

JAMAICA

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KINGSTON

At the foot of the Blue Mountains, overlooking the world's seventh-largest natural harbor, Jamaica's vibrant capital with a population of 579,137 (Kingston Metropolitan Area) is the largest English-speaking city south of Miami. The center of the country's government and commerce, Kingston is also Jamaica's cultural heart, with a wide variety of historical and cultural attractions. A sophisticated, upbeat nightlife and diversity of dining venues offer a cosmopolitan contrast to the rest of the island's slow and easy pace.

Cultural Attractions

The city's waterfront includes the Jamaica Conference Centre, which was built to United Nations specifications, and the National Gallery of Jamaica, with a fine collection of past and modern Jamaican works of art.

Nearby are: The Money Museum, housed in the Bank of Jamaica building; the African Caribbean Institute of Jamaica, with its displays of masks and jewelry; and the Victoria Crafts Market, where vendors sell colorful batiks, wood carvings, straw baskets and other locally crafted wares.

Historic landmarks include Kingston Parish Church, where the earliest grave is dated 1699. The Parade is a busy square, once the site where British soldiers drilled and now a vibrant commercial center and meeting point. Devon House on Hope Road is an elegantly restored Georgian mansion built in 1881 by a wealthy Jamaican who made his fortune mining gold in Venezuela. Open to the public, its period rooms are decorated with exquisite antiques, while the grounds outside hold several interesting shops and restaurants.

Always a hub of activity is the Bob Marley Museum, housed in the late musician's former home and recording studio on Hope Road. On display is an extensive collection of photographs, newspaper clippings and personal effects; a 20-minute video provides insight into the reggae star's life and times.

Near the University of the West Indies campus, flowers and trees bloom year-round at the 200-acre Hope Botanical Gardens, which opened in 1881 and features an orchid house. The University itself was founded in 1948 on the grounds of a former sugar plantation, and is now the region's most famous center of learning, with additional campuses in Trinidad and Barbados.

Equestrian enthusiasts flock to the race meetings at Caymanas Park & Polo Club, held every Wednesday and Saturday, and on holidays. Horseback riding is offered at Guardsman Farm in Bushy Park, Old Harbour, where nature tours also are available.

Fascinating Museums at Nearby Settlements

Until the earthquake of 1692, Jamaica's principal settlement was Port Royal, located at the end of the Palisadoes Peninsula that curves around Kingston Harbour. In the 17th century, this was the lair of buccaneers Henry Morgan and Calico Jack Rackham, with a bar for every 10 men. Relics of the town's wicked past can be seen at the small Fort Charles Museum. With special permission, scuba divers can explore buried ruins about 30 feet (nine meters) from the shore.

Fort Charles, built by the British shortly after they seized the island from the Spanish in 1655, is another highlight for visitors to Port Royal. Cannons still point out toward the sea. The small Maritime Museum here offers a reproduction of the quarters where Admiral Horatio Nelson resided as a 20-year-old lieutenant.

Just a short drive from Kingston, Spanish Town was the island's capital under both the Spanish and, until 1872, the British. The Cathedral Church of St. James (St. Jago de la Vega) is located here; built in 1523, this is the oldest cathedral in the Western Hemisphere. Spanish Town's attractions also include the Old King's

House, once the British governor's residence and now an archaeological museum, and the adjacent Museum of Craft and Technology, featuring vintage farm implements, musical instruments and pottery.

A few miles away, a fascinating collection of artifacts in the Taino Museum depicts island life before the Spanish arrived. This is run by the Institute of Jamaica, which is based near Kingston's waterfront and encompasses the National Library and the Natural History Museum, containing a world-renowned herbarium with more than 130,000 plant specimens.

Performing Arts

Kingston's cultural life thrives after dark with performances by the internationally acclaimed National Dance Theater Company as well as the Jamaica Folk Singers, the Jamaica Philharmonic and the National Chorale. Music is everywhere, and clubs offer a wide range, including reggae, jazz and alternative rock. Among the hot spots are Pepper's, Asylum and The Quad club.

Diverse Dining Options

Places to eat are equally varied, with an array of restaurants that reflects Jamaica's unique blend of cultures, including Indian, Middle Eastern and Chinese. Local favorites include the informal Port Royal Grog Shoppe at Devon House and the nouvelle cuisine of Red Bones Blues Café in New Kingston (where great jazz sets the scene).

Accommodations

As the capital city of Jamaica, Kingston offers an excellent choice of hotel accommodations for business travelers, many with sophisticated meeting facilities. Nearby are also attractive resort properties with great facilities for family groups, rustic accommodations for hikers and an extraordinary retreat halfway up the Blue Mountains.

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