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# Where to Find the Best Food in Jamaica

by CNT Editors • September 28, 2016



Photo by Mikkel Vang  
 Escovitch-style fish at Jakes Treasure Beach.

Follow a food lover's guide to the Caribbean island, from a no-frills breakfast spot in Treasure Beach to the North Coast for the best jerk chicken and seafood around.

Lucinda Scala Quinn, award-winning television host and author of the *Mad Hungry* cookbooks, thinks of Jamaica as her spiritual second home. "I've been visiting for decades," she says in her October issue story for *Traveler*, "[Why Jamaican Food Has Never Been Better](#)." "During our family's regular visits to [old friend Blaise Hart's homes] on Montego Bay and later at Good Hope, an eighteenth-century estate set amid pineapple fields along the Martha Brae River, Jamaica's backcountry rhythms imprinted themselves on me: diving into the cool river to swim across a rushing current until the eddy pulled us back upstream, or walking through citrus fields and estate ruins, the air thick with the scent of orange blossoms.

"But what really hooked me was the food."

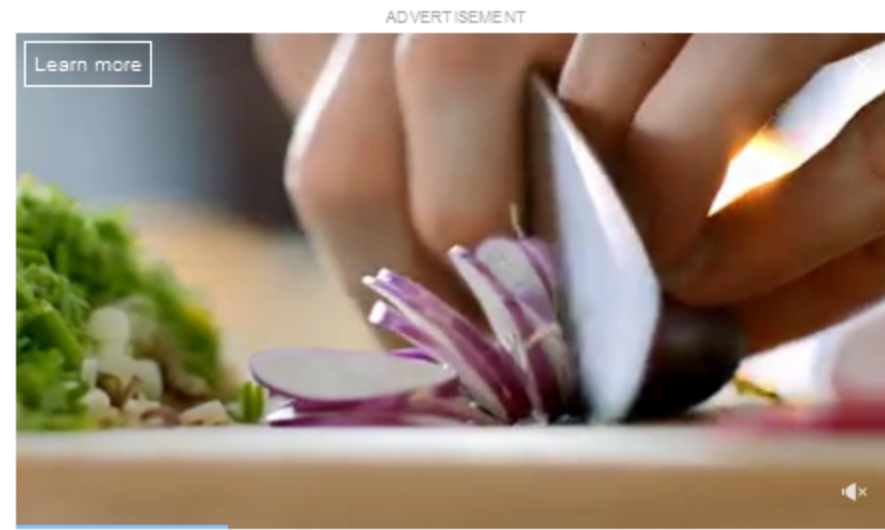
Quinn has crafted something of a food tour of Jamaica. On an island slightly smaller than Connecticut, the new North-South Highway between Kingston and Ocho Rios has made it easy to get virtually anywhere in a couple of hours. Most visitors stay in one of the following three areas; she tells friends to choose a base—beach or mountains—rent a car ([Island Car Rentals](#) is Jamaica's largest agency), or hire a driver through their hotel (Andy, who runs Metro Tours, is used to shuttling everyone from film crews to sports stars around the island). Then follow your cravings into sandy parking lots or up rambling dirt roads.

Note: If you want some help on the ground, [Jamaica Tour Society](#) founder Lyndalee Burke will customize any sightseeing itinerary for you, from food, art, and architecture to hiking, biking, birding and swimming.



## THE NORTH COAST

*A well-traveled stretch from Oracabessa to Montego Bay.*



### Start with the Island's Best Jerk and Seafood

With locations in Montego Bay and Ocho Rios, Scotchies cooks up Jamaica's most memorable jerk chicken, pork, and fish in an open-air setting where the jerk is smoked and chopped right in front of you. (Be sure to load up on sides, such as festival—a crispy and slightly sweet cornmeal-flour Johnny cake—roast breadfruit, and coconut-infused rice and peas.) In the heart of Ocho Rios, try the home-style curried goat or shrimp “rundown” (so-called because it’s “run down,” or simmered, until thickened in coconut milk) at [Miss T's Kitchen](#), a tidy lunch and dinner spot serving Jamaican classics on brightly painted tables within a garden. A half hour away, [Stush in the Bush](#) is hands down the most unexpected food experience in Jamaica, where proprietors Lisa (the “stush,” patois for stylish) and Christopher Binns (aka “bush,” or farmer) serve up vegetarian (mostly vegan) meals on a rootsy-chic 15-acre hilltop farm. (Reserve ahead so Chris can meet you in Free Hill and get you up to the property in his all-terrain vehicle.) Lunch there starts with a glass of fresh passion fruit juice, followed by a changing multi-course menu based on what's growing, like beet carpaccio or yam croquettes with cilantro chimichurri. Wash down peel-and-eat shrimp with rum cocktails at the colorfully painted [HouseBoat Grill](#), moored in Montego Bay Marine Park (grab a table on the upstairs deck in the southwest corner for sunset). At the [Lobster Trapp](#) in Hopewell, owner Dervy is equal parts fisherman, artist, and chef: His grilled kingfish and snapper are always fresh, along with lobster doused in a butter, Scotch Bonnet, and garlic sauce. Go into the kitchen for some of his fermented noni (a superfruit) to cure whatever ails you. And even if you're not a guest at the [Half Moon resort](#), it's worth dressing up a little for its [Sugar Mill restaurant](#), set in a vaulted-ceiling dining room behind a 17th-century water mill, which does modern Jamaican dishes like crayfish bisque and ackee flan. (Half Moon is now also growing its own produce on property.)

### Then Retreat to Your Estate House

The best way to experience the countryside is to stay at the [Coach House Villa at Good Hope](#), a 2,000-acre 18th-century sugar plantation-turned-citrus farm by the Martha Brae River. The six-room 18th-century villa is staffed by one of my favorite Jamaican cooks, Barbara Murray (ask her to cook her curry chicken with shredded beets and carrots), and its beautiful new pool overlooks the valley. Or book a room at [GoldenEye](#), once the home of *James Bond* author [Ian Fleming](#) and now an unshowily luxe resort that attracts a hip international crowd with its 26 new beach huts, pool, and restaurants supplied with produce from Pantrepant farm. And you still can't beat [Round Hill](#) for its history (JFK and Jackie O spent their honeymoon in villa 10; Noel Coward and Oscar Hammerstein owned villas 3 and 12 respectively) and elegant chaise-lined beachfront. Since its 1953 conversion from a sugar and pineapple plantation, it remains one of the most polished resorts on the island: Ralph Lauren, who owns two villas here, is responsible for the recent redesigns of its 36 oceanfront rooms as well as The Grill restaurant, which draws from the three organic vegetable gardens on the property.

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## THE BLUE MOUNTAINS

*The lush region between Kingston and the beaches of sleepy Port Antonio.*

### Go for More Than the Coffee

Gloria's Rendezvous is a laid-back 44-year-old institution beloved by prime ministers and musicians for its grilled fish and bammy (cassava cakes); stop in after exploring the vast Caribbean art collection at Kingston's National Gallery of Jamaica. On Hope Road, close to the [Bob Marley Museum](#), you've got to brake for the utterly unique ice cream at [Devon House](#), made with the island's dark stout beer. While there, tour the historical property, anchored by a Georgian-style great house constructed in 1891 by Jamaica's first black millionaire, George Steibel. EITS Café, above Kingston, is run by father-daughter pair Robyn and Michael Fox out of their guest house and Food Basket Farm. Their eclectic meals mix European ingredients with Jamaican dishes like smoked marlin or oxtail. After lunch, drive to Belcour Lodge, an 18th-century former coffee estate owned by third-generation Jamaican and cookbook author Robin Lin Lumsden. You can tour their citrus orchards (used in their five-fruit marmalade) and 75 bee colonies, which produce their Belcour Mountain Honey; be sure to try Robyn's locally famous ginger cake. In this region, there are four or five historic coffee estates worth visiting along the slopes of the Blue and John Crow mountains. At the oldest, Clifton Mount, you can arrange for a hiking excursion timed to arrive for a sunset coffee and stunning view of the blue peaks. Afterwards, refuel next door at roadside “cookshop” Crystal Edge (locally known as “Winsome” after the beloved proprietor) with canonical Jamaican country cooking like chicken soup and brown stewfish.

### Bunk Down in the Sky

The Woodside Villa, a five-bedroom colonial 4,000 feet above sea level, has 360-degree mountain views from a wrap-around veranda and a spring-fed pool surrounded by guava and peach trees. Paul, the cook, and his assistant Mark turn out spectacular meals, including the most delicious barbecue chicken. Chris Blackwell's mountain cottage resort, [Strawberry Hill](#), has a bird's-eye view of Kingston from its infinity pool. The restaurant on the site of the original home serves Jamaican specialties like curried goat oxtail and incorporates fresh local produce into dishes like quinoa-Rasta salad (made with ackee, calaloo, and citrus vinaigrette). Sip tropical drinks at the clubby, wainscotted bar that has a rare stone fireplace (for cool mountain nights) and walls hung with vintage black-and-white photos of greats from jazz, rock, and reggae. If you want to day-trip to the mountains but stay by the beach, try the old-school, sleepy coastal town of [Port Antonio](#) down the hill, once a favorite haunt of mid-century British royals and Hollywood bon-vivants. [Geejam](#), just ten minutes from town, is a rustic yet refined hotel with forest-to-ocean views and sleek wooden treehouse-like rooms. Last time I stayed there, two rock stars were making a record in the on-site recording studio. The Bushbar serves consistently delicious Asian-influenced food with Jamaican ingredients. Don't miss the glorious white sand Frenchman's Cove beach or the trio of natural local unspoiled waterfalls—Reach, Somerset, and Scatter—all within a 20-minute drive.

## THE SOUTH COAST

*From unspoiled Treasure Beach to the thronged resort town of Negril.*

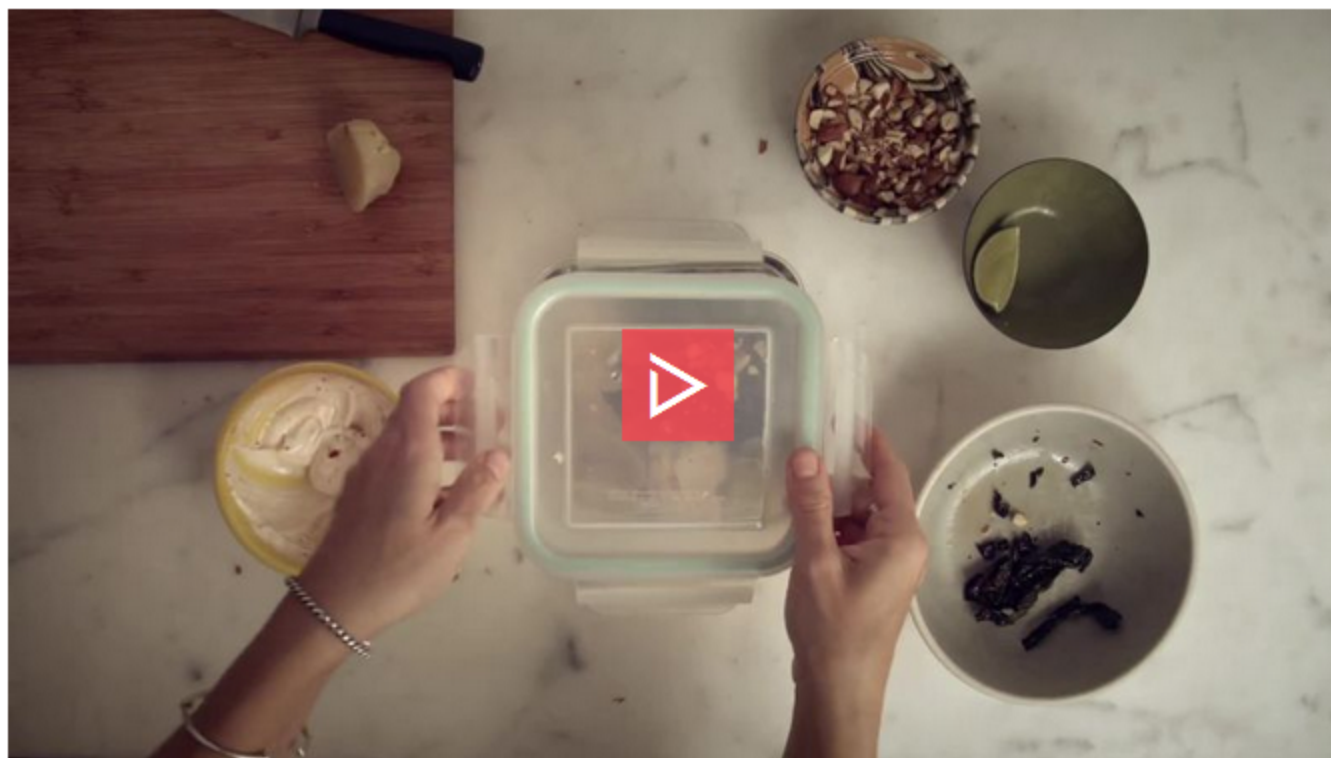
### Do the Seriously Local Thing

For the best breakfast in Treasure Beach, hit up no-frills Smurfs, where the owner, Dawn, roasts her own coffee to go with the ackee and saltfish. At lunch, try the righteous jerk, curried goat, and great soups, especially the superb Mannish Water (goat's head soup, said to make a man more "mannish" on his wedding night) at Murray's Fish & Jerk Hut, on the Kingston and Ochi roads heading southwest. Hosted on (or near) every full moon by Jake's hotel and organized by organic farming pioneer Liz Solmes on a farm in Pedro Planes, Jakes Full Moon Dinners showcase local produce. (Reserve through [Jakes Treasure Beach](#).) Have your hotel book a fisherman to ferry you to Floyd's Pelican Bar, a quarter mile out to sea on a sandbar near Treasure Beach. Play dominoes, sip a Red Stripe, and order fresh-caught and grilled fish. Down south in St. Elizabeth and en route to the unmissable YS Falls, the Middle Quarter Shrimp Ladies sell bags of heads-on Black River shrimp boiled with supersonic hot pepper. (As you drive in, multiple pepper-shrimp purveyors will descend upon your car, so be firm but fair when procuring your snack.) My favorite place to eat in Negril is beachside spot Cosmos Seafood. Come for a swim and stay for a lunch of traditional red pea soup with spinner dumplings and Escovitch-style fried fish. At [Rockhouse](#) you can hit three spots on one beloved property. At the restaurant, order an old-time "synting" (crayfish, calamari, snapper, and shrimp simmered in run-down coconut sauce) and warm sweet potato pone for dessert. There's a popping scene at the Pushcart Rum bar, which is the perfect place to try a wide selection of Caribbean rums and tropical drinks—or you can go virgin with a pressed watermelon-basil concoction at the Juice Bar.

### Avoid the Spring Break Crowd

Negril's world-class, seven-mile white-sand beach and limestone cliffs are a huge draw, but can get congested during vacations. My favorite place to stay here, Tensing Pen, has treetop bungalows, a pool, and phenomenal swimming and cliff diving from the edge of the property. Rockhouse, with its chic stone huts that sit right over the cliffs, has a die-hard clientele that returns year after year. Or you can just day-visit Negril: Personally, I love the remoteness of Jakes Treasure Beach, where Jason and his mom Sally have created their own out-of-the-way beach town with colorfully painted cottages and villas. Once you're over the no-cellphone blues, what seeps in through the Treasure Beach breeze is total relaxation.

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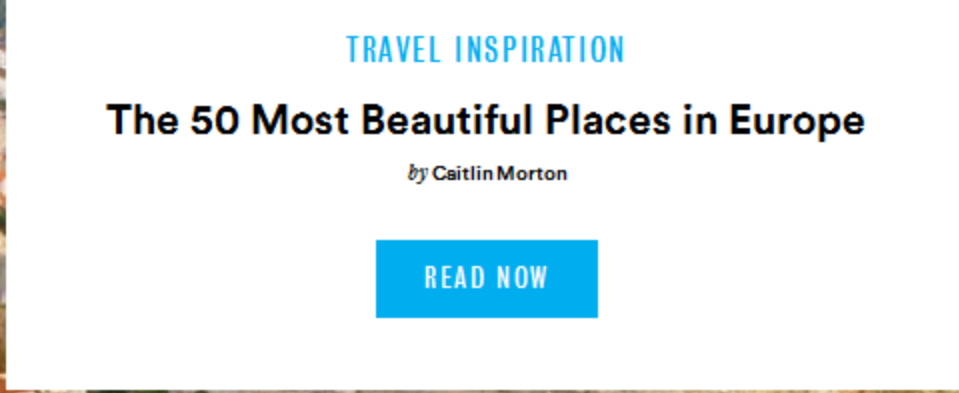




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