweller could fail but feel relaxed in this sleepy, colourful slice of paradise.

There's nothing wrong with making the most of Jamaica's perfect beaches. Just make sure you don't miss out on the cultural treasures that make the island truly one of the Caribbean's most exciting, beguiling and buzzy destinations.

Photographs courtesy of Poppy Hollis.

For more information see Visitjamaica.com. Rates at Strawberry Hill start from \$310 per night including breakfast, excluding taxes and service, while at Jakes, prices begin at \$95 room only, excluding taxes and service.