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## **THE GENIUS OF JAMAICA'S NATURAL BEAUTY**

Spectacular land and seascapes set the scene for any visit to Jamaica, where the capital city of Kingston is built around the seventh-largest natural harbor in the world. A little exploration will unveil spots of extraordinary beauty that serve as a magnet for nature lovers, hikers, divers and addicted vacationers, who return repeatedly to this magnificent Caribbean island.

### **Exploring the Reefs**

Divers find plenty to explore among Jamaica's reefs:

- Port Royal at Kingston airport is steeped in tales of pirates and sunken ships that now provide a haven for a dense array of tropical fish. Some of the best reef development is found in this area, with small cays separated by clear blue water no deeper than 50 feet (15 meters), and an outer reef with a challenging drop-off point of 80 feet (24 meters).
- Airport Reef, at the southwestern edge of the airport area in Montego Bay, is defined by coral caves, tunnels and steep canyons.
- The Throne Room is a popular dive site in Negril, where coral, sponge, nurse shark and cubera snapper are visible through a crack in the reef.
- Treasure Reef is a great place to spot eel, basslets and large star coral heads.

- Devil's Reef, east of Ocho Rios, drops from 60 feet (18 meters) to over 200 feet (61 meters), with a sand shelf at 130 feet (40 meters).
- Caverns is a shallow reef about a quarter-mile (402 meters) long, with endless small tunnels that have become home to silversides and nurse sharks.
- Runaway Bay is alive with brightly colored schools of tropical fish, grouper, snapper and stingrays. Large green morays, barracuda, sharks and turtles also hang out. An outstanding site here is the Canyon, where the bottom slopes down to beyond 130 (40 meters) feet.
- At Cayman Trench, between Runaway Bay and Ocho Rios, a popular dive explores the wreck of the *Kathryn*, a World War II Canadian minesweeper that is now home to a magnificent array of fish that are fed by hand.

### **Inviting Beaches**

White-sand beaches edged with the ocean's deep aqua tones are always inviting, and every Jamaican has a favorite spot for bathing or just *liming* (meaning *lazing*).

- Seven Mile Beach in Negril runs north from George Town, curling around the west coast of the island, protected by a reef that ensures calm water and ideal conditions for swimming and snorkeling.
- In Ocho Rios, at the base of the world-famous Dunn's River Falls, lies a long golden stretch of beach, starting at the spot where the waterfall meets the sea and following the gentle curve of the bay. A steep slope brimming with verdant tropical plants creates a stunning backdrop.
- A few minutes to the east of Ocho Rios is Reggae Vibes Beach, described by locals as a "tall" beach, meaning it's a long stretch of land. In the far corners are quiet, secluded spots that are favorite nesting grounds for turtles.

- Located just 20 minutes from Ocho Rios, James Bond Beach is surrounded by crystal clear water on three sides, with the lush mountains of St. Mary forming a dramatic backdrop.
- Shanshy Beach Complex lies to the west of Port Antonio, just outside the entrance to the town. A fence divides the beach into two areas. The small patch to the west of the fence belongs to fishermen, whose little huts rest on the land while their brightly painted canoes float in the water. On the other side, clean white sand extends toward Port Antonio. The water off the beach is excellent for swimming, with a shallow and clear area that leads to a deep, dark blue bay. A walk along the beach reveals views of Navy Island and Port Antonio's harbor.
- Ras Johnson's Ranch is located between Long Bay and Manchioneal. A shallow stream, called the Christmas River, runs behind the huts. It is bordered by a steep hillside covered with lush tropical vines. There is a small but wide coarse sand beach, which looks out across the coast. To one side, the town of Manchioneal scrambles along the shore.

### **Cascading Waterfalls**

Climbing rock surfaces through cascading water is a challenging and rewarding way to explore some of Jamaica's most dramatic scenery. There are several favorite spots:

- Dunns River Falls in Ocho Rios is the most famous. Here, visitors climb a 600-foot (183-meter) series of plummeting waters, supervised by professional guides.
- Y.S. Falls, located on Jamaica's undeveloped south coast, are quite spectacular with a series of 10 cascades. These have appeared in several feature films and are winners of the Jamaica Hotel & Tourist Association's inaugural ecotourism award.
- Mayfield Falls feature 22 mini-cascades and numerous swimming holes in the low-lying Dolphin Head Mountains. There is an underwater cave to swim through, smooth rockslide areas and mini-cliffs for high diving. This

natural water park is edged and overhung with bamboo, flowers, vines, trees and shrubbery.

### **Fast-Flowing Rivers**

Over 120 rivers flow through the land from Jamaica's central mountain region to the coasts. The rivers on the north side tend to be shorter and swifter than those on the south side. The fast-flowing rivers are used for transport and the production of electricity, and provide irrigation for agricultural purposes.

- Black River, at 44 miles (71 kilometers) is Jamaica's longest navigable river, running along the south coast, and navigable for about 25 miles (40 kilometers). Peat moss at the river bottom makes the crystal-clear water appear black.
- Rio Minho, in Clarendon, is the longest river.
- Rio Cobre is said to be inhabited by a mermaid, who lives at the bottom of the river and on moonlight nights comes up to sit on a huge stone, running a silver comb through her long black hair.
- Milk River originates near Round Hill and is a main source for the water that irrigates the vast agricultural regions of the Clarendon plains. The mineral waters flow directly from a source in a rock and are especially recommended for use by those suffering from rheumatism, arthritis, sciatica and nerve complaints.
- Rio Grande in Port Antonio is popular for rafting. The trip from the town of Berrydale in the hills to Rafter's Rest on the coast at times takes two-and-a-half hours, a slow idyllic meander through rainforests and farmland on a 30-foot (nine-meter) raft steered expertly by a local captain.
- Martha Brae is also a favorite river for rafting.
- White River Valley is populated by many breeds of exotic birds.

### **Therapeutic Mineral Springs**

Several mineral springs in Jamaica are recognized for their therapeutic value. Some have been developed with facilities for bathing and/or accommodations,

including Milk River Bath, Bath Fountain, the Spa at Grand Lido Sans Souci and the Rockfort Mineral Bath. On the south coast is Milk River Spa, a naturally radioactive mineral bath with waters at a temperature of 33°C (91°F).

Analysis of the mineral waters that flow from the nearby hills apparently shows that they are as rich as the waters of any of the leading European spas, and are reputed to cure numerous ailments like rheumatism, gout, neuralgia and liver disorders.

### **Dramatic Mountain Ranges**

Much of Jamaica's land rises more than 1,000 feet (308 meters) above sea level. The celebrated Blue Mountains, famed for their fine coffee, are actually made up of two ranges:

- The Central Range, in the northern section, is the location of Blue Mountain Peak, the island's highest point at an elevation of 7,402 feet (2,256 meters). This is home to the world's second-largest butterfly, the *papilio homerus*.
- The second range, called the Port Royal Mountains, rises above the Liguanea Plain just north of Kingston.

### **Glorious Gardens**

Soil and climactic conditions in Jamaica promote an extraordinary range of exotic plants. Here are a few places of special interest for botanists and nature lovers:

- Cranbrook Flower Forest features beautiful tropical gardens with ponds, waterfalls, a natural rain forest and sports facilities.
- Royal Botanical Gardens, also known as Hope Gardens, offers 20 acres of tropical plants and exotic flowers and trees. Additional features here include the Coconut Museum, the Sunken Gardens, the Orchid House, the Lily Pond, the Maze and Palm Avenue.
- Coyaba River Garden derives its name from an Arawak word meaning *paradise or heaven*. Once a part of the Old Shaw Park Estate, this small manicured garden occupies a few acres of land above Ocho Rios. The

- garden bursts with bright hues from countless flowering plants and vines and runs along crystal clear streams. Brick and wooden walkways, and tiny bridges cross the grounds. Among the exotic plants here are the shell ginger lily, tree fern, green jade vine and angel's trumpet. Two ponds in the garden are home to river mullets and snapping turtles. The mullet pond has a glass viewing panel that provides a clever underwater view of the fish. Coyaba's streams originate at the top of the property, where the Milford River surfaces after traveling nearly 25 miles (40 kilometers) underground through a natural limestone filter. Each day, gallons of water gush from this spring into Coyaba's streams.
- Holywell lies 21 miles (34 kilometers) outside Kingston and spans 120 acres of protected forest. The park sits in the midst of the Blue Mountain Range and is home to a diverse selection of Jamaica's flora and fauna, including several species of birds, butterflies, ferns, trees and wild flowers. There's always a cool mist over the tall pine trees, and the views of Kingston are breathtaking.
  - There are also at least four nature trails that start at Holywell and wind through the mountains – in and out of lush tropical rainforests, past spectacular valley views, beside coffee farms, and by hidden waterfalls and streams. The most popular of these tracks is the Oatley Mountain Trail, which takes about an hour-and-a-half to complete. It's a gravel loop path that climbs through verdant forests to 4,395 feet (1,340 meters) above sea level and returns to Holywell. The first part of the trail cuts through a moderate woodland – over 50 different species of trees and shrubs – up to its highest point, which borders the parishes of St. Andrew and Portland. This walk affords amazing views of Kingston, the Harbour and Spanish Town. At the borderline, on a clear day, one can see a part of Jamaica's north coast. The second leg of the path curves through a valley rich in ferns, mosses and orchids, back to Holywell. Along the trail are a few signs that serve as markers to the various lookout spots and provide information about the region's plants and animals.

- Shaw Park Botanical Gardens cover 25 acres high on a hilltop overlooking the Bay of Ocho Rios, surveying the Caribbean Sea. A waterfall cascades down a rocky course with luxuriant plant specimens on all sides. Lush tropical trees form bowers with flamboyant blossoms year-round.

### **Agriculture on the Plains**

Five major plains provide the backbone for the largely agricultural economy: Vere, St. Jago, George's, Liguanea and Pedro. Fruits, orchids, bromeliads, hardwoods and ferns all thrive in this rich soil and bountiful environment, and sugar remains a major product.

### **Wildlife**

Many bird-watchers flock here to see the vervian hummingbird (the second-smallest bird in the world, larger only than Cuba's bee hummingbird); the Jamaican tody (which nests underground); or another of the island's 27 unique species. Fish populations flourish here, both freshwater and saltwater species. At Dolphin Cove, visitors can swim with a family of bottle-nose dolphins. This cove is also home to rays, eels and sharks; on the surrounding four acres of lush tropical rain forest, the indigenous fauna includes tropical birds, like the macaw, and a fascinating collection of reptiles.

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