Montego Bay & Northwest Coast

Gateway to Jamaica for the vast majority of its visitors, Montego Bay forms most first impressions of the island. For some, the vision is celestial, and they embrace ‘MoBay’ from the catered comfort of an all-inclusive beachside resort. For others, it’s simply a tourist trap en route to the ‘real Jamaica;’ and they flee as soon as they get their bearings.

In truth, the attractions of Montego Bay and the surrounding northwest coast offer enough variety to repay deeper exploration. In addition to its celebrated beaches, MoBay’s ‘Hip Strip’ boasts enough fine restaurants for a pleasurable tour de fork followed by some of the most pulsating nightlife on the island. Pockets of downtown will pique interest in St James Parrish’s vibrant (and violent) past, a historical thirst that can be slaked with visits to the great estates of Greenwood and Rose Hall, or to the fading Georgian marvel of Falmouth.

Some of Jamaica’s most remarkable nature spots are within easy striking distance. The snorkeling and scuba diving in the limpid waters of the Montego Bay Marine Park are world class, and the rafting on the Great and Martha Brae Rivers is truly unforgettable. And barely an hour from the resorts – though truly a world away – rolls the eerie hillscape of Cockpit country, Jamaica’s most unspoilt (and often impenetrable) region, where the hiking and caving are terrific, and you can take exhilarating horseback rides straight into the sea.

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Reggae Sumfest** Dance until dawn to Jamaica’s most renowned musicians at this world-class midsummer reggae festival (p189)
- **Sunset sailing trips** Party hearty on a cocktail-propelled jaunt across the bay and toast the sun as it plops into the sea (p188)
- **Falmouth** Lose yourself among the faded Georgian splendor of this compelling historic market town (p202)
- **Greenwood Great House** Explore the exquisite period furnishings of this well-preserved great house with a remarkable view of the sea (p201)
- **Rafting the Martha Brae** Serenade your beloved or splash your pal as you glide down one of Jamaica’s loveliest rivers on a bamboo raft (p205)
- **Windsor Caves** See what Cockpit Country looks like from down below in one of the island’s most expansive and accessible caves (p214)

**AREA: 1480 SQ KM**

**MONTEGO BAY DEC AVERAGE HIGH TEMPERATURE: 28.3°C**
HISTORY

In 1494 Christopher Columbus dropped anchor in the harbor of what is today known as Montego Bay. The Spanish put down roots here in 1510, and the English took control in 1655, transforming the town into an affluent sugar-production and trading center. The plantation culture came crashing down in the 1831 slave revolts, when nearly all of the plantations and estates were razed. Post-emancipation, Montego Bay languished until the early 20th century, when it took its place as Jamaica’s most popular tourist destination. For more details of the region’s history, see right.

CLIMATE

MoBay’s balmy weather is world famous. The most pleasant months are December to February, when the temperature hovers between 22°C and 28°C and the coast enjoys the cooling effects of the northeasterly trade winds. October is the wettest month with average rainfall of 188mm; winter is generally the driest season.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Montego Bay is home to Jamaica’s busiest airport and cruise-ship port. Buses, minibuses and route taxis arrive and depart from the busy transportation station off Barnett St, downtown.

MONTEGO BAY

pop 110,000

A bustling town with a turbulent history, a thriving port and a hopping ‘hip strip,’ Montego Bay is Jamaica’s most charged city. While spring-breakers descend on MoBay each year for bouts of ritualized raucousness, being host to the island’s busiest airport and cruise-ship port assures the town a steady stream of visitors, many of whom pop down from North America for long weekends.

Most never make it off Gloucester Ave, which has attained the wince-inducing title of ‘hip strip.’ Most of the hotels, restaurants, bars and souvenir emporia line this parade, which runs parallel to the beach; everything is here – and a loose confederacy of hustlers patrols the strip ready to offer guidance (and other services) should you find it all overwhelming. Despite its gaudiness, the strip boasts some of the best eating options on the island.

Streetlife of another, more genuine, order courses through downtown. Centered on pedestrian Sam Sharpe Sq, the town fans out over a grid, its streets lilt to the beats pulsing from competing storefronts while pushcart peddlers lurch in and out of routes they alone know. Downtown features a selection of decaying Georgian buildings that hint at earlier prosperity and the excellent Museum of St James, which bears poignant testament to the city’s brutal slave history.

Montego Bay is also a major port city, based on the container-shipping trade at the Montego Freeport. The town spreads tentacles of light industry west as far as Reading, 6km away. An equal distance to the east, Ironshore (p198) marks the beginning of a series of swanky all-inclusive resorts.

HISTORY

Columbus anchored in Montego Bay in 1494 and called it Gulf of Good Weather. In 1655 a settlement appeared on Spanish maps: Manterias, after the Spanish word manteca, or lard, from the days when the Spanish shipped ‘pig’s butter’ derived from the herds of wild hogs that flourished in the nearby hills. Following the British takeover that year, the parish of St James was established. As sugar was planted, Montego Bay took on new importance, and St James became the most important sugar-producing parish on the island. Wealthy planters and merchants erected lavish townhouses and a parish church. Many original buildings perished in fires and hurricanes, which also destroyed valuable records in the western part of the island, obscuring this early history.

Montego Bay and its hinterland were the setting for the slave rebellion of Christmas 1831, when estates throughout St James were put to the torch. Militia and regular troops stationed in Montego Bay quickly quelled the revolt, and the courthouse became a center for savage retribution (see the boxed text, p188).

After emancipation in 1834 the sugar trade slipped into decline. The city once again languished until it was revived by the development of the banana trade, and by the tourist trade that developed in the late 1880s when Dr Alexander G McCatty founded a sanitarium at what is today Doctor’s Cave Beach. Rich Americans and Britons flocked