

JAMAICA

# A birthday party like no other

It's been 50 years since the former British colony gained independence and, says **Boyd Tonkin**, it's in the mood to celebrate

All night the waves break on the rocks just a few feet from my bed, a background rustle – with the odd roar – that seems to deepen sleep rather than impede it. My seaside suite takes the form of a miniature castle painted in duck-egg blue, set on the shore's edge, in a garden full of tropical trees and flowering shrubs. Sunloungers stand on the decking by the ocean. Above my head, a roof terrace carries canopied day beds with vistas along the indented coast and south-west towards Nicaragua. As for the decor, with its multicoloured glass and shells inlaid into every surface, it feels as if Antoni Gaudí had been whisked from Barcelona and hired as the set designer on some surreal episode of the *Pirates of the Caribbean* franchise.

This is Jamaica, but not as the high-volume tourist business usually markets it. Jakes is a collection of suites, cottages and villas in the village of Treasure Beach, part of the out-of-the-way and still-unspoiled south-coast parish of St Elizabeth. "In this parish we work, not shirk," warns a sign on one road as you enter this cluster of farming and fishing communities in the semi-arid lee of the Santa Cruz mountains. That's indisputably true of the locals in this "bread-basket" for the whole island. As for the visitors – well, they have a licence to chill.

One way and another, Jamaica is making quite a bit of noise at the moment. Tomorrow, the former British colony celebrates 50 years as an independent nation, with the anniversary marked in style not just at home but in every place where its three-million strong

diaspora (more people than live on the island) have put down roots. To coincide with the Olympics, the Bubble at the North Greenwich Arena has been transformed into Jamaica House, with a crammed schedule of music and other events. Meanwhile, today, across the river at the stadium in Stratford, the 100m final may well see Jamaica's super-fast hero Usain Bolt crowned with gold.

Tomorrow, reggae pioneer Jimmy Cliff performs at North Greenwich as part of the Jamaica 50 festival. And it's Cliff (right) who, via the cult film that introduced his talent to the world, supplies a link to the quieter, gentler Jamaica of Treasure Beach. *The Harder They Come* starred Cliff: Jamaica's first full-length feature, it was directed by writer and film-maker Perry Henzell in 1972. Henzell had married Sally Densham, an artist, designer, poet and photographer whose family came to Jamaica from Britain in the wake of the Great Crash. Sally's sailor uncle Lionel had fallen in love with the island and sent

an urgent telegram to his brother Basil, her father: "Sell everything. Bring No 9 Hardy Fishing Rod, polo sticks and come."

Basil did. Eventually the family moved to Treasure Beach, a necklace of four bays – from Billy's in the north-west to Great Bay in the south-east – where the Pedro Plains meet the sea. Sally bought her own property here in 1991. First a bar and restaurant, Jakes – named after a family parrot – spawned one strikingly original accommodation unit after another, from those one-bed coastal castles through two- and three-bed cottages to a handful of four-bed villas. In addition to the on-site restaurant and Dougie's Bar (complete

with signature rum punch) beside the seawater pool, the Jakes-owned Jack Sprat, just along the water, serves fresh local seafood, tasty fish stew and huge pizzas by the beach.

Jakes functions not just as a family concern, but a community powerhouse. Jason Henzell, Perry and Sally's son, manages the business and ensures that – in this gorgeous but challenging landscape – it remains sustainable. His wife

Laura Henzell directs the Driftwood Spa, committed to the use of natural materials. The Henzells help, along with their fellow citizens, to manage the Breds Foundation, which raises funds for community projects in education, health, youth work and (most recently) a sports park. One of the highlights of the Jakes events calendar is the Calabash literary festival in late May. Inaugurated in 2001, and co-directed by Jason's sister, film-maker Justine Henzell, it attracts about 5,000 locals and tourists for three days of free readings and discussions from top-flight Caribbean and global authors – with plenty of music in the mix as well.

Some tourism did exist on this coast before Jakes. The 1930s Treasure Beach Hotel still flourishes. Since the Henzells first made an impact, other low-key guesthouses and villas have arrived, although the scatter of pastel-painted cabins that counts as a "resort" around here has nothing in common with the high-security, package-deal citadels of Jamaica's north coast. In spite of the village's reputation as a fashionable "chic-shack" destination, Treasure Beach life can still be tough. Healthcare and schooling remain precious, hard-won assets; the sea claims its toll of victims among the fishermen. But country manners, and country rhythms, still prevail. If you ever tire of the coast, stroll from one



cheerfully painted diner to another, in search of the best ackee-and-saltfish, rice-and-peas or conch soup, amid the clack of dominoes. Wash down the meal with an Appleton's rum (distilled on an estate to the north that you can visit) or an icy Red Stripe beer. Then wander on. Pretty soon, you'll be meeting more goats than people. This tranquil side of the island deserves a big shout of its own.



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**TRAVEL ESSENTIALS**

**GETTING THERE**

British Airways (0844 493 0787; [ba.com](http://ba.com)) flies to Kingston from Gatwick. Virgin Atlantic (0844 874 7747; [virgin-atlantic.com](http://virgin-atlantic.com)) flies to Montego Bay from Gatwick, while Thomson (0871 231 4787; [thomson.com](http://thomson.com)) flies from Gatwick, Manchester (July to December) and Birmingham (June to October).



**STAYING THERE**

Jakes Hotel, Treasure Beach (001 877 526 2428; [jakeshotel.com](http://jakeshotel.com)). Two-bedroom cottages start at US\$234 (£156), room only.

**MORE INFORMATION**

Jamaica House programme: [jamaicahouse2012.com](http://jamaicahouse2012.com)





**LICENCE TO CHILL**  
The seawater pool at Dougie's Bar, Jake's Hotel; Jimmy Cliff, inset below

