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Jessica Barrett

= JAMAICA =

This way up for a happy holiday

From bohemian Negril
to rural Treasure Beach,
Jessica Barrett gets a
flavour of Jamaica's
celebrated coastline

From the moment we arrived in Montego Bay, it became clear we wouldn't ever be stuck for help, advice or a chat. We were offered cigarettes, help with our luggage, even a lift from people waiting outside the airport. Our own ride soon appeared and, as we loaded our bags into the back of the car it started to rain, we panicked. "It's just a little tropical refreshment," said the driver. "You get five minutes of refreshment per day. It's nothing to worry about." She was right: the weather was perfect for the whole week.

I'd been to Jamaica 21 years previously and, even though I was only 11, the holiday had stayed with me. I had thought about it a lot: the memories of sitting in the cool, steep Blue Mountains, with reggae echoing off the hills from neighbouring villages, were still vivid.

This time I wanted to experience the island's justly celebrated coastline, starting in the bohemian, laid-back west coast resort of Negril. Here, the craggy limestone is plugged with dozens of stylish boutique hotels, including the popular Rockhouse above Pristine Cove. It's understated but cool, its stone and thatch villas opening on to private terraces with stairs leading down into the sea. The restaurant menus read like something you'd find at a trendy pop-up: green juices for breakfast, kale, ginger and jerk chicken for dinner. It's the perfect spot to spend a few days doing absolutely nothing. We did just that, but while it was tempting to sit by

the pool in the sun drinking drunken coconuts (filled with rum - a lot of rum), there was plenty to explore nearby.

We started at Zimbali's Mountain Cooking studio at the Zimbali Retreat, a hotel and kitchen garden on Canaan mountain that offers cookery demonstrations twice daily. A 30-minute drive up a road so potholed we nearly fell into one entirely delivered us to a glorified

treehouse surrounded by tropical trees and flowers. It was calm (perhaps something to do with the cloud of weed smoke floating above the communal area), quiet and cool. Owner Mark - a dreadlocked American expatriate - had been a stressed-out stockbroker living in Chicago before deciding to move to Jamaica in search of a more spiritually enriching life. He has certainly found it at Zimbali.

We were led into his kitchen garden, abundant with lychee trees and pineapple plants, basil and plantains before watching the chefs cook: plantain and salsa, coconut and mango sushi and fish steamed in banana leaves with freshly made bread. We devoured it in the glorious treetop restaurant with icy bottles of the island's favourite beer, Red Stripe.

From there we ventured south (you can pretty much get anywhere around the island

in two to three hours, if the road is smooth). Where Negril is a swanky hippy retreat, the south coast is rural and raw. We were staying at [Jakes](#) hotel on Treasure Beach, opened by

artist Sally Henzell in the early Eighties after she bought what was essentially a shack on a deserted beach.

The sun was setting as we arrived and we were ushered into sun-loungers with a rum punch to hand. Jakes is more basic than the boutique hotels on the Negril cliffs, but you're by no means slumming it. Each room is different, decorated with handpicked local art. Henzell based the architecture loosely on Gaudi's work in Barcelona.

Jake's restaurant - Jack Sprat - is signposted at the corner of almost every major road around the island, a marker of its renown - happily, it lives up to its reputation. The food is simple: jerk chicken, rice and peas and celebrations (a type of dumpling), but was so good that I had to go back the next night for more.

It's hard to visit Jamaica and avoid rum, but the Appleton Rum Estate makes an interesting diversion. Regardless of the fact that we arrived at 10.30am, we were greeted with the strongest rum punch of our whole trip, and then another before we learned about the history of the estate's sugar cane plantation and the production process. A dozen different bottles of rum were laid out in front of us to sample. Luckily we had a driver who wound the windows down to sober us up for our next stop: YS Falls, the perfect tonic. The waterfalls are a picturesque series of cascades and rocky pools, in which the brave were jumping from one level to the next.

A phrase I'd heard a lot during our stay - "way up, stay up" - chimed in my mind. It's the name of a Beenie Man song, and means you're happy and you'll stay happy. It's a phrase that was definitely true of my week in Jamaica.



GETTING THERE

Thomson Airways (thomson.co.uk) flies from Gatwick to Montego Bay from £605 return.

STAYING THERE

Rockhouse (rockhouse.com), doubles from US\$109 (£72). **Jakes** (jakeshotel.com), doubles from £65.

MORE INFORMATION
visitjamaica.com

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Treasured beach: the white sands of Negril (above). Jakes Hotel (below) RICHARD BROADWELL/JALAMY

