

Spice mountain

Jamaica offers a feast of flavours, as a group of agents discover during the Jamaica Tourist Board's 70th anniversary celebrations. **Sasha Wood** reports

The sweet, smoky aroma reaches me before I even set eyes on it. My nose has been leading me here for days, via spicy patties from food trucks in Negril, tender barbecued chicken on the beach in Ocho Rios, rich bean stew in the Blue Mountains and curried goat in Kingston.

Jamaica arguably has the most confident homegrown cuisine in the Caribbean and this colourful roadside shack called Scotchies in Montego Bay – with a branch in Ocho Rios – is the go-to spot for authentic jerk.

In the smokehouse, I see the secret to jerk first-hand. The cook lifts the giant metal corrugated hood to reveal rows of pork and chicken simmering above

burning wood from the Jamaican allspice tree. I take a seat in the rustic garden ready to savour a lunch of spice-rubbed chicken with scotch bonnet sauce, cinnamon-infused 'festival' dumplings and rice and peas that I know will be almost impossible to find off-island due to the pimento wood-infused cooking process. It's the culmination of an agent fam trip that's revealed Jamaica's true nature, away from the allure of its tropical beaches.

By the time I sniffed the scent of Scotchies, I was back in Montego Bay, where my journey began at Sangster International airport seven days earlier. But during that week, I'd travelled all over the ➤

The Blue Mountains, Jamaica

PICTURE Shutterstock/
Marc Stephan

Caribbean's third-largest island – to capital Kingston, port city Ocho Rios in the north, beach favourite Negril in the far west and the Unesco-listed Blue Mountains National Park in the east, exploring every dimension of this sun-kissed isle.

MAGIC BEANS

On the cool green terraces of Craighton Estate in Irish Town, 800 metres above sea level, thick cloud envelops the ridge beyond, sunshine super-charges the coffee bushes along a sloping trail and Kingston glints far down below. Sun, showers and rich soil are the key to Blue Mountain Coffee's taste, according to long-serving resident coffee master Alton 'Junior' Bedward who leads the hour-long tour of the heritage-filled Great House, coffee plantation and gardens plump with ripe mangoes.

Sticky from the uphill exertion, I stop to examine the fat red arabica beans, widely considered to make

the best brew in the world. Without a hint of bitterness and only mildly caffeinated – though it is said to have medicinal properties – the final product tastes as smooth as the Blue Mountain air feels.

One cup gives me just enough of a boost for my next stop high on the rainforest trails of Holywell Park, which offers the best route into this lush wilderness. A short walk along the Blue Mahoe Trail, a nature trek named after the national tree, leads to the top of the Waterfall Trail where a small birdwatching hide offers a place to spot the rare mountain witch bird that haunts these parts with its strange call.

Soon I'm deep among elfin woodland and birdsong, ferns blanketing steep banks as the path descends to a bouldered stream. The sound of rushing water below mingles with raindrops, and I emerge upon a delightful waterfall before climbing the path back to the ranger's hut, as an eerie mist swirls all around.



The Beachfront BY THE FIVES HOTELS

The Beachfront by the Fives Hotels, is an intimate boutique hotel, operating on an all-inclusive basis and features a private pool, relaxing sunbeds, and spectacular ocean views with direct beach access.

Guests can take advantage of accessing all the amenities, facilities, and restaurants at the adjacent Essence at The Fives Beach. Beachfront guests can simply stroll across the beach or jump on the golf cart shuttle between hotels.

The luxurious accommodations offer a serene and elegant atmosphere with stunning ocean views.

The exclusive restaurant & bar, Santa Sirena at Beachfront by the Fives is a true gem, offering direct views across the beach, with a rustic chic ambiance and Mexican fusion cuisine. Skilled mixologist will craft exquisite cocktails, adding the perfect touch to an unforgettable dining experience.



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Essence At The Fives

- 15 speciality restaurants
- 5 pool bars and 4 signature bars
- Daily and nightly entertainment
- Luxurious accommodations
- The Spa spans over 15,000 sq.ft. 11 treatment rooms which cater for the most relaxing treatments.



The Fives Oceanfront

- 2 infinity pools
- 3 gourmet restaurants
- Prime beachfront location
- Furnished terraces and balconies
- Exclusive beach club by Bob Marley's son. The Ro Marley Beach Club.



The Fives Downtown

- Rooftop with 2 infinity pools
- 3 bars
- 2 on-site restaurants
- Prime location with local restaurants, nightlife and shops
- Spa by The Fives & fitness centre.

AGENTS' VIEWS



Teresa Williams, Hays Travel

"My top tip is to try everything. I'm gobsmacked I climbed Dunn's River Falls, but it was so worth it. I enjoyed the trip so much I've been looking to book a Jamaica holiday for myself. Though the Princess Grand and Half Moon were impressive resorts, I think the boutique-style S Hotel Montego Bay, with its distinct Jamaican flavour and food, is more for me."



Charlotte Harrison, Travel with Charli UK

"The *Cool Runnings* bobsled at Mystic Mountain was an epic experience. In terms of recommending an area, it would have to be Negril. Although it's out on its own peninsula, I absolutely loved the Princess Grand for a relaxing all-inclusive break and will definitely be pushing it as a top hotel in Jamaica for my clients."



Gemma Perry, The Holiday Fixer

"The fam reinforced the idea that Jamaica offers diverse luxury experiences. Couples Sans Souci stood out with its adult-only atmosphere, but Half Moon was the real revelation – the turtle sanctuary makes it unforgettable for eco-conscious travellers, while the sprawling grounds and championship golf offer privacy that high-profile clients crave."



ABOVE: Dunn's River Falls **FACING PAGE:** Jerk-spiced chicken; arabica coffee beans **PICTURES:** Jamaica Tourist Board; Shutterstock/petalouda, artphotoclub

MELTING POT

The Jamaica Blue Mountain Culinary Trail extends from these mountains to roadside eateries serving food cooked the traditional way. Ital culture is strong here thanks to the resident Rasta community, so at Crystal Edge cafe, I opt for a steaming bowl of flavoursome pea stew, hearty with sweet potato, lentils and kidney beans. Visitors can follow this tasting trail

either side of the mountains, to the natural haven of Portland and the birthplace of jerk at Boston Bay, or to Kingston and foodie hotspots such as Triple Tz and the popular I-Scream parlour at Devon House.

The Blue Mountains are easy to visit on an excursion from Kingston or Ocho Rios with local operators such as Island Routes and area specialists Blue Mountain Tours offering hotel pick-ups. As a base, ➤

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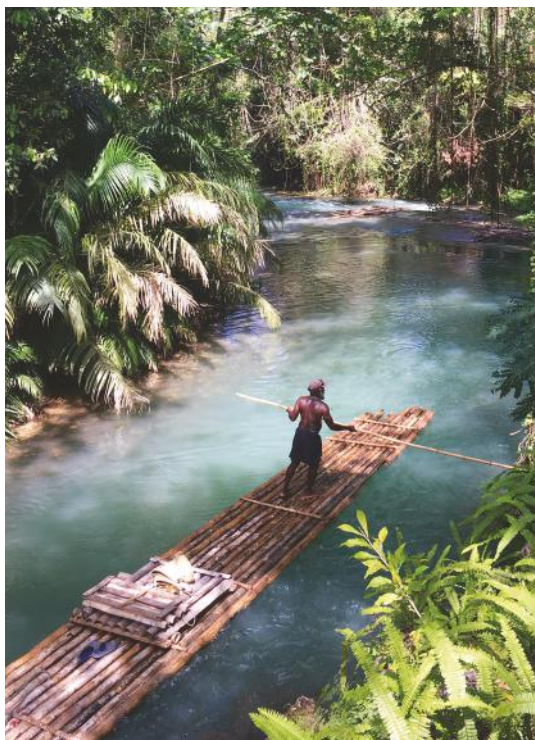
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DESTINATIONS

CARIBBEAN | JAMAICA



ABOVE: The fam trip agents explore the island; rafting on the Martha Brae River

Ocho Rios is ideal for travellers who want to see the island's highlights, with two top attractions on its doorstep – Dunn's River Falls and Mystic Mountain.

Climbing the tiered cascades of Dunn's River as they tumble down to the beach is an utterly enchanting immersion in the island's tropical landscapes, while jungle theme park Mystic Mountain has an exhilaratingly high perch above Ocho Rios. A chairlift swings us to the top where the bobsled from classic movie *Cool Runnings* zooms down through the forest. The park reopened last year following a revamp and features the fun Raggamuffin coaster that tosses riders around on the hilltop, as well as a treetop adventure course and a quintessentially Jamaican picnic area serving up Red Stripe beer with a reggae soundtrack kept fresh by breakout island artists such as Chronixx, Protoje and Koffee.

NATURE'S BOUNTY

Visitors staying in Montego Bay, around 90 minutes away, have their share of natural attractions too, starting with Martha Brae

Jamaica's flavours make the island stand out as a beach destination with extra bite

river rafting. On a gentle journey aboard a bamboo raft powered by gondolier Fred, it's easy to imagine the days when this emerald river was used to transport fresh produce to the historic port of Falmouth.

Fred hops off the raft to fetch fragrant Jamaican rose apples from

his neighbour's tree while I sip from a freshly hacked coconut bought at a riverside stall. As we float downstream, mangoes, breadfruit, walnuts, almonds and figs appear in the canopy all around, the source of the fresh produce I had seen while browsing the fruit stalls of Ackee Walk in Kingston. It's a far cry from the plastic-wrapped fruit and veg in our supermarket aisles.

Jamaica is, quite literally, infused with flavour. Spicy, sweet, aromatic and bold, it makes the island stand out as a tropical beach destination with extra bite – and the real jerk experience alone is worth coming back for. **TW**

BOOK IT

Kuoni offers a 10-night, two-centre package with three nights, including breakfast, at S Hotel Kingston and seven nights' all-inclusive at S Hotel Montego Bay from £3,499 per person, based on two sharing, including return flights and excursions to Dunn's River Falls and the Blue Hole. [kuoni.co.uk](https://www.kuoni.co.uk)

Caribtours offers seven nights at Half Moon resort, staying on a room-only basis, including return flights, private transfers and access to a UK airport lounge from £2,675 per person. [caribtours.co.uk](https://www.caribtours.co.uk)

The **Jamaica Tourist Board** has trade resources available at [visitjamaica.com](https://www.visitjamaica.com)

HOT hotels

Princess Grand Jamaica,

a new luxury enclave, made its debut on Negril's sprawling beachfront last winter, offering 1,005 suites, glossy interiors and room categories that include swim-up, overwater and special couple's suites, butler-serviced rooms, family areas and adult-only section Princess Senses The Mangrove.

Highlights include the huge range of culinary options and a Jamaican snack truck serving tasty patties. From £327 per night, all-inclusive.

princess-hotels.com



Princess Grand

Half Moon is a favourite of the royal family and boasts a 70-year heritage, but it remains fresh-faced thanks to timely tweaks and additions.

After an update to its tasteful Founders Cove cottages, the resort added the swish Eclipse Great House with its 33 suites and sanctuary-like Fern Tree spa in 2020, and recently overhauled its luxury villa collection with seven plush oceanfront pads. Highlights include the resort's renowned Sugar Mill restaurant, horse stables and a turtle nesting beach. From £337 per night room-only.

halfmoon.com



Half Moon

PICTURES: Shenika Ramsay/Jamaica Tourist Board; Princess Hotels & Resorts; Shutterstock/royal 1970