

Blue Mountains & Southeast Coast



Kissing the sky over the eastern half of Jamaica, the majestic Blue Mountains throw the rest of the island into sharp relief. Barely an hour's drive from Kingston, their slopes, crags and fern forests seem light years from the capital's gritty streetscape. Some 2000m above sea level, the ruggedness of the mountains forms the perfect counterpoint to beachside hedonism.

Hiking in the Blue Mountains is the best way to get to know them. Climbing Blue Mountain Peak rewards with striking panoramas (weather permitting) across the entire island; less arduous treks to Cinchona Gardens or through the Holywell Recreation Area offer wonderful samples of the region's plantlife. Sixty-five distinct species of orchid are among the more than 200 endemic plants that grace the mountains. The bird-watching here is equally stunning – look out for the yellow-billed parrot and the streamertail hummingbird (also known as the doctor bird). If you're really lucky, you may catch sight of the endangered giant swallowtail butterfly, the second largest butterfly on earth.

As for human life, you'll find the residents of the area west of the peak preoccupied with growing one of Jamaica's most famous crops: coffee. Several working plantations reveal the nuances of the cultivation process, culminating in a cup or two of Blue Mountain Coffee – which tastes even more heavenly when you can smell the beans from a nearby field.

Largely ignored by tourists, the parish of St Thomas lies in the shadow of the Blue Mountains. Site of the 1865 Morant Bay Rebellion, it is home to the ramshackle old spa town of Bath. If you have time for exploration, you should definitely try to make it through the mangrove fields to the lighthouse at Morant Point, the island's easternmost tip.

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Strawberry Hill** Reward yourself with a meal, spa treatment or night of romance at one of Jamaica's best hotels (p114)
- **Blue Mountain Peak** Set out before dawn for the greatest high in Jamaica (p119)
- **Old Tavern Estate** See how a red berry is transformed into the world's best coffee bean (p116)
- **Cycling from Hardwar Gap** Quicken your pulse with a rip-roaring descent from the high mountains, through coffee plantations and villages (p113)
- **Morant Point Lighthouse** Find your way to this remote beacon providing a privileged view of coast and mountains (p122)



■ AREA: 750 SQ KM

■ STRAWBERRY HILL DEC AVERAGE HIGH TEMPERATURE: 23.3°C

HISTORY

With their dense primary forests and forbidding topography, the prospect of life in the Blue Mountains has discouraged all but the most determined settlers over the centuries. During the 17th and 18th centuries, these same formidable qualities made the territory the perfect hideout for the Windward Maroons, who from their remote stronghold at Nanny Town resisted enslavement and British colonialism for more than 100 years. But this region's primary claim to fame has always been coffee cultivation; it has been a mainstay since the very first coffee factories were erected around Clydesdale in the mid-18th century. Meanwhile, back down at sea level, the southeast coast of St Thomas parish is notable for its long history of protest and rebellion, and the independent spirit of the region has kept it at odds with the government even up to this day.

CLIMATE

Moisture-laden trade winds blowing in from the northeast spill much of their accumulation on the Blue Mountains, which forms a rain shadow over Kingston and the southern parishes. The temperature drops 1°C to 2°C for every 300m rise in elevation (indeed, it can freeze in the early morning above 1700m). From June through to September you'll experience the best weather for exploring.

St Thomas parish, like Kingston, lies in the rain shadow and there's far less precipitation than up in the Blue Mountains.

GETTING THERE & AROUND

The Blue Mountains are best explored by private car. From Kingston's eastern fringe, public transportation runs from Papine, but service is disorganized and delays and cancellations are frequent. Public transportation is far more predictable on the southeast coast along the A4 road.

BLUE MOUNTAINS

Deriving their name from the azure haze that settles lazily around their peaks, this 45km-long mountain range looms high above the eastern parishes of St Andrew, St Thomas, Portland and St Mary. The

Blue Mountains were formed during the Cretaceous Period (somewhere between 144 and 65 million years ago) and are the island's oldest feature. Highest of the highlights, **Blue Mountain Peak** reaches 2256m above sea level, and no visit to the area should neglect a predawn hike to its summit for a sunrise view.

Unsurprisingly, the Blue Mountains' largely unspoiled character owes much to the difficulty in navigating around the area. Roads are narrow and – as often as not – dirt tracks that are utterly impossible to pass without 4WD, especially after heavy rains. If you are spending time in the area, contacting a tour guide or making arrangements with your hotel are highly advisable.

Activities

HIKING

The Blue Mountains are a hiker's dream, and dozens of trails lace the hills. Many are overgrown, but others remain the mainstay of communication for locals.

By far the most popular route is to 'The Peak,' which in Jamaica always means Blue Mountain Peak. The steep and exhilarating trail is well maintained.

These trails (called 'tracks' locally) are rarely marked. When asking for directions from locals, remember that 'a few chains' can mean several kilometers, while 'jus a likkle way' may in fact be a few hours of hiking. Within the Blue Mountains-John Crow National Park, hiking trails are categorized as guided, nonguided and wilderness.

A Hiker's Guide to the Blue Mountains, by Bill Wilcox, is an indispensable guide for serious hikers.

Guided Hikes

Guides can be hired from most hotels in the area for about US\$35 for a half day, and US\$45 for a full day. Freelance guides hire themselves out at Penlyne Castle, Hagley Gap and Mavis Bank. On overnight trips you're expected to pay for the guide's food and accommodations.

In addition to others, the following offer guided hikes:

Forres Park Guest House & Farm (www.forrespark.com; Kingston ☎ 927-5957; Mavis Bank ☎ 927-8275) A good option for custom hiking trips. See p118.