



Blue Mountains & Southeast Coast

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Why Go?

Looming over Kingston, the majestic, forest-covered Blue Mountains throw the rest of the island into sharp relief. Their slopes, crags and fern forests seem light years from the capital's gritty streetscape, allowing you to hike old Maroon trails, go in search of the elusive streamertail hummingbird (Jamaica's national bird) or simply perch on a mountaintop, watching the valleys unfold out of the mist below.

A steep walk through a highland working plantation reveals the nuances of the coffee 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.

The least-explored corner of the island, the southeast coast is a place of bloody rebellions, obeah rituals, and traditional rural life, largely undisturbed by visitors. Dirt trails lead you through cane fields to rustic hot springs or a picturesque lighthouse on a lonely coast.

When to Go

In February, Holywell Recreation Area hosts the Misty Bliss festival, celebrating the island's Maroon heritage. Predawn hikes up Blue Mountain between June and August are enlivened by a proliferation of peeny-wallies (fireflies), and September is a good time to join in the parade and the dancing at Bath's Breadfruit Festival to commemorate the arrival of the first breadfruit.

Best Places to Eat

- » Strawberry Hill (p85)
- » Cafe Blue (p82)
- » Crystal Edge (p83)
- » Gap Café Bed & Breakfast (p84)

Best Places to Stay

- » Strawberry Hill (p85)
- » Lime Tree Farm (p87)
- » Forres Park Guest House & Farm (p87)

BLUE MOUNTAINS

Deriving its name from the azure haze that settles lazily around its 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 winding, and some are dirt tracks that are utterly impossible to pass without 4WD, especially after heavy rains. If you are spending time in the area, renting a hardy vehicle, contacting a tour guide or making arrangements with your hotel are highly advisable.

History

With dense primary forests and forbidding topography, the prospect of life in the Blue Mountains has discouraged all but the most determined settlers. 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.

National Parks

The Blue Mountains-John Crow National Park protects 78,210 hectares and is managed by the Natural Resources Conservation Authority (NRCA). The park includes the forest reserves of the Blue and John Crow Mountain Ranges and spans the parishes of St Andrew, St Thomas, Portland and St Mary. Ecotourism is being promoted and lo-

cal is being trained as guides. Camping is only permitted at designated sites. Camping 'wild' is not advised.

Dangers & Annoyances

The roads in the Blue Mountains consist of endless switchbacks; they are narrow, often overgrown with foliage and can be badly rutted. Many corners are blind. Honk your horn frequently and watch out for reckless local drivers.

Ask about trail conditions before hiking in the mountains. If a trail is difficult to follow, turn back. Mountain rescue is slow and you could be lost for days.

Information

There are **ranger stations** (☎9am-5pm) at Holywell Recreation Area and Portland Gap, and at Millbank in the Upper Rio Grande Valley. Entry to the park is free, except for Holywell Recreation Area. Other than the station at Holywell, the other stations might keep more erratic hours.

Jamaica Conservation & Development

Trust (JCDT; ☎920-8278; www.jcdt.org.jm; 29 Dumbarton Ave, Kingston) Provides management and supervision of the national park.

Getting There & Away

BUS Minibuses and route taxis arrive from and depart to the mountains from the Park View Supermarket on the square in Papine. The frequency of service depends on demand. There is at least one morning run and one in the afternoon for the two main routes. Destinations include Mavis Bank (J\$250, 15km, 1½ hours) and Newcastle (J\$270, 23km, 1¼ hours). There is no regular bus service from Buff Bay up the B1.

CAR There are no gas stations; fill up in Papine. From Kingston, Hope Rd leads to Papine, from where Gordon Town Rd (B1) leads into the mountains. At the Cooperage, the B1 (Mammee River Rd) forks left steeply uphill for Strawberry Hill resort (near Irish Town) and Newcastle. Gordon Town Rd continues straight from the Cooperage and winds east up the Hope River Valley to Gordon Town, then steeply to Mavis Bank and Hagley Gap. From the north coast, the B1 heads into the mountains from Buff Bay (closed at time of writing due to a landslide).

Getting Around

Traveling by your own vehicle is the best way to enjoy the Blue Mountains as public transportation between villages is infrequent and it's difficult to reach many points of interest. You'll need a sturdy 4WD with a low gear option to handle the road conditions.