



Montego Bay

PICTURE Shutterstock/Matheusf_arias

One love

How is Jamaica's tourism sector faring in the wake of last year's Hurricane Melissa? **Jo Fernández** reports

If Jamaica were a person, they'd be strong, bold and colourful. They'd also drink a lot of rum. As an island, it's blessed with dreamy beaches, jungle-clad mountains, well-seasoned food and a soul-stirring musical heritage, making it one of the most popular and alluring destinations in the Caribbean.

Then, last October, the worst hurricane ever to hit the island tore across southern and western Jamaica. Melissa brought torrential rain, landslides and flooding that caused death and destruction and has left many still living without secure shelter. Tourism infrastructure has been quicker to recover, with room capacity now back to over 80% of pre-hurricane levels. Montego Bay's hotels were worst affected – several won't reopen until later this year – so that's where I started my journey around the island to see how tourism is getting back on its feet.

ENDURING APPEAL

MoBay, as locals call it, is home to the Sumfest reggae festival, blissful beaches and a natural harbour framed by hills. I stood on my balcony at the Iberostar Selection Rose Hall Suites surveying much of what brings visitors to the island – shimmering sand lapped by sea as blue and clear as the water in the resort's six swimming pools.

Bleary-eyed from a sleepless 10-hour flight, my breakfast of ackee and saltfish – Jamaica's national

dish – and a cup of Blue Mountain coffee pepped me up for my journey to Negril. This small resort town is 90 minutes away at the westernmost point of Jamaica.

Among the independent low-rise hotels strung along Seven Mile Beach, Footprints is a contemporary light-filled boutique with warm woody touches and a striking skywalk over the courtyard pool. I relaxed into its vibe, sipping punchy rum cocktails on a sunbed, walking barefoot along the beach and eating sweet jerk corn in Blushy's beachfront grill. Its pared-back rooms let the local culture and scenery do the talking.

Late one afternoon, I joined the day-drinking crowds at Rick's Cafe. Half an hour before dusk, this cliff-top institution fills with people angling their phones toward the mesmerising sky, ablaze as if on fire. Aside from the sunsets, it's famous for cliff diving – though I wimped out of that challenge, leaving swaggering locals to do handstands before plummeting more than 10 metres from its rocky shoreline into the green sea below.

SMALL TREASURES

Two hours southwards along the coast lies St Elizabeth, one of the areas hit hardest when Melissa made landfall on the island. I passed through small communities now awash with roofless homes and bowed-down trees stripped bare by the force of the storm. ➤

DESTINATIONS

CARIBBEAN | JAMAICA

ASK THE expert



Donovan White,
director of tourism,
Jamaica Tourist Board

"While most touristic assets came back within three months of the hurricane, some of the bigger ones are still out, based on structural damage they've had to address. We're down about a quarter of where we would normally be at this point of the year and we probably won't recover until this time next year. The hotels that are open are all flying high; others are still building as a lot of the insurance claims take time. It's a combination of community development and new development. For example, the east coast is underdeveloped, almost virgin, but has some of the best beaches and scenery in the country. The south coast is all about rustic luxury with space and privacy among the farming communities, away from the all-inclusives."

BOOK IT

Sandals offers seven nights at Sandals Dunn's River from £2,319 per person, based on two sharing, all-inclusive, with UK flights and transfers, departing September 6. sellingsandals.co.uk

Tui offers seven nights, at the Iberostar Selection Rose Hall Suites, from £1,666 per person, based on two sharing on an all-inclusive basis, with UK flights and transfers, departing September 7. tui.co.uk



top tip

Pelican Bar, a platform on stilts near Treasure Bay, is a no-frills spot for a Red Stripe and game of dominoes while pelicans perch nearby

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Jakes Hotel cottages; Dunn's River Falls; local fruit for sale PICTURES: Jamaica Tourist Board



A world away from the high-rise all-inclusives and glitzy resorts, this rural fishing and farming area is the breadbasket of Jamaica, known for producing a significant portion of the island's food. Tourism is low-key and community-focused.

Fittingly rustic and relaxed, Jakes Hotel on Treasure Beach is something of an institution, created by charismatic Sally Henzell, art director of the 1972 reggae movie *The Harder They Come*. The hotel's collection of kaleidoscopic cottages adorned with local arts and crafts is charming; it's incredible to think the coast-facing cottages battered by Melissa were up and running again by Christmas. Mine featured African textiles and an outdoor bath and shower, while at night the waves crashed dramatically against the jagged curve of the coast.

Despite hosting guests ranging from British reggae singer Maxi Priest to Hollywood star Angelina Jolie (who popped in for Treasure Beach's Calabash Literary Festival in 2023), Jakes remains affordable, unpretentious and unfussy. It's also sustainable in a very real sense, boasting solar panels, a saltwater pool and seasonal ingredients, and funding local foundation Breds.

Guests eat simple, well-cooked staples such as chicken with jerk sauce and rice and peas on the shaded, sea-facing patio. Sally, along with son Jason and daughter-in-law Laura (who doubles as a yoga teacher), told me about some of the positive changes post-Melissa. They include a new farmers' market and, on a cycle ride, I met a cucumber and callaloo farmer whose only help was from the Breds Foundation.

SWEET THING

Leaving the sleepy southwest, I went on to Ocho Rios, known as the garden parish, on the north coast. We pulled in to Couples San Souci, an adult-only oceanfront resort set among hillside gardens leading down to the beach. Recently renovated, it has fresh pastel decor, a natural mineral pool, swim-up bar and a private island.

I knew about Saint Lucia and Grenada's chocolate industry, but not Jamaica's. Here, workshops with farm-to-bar chocolate maker Pure Chocolate, run by engaging co-owner Rennae Johnson-Tjeertes, are a way to make silky sweet mixtures and taste local produce.

Rennae explained: "After Hurricane Melissa, cocoa beans, bananas and plantain became scarcer and more expensive. We adapted quickly while supporting our local suppliers. Thankfully, things are getting back on track."

As keen as I was on new discoveries, I couldn't miss a trip to Jamaica's most famous attraction, Dunn's River Falls. Holding hands in a human snake, I clambered up the slippery 55m-high falls while the water cascaded down over forest-fringed limestone rocks. It was exhilarating and refreshing, and whetted my appetite to explore the east coast. Sandals Dunn's River sales executive Tavina Porter said: "We were barely impacted by Melissa – just a few leaves to clear up. Highlights of our beautiful resort are Dunn's Rum Club, home to 30 types from around the Caribbean, and 12 restaurants including my favourite, the Asian-fusion Banyu. One love."

It's a message guests will hear time and again as they tour the island. After the events of the past year, maybe it's time to show Jamaica some love in return. **TW**