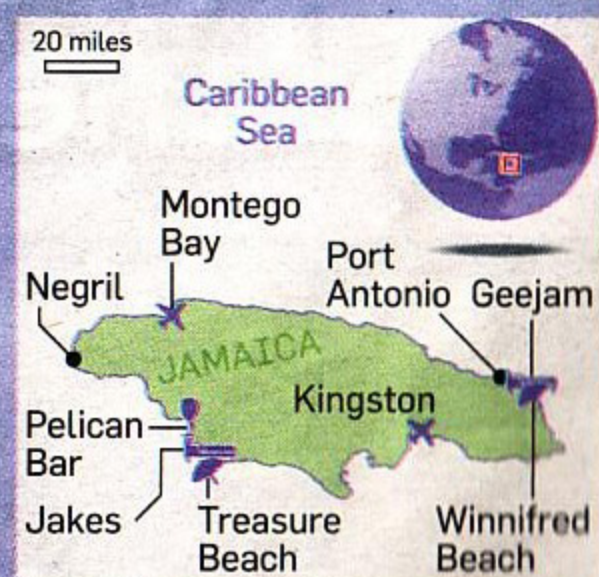


travel

Tim Gartside/Alamy; Guido Cozzi/SIME/4Corners Images



DON'T WORRY, BE HAPPY

Outside the big resorts is where the real fun's to be had in Jamaica, says Robert Ryan

The Pelican Bar, off Jamaica's south coast, must be one of the world's odder drinking establishments. It sits on wooden stilts out on the reef, accessible only by boat — a jerry-built wonder. There is barely a flat surface, including the table, at which you can eat fish or lobster with rice. But mostly you stand on the rickety jetty, Red Stripe in hand, looking out for frolicking dolphins and chatting to your fellow drinkers.

"They told me I'd be lucky to get back in one piece if I went outside the hotel," confided one English girl, who was staying at Negril and delighted to be out of a resort environment. As Jamaica celebrates 50 years of independence this year, it is still saddled with pre-conceptions such as this — that, outside the cossetting all-inclusives, hassle and mayhem invariably await.

Yet projects in two of the safest, most welcoming places in Jamaica aim to give the lie to that. One sees a community thriving by attracting sport-obsessed tourists. The other is using music to return a moribund town to its glamorous, celebrity-studded heyday.

The sports fan is Jason Henzell, whose family founded and still runs Jakes, a small boutique hotel that, in 20 years, has grown from a restaurant with rooms into a collection of funky, quirky seaside cottages and villas. It's not perfect — it may be too rustic for some, there is no sweeping beach out front, it's a long transfer — but it has a pleasing warmth, and any barrier between the hotel and the surrounding town is uniquely permeable. "It has always been important to us that Jakes and Treasure Beach are part and parcel of each other," Henzell insists.

He is telling me this on the site of his latest project, a huge community playing field that will also be available to his guests. It is a Sunday afternoon, and tourists and Jamaicans have gathered over beers and jerk chicken to watch a 20/20 cricket match of a gratifyingly high standard. Football pitches and basketball and tennis courts are in various stages of construction. Most of the town has come out to play, and there are football games springing up, with outsiders more than welcome to join in.

Henzell hopes that the field, which is run by a charitable foundation, will attract teams and fans from America and Britain, enabling visitors and locals to meet on equal terms. But fear not, you don't have to know anything about silly mid-off to get something from Jakes:

you can enjoy heritage tours, stargazing at its farms, croc-watching jaunts, rum-bar crawls and the wonderfully wonky Pelican Bar. Nobody will make you kick a football (but if you bring one as a gift, you'll get a room upgrade).

While Treasure Beach is busy lacing up its boots, Port Antonio, on the northeast coast, is full of ghosts. You can hear the clink of their glasses and the hum of their carefree conversation as you walk through the ruins of the Blue Lagoon restaurant, where the Burtons, Errol Flynn and the Aga Khan once dined. Many resorts around the world have had golden ages, then faded. "Portie", as the locals have it, didn't so much fade as vanish altogether. Then, a couple of years back, the celebrities reappeared, among them Amy Winehouse, Drake, Björk, Rihanna and Damon Albarn.

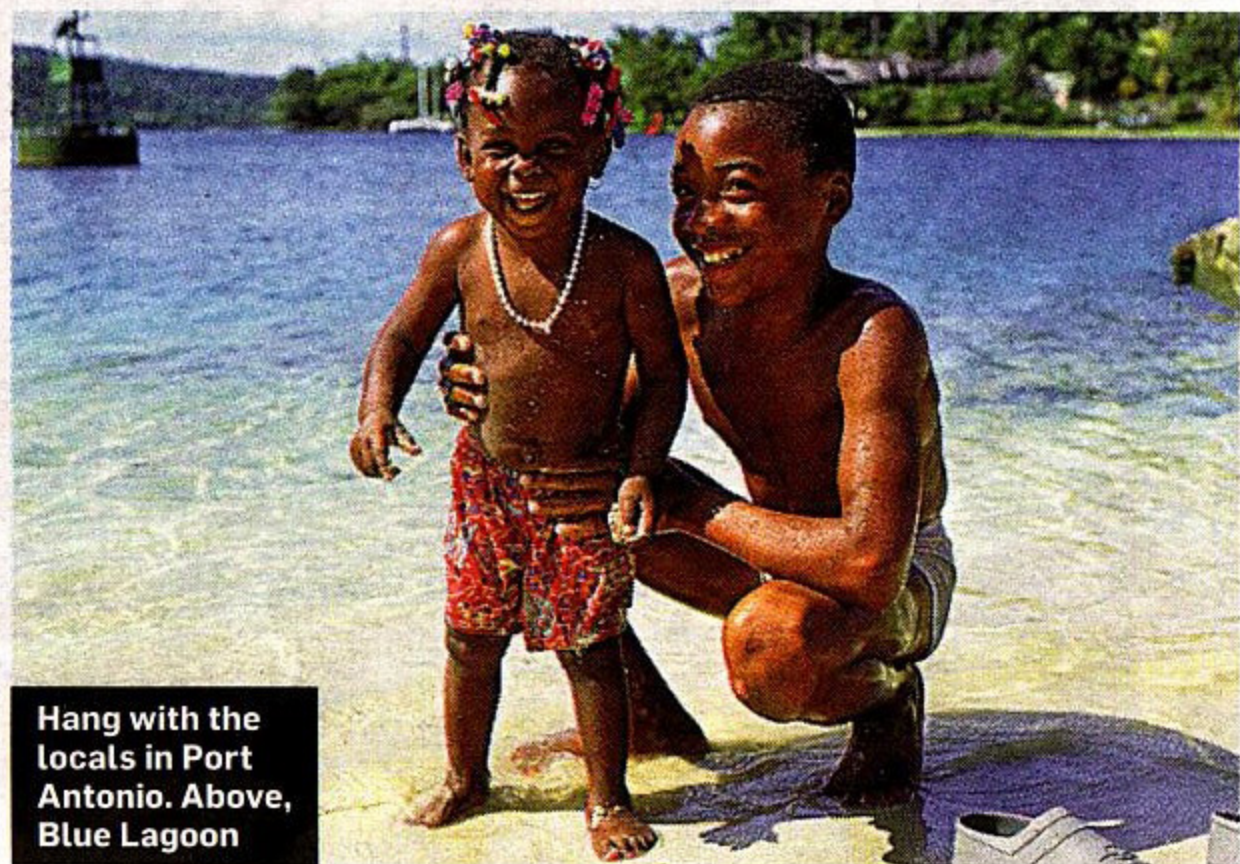
"I was working here when Mr Errol Flynn was alive, and the town was very lively," says Albert Minott. "Then it all changed. But Mr Jon Baker is doing a good job of putting the town and the Jolly Boys back on top."

We are sitting in the Bush Bar at Geejam, Baker's hotel and recording facility in the hills above town, which he runs with Steve Beaver, another British music-business veteran. Minott is lead singer with the Jolly Boys, a local band who play mento, a form of Jamaican music that predates even ska and rocksteady. With an average age of 73, they are unlikely stars, but last year they toured Europe with Sade.

Like Treasure Beach, Port Antonio is both safe and easy-going. You might get a little light hustling at Boston Bay, but it's worth it for the jerk pork and chicken they serve there. Another strong suit is its excellent beaches, especially Winnifred, an idyllic local hang-out full of food shacks and bars. Bentley, my veteran driver, told me why it gets his vote: "I like to laugh, and sometimes my dentures fall out. The water is so clear, I can always find them here."

Geejam consists of just seven double rooms, in wooden treehouse-like cabins and a villa, each with astounding views over the coast. It feels deliciously secluded and special, and the food's good, but don't come for raucous nightlife, except when the Jolly Boys play.

Seven rooms is not enough to achieve critical mass for a hotel, so, at the moment, the studio pays the bills. Which is why Baker has bought the derelict Trident Hotel, as well as Trident Castle, a Jamaican chateau folly, and plans to open a waterfront complex. Also in the scheme is the resurrection of the Blue Lagoon restaurant and bar. It is a bold undertaking, but every single local I spoke to is rooting for Baker and Beaver. Even local hero Chris Blackwell, the Island Records tycoon — Geejam is part of his Island Outpost group — is daunted by their task. Still, as he says: "I never thought Jon would succeed with the Jolly Boys, and look at them now. If anyone can pull it off, it's him."



Hang with the locals in Port Antonio. Above, Blue Lagoon

IS JAMAICA SAFE?

Much of Jamaica's reputation for violence is a hangover from 40 years ago, when elections meant serious trouble. It still exists, and is often drug-related, but is mostly confined to areas of west Kingston where tourists never venture. When visitors are involved, it's normally opportunist robbery: you're advised not to walk around with cash or valuables on display, and to avoid some areas after dark. Hustlers are a fact of life around the big resorts of the north coast, offering everything from tours to drugs. They can be tedious, but it's usually easy to dismiss them with good humour. And they shouldn't deter you from visiting what is, scenically and culturally, one of the richest of the Caribbean islands.

For detailed advice on travel to Jamaica, visit fco.gov.uk.

Travel details: Virgin Holidays (0844 557 3859, virginholidays.co.uk) has seven nights at Jakes (jakeshotel.com) from £915pp, room-only. Seven nights at Geejam (geejamhotel.com) start at £2,249pp, B&B, with Virgin Holidays + Hip Hotels (0844 573 2460, vhiphotels.co.uk). Both packages include flights with Virgin Atlantic from Gatwick, and transfers.

Other operators to try include Carib-tours (020 3131 0174, caribtours.co.uk) and Turquoise Holidays (01494 678400, turquoiseholidays.co.uk).

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ST See a video of the Jolly Boys covering Amy Winehouse: thesundaytimes.co.uk/travel

✦ Robert Ryan travelled as a guest of Virgin Holidays