



South Coast & Central Highlands

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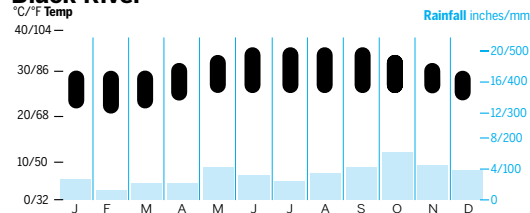
Why Go?

Cut off from the clamorous north coast by the natural bulwark of Cockpit Country and protected from resort development by local communities that seriously value their near-virgin beaches, southwest Jamaica feels like a clandestine paradise for the trickle of off-island visitors who make it this far. Its biggest present is Treasure Beach, an antidote to pretty much everything else in Jamaica you will have encountered so far, with its cow-filled pastures, crime-free country lanes, and semi-deserted scimitars of sand.

Rural St Elizabeth parish is often coined the breadbasket of Jamaica for the many crops that grow there, but fertile fields quickly give way to swamp around Black River and mountains around the lightly touristed, highland town of Mandeville. The region's most notable sights – the Black River, YS Falls and the Appleton Rum Estate – are usually visited by day-trippers on organized excursions from resorts in Negril and Montego Bay.

When to Go

Black River



Jan The Accompong Maroon Festival is one of the most compelling celebrations of Afro-Caribbean culture.

Dec–Apr It's high season for a reason: no hurricanes, less chance of rain and calmer seas.

Jun–Aug Summer is also not a bad time to visit; rates go down and the region stays relatively dry.

BLUEFIELDS TO BLACK RIVER

Bluefields & Belmont

Bluefields in southeastern Westmoreland parish is appropriately named: look out the door and it's either big light-blue skies beyond the mountains or sea-blue harbors lapping the rocky beach. In 1519 this was Oristan, one of the first Spanish settlements in Jamaica; Bluefields Bay provided safe anchorage for Spanish explorers, British naval squadrons and pirates. In 1670, before he became a tacky rum mascot, infamous buccaneer Henry Morgan set out from Bluefields Bay to sack Panama City. Today Bluefields (population 2560) and adjacent Belmont (population 2880) are populated by a quiet collection of fishers, tourists, escape artists, regular artists, expats and returnees – the latter two attracted by a small housing-construction boom in the hills.

Sights

Peter Tosh Monument

MONUMENT

(Hwy A2; admission J\$1000; ☉vary) Many monuments make a political statement, and the memorial to reggae superstar Peter Tosh, plunked a kilometer south of Bluefields on the beach road in Belmont, is no exception. And the cause here is, as Tosh once sang, to 'legalize it.' You can guess what 'it' is, but if not, just check all the murals, which depict a Rasta man with a huge joint, jumbo marijuana leaves, and, best of all, a red-eyed Lion of Zion on Tosh's actual tomb.

Behind the tomb is a garden where they ain't growing oregano. This is a casual place with few visitors, a stark contrast to the tourist maelstrom surrounding fellow Wailer Bob Marley's mausoleum in Nine Mile. It is run by the Tosh family – his nonagenarian mother lived on the property until her death in 2013 – and your money is taken by a caretaker who will give you a brief tour along with commentary on Tosh's political positions ('I'm like a smoke. Dat why we say legalize it.'). In mid-October the annual Peter Tosh Birthday Bash, an informal local affair, features live roots reggae music played deep into the night.

Bluefields House

HISTORIC SITE

Philip Gosse was one of the great polymaths of his time: the man who both popularized the aquarium and modified its design, and illustrator of gorgeously detailed renditions of Jamaican birdlife. His old home, naught but a

ruin located inland from the Bluefields police station, is worth visiting for historical novelty more than anything – to see where the author of *Illustrations of the Birds of Jamaica* and *A Naturalist's Sojourn in Jamaica* once laid his head. There's a lovely breadfruit tree on site, said to be the first on the island.



Beaches

Bluefields Beach Park

BEACH

(Hwy A2; ☉8am-sunset) Well signed from the Winston Jones Hwy (A2), this beach is a swathe of pale sand that frames the dark-blue water like a ribbon; a beach as beautiful as it is ignored by foreign tourists, although it's quite popular with locals on weekends. During the early evening and on weekends you'll find a nice collection of food stalls featuring locally caught fresh fish and plenty of Red Stripe.

Belmont Beach

BEACH

There are actually two small Belmont Beaches, but one is too rocky to relax on and the other is a major mooring point for fishing boats. That said, if the day is clear the water will be as well, so you can swim out a little way and do some fine snorkeling or spear fishing. Most accommodations rent the required equipment.



Tours

Travelers staying in the area can enjoy day trips and excursions to regional attractions including YS Falls, the Black River Great Morass, Ipswich Caves and Alligator Pond.

Natural Mystic Tours

NATURE TOURS

(☎851-3962; www.naturalmystic-jamaica.com) Run by a German expat; leads tours (in English and German) all across the island.

Nature Roots

NATURE TOURS

(☎955-8162, 384-6610; www.natureroots.de) Go with Brian the Bush Doctor out on the sea and into the jungle, or stay at his friendly little cottage.

Shafston Tours

NATURE TOURS

(☎869-9212; www.shafston.com; Shafston Estate Great House, Bluefields) A good choice for outdoor pursuits such as river kayaking (US\$50 per person) and hiking.



Sleeping & Eating

For food, you can eat at any of the accommodation places listed. It's also worth pressing on to Scott's Cove for the full-on Jamaican fish and *bammy* (pancake of fried cassava) experience.