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## THE NEW JAMAICA

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# The NEW JAMAICA

A behind-the-scenes look at why Jamaica is  
shaping up to be a tourism giant

BY JOE PIKE

We admit we had serious doubts when Edmund Bartlett spoke to us roughly two years ago about his initial goals following his appointment as Jamaica's minister of tourism. During that first conversation with **Travel Agent**, Bartlett said he wanted Jamaica's annual arrival numbers to average about 5 million by 2015, nearly five times the average number at the time.

So, what does he think about his projections now that we are in the midst of an economic downturn that has resulted in as much as 20 percent drops for other islands in the Caribbean?

During a breakfast at the Goblin Hill Inn in Port Antonio, Jamaica, Bartlett took a bite of his steamed red snapper, sipped his tea and confidently told us, "I think my numbers should have been higher."

But this time Bartlett's answer didn't come as a surprise. After all, he, his right-hand man, Director of Tourism John Lynch, and the rest of the Jamaica Tourist Board are a confident bunch.

They are also honest. So when these two Jamaican experts tell **Travel Agent** time and again that the destination could exceed 3 million annual stopovers and 2 million annual cruise passengers by 2015, we believe them.

But if you need more convincing that Jamaica will continue to flourish despite these economic times, here are some reasons why you might consider jumping on the Jamaica bandwagon.

### Port Antonio, The Last Piece of the Puzzle

Jamaica has had its share of luxury properties—such as the famed Jamaica Inn—for quite some time now, but for the first time the island is looking to designate a particular region as luxury-only. This, according to Bartlett, is the last piece in a puzzle that will make Jamaica appeal to any traveler.

Port Antonio is being branded as the luxury capital of Jamaica—or, as Bartlett described it, "Jamaica's greatest secret." When we visited, we found the roads to be the only major obstacle to Port Antonio soon becoming perhaps Jamaica's best destination. But construction on the Ocho Rios-to-Port Antonio segment of the North Coast Highway continues and is expected to be completed by the summer. In addition, a new jet landing strip that will be able to accommodate six to seven jets is slated to open in the next few weeks near Port Antonio.

Port Antonio is between the Blue Mountains and the Caribbean Sea on Jamaica's eastern coast. It has preserved its charm as a sleepy fishing village while still offering the comfort and variety of a vacation hideaway with its lagoons, vegetation, crystal-clear waters, beaches and mountains. "We are driving a market strategy that is designed to make Jamaica the preferred destination for all, whether you are looking for an affordable vacation or looking to travel expensively," Bartlett told us.

According to Bartlett, Negril is a haven for casual travelers and "hedonists," or free-spirited, clothing-optional clients; Montego

Bay is Jamaica's spot for business travel, a little luxury and some good old-fashioned entertainment and nightlife; Ocho Rios is Jamaica's family getaway and home to an array of bed-and-breakfasts; and Port Antonio will be the country's luxury hot spot.

**The Mocking Bird Hill Hotel** ([www.hotelmockingbirdhill.com](http://www.hotelmockingbirdhill.com)) opened in February and is a 10-room luxury resort offering everything from a coconut-oil massage in a zephyr-cooled



ABOVE: From left, Jamaica's Director of Tourism John Lynch and Minister of Tourism Edmund Bartlett

OPPOSITE: Port Antonio is set to become Jamaica's luxury district

gazebo beneath an orchid tree where hummingbirds flutter to some of the most innovative and acclaimed cuisine in Jamaica. **Frenchman's Cove Resort** ([www.frenchmans-cove-resort.com](http://www.frenchmans-cove-resort.com)) is one of the most beautiful holiday villa beach resorts in Jamaica. Already up and running, this off-the-radar gem offers one-, two- and three-bedroom villas scattered among the cliffs, in a park-like setting above famous Frenchman's Cove Beach—one of Jamaica's prettiest beaches. The **Trident Castle** ([www.tridentcastle.com](http://www.tridentcastle.com))

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The Geejam Hotel, located on the shores of northeast Jamaica, is a popular resort for young travelers to the Port Antonio area

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is currently undergoing a massive renovation and will most likely be one of Port Antonio's best properties when it officially opens. Bartlett says it could be ready by the beginning of 2010.

Other major resorts in the Port Antonio area include the **Geejam Hotel** ([www.geejamhotel.com](http://www.geejamhotel.com)) and the **Jamaica Palace** ([www.jamaica-palacehotel.com](http://www.jamaica-palacehotel.com)).

More developments are also being discussed, all with a focus on luxury, wellness and health. In fact, Bartlett told us that he reached an agreement with the minister of tourism for Turkey to have the country assist in designing many of Port Antonio's future spas. "To be aggressive now will ensure that Jamaica will remain on the top of travelers' minds as a destination that is committed to travel and tourism," he says.

### Luxury Outside Port Antonio

Although Port Antonio is Jamaica's first area to include solely upscale properties, it should be noted that luxury can be found in just about every area of the island. Here are some of the developments throughout Jamaica.

**Solis The Palmyra Resort & Spa** ([www.solisthepalmyra.com](http://www.solisthepalmyra.com)), the island's first luxury beachfront residential community,

is set to open in September on 16 acres of pristine waterfront land on the Rose Hall estate. Solis The Palmyra offers 299 beautifully appointed guest rooms as well as one-, two-, three- and four-bedroom suites, penthouses and private villas that feature between 645 and 2,600 square feet of living space with large private terraces.

AMResorts is expected to open a resort in Montego Bay under its new Zoetry Wellness & Spa Resorts brand, but no timetable has been set. The company broke ground on its Secrets St. James and Secrets Montego Bay resorts in December, marking the debut of the Secrets brand in Jamaica. The side-by-

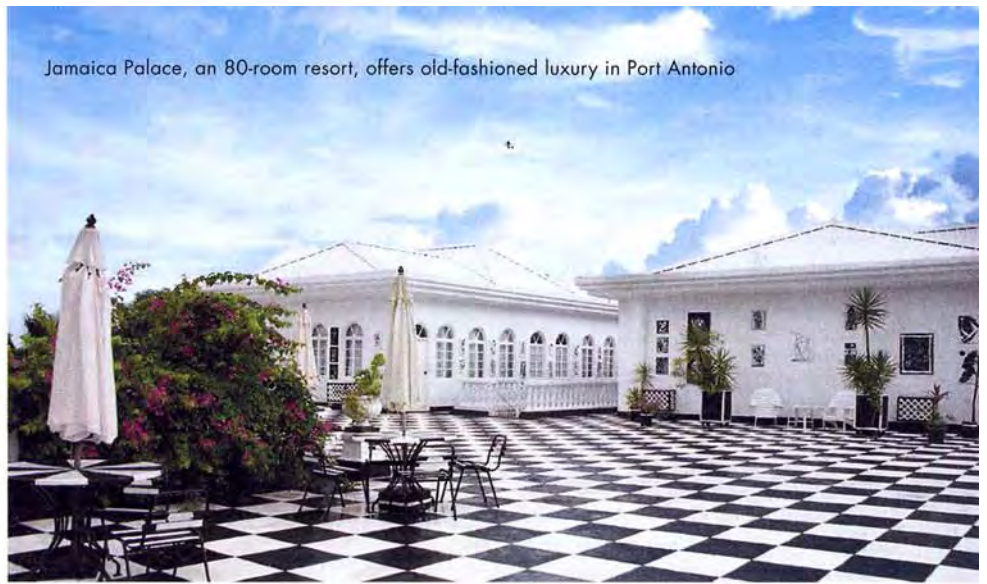
side resorts, located at the Montego Bay Freeport, will feature 700 rooms and are scheduled to open by the end of the year. The properties share a common area and feature 14 bars, lounges and gourmet à la carte restaurants; spas with oceanfront massage cabanas; a private concierge on every guest floor; an open-air theater; and a full array of activities.

GoldenEye is adding a multimillion-dollar, high-end resort village to its exclusive property in Oracabessa, St. Mary. Completion of the mixed-use residential and full-service resort is set for December 2010 and will feature approximately 200 guest rooms

## BY THE NUMBERS

THE JAMAICA TOURIST BOARD REPORTED a strong start in tourism arrivals for 2009, with 148,886 total stopover arrivals for January, an increase of 4.2 percent over the same period in 2008. Furthermore, for the first month of this year, Jamaica welcomed 80,190 visitors from the U.S. and just under 40,000 visitors from Canada. Preliminary figures for airport arrivals for February 2009 indicate an increase of 1.3 percent over the corresponding period last year. For the month of March, preliminary figures for airport arrivals reflect a 4.5 percent decrease over last year.

Jamaica Palace, an 80-room resort, offers old-fashioned luxury in Port Antonio



spread over 60 acres of coastal land. The property will include its own spa, swimming pools and a lagoon. The development is in its first phase, which includes the strengthening of the seacoast and work on the lagoon.

### The Sky's the Limit

Jamaica's airlift strategy is pretty basic: Make sure the strongest markets remain that way and look into ways to utilize some of the weaker ones as well. And the island seems to be succeeding so far this year.

Jamaica's recent deal with **JetBlue Airways** ([www.jetblue.com](http://www.jetblue.com)) for daily nonstop service from New York's John F. Kennedy International Airport has received a lot of positive feedback. The flights are slated to launch in late May. The Jamaica Tourist Board has also signed a contract with JetBlue's in-house tour operator, JetBlue Getaways.

As for Jamaica's plans for tackling some untapped markets, Lynch gave us a behind-the-scenes look at how the brain-

storming process works. He was gracious enough to allow **Travel Agent** to sit in on a closed-door session in which we heard some of Jamaica Vacations' (JAMVAC) initiatives, including its aggressive plans to beef up flights from Central and South America. (JAMVAC falls under the Ministry of Tourism and works with tour operators and airlines to develop more airlift.)

Lynch told us that Brazil is one of Jamaica's main tourism targets. The plan is

to offer flights to the Caribbean from many of Brazil's connecting routes. Lynch said it is time for the destination to look into all "dirt track" markets, or markets that can only be relied on for connecting flights.

For example, you may not get an enormous number of travelers from Japan to Jamaica, but you may get travelers from Japan who connect in Atlanta via **Delta Air Lines** ([www.delta.com](http://www.delta.com)) and ultimately find

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# COVER STORY

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their way to Jamaica. "Our target is to grab the market share," Lynch says. "When we come out of this recession, or depression,

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the market share will be there."

In other flight news, **Air Jamaica** ([www.airjamaica.com](http://www.airjamaica.com)) is expected to be off the Jamaican government's budget soon as privatization of the airline is expected to be complete by June. While the carrier has dropped several markets recently, Delta still operates flights to Jamaica out of Atlanta, and several carriers offer flights from Miami to Jamaica. Los Angeles "still remains an issue" for the carrier and for the destination, Bartlett says.

### More Than Fun in the Sun

Bartlett says that broadening the destination's offerings will make Jamaica much more than just a fun-in-the-sun getaway. He pointed to Mexico's success in the last decade in transforming itself from just a beach destination to a destination that offers culture as well.

"Whereas the push to promote heritage has worked out great for Mexico, promoting museums, sports, health and wellness will

be great for Jamaica," he says, noting that Jamaica offers more than 150 attractions. "We can't compete with the culture offered by Mexico, but we can offer entertainment, great food and attractions."

### Spanish Invasion

For years, Sandals Resorts and other locally owned and operated hotels dominated Jamaica. But more recently, a major foreign entity in the form of Spanish-operated all-inclusives has established a firm position in the destination.

With two new RIU properties in the last two years in Negril and Montego Bay (in addition to existing RIU and Occidental resorts and a brand-new Iberostar resort in the Rose Hall section of Montego Bay), Jamaica is experiencing a full-fledged Spanish invasion.

"We don't think these hotels are going to go away anytime soon," Lynch says. "This is something that we saw coming for a while now, and these are hotels that had to be built. They have brought the destina-



The longest and best stretch of Negril's Seven-Mile Beach.



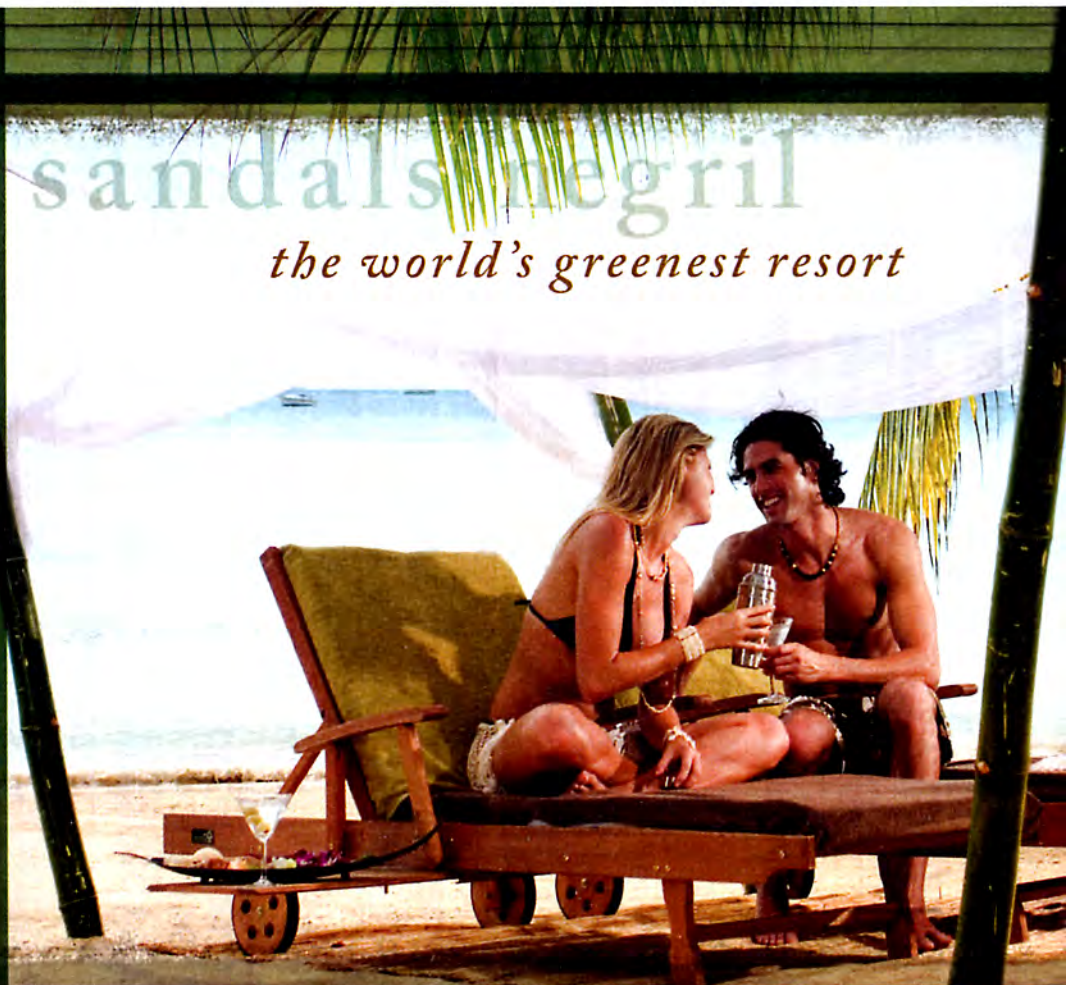
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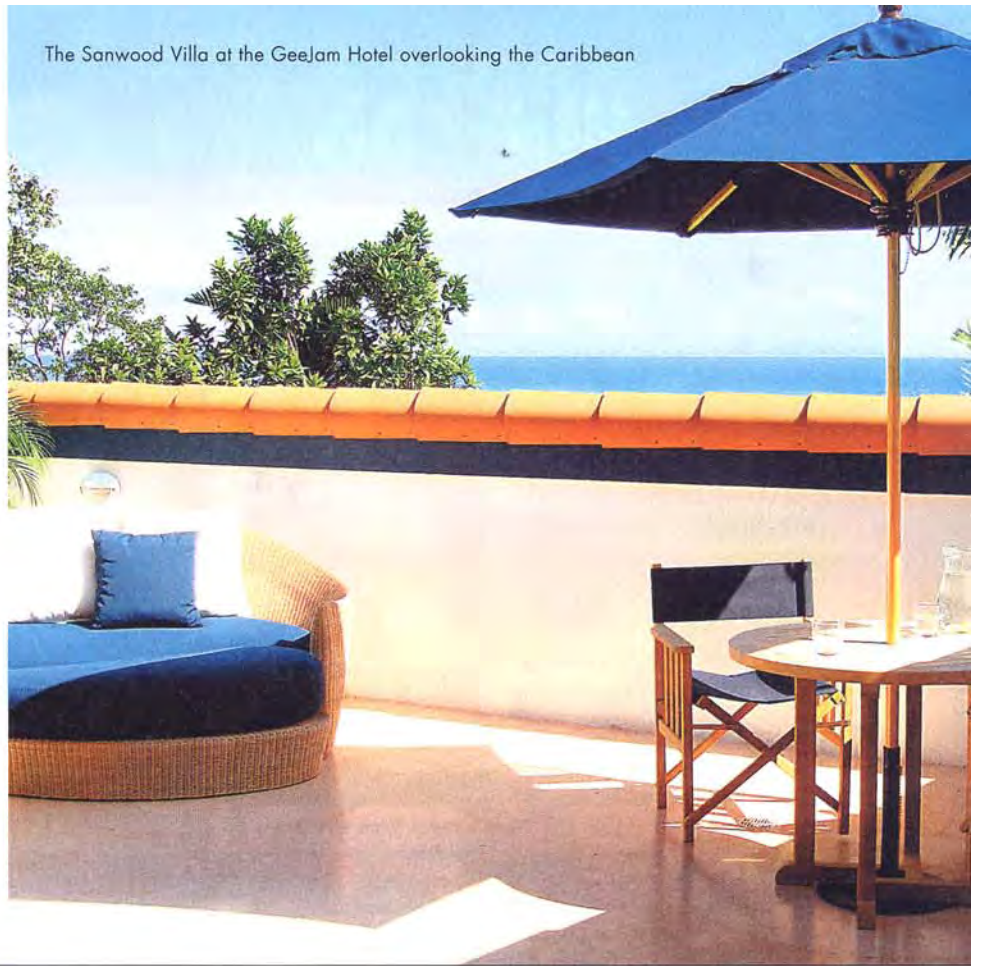
tion some strengths and have caused other hotels to step up their product. So we welcome products like these.”

Apart from locally owned (but foreign-managed) U.S. brands like Marriott, Holiday Inn and Ritz-Carlton, Jamaica didn't really have much of a foreign presence before the Spanish all-inclusives decided to join the party.

This transformation took a little time to get used to, but major hotel chains such as Sandals say they welcome all competition and see it as motivation to improve the quality of their products. Within the last year, Sandals' Jamaica properties have constantly been upgrading, including Sandals Royal Caribbean's recent addition of its River Suites.

“Naturally, a level of competition has emerged with all the new Spanish properties coming on board,” Bartlett says. “And all this has done is force other products to increase their levels, to step to the plate and improve their products.” ■

The Sanwood Villa at the GeeJam Hotel overlooking the Caribbean



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