

Understand Jamaica

JAMAICA TODAY 182

Known for reggae rhythms, Rasta cool and athletic prowess, modern Jamaica navigates choppy waters socially and economically. How is the average Jamaican coping?

HISTORY 184

Táinos and Spaniards; pirates and slave traders; sugar fiefdoms and abolitionists; black nationalists and street politics – how Jamaica's turbulent past shaped its present.

JAMAICAN CULTURE 192

Jamaica is a fascinating mix of influences: deep spirituality, deprecating humor, political upheaval and a fiercely creative soul. From Bob Marley to Usain Bolt, culturally speaking this is an island that punches far above its weight.

JAMAICAN LANDSCAPES 200

Narrow coastal plains, broad flatlands and rainforests, jagged green mountains pocked with caves cut by countless rivers; all pulsating with wildlife.

Jamaica Today

It's quite possible to visit Jamaica and do little more than lie on a beach with a rum cocktail in hand, taking in sunset after spectacular sunset. It's a seductive option (to be fair, we've done plenty of that ourselves), but engage a little further and Jamaica reveals itself to be a far more interesting, exciting and complicated place than you could ever have imagined.

Best on Film

The Harder They Come (1972) A classic rags-to-rude *bwai* (rude boy) story of a country boy turned Kingston criminal. One of the best soundtracks in film history.

Marley (2012) Exemplary documentary about the life and music of reggae superstar Bob Marley.

Better Mus Come (2013) Acclaimed feature about Jamaica's gang troubles of the 1970s.

Life and Debt (2001) A powerful documentary on the impact of globalization on the Jamaican economy.

Best in Print

The Book of Night Women (2009) Gripping tale of a female-led plantation revolt, by Marlon James.

The Lunatic (1987) Comic novel revolving around a village madman and his affair with a tourist, by Anthony Winkler

Lionheart Gal (1986) A lively short-story collection that reveals much about patois and the lives of women.

White Witch of Rose Hall (1928) Herbert de Lisser's classic Gothic horror, set in colonial Jamaica.

Global Position

Modern Jamaica looks less and less to Britain, its old imperial ruler, instead turning its head more toward the USA. Far from just being that slice of tropical paradise sold through the brochures of all-inclusive resorts, Jamaica is a developing country negotiating its way through the 21st century, with all the challenges – and opportunities – that presents. A troubled economy has meant an increasing number of Jamaicans (and the majority of those with a post-high school education) are emigrating. Remittances from the Jamaican diaspora made up nearly 20% of the economy in 2013.

In keeping with many developing nations, Jamaica has also looked to China, and Prime Minister Portia Simpson-Miller has been keen to pursue closer economic ties to Beijing. The biggest project to come out of this policy has been the controversial Goat Island infrastructure plan. This seeks to turn the Portland Bight Protected Area near Kingston, the largest protected conservation area in Jamaica, into a huge transshipment port and logistics hub. The passionate voices from both those for and against the project raised key questions about the discontents of globalization: are economic development and environment protection mutually exclusive, and who benefits from the scheme – the people, the government or the corporations? The answers that Jamaica finds to these questions will be key in determining its future development.

Courtroom Drama

Throughout the first half of 2014, Jamaica was in thrall to a courthouse drama unfolding in downtown Kingston. Vybz Kartel, who has spent a decade as both the country's most popular and infamous dancehall star, was found guilty of the murder of his associate Clive 'Lizard' Williams.