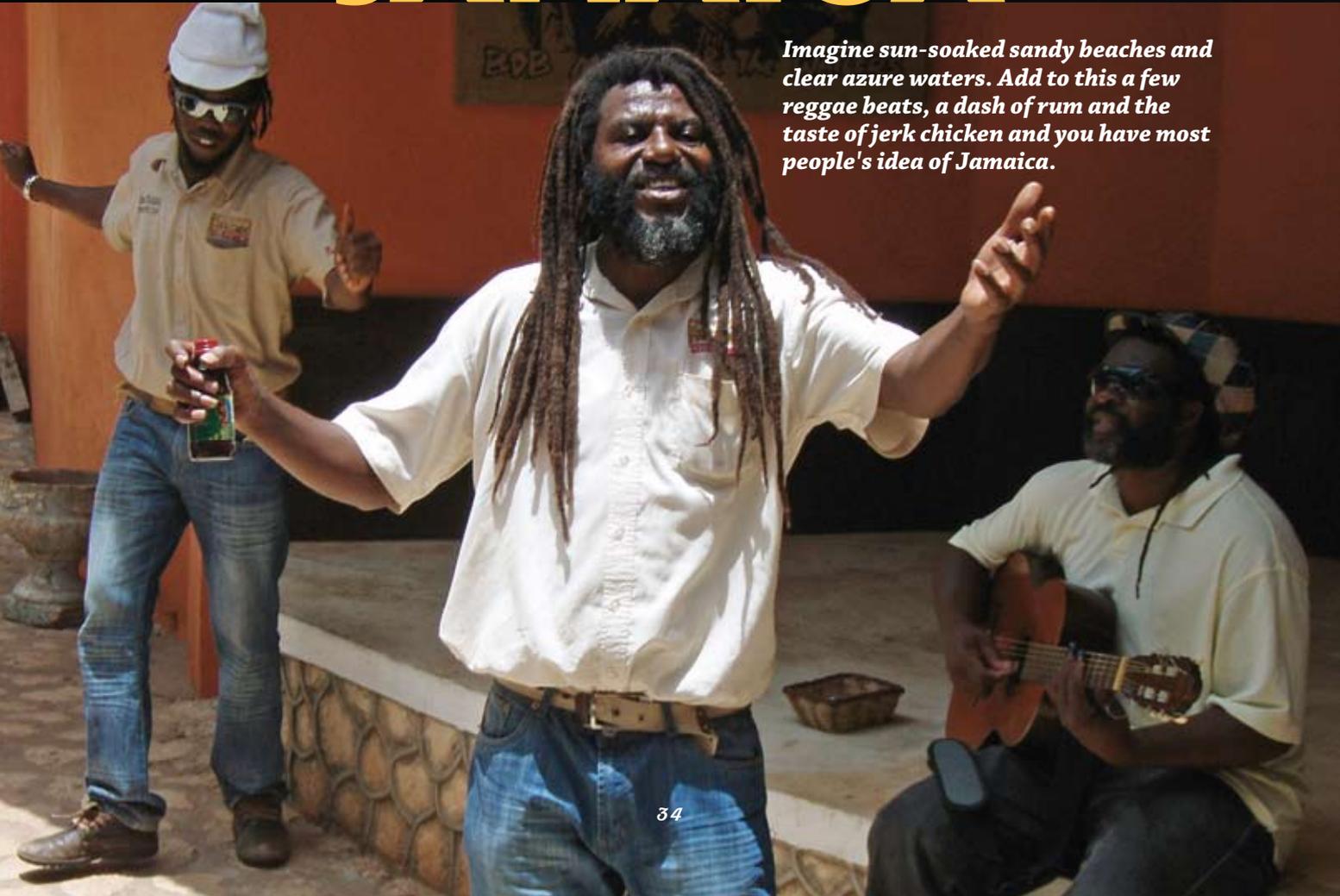


Life in JAMAICA



Imagine sun-soaked sandy beaches and clear azure waters. Add to this a few reggae beats, a dash of rum and the taste of jerk chicken and you have most people's idea of Jamaica.

Text and Photos Antony Barton

Home to legends such as **Bob Marley** and world-champion sprinter **Usain Bolt**, this Caribbean island is just one and a half hours from Florida and a short distance from Cuba and the Bahamas. It boasts many luxurious five-star resorts and is a destination of choice for honeymooners seeking seclusion.

Most first-time visitors are amazed at the sheer size of the island, which covers over 10,991 square kilometres and offers plenty to see and do. A journey to the heart of the country reveals the Blue Mountains, rising above the dense rainforest that hides yellow-billed parrots and fabulous zip-lining opportunities. Shanty towns and orange groves line the way to the bustling capital Kingston, while those travellers who stay on the island's golden periphery have access to world-class scuba diving and vibrant night life.



The Bird of Paradise is among Jamaica's more exotic flora.



The Bob Marley Museum is a must for reggae lovers.



THE BOB MARLEY PILGRIMAGE

Reggae lovers can trace the life of Bob Marley through various locations across Jamaica. The first stop should be his teenage haunt in a government yard in Trench Town, where visitors can still see Bob's first acoustic guitar and the rusted VW Camper that once carried him and The Wailers. Bob refers to this yard in at least four of his songs, including *No Woman, No Cry*.

A short distance away in Kingston lies 56 Hope Road, where Bob once recorded and lived with his wife **Rita**. Now called the Bob Marley Museum, the house was the scene of a failed

assassination attempt on Bob's life, with the bullets still lodged in the inside walls. The rooms are covered in memorabilia, such as newspaper cuttings, photos and album covers, and visitors may be unsurprised to find marijuana plants growing in the garden.

Die-hard fans should round off the pilgrimage with a trip to Nine Mile. This mountain village overlooks a vast expanse of green hills and lies at the end of a series of twisting, bumpy roads. A Rastafarian guide is on hand to show you Bob's birthplace, before leading you around the tombs that hold Bob and his mother.



The forested peaks of the Blue Mountains pierce the clouds.



Powdery sand covers the length of Negril's Seven Mile Beach.



SNORKELLING CAN ALLOW YOU TO GET UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL WITH SQUIRRELFISH, STINGRAYS AND TURTLES.

THE RAINFOREST

Rising to 2,256 metres in height, the iconic Blue Mountains stand majestically in the east of Jamaica. They are home to the world's second-largest butterfly and more than 200 species of bird. The lower slopes of these mountains are used to grow Blue Mountain Coffee, over 80% of which is exported to Japan.

For travellers, a walk to the top of Blue Mountain Peak can offer views of both the north and south coasts, as well as a glimpse of Cuba. Most tourists, however, enjoy the scenery as part of a downhill bicycle ride that runs through the rainforest and alongside gushing waterfalls.

Elsewhere, you can zip-line through the rainforest canopy or take a cable car for sweeping panoramas across the island. The film *Cool Runnings* has inspired a bobsled roller-coaster ride through the tropical terrain.

One of Jamaica's top attractions is Dunn's River Falls, concealed in the rainforest on the north coast. The waterfalls, among the few in the world to empty directly into the sea, cascade for some 300 metres. Climbing all the way to the top has become a rite of passage for any self-respecting visitor.



A brazen cliff-jumper shows his bravery.



Crowds watch the action at Rick's Cafe.

SEA AND SAND

Seven Mile Beach in Negril is reason enough for many travellers to visit Jamaica time and time again. Forming a gentle arc along the west coast, this seemingly endless stretch of white sand offers plenty of privacy for sunbathing beside the turquoise sea.

Perched on a nearby cliff is Rick's Cafe, where locals and tourists gather for drinks and late-night music. The cafe's real pulling power rests in the cliff-jumping. With the highest platform at 12 metres above the sea, a constant stream of thrill-seekers can be found diving or belly-flopping into the water in the early evenings.

Other spectacular locations include James Bond Beach on the north-east coast. Set against lush green mountains, this is where Ursula Andress was filmed stepping from the water in *Dr No*. It also has a reputable bar serving delicious seafood.

Aside from the beaches, there are also plenty of amazing scuba sites. You can find sponge coves with the occasional nurse shark, a wrecked Canadian minesweeper from the Second World War and vibrant reefs teeming with parrotfish. Even snorkelling can allow you to get up close and personal with squirrelfish, stingrays and turtles.

ENTERTAINMENT

There are many ways to while away the evening hours in Jamaica, ranging from a game of dominoes in a rainforest rum shack to bar-hopping along the Hip Strip in Montego Bay. Here, at the bustling Margaritaville night spot, you will find live bands playing reggae as drinkers zip along water slides and into the warm Caribbean Sea. Nearby is the Pier One nightclub, where locals and tourists alike enjoy heavy dancehall music until sunrise.

Aside from night-time entertainment, there are special music events throughout the year. Reggae Sumfest is the country's largest concert festival, and it takes place every July. This dancehall and reggae event, held in Montego Bay, attracts some of the biggest names in music, including **Usher, 50 Cent** and **Rihanna**. Alternatively, the annual

Jamaica Jazz and Blues festival has provided R&B, soul, Latin and world music since 1996, with as many as 40,000 patrons each year.

But for the quintessential Caribbean experience, time your trip to coincide with the Carnival, held across the island in April each year. Inspired by the Trinidad Carnival, elaborate dancers dazzle the crowds in feathers and sequins, while steel bands and soca musicians have everyone dancing until nightfall.

The Carnival is an excellent opportunity to try some of Jamaica's unique food, served up by street vendors. Jerk chicken and curried goat offer a spicy kick, beef patties are ideal snacks and the national dish of ackee and saltfish is best enjoyed with a refreshing glass of coconut water or a well-earned Red Stripe.



Hit the Hip Strip for drinking, dining and splashing into the sea.

