

What's new in Jamaica

The Caribbean cultural powerhouse has plenty to entice repeat visitors this year, finds **Alice Barnes-Brown**

An island of immeasurable beauty, world-class beaches and flavoursome food, Jamaica has long been a popular destination for British travellers. Following record visitor numbers in 2023, the island's tourism body has set ambitious targets, hoping to attract 250,000 travellers from the UK and Ireland alone by 2025.

To meet the demand, 2,000 new hotel rooms are set to open this year, and flight capacity is well and truly taking off. Jamaica is also hosting the Caribbean Travel Marketplace from May 22-24 this year, offering the international travel trade the chance to meet suppliers and explore the island's hottest offerings.

Here we look at what will be touching down in Jamaica this year and beyond.

FLIGHTS OF FANCY

The turquoise seas, rocky coves and rum-based relaxation of Montego Bay will be even easier to

access this year, thanks to increased flight frequency from London. On March 31, Virgin Atlantic will boost its route from Heathrow from five flights a week to daily, year-round, with the addition of services on Saturdays and Sundays. The expansion adds 516 seats a week on the carrier's route and, according to tourism minister Edmund Bartlett, "underscores the confidence in our destination as the most-visited Caribbean island from the UK".

Clients keen to incorporate another idyllic island on their trip are in luck too. In February, InterCaribbean Airways launched a service between Jamaican capital Kingston and Bridgetown, Barbados, not only linking two of the most popular Caribbean destinations with UK travellers, but also creating convenient one-stop connections with other Caribbean islands, including Grenada, Saint Lucia and Antigua.

DESTINATIONS

CARIBBEAN | JAMAICA



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Bob Marley Museum; Doctor's Cave Beach, Montego Bay; Princess Grand Jamaica Resort

PICTURE: Shutterstock/Photo Spirit

HOT HOTELS

Jamaica's hotel scene already offers a vast array of options, and it's about to get a bumper crop of accommodation upgrades as part of the island's plan to introduce 20,000 rooms in the next 10 to 15 years.

June will see the long-awaited opening of not one, but two, resorts from Spanish hospitality brand Princess. The sea-facing Princess Grand Jamaica Resort at Green Island, between Montego Bay and Negril, is a veritable Caribbean dream. It features kid-friendly amenities ranging from a multifunctional sports field to a rip-roaring water park, while couples and honeymooners will be catered for with Master and Platinum suites offering a butler service and an exclusive pool area.

For an adult-only getaway, neighbouring resort Princess Senses The Mangrove delivers, with 401 suites and 14 overwater villas to hide away in. As well as its own sublime offering of restaurants and bars, guests at

the Mangrove will have access to all the facilities and outlets at the Princess Grand. Those looking for the most exclusive (and grown-up) experience should go for the O Club package, with mixology workshops, themed parties and dance classes available.

Opening this summer, a dynamic new contender on White Bay Beach is the 753-room Riu Palace Aquarelle. Five pools (two with swim-up bars) plus a water park will help guests occupy their lazy Caribbean days, but the real USP is 24-hour all-inclusive service: clients can get their fill at the buffet any time of day (or night), or use the self-service machines for drinks when the bars are shut.

A few steps from the new Riu Palace Aquarelle, the Royalton Blue Waters opened a stellar adult-only resort, the Hideaway, in November. Wellness is the name of the game here, with yoga sessions on the resort's private islet and non-motorised watersports included in the price.

Clients visiting the island for a second time will find new options at some of their favourite hotels. Several of Jamaica's much-loved Sandals resorts have been spruced up: Montego Bay has six new room categories (each with soaking tubs), with the Negril and South Coast outposts also upgraded for 2024.

IN THE PIPELINE

It's not just this year that's set to be exciting for Jamaica – there are ongoing projects that will benefit travellers in the coming years. Montego Bay's Sangster International airport opened a \$70 million runway extension last year and has since been granted an additional \$70 million to improve the passenger experience.

Elizabeth Fox, the Jamaica Tourist Board's regional director for the UK and northern Europe, says new things are also happening on the island's less-visited eastern coast. "We're improving the road over to the east side, which will open up that coastline, and that's nearly finished. In February, we

MARLEY MANIA

Bob Marley biopic *One Love* stormed onto cinema screens last month, with a reggae soundtrack and plenty of cinematic shots of Jamaica. The tourist board's Elizabeth Fox says: "It's put Jamaica on the map – we've had several companies tell us that Jamaica was the most searched-for destination in the Caribbean, which it isn't generally. We've also rebranded our agent award programme to call it 'One Love'."

To capitalise on the movie's buzz, suggest the One Love Tour at the Bob Marley Museum in Kingston, which visits the reggae star's former house and Tuff Gong recording studios. Marley fans flying from Montego Bay's Sangster International can also enjoy the One Love restaurant, which is built around a pimento wood grill and serves jerk delights.

also saw the first commercial flight [American Airlines] land into Ian Fleming airport – it's very small, but it was a huge deal [for that part of the island]."

Several of Jamaica's cultural attractions are getting a makeover too. Seville House Heritage Park (a museum of Jamaican history, set in a former plantation home) has upgraded its visitor signs and storyboards. Meanwhile, Independence Park – a vast athletics and sports complex in the capital, Kingston – is getting a new velodrome and National Sports Museum over the next three years.

No matter how well you think you know Jamaica, this is an island that is always reinventing itself. **TW**

BOOK IT

Tui offers seven nights' all-inclusive at the Princess Grand Jamaica from £1,449 per person, based on two adults sharing a junior suite. The price includes flights from Heathrow on October 1. [tui.co.uk](https://www.tui.co.uk)