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David G...

The Best Adventures in Jamaica

Jamaica, 1 Day

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Guide Description

AUTHOR NOTE: There is never a dull moment in Jamaica.
These are some of the best adventures

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Itinerary Overview

things to do
restaurants
hotels
nightlife

Day 1 - Jamaica

DAY NOTE: The Dunn's River climb and hiking or biking in the Blue mountains may require a little stamina. For a lazy day, floating on a raft is ideal, immersed in lush green scenery. Chukka Cove is perfect for bringing out the adventurer in you and what better kid friendly adventure could you find in Jamaica than a swim with the dolphins!

Blue Mountains
A hiker's paradise

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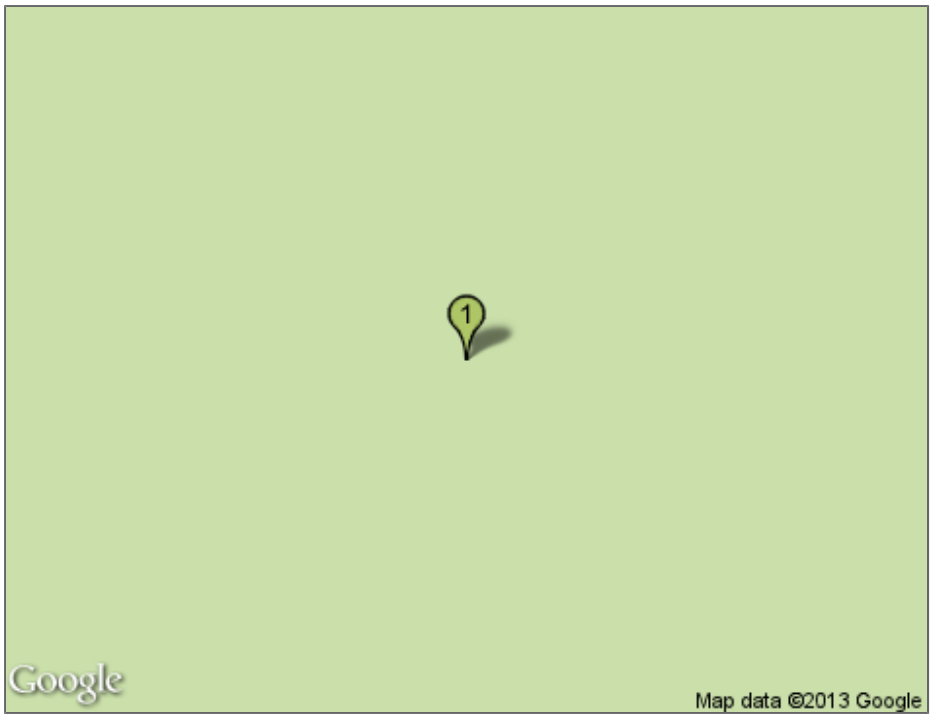
Day 1 - Jamaica



QUICK NOTE

DAY NOTE: The Dunn's River climb and hiking or biking in the Blue mountains may require a little stamina. For a lazy day, floating on a raft is ideal, immersed in lush green scenery. Chukka Cove is perfect for bringing out the adventurer in you and what better kid friendly adventure could you find in Jamaica than a swim with the dolphins!

location:
Blue Mountains
Kingston

hours:
24 hours M-Su

1 Blue Mountains

DESCRIPTION: Challenge yourself with this truly breathtaking hike to Jamaica's highest point. Traverse the undulating and sometimes risqué foot path that leads to the Blue Mountain peak. Starting at Gordon Town and passing through Newcastle, this at times demanding hike takes you deep into the flora of the Blue Mountain with streams gushing from the most unexpected places. The exhilarating feeling of being high up in the clouds and away from civilization makes the burn well worth it. Be sure to arm yourself with the hiking basics and you may just want to overnight at the rustic cabins at Portland Gap before setting off for the peak in time for sunrise. Alternatively, you could try the downhill bicycle ride which involves no pedalling! © NileGuide

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Jamaica Snapshot

Local Info

Jamaica is the third largest island in the Caribbean. Despite being a small nation, Jamaican culture has a strong global presence. Its vibrant urban recording industry gave birth to the musical genres of reggae, dub, ska, rocksteady, and most recently dancehall and ragga. The island is also famous for Jamaican jerk spice as well as home to Red Stripe beer and Jamaican Blue Mountain Coffee. The tourist infrastructure is well-developed, especially in the popular destinations of Negril, Montego Bay, and Ocho Rios, where white-sand beaches meet the crystal clear Caribbean Sea.
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History

If there was a prize handed out for tenacity among the world's cities, Kingston would be up there with the winners. A real survivor, this hardy metropolis has risen like a phoenix from fires, floods, earthquakes and hurricanes.

Kingston survives in spite of its grossly exaggerated reputation as a dangerous city of tenuously reined-in chaos. Because of that reputation, most tourists stick to the holiday destinations of the north coast. Ironically, though you will undoubtedly see something of the rough edges of this town, the hustlers who plague the tourist centers of Ocho Rios and Montego Bay are relatively sparse in Kingston.

Kingston was founded at the end of the 17th century as a refuge for survivors of a devastating earthquake that had hit Jamaica, and that all but destroyed Port Royal, a large town on the opposite side of the harbor. Before the earthquake, the Kingston area housed little more than a few pig farmers and fishing shacks. Earthquake survivors set up homesteads, and very shortly plans were drawn up for a new town to be laid out beside the water and to be named in honor of the British king, William of Orange.

By the early 18th century, Kingston's natural harbour enabled the city to flourish as an important seaport. The traders who grew fat on the profits built fine town houses throughout the city, and freed slaves and immigrant workers flooded in, hoping to share in the city's boom. Some hundred years later, when Kingston finally received recognition as the island's capital, the rich had gravitated towards uptown Kingston and the northern outskirts, and the poorer population huddled in shantytowns on the edges of the old town.

Calamities plagued the city's early years, changing the look of the city: a massive hurricane in 1784, an enormous fire in 1843, a cholera epidemic in 1850, fire again in 1862, and the devastating earthquake of 1907 that destroyed nearly all the buildings south of Parade. The largely destitute population of the downtown area helped swell the Rastafarian movement during the 1920s and'30s. Major riots during the Depression'30s gave rise to the development of trade unions and political parties set up to represent the workers and the dispossessed. But improvements in housing and working conditions were slow in coming. Not until the 1960s did this vibrant city see any tangible change. The much needed facelift given to the old downtown area, together with the expansion and redevelopment of the waterfront area, coincided with Kingston's growing international fame as a center of reggae music. Shops and offices emerged during this facelift(casualties of which included the once famous Myrtle Bank Hotel and Knutsford Racetrack—now New Kingston—and Victoria Market), as well as wide boulevards and multi-story buildings. But for the people of West Kingston, this development was seen as primarily superficial—and the 1970s and 1980s proved tense times politically.

Today, Kingston is something of a divided city. The wealthy largely live in the smart suburbs to the north, traveling in to work in the relatively sanitized zone of New Kingston, and rarely venturing downtown. But there are hopes that the city's politicians are beginning to address the problems of the ghettos, gangs and party factions. This comes coupled with proposals for tourist development, with the return of cruise ships being the priority.
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Hotel Insights

The lion's share of the city's hotels are situated around the small uptown district of New Kingston. Here, you are close to major places of interest as well as bars, restaurants, theaters and clubs. Bear in mind that most of these establishments cater to the business rather than the tourist sector; nonetheless, they range from comfortable and convenient to lavish.

If you seek peace and solitude but need to be close by, there are a handful of excellent options in the foothills of the Blue Mountains just north of Kingston. They are generally peaceful places, offering superb vistas of the city, ideal if you want to combine business with tropical tranquility or a day's hiking in the country.

Depending upon priorities and pocketbooks, you may want to explore the Guesthouses, which are scattered throughout the city and suburban areas. These more intimate accommodations allow you to get a feel for Jamaica's essence and culture, and at substantial savings. Check out Alhambra Inn, Sutton Place and more.

Knutsford Boulevard runs through the center of New Kingston and is home to the city's two high rise hotels, Hilton Kingston Jamaica and Le Meridien Jamaica Pegasus. The 17-story Jamaica Pegasus is big and impressively contemporary. The Hilton, our other skyscraper hotel, offers upscale accommodations and amenities to match, geared predominantly towards the business traveler. There is a fabulous swimming pool, small gym, casino and nightclub. Both hotels are 20 minutes from Kingston's International Airport and are well-positioned for sightseeing, dining and shopping.

Courtleigh Hotel& Suites is one of those impressive little jewels: once you've been a guest, nothing else will do. It's a pocket

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of the good life in the heart of the financial district. If you're after a more relaxed meal, don't miss Mingles Pub, a place to see and be seen.

To sooth your soul, the Terra Nova Hotel provides peaceful olde-world ambiance in a splendid colonial mansion, famed for its personal service and fine cuisine. Rooms are luxuriously and imaginatively appointed; public rooms are elegant and comfortable.

Two moderately priced hotels worthy of mention are Altamont Court Hotel and Christar Villas, both in the center of New Kingston and close to sightseeing, restaurants, businesses and shops. Altamont Court Hotel is attractive, well furnished and comfortable. A popular alternative for those who prefer the self-catering option, Christar Villas offers a host of features in one and two bedroom apartments—just a stone's throw from the Bob Marley Museum.

And then, we come to the crème de la crème.Strawberry Hill is a superb mountaintop resort located 3100 ft above sea level in the picturesque Blue Mountains. The property is owned by Island Records guru, Chris Blackwell, and is where Bob Marley convalesced after being shot in 1976. Consequently, it is a magnet for the international glitterati set. Though set outside Kingston's city limits, and one mile north of Irish Town, you can see the lights of the city twinkling in the distance, and its fabulous facilities are well worth the detour. Strawberry Hill also hosts a calendar of year round special events, from concerts to parties to art exhibitions. Many Jamaicans make the drive out to Strawberry Hill restaurant just to sample the modern Jamaican cuisine—reservations are advisable.
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Restaurants Insights

Kingston's eateries, mostly centered in the New Kingston and Half Way Tree sectors, are plentiful, and for relaxing, open-air dining, especially after a busy day of meetings or sightseeing, New Kingston has some rich pickings. There are reasonable lunchtime choices downtown, and elsewhere anything from small jerk bars, where you can try out the island's spicy barbecued specialties, to up market seafood restaurants. Variations on Jamaican Cuisines are on offer in many establishments, but you will also find good Asian, Middle-Eastern, vegetarian and fast food restaurants, the latter, springing up around the Parade area and in the shopping malls.

On Knutsford Boulevard, you can find lots of vans selling a satisfying lunch for around US$2.50, and for classic Jamaican fast food, try Mothers, Tastee, or Island Grill. Their takeaway patties, or in the case of Island Grill Jerk Fish, make a great change from burgers(branches across that island).

Here's just a sampler of a few of Kingston's most interesting restaurants, by district.

Downtown

The inexpensive Bench& Bar Restaurant is a magnet for office workers seeking good breakfasts and lunches. Lasagne and kebabs meet with curried chicken and steamed fish, with daily specials costing around USD 6. The owners also run the famous Blue Mountain Inn out of town in Mavis Bank.

The Ocean Restaurant is an unpromising-looking cafe facing the sea, but handy for lunch after a trip round the National Gallery of Jamaica. Very affordable dishes include chicken, goat and fish curries and steamed fish. Expect to pay around USD 3.

Uptown

Chelsea Jerk Centre is a mecca for jerk dishes. This popular shack has spicy chicken and pork specialties doused in hot pepper sauce for around USD 3.

The Grog Shoppe, located in an old brick warehouse on the grounds of Devon House, offers a feeling of Port Royal in the 1680s. Cocktails are exotic and colorful(many people just come here to drink), and dishes include ackee crepes, suckling pig, Jamaican hotpot and callaloo as well as steaks and Blue Mountain burgers, with prices starting from USD 6. Try and get a table outside under the mango tree. Jazz is played on Tuesdays.

Devonshire Restaurant, also on the grounds of Devon House, is a smart restaurant in a cool, elegant setting. The best tables are located on the verandahs overlooking a forest of greenery. Dishes are fairly costly, and feature continental specialties with Jamaican accents, such as cream of red snapper chowder and tropical conch curry with mango, papaya and jackfruit.

At the Hot Pot, behind the Wyndham Hotel, you can sit at wooden tables under awnings in a courtyard and try out Jamaican favorites like xxtail soup, goat curry, bammy and stewed beef.

Indies Pub& Grill is an easy-going establishment popular with the after work crowd and New Kingston business lunchers who favor simple dishes like chicken, fish& chips and pizza. Inside it looks like a traditional English pub, though there is room to dine outside too.

Red Bones offers top notch Jamaican nouvelle cuisine in a lovely garden setting and trompe-l'oeil decorated dining rooms. Jamaica's in-crowd are regulars here, keen to try out imaginative dishes like drunken cod fish and herbed chicken and listen to blues music.

Akbar is Kingston's best Indian restaurant, with pleasant atmosphere and fabulously decorated interior.

Out of Town:

Jamaican born chef James Palmer presides over Strawberry Hill, part of Chris Blackwell's up market resort retreat. Palmer's signature is modern Jamaican cooking, and he even stages cooking courses. You dine either in the atmospheric colonial style dining room, or outside on the terrace. Sunday brunches feature jerk lamb with roasted garlic guava glaze, jerk pork, ackee and salt fish, fried bammy and more. Evening meals might include starters like Angel hair pasta with grilled jumbo shrimps, and such entrees as curried goat roti with mango relish or baked yellowtail snapper with lemon butter sauce.

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Blue Mountain Inn is a romantic four-room oasis half way up the Blue Mountains, with a superb dining room run by the charming, hospitable duo, Ilean and Malcolm McInnes. There are four tiny dining areas to the taverna, including a roadside café and garden area with mountain views. Main courses feature dishes like Yallas River Shrimps with crayfish sauce, and Blue Mountain tree tomatoes.

BARS Kingston offers a good selection of cafes and hotel bars in the uptown district. Traditional bars are generally one-room affairs, reserved primarily for local men, where cheap rum is the order of the day.

Recommended outdoor venues include Peppers(31 Upper Waterloo Road), a popular bar attracting the after-work crowd and which also serves jerk pork and chicken; and Carlos' Café(22 Belmont Road), very much an in-vogue meeting place.

Elsewhere, try the Jamrock Sports Bar& Grill(66 Knutsford Blvd), which stages a happy hour. Popular with the in-crowd, this sophisticated joint features wall-to-wall TVs, and loud music.
©

Nightlife Insights

Music

Music abounds in Kingston. Its unofficial title,"Nashville of the Third World," points to the numerous recording studios that have blossomed throughout the city and that have given birth to new titles and bands almost every month of the year. As with the rest of the island, buses double as mobile discotheques, and shops and bars blast reggae, ska and dancehall(types of music) from mammoth speakers pumped up to the highest possible decibel. You can get a good idea of Jamaican music just from wandering the streets of Kingston. Better still, hit some clubs to hear live bands perform.

The current big rhythm in Jamaica is dancehall, a compulsive, somewhat monotonous rap linked to a danceable reggae beat. You'll find it nearly impossible to understand the lyrics unless you are familiar with patois(the Jamaican dialect). The songs mostly address everyday issues like corruption, sex and money, often with a controversial message—one of the reasons why dancehall is so popular.

Reggae developed during the 1970s as singers like Bob Marley and the Wailers and Jimmy Cliff gained popularity throughout the island. By the time of Bob Marley's death in 1981, reggae had achieved international acclaim. Both the Bob Marley Museum and the Tuff Gong Recording Studios, run by Marley's son Ziggy, are well worth a visit(see Recommended Tours).

Friday night is the time to catch live music in town(expect to pay around USD 2-USD 5 entry fee) and the daily newspaper,The Gleaner, gives good listings, particularly for dancehall venues. Remember that the scene doesn't really start to shift until around midnight. There is also a good retro scene where vintage oldies pull in the nostalgia crowd.

Clubs include Asylum, a very popular club, packing in the crowds on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays. The Countryside Club, close to Half Way Tree, is a well-designed outdoor venue featuring live music, including Latin(Cuban) on Thursdays.

Extremes in Portmore is a popular out-of-town local disco with dancehall on Sunday nights. The Junkanoo Lounge in the Hilton Kingston Hotel is popular with an older, more international clientele. It attracts an older clientele who come for the Latin beat on Saturdays. The club also features Salsa, Lambada and Merengue.

Theater& Dance

Kingston has a year-round calendar of lively theater and performance, mostly with a local flavor. Plays often incorporate dance and include a message—sometimes concentrating on the tribulations of the poorer classes, or commentary on the slave era. That said, many performances are bawdy, upbeat affairs, and whatever your tastes, be it comedy, tragedy, sexual romp or political satire, there will surely be something to suit. Most of the plays feature Jamaican patois, but not so that you won't understand what's going on in a general sense.

Jamaican pantomime is a distinctive art form completely different from British pantomime, though there are nods in the direction of traditional fairytales from the British Isles. Folklore is prominent, audience participation high, and song, dance and satirical stabs at the political scene are rife.

Jamaican dance covers classical, African and contemporary forms. Kingston is blessed with having the acclaimed National Dance Theatre Company based at the Little Theatre. The troupe, famed for its elaborate, colorful costumes and African themes, was founded in 1962. The dancers have given worldwide performances under the directorship of Rex Nettleford.

The Ward Theatre north of Parade features the city's primary annual pantomime(running December through April), Jamaican folk singers and other kinds of performance. The Little Theatre is home to the NDTC, whose season runs from mid July to mid August, with performances also in November and December. The Barn Theatre on Oxford Road features lively folk and jazz performances by the University Singers as well as shows by the Cari-folk Singers, a troupe renowned for preserving traditional Jamaican folksong.

Cinema

Extremely popular with the locals, Kingston's cinemas feature a good smattering of Hollywood hits. Most are located uptown with tickets selling for cheap. Expect an intermission and to stand for the National Anthem. The most comfortable include the five screen Carib Cinema on Cross Roads, and the Palace Cineplex at the Sovereign Centre on Hope Road. Better still, there is a popular drive-in for breezy night time movie watching at Harbour View(situated a little outside of Kingston).

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The Arts

Kingston has a vibrant art scene. Kick off with a visit to Kingston's National Gallery. The Jamaican School can be found on the first floor. Here are works by the school's leader, the sculptress Edna Manley, as well as paintings by the self-taught primitive John Dunkley, a Kingston barber who started off by painting his entire shop with colorful organic forms before moving on to canvas. More mystical in feel are the works of sect leader'Kapo' Reynolds(his figurines made of wood are particularly enchanting), and Albert Artwell, Everald Brown, David Pottinger and Osmond Watson—all of who use Rastafarian symbolism in their paintings. The entrance fee is by contribution—usually USD.75 minimum. It is recommended that you get a guide to show you around. Their services are free, though tipping is a good idea.

Rastafarian art can be seen also at Bolivar Art Gallery, which holds works by many of the leading Jamaican artists. The Grosvenor Gallery shows both permanent and temporary exhibitions by renowned figures, or stop by the Contemporary Art Centre, owned by a local painter, and always showing some interesting exhibits.

Some of the leading hotels are good venues of artistic expression. The Jamaica Pegasus on Knutsford Blvd has a basement gallery housing regular exhibitions of Jamaican art, while the neighboring Hilton Kingston Hotel possesses a great collection of works by Portland artist Ken Abendana Spencer in its lobby.

Events

Time your visit to coincide with one of Kingston's many festivals.

In January, the National Gallery stages its Annual National Exhibition, a showpiece for both new artists and the more established crew.

February is the month for the Bob Marley Birthday Bash, held at the Bob Marley Museum and around the island. Celebrations concentrate on the late musician's birthday on 6th February. His son Ziggy often performs with his band the Melody Makers. February is also the month for the University of the West Indies Carnival. This annual celebration feature steel bands, parades, mas players, soca jump ups and the choosing of a carnival king and queen.

April sees the carnival proper bursting onto the streets of Jamaica. The festivities kick off early in the month, with costume parades and all night parties.

July and August set the scene for the Little Theatre's National Dance Theatre Company's season of dance. Check the local paper, The Daily Gleaner, for details of their performances. August: The Independence Day Street Parade on August 6th wends its way through the streets of central Kingston with costumed parades and Junkanoo.

December is the month for the Devon House Christmas Fair, and the"don't miss" annual pantomime staged at the Ward Theatre(which moves to the Little Theatre in February).
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Things to Do Insights

There is plenty to enlighten the visitor to Jamaica, with museums uncovering and revealing the island's history in a comprehensive and entertaining way. You can easily get a feel of Jamaica's rich heritage—her history, her flora and fauna, and of course her culture both musical and artistic—in just two or three days of leisurely sightseeing. Close to Kingston, Port Royal and the elegant Devon House take you back several generations; the lush Hope Botanical Gardens display the island's rich varieties of nature, and a trip to the renowned Bob Marley Museum and Tuff Gong Recording Studios will bring you right up to date with her musical culture.

Day 1

The old naval base of Port Royal is now a somewhat down-at-the-heels, funky fishing village. It lies across the harbor on the tip of the Palisadoes, Kingston's narrow sandy spit, which is also the site of the Norman Manley International Airport. You can get there by road or via a 25-minute boat ride from Victoria Pier. Sir Henry Morgan's restaurant in Morgan's Harbour Hotel, an upscale resort favored by both locals and tourists on the grounds of the old naval dockyard, rates as a perfect lunch spot during your visit.

Port Royal was founded in 1650 and soon became the hub of British naval and military power in the West Indies. It grew faster than any town founded by the English in the New World, and it became the most economically important English port in the Americas. But it's just as famous for its more grisly face as a haven for cunning pirates like the infamous Henry Morgan, and as a hive of gambling and drinking dens and brothels--the whole site protected by six forts and 145 guns. Port Royal soon earned a reputation as"the wickedest city in the world" and the massive earthquake of 1692, which saw whole streets sliding into the sea, was thought by some to be a case of divine retribution. Local merchants rebuilt their city, only to see it destroyed by fire a short 11 years later, in 1703.

This second devastation knocked the debauched city to its knees and from then on the area operated solely as a naval base. Horatio Nelson, later an admiral and the hero of the Battle of Trafalgar, served as a post-captain from 1779-1780 and was in charge of Fort Charles, the key battery in the island's fortifications. This fort was the only one of the port's six to withstand the earthquake.

A tour around atmospheric Fort Charles inlcudes plenty of old cannons, though nothing like the hundred or so guns that once made it the most heavily defended fort in the Caribbean. Best of all, you get a stunning view of the Kingston mountain range from its castellated ramparts. There is a small Maritime Museum in the fort with model ships, canoes used by the island's indigenous tribe, the Arawak, and a mock-up of Nelson's quarters. Just beyond the fort is the topsy-turvy shape of Giddy House, once the Royal Artillery store, first built in 1888 but damaged in the 1907

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earthquake which accounts for its bizarre 45-degree tilt.

Take to the waters in a glass-bottomed boat. Trips out to the sunken city as well as scuba diving expeditions can be had from Morgan's Harbour Marina. At present, you need a permit to dive the protected treasure, though the club will have further details on this.

If you feel like cooling off after tramping around fortifications, then the Rockfort Mineral Baths are close at hand(three miles east of downtown Kingston). More than just a public swimming bath, this oasis offers a series of small mineral spas fitted with Jacuzzis with the water pumped in from a local spring. The site of the baths is of some interest, too. This was where the 17th century British Fort Rock was located, first strengthened against a threatened invasion from the French in 1694.

Back in Kingston, you might like to poke your nose into The National Gallery, home to a collection of paintings and sculptures by the celebrated Jamaican School(see Entertainment section for further details).

Day 2

Devon House, an easy walk from your hotel in New Kingston, is a former"Great House" set in gardens of palms and flowering trees. This huge house with its louvered windows and palm-patterned wallpaper was built in 1881 for George Stiebel, Jamaica's first millionaire. The house was restored in the 1960s and, with its fine antiques and paintings, now offers interesting insight into the style of merchant houses of the 19th century—complete with a private gambling den in the attic!

The grounds of Devon House are particularly attractive and often used as a backdrop for wedding photographs. You can stop for lunch in the old stables where there are two excellent restaurants(see Dining& Drinking).

About ten blocks east of Devon House is the Bob Marley Museum. This much-revered spot on Kingston's"must-do" list is where the King of Reggae used to live. There are exhibits about his childhood and family, with his simple bedroom kept intact. Marley died tragically of brain cancer in his 30s, having survived an assassination attempt—the bullet holes in the walls have been left as a reminder.

The old recording studios have been turned into an auditorium where your tour ends with an interesting film about Marley's later years. There is an Ethiopian restaurant in the garden, theQueen of Sheba, where you can get a good lunch including some of Marley's favorite vegetarian dishes.

You can get a free tour of theTuff Gong Recording Studios, but ring first to see if a visit is convenient. If you're in the mood for even more things Marley-related, then it is worth traveling out of town a bit and seeing where his old recording studios have taken new root. Marley's son, Ziggy, runs the studios; you get a conducted tour, and there is a good souvenir shop selling tapes and Marley memorabilia.

Hope Botanical Gardens is a 200-acre site containing the Caribbean's largest collection of flora and fauna, though there was quite a lot of destruction following Hurricane Gilbert in 1988. The gardens took shape back in the 19th century, starting life as an experimental crop station on the site of the old Hope estate. Highlights of a visit include the orchid house, sago palms from the antediluvian era, a maze, and first-rate aviary. There is also a small play park for children complete with a petting zoo.

Day Trips

The city is well placed for alternative day trips, be it a spell by the beach or a hike into the mountains, should you fancy a change from the hustle and bustle of downtown Kingston. Blue Mountains(4 wheel drive recommended):

Head north out of Kingston and you're in the craggy, mist-strewn and leafy peaks of Blue Mountain country. There are several scenic routes you can take, some involving energetic hikes, others half-day tours by car. If time is limited, a quick trip to the little village of Mavis Bank nestling in the Yallahs River valley is recommended. It's just one hour's drive from Kingston and ideal if you want a glimpse of Jamaican country living. Focal point of this single street village is the pretty white painted church and the Hikers Guide Rest Stop, where you can pick up a guide to lead you on local nature walks for around USD 15 per day. The Rest Stop also serves a simple Jamaican lunch. Better still, head for lunch at the Blue Mountain Taverna, followed by a tour of the JABLUM coffee factory, located below the main road into the village.

Blue Mountain coffee is reckoned by some to be the finest in the world, and the coffee factory in Mavis Bank is one of four plants where the beans are processed. An informal tour will show you how the beans are husked, sized and dried, a few historical artifacts, and how to"cup," the noisy process by which experts taste the coffee for quality. It involves lots of sucking, swilling and spitting, a bit in the style of wine tasting—you have been warned!

There are guides who will take you on the walk from Mavis Bank(around 2 hours, reasonable fitness required) to the starting point of the trail to the Blue Mountain Peak which, at 7,402ft, is the highest point on the island. It might sound terribly daunting, but climbing the peak is actually relatively easy, and should take three-five hours up and two-three hours downhill, depending on your fitness levels. The climb is just under seven miles, and magnificent: an opulent trail winding through wild orchids and ferns, coffee groves and banana plantations, with the chance to do some bird-watching too. The doctor bird, the national bird of Jamaica, is thick on the ground. It is a beautiful, swallow-tailed hummingbird recognizable by its loud buzzing call, and found near the many flowering bushes. Regular signposts make the hike easy without a guide, and if you want to extend the hike, there are huts on the peak where you can overnight(albeit uncomfortably) and a campsite with cabins and showers at Portland Gap, about one hour up.

Hellshire Hills

More hiking opportunities are available in the Hellshire Hills, the vast and somewhat arid upland region to the west of Kingston.

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The area was once home to the Taino Indians and then to runaway slaves. Now it is migrant birds and a handful of the endangered Jamaican iguana who have settled here, the latter growing up to 2 meters in length.

The hills cover 100 square miles and form a loop surrounded on three sides by the Caribbean. Low rainfall and the scrub-covered limestone makes this a seemingly inhospitable place to visit, but if you are into nature and want to see one of the island's genuine wilderness zones, then a day trip here with a guide is highly recommended. Best of all, opt for the one-day"Iguana Project Trip," offered by the Iguana Conservation Group at the University in Mona. The cost includes transfers from Kingston, eight-mile guided hike and lunch.

Hellshire Beaches

The eastern edge of the Hellshire hills is marked by lovely sandy beaches and coves, reached via a road that runs south from Portmore to Hellshire Point. There are buses from Parade and Half Way Tree that run to the beaches, roughly every half hour. The beaches are highly popular with Kingstonians, especially on weekends, when the locals set up fish stalls piled high with lobster, and reggae blasts a rhythmic beat. Fort Clarence Beach Park is one of the liveliest, with good amenities: there is a small restaurant and bar, car parking facilities and toilets. Fisherman's Beach has a good social scene with stalls selling jerk, beer and fresh fish to the crowds of city dwellers who throng here on Saturdays and Sundays. You can also hire jet skis and snorkels. The village behind the beach has gaily painted shacks and houses.

A short drive south takes you along a wonderfully unspoilt stretch of coastline towards Two Sisters Cave. Ancient earthquakes created subterranean chambers here where the Taino Indians set up home. In the past, explorers found old weapons and bits of pottery, as well as petroglyphs of faces and figures. You might come across a guide sitting at the entrance to the caverns who will be willing to take you in and show you around for a donation. ©

Travel Tips

Getting There:

By Air:

Kingston is serviced by the Norman Manley International Airport(http://www.manley-airport.com.jm). Major airlines offering service include:

Air Canada(http://www.aircanada.ca)

Air Jamaica(http://www.airjamaica.com)

American Airline(http://www.aa.com)

British Airways(http://www.britishairways.com)

British West Indian Airways(http://www.bwee.com)

Cubana Airlines(http://www.cubana.com)

The Jamaican Union of Travelers Association(http://www.jutatoursnegrilltd.com) offers service to and from the airport.

Rental Car Companies include:

Hertz(http://www.hertz.com)

Island Car Rentals(http://www.islandcarrentals.com)

By Bus:

The Jamaican Union of Travelers Association(http://www.jutatoursnegrilltd.com) offers some of the best transportation around the island.

By Car:

Driving in Jamaica offers an experience as unique as the local food or climate. Road conditions and driver temperaments are unpredictable at best. Major roads include the A1 and the A3.

Getting Around:

The Jamaican Union of Travelers Association(http://www.jutatoursnegrilltd.com) offers effective transportation throughout Kingston. A number of other local taxi providers offer service around the city. Motorcycles, mopeds, scooters, and bicycles are also common forms of local transportation. ©

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