

Caribbean dreaming

LOWDOWN: Jamaica. By **Cathy Hawker**

Location and geography

Jamaica is in the Greater Antilles, 90 miles south of Cuba. At 4,420 square miles it is the largest English-speaking island in the Caribbean and the third largest overall behind Cuba and Hispaniola. It measures 146 miles by 51 miles at its widest and has a ridge of mountains running down its spine. These Blue Mountains, famous for their high-quality coffee, peak at 7,400 feet.

The capital, Kingston, is in the south-east and has the seventh-largest natural harbour in the world. Most tourists fly into Montego Bay on the north coast and rarely visit Kingston.

Access

British Airways (www.ba.com) flies three times a week to Kingston from Gatwick. Virgin Atlantic (www.virginatlantic.com) flies twice a week from Gatwick to Kingston and from Gatwick to Montego Bay. Montego Bay airport has just had a £100 million renovation and receives flights from 55 cities worldwide.

History

The country gained its independence from Britain in 1962 and remains a key member of the Commonwealth.

Climate

The island has a hot, tropical climate with most rainfall between May and October when humidity can be high. Average annual temperatures are 28 degrees Celsius.

Tourism history

Hollywood glitz and British society discovered Jamaica more than 50 years ago when stars such as Errol Flynn holidayed here. As well as Bond author Ian Fleming, another notable British resident was Noël Coward, who built Firefly, a simple house on an outstanding site overlooking the sea near Oracabessa. Coward died there in 1973 and is buried in the garden. His house is now an evocative museum to his life on Jamaica.



The palm-fringed tropical beach at Palmyra, where oceanfront apartments start at £230,000 (0845 051 9190)

Classy hotels welcomed well-heeled guests in the post-war years. Half Moon, Round Hill and Jamaica Inn were smart hotels for an international crowd. Then, in the Eighties, large all-inclusive hotels moved in along the north coast, monsters with 1,000-plus rooms where guests were encouraged to stay on-site.

At a time when the political situation was precarious and crime was rife, Jamaica's reputation for compound hotels was born.

Today there are still plenty of hotels catering for visitors who want to explore one of the Caribbean's most vibrant and colourful islands. A more stable political climate and increased policing in tourist areas have made Jamaica safer and helped visitor numbers increase by 14 per cent in 2007.

Property

According to Century 21 estate agents in Jamaica, annual price appreciation on Jamaica's north coast was at least 30 per cent from 2006 to 2007, with residential land around Montego Bay costing about £300,000 an acre.

Frank Perolli of The Palmyra development in Montego Bay says prices on the island have doubled in the past two years. "Jamaica is being rediscovered," says Perolli. "The Florida market is suffering but people still want beaches, good weather and good access and Jamaica has these."

Apartments at the oceanfront Palmyra start at about £230,000, with completion of phase one due in October 2008. Call 0845 051 9190, or visit www.thepalmyra.com.