

Ocho Rios & North Coast



Five hundred years after Christopher Columbus dropped anchor on the north-central coast, the region is booming with tourists. Ocho Rios, the main town in the area, is the island's second-busiest cruise-ship berth, disgorging almost half a million visitors each year to shop and catch glimpses of Dunn's River Falls (Jamaica's highest-grossing tourist attraction) and Dolphin Cove.

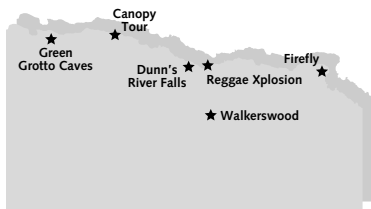
However, it's very easy to shake the pre-fab commercialism and enjoy some of the island's most enduring attractions. The town itself, backed by green hills and fronted by a wide, scalloped beach and a reef-sheltered harbor, boasts an excellent reggae museum, several fine botanic gardens looking out over the bay and an exuberant nightlife.

It's also a good base for exploring the area. Zigzagging inland through Fern Gully beneath a canopy of trees, you'll soon realize why St Ann's is known as 'the garden parish.' The bucolic, hilly terrain offers excellent vistas to pilgrims on the way to Nine Mile, the birthplace of Bob Marley, or foodies seeking Walkerswood and the mysteries of jerk sauce.

East of Ocho Rios, the quaint town of Oracabessa is home to Goldeneye, Ian Fleming's former home and now one of Jamaica's most elegant hotels. Further along the coast brings you to Firefly, Noel Coward's former home. Along the way, you can take in a working plantation, or enjoy some of Jamaica's best snorkeling and diving. West of Ocho Rios, along the well-paved road to Montego Bay, lies a succession of historic coastal towns like Runaway Bay, Discovery Bay and St Ann's Bay, where Columbus decamped.

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Dunn's River Falls** Come early to avoid the teeming masses and climb one of the world's most famous waterfalls (p152).
- **Walkerswood** Discover the mysteries of jerk at this world-renowned producer of sauces, marinades and chutneys (p166).
- **Canopy tour** Make like Tarzan and zip from platform to platform in the Cranbrook Flower Forest (p171).
- **Firefly** Savor the jaw-dropping view from author Noel Coward's well-preserved former home (p163).
- **Reggae Xplosion** If you can't pay homage to Bob Marley's final resting place at Nine Mile, this excellent museum captures reggae in all its vitality (p149).



■ AREA: 1834 SQ KM

■ OCHO RIOS DEC DAILY HIGH TEMPERATURE: 26°C

HISTORY

The name Ocho Rios is a corruption of the Spanish term *chorreros*, which means, roughly, 'swift water.' The area was one of the last strongholds of Spanish dominion over the island, and the site of Spain's last stand in Jamaica can be found at Rio Nuevo, east of modern-day Ocho Rios. It was here that the British instituted huge sugar and pimento (allspice) plantations, crops that defined the region until the mid-20th century, when bauxite mining and tourism took over.

CLIMATE

The north central coast has some of the island's most predictable weather – that is, predictably hot and humid. Temperatures stay within a 16° to 30°C range throughout the year. The rainiest periods occur in May to June and September to October.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

The majority of international air travelers fly into Donald Sangster International Airport in Montego Bay, while domestic charter passengers fly into Boscobel Aerodrome, 16km east of town. Ocho Rios is also Jamaica's second-busiest cruise-ship port. With its central-north-coast location, land travelers have no trouble finding transport to and from town via minibus or route taxi.

OCHO RIOS

pop 16,500

Wrapped around a small bay with postcard-worthy snugness, Ocho Rios is a former fishing village that the Jamaica Tourist Board earmarked for tourism in the mid-1980s. Whatever character Ocho Rios lost when the local nets were redirected from fish to the tourist dollar, its streets today are lined with interchangeable duty-free shopping plazas and fast-food emporia, persistent higglers (street vendors) and would-be tour guides, and a palpable air of waiting for something.

That something is cruise ships – after Montego Bay, this is the island's premier port of packaged call. Yet 'Ochi's' beaches lack the splendor of MoBay's, it has nothing approaching the latter's downtown historic center, and the disembarkation dock here is so centrally located as to command the town's focus. When the floating resorts pull in, their

human cargo streams into town to meet the local traffic in souvenirs untainted by memories; the full frontal hustle is on.

Note, however, that the cruise ships are generally gone by nightfall and seldom dock on weekends. The hordes can be avoided with a little planning, and if you're looking for a good base for exploring the north coast and the scenic interior of St Ann's Parrish, this is it. A terrific reggae museum, a lively nightlife scene, a trio of serene hillside gardens and an abundance of fine hotels and guesthouses make Ochi a good place to pause.

HISTORY

Although plantations developed during colonial times, Ocho Rios never evolved as a fruit-shipping port of any consequence. Things began to change in the 1940s when Reynolds Jamaica Mines built the deep-water Reynolds Pier west of town. An overhead conveyor belt still carries bauxite ore 10km from the Reynolds open-cast mines at Lydford, in the hills south of town.

Nonetheless, Ocho Rios was still just a quiet village in the 1960s when the Jamaican government formed the St Ann Development Council and then launched a systematic development. It dredged the harbor and built a small marina, reclaimed the shore, brought in sand for Turtle Beach, and built shopping complexes and housing schemes. By the early 1980s, Ocho Rios' character had been established: a meld of American-style fast-food franchises, nondescript shopping malls, an enclave of mediocre hotels in town, and more tasteful, upscale English-style hotels a discrete distance east. The construction of Island Village, a major shopping and entertainment complex (see p149) has spruced up 'Ochi.'

ORIENTATION

Greater Ocho Rios extends for 6km between Dunn's River Falls, 3km to the west of the town center, and Harmony Hall, 6km to the east.

The main coastal road, the A3, passes just south of the town center via a two-lane highway. West of a roundabout (traffic circle) at Milford Rd the A3 becomes DaCosta Dr; east of the roundabout it is known officially as the Ocho Rios Redevelopment Rd. South of the roundabout, Milford Rd is a trunk of the A3 that leads to Fern Gully and, eventually,