



Buried treasure, Jamaica

Forgotten, affordable paradise awaits in Port Antonio

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Think of a Jamaica with lush tropical forests; swaying palm trees surrounding empty, postcard-white beaches; slowly moving rivers; friendly people; Blue Mountain coffee plantations; private villas; endless water activities, and doing nothing. Oh, and the only traffic light controls a one-lane bridge over the Rio Grande.

Obviously, that's not Montego Bay, Ocho Rios or Negril. It is Port Antonio, about 60 miles north of Kingston, in the northeastern parish of Portland. Instead of a resort with hundreds of guest rooms, you find an area that has somewhere between 500 and 1,000 guest beds, total. Plan your vacation from late April until mid-December (roughly the rainy season) and you'll find accommodations and transportation are much less expensive than during high season. Throw in many activities that are free or inexpensive and you'll hesitate to tell others about this secret getaway.

Port Antonio's secrets were known by Errol Flynn (and movie star Patrice Wymore Flynn, his widow, and still a resident), Ginger Rogers, Clara Bow, Noel Coward, Ian Fleming, Queen Elizabeth II, Gwen Stefani and Grace Jones. The area has been nearly cut off since the forever construction began on the island road. Originally known as Highway 2000 (then Highway 2005, you get the idea), theoretically, it should be completed within the next month or two.



Tourists take in the sights from a bamboo raft on the Rio Grande

Port Antonio is ready to be discovered again

Birders delight in spotting the 265 resident and a couple of dozen endemic bird species that populate the island, including sand fly catchers, doctorbirds (aka the red-billed streamertail, Jamaica's national symbol), chestnut bellied cuckoos, Auntie Katie, Jamaican woodpecker, white-cheeked thrush and the Duppy bird.

Stop by one of the beaches along Long Bay, Frenchman's Cove, Dragon Bay, Winnifred Beach, San San, Cocktail and others. You might find a small fee or ask for a pass from the management where you're staying.

Talk with Steve Widener and Jan Lee, of Lady G'Diver Scuba, if you're interested in a dive or Professional Association of Diving Instructors certification. This is a small operation with a maximum of 12 divers on a trip, accompanied by at least one dive master and usually one instructor. The dive generally visits sites east and west of the bay for eight miles of interconnected coral reefs and walls, with visibility of more than 70 feet. They also offer night, deep and photographic dives.

Flynn is noted for starting the river rafting business, in which the bamboo rafts that once carried bananas down the Rio Grande and now carry tourists. The seven-mile ride takes two to three hours and can include lunch at Miss Betty's (run by her daughter Belinda). Along the way, look for blue herons, children trapping crawfish and blue plastic bags protecting bananas that are destined for export markets.

Two waterfalls are of particular interest. At Somerset Falls, a cascade of the Daniels River, you take a very short boat ride or plunge in the water and over some rocks to reach the hidden falls. Ah, the wonders of a waterfall massage on your shoulders.

Reach (Reich) Falls, on the Drivers River, is a series of cascades, about a half-mile in length, that you can hike to Mandingo Cave, where you can enjoy the whirlpool waters as your reward.

Some kind of jerk

When it comes to food, stop by the Boston Jerk Center, the place they say the jerk food industry was created. You'll have a choice from about a dozen shacks, so you can decide who has the best.

Stop for a meal at Norma's at the Errol Flynn Marina. This is perhaps the most casual of Norma Shirley's three island eateries, and the beach setting just makes it perfect for her garlic bread, fresh fish or even chicken, steaks or other meat dishes if you prefer. Do save room for some Devon House I Scream, which could be the best you've ever tasted.

Another must-eat place is Woody's, in Drapers, east of Port Antonio. Run by Charles "Woody" Cousins and his wife, Cherry, they offer great hamburgers and local cuisine, including vegetarian options. If he's in a good mood, he may even sing some of the songs he's recorded over the years and for his new CD.

When it comes to accommodations, you have a wide variety, from hostels to lifestyles of the rich and famous.

Barbara Walker and Shireen Aga are the hands-on owners and operators of Hotel Mocking Bird Hill, a 10-room hideaway full of eco-friendly, guilt-free indulgence. This is a good place to establish your base camp, whether you plan to explore the entire parish or just the six-plus acres of their property. White tiles, locally built bamboo furniture, hand-printed tropical-themed fabrics and Walker's paintings and sculptures fill the public and guest spaces. What you won't find in your room are a television, a phone, air conditioning (although there is mosquito netting around your bed) or the normally ubiquitous plastic beverage bottles.

Goblin Hill Villas has 20 villas on 12 acres overlooking the turquoise waters of San San Bay. Each villa has one or two air-conditioned bedrooms, a fully equipped kitchen, a living and dining room and a wide covered terrace or balcony with a view of the bay. A housekeeper prepares and serves meals, does your shopping and provides housekeeping chores. Two lighted tennis courts and a swimming pool are available for a daily activity quotient.

Sound construction

Musicians are finding their way to music producer Jon Baker's Geejam Hotel in San San, where he's created a recording studio that's the envy of the industry. Staying here or just having a meal at the Bushbar, you may run into No Doubt, Grace Jones or India.Arie. Whether you opt for the villa, a cabin or the drum-and-bass suite, the luxurious and high-tech touches will amaze all of your senses.

Kanopi House is the place to stay if you've ever wanted to live in a tree house. With elegant amenities, of course, and a nearly 360 degree view of the Caribbean and the woods. Enjoy the furnishings, which were designed and created by area artisans from renewable Jamaican material. No trees were destroyed in laying out the buildings. Visitors can enjoy fine dining and a walk down to the Blue Lagoon.

If you want to be on the water, then check out the Blue Lagoon Villas, where every villa has indoor and outdoor dining, living and entertainment areas, a fully equipped kitchen and steps right into the water. A chef, butler and housekeeper tend to your every need. With one-to four-bedroom options, each one has cable TV and stereo, kayaks, and complimentary access to Blue Lagoon and Frenchman's Cove Beach. You can also schedule an in-house massage, manicure and pedicure. You can even -- if you must -- have international newspaper service, printed tabloid size with crossword, editorials, supplements and more.

Air Jamaica airlines (flying from BWI to Montego Bay to Kingston) and American Airlines (flying from BWI to Miami to Kingston) provide daily service.

Car rentals are available. Just remember that they drive on the left-hand side.

Accommodations

Hotel Mocking Bird Hill
876-993-7267
www.hotelmockingbirdhill.com

Goblin Hill Villas
876-925-8108
www.goblinhillvillas.com

Kanopi House
876-993-8509
www.kanopihouse.com

Geejam Hotel
800-688-7678 or 876-993-7000
www.geejamhotel.com

Blue Lagoon Villas
305-433-4223 or 876-978-6245
www.bluelagoonvillas.com

Attractions

Somerset Falls
(admission fee)
876-913-0046
www.somersetfallsjamaica.com
info@somersetfallsjamaica.com

Reach Falls
(admission fee; closed Monday & Tuesday)
876-993-6683

<http://reachfalls.com>

Lady G'Diver
876-715-5957
www.ladygdiver.com

Dining

Devon House I Scream
876-993-3825

Woody's Low Bridge Place
876-993-7888

Norma's at the Marina
876-993-9510
www.normasatthemarina.com

Other information

Jamaica Tourist Board
www.visitjamaica.com

Air Jamaica
www.AirJamaica.com

American Airlines
www.AA.com