

Understand Jamaica

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Amid the reggae rhythms and athletic prowess, modern Jamaica navigates choppy social and economic waters. How are the nation's prospects?

HISTORY 184

Táinos and pirates; sugar and slavery, black nationalists and street politics – how Jamaica's turbulent past shaped its present.

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Jamaica is a fascinating mix of influences: deep spirituality, deprecating humor, political upheaval and a fiercely creative soul.

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From Bob Marley and Usain Bolt to Marlon James, culturally speaking this is an island that punches far above its weight.

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

Jamaica Today

Abroad, Jamaica sells itself to visitors as a destination where you're never troubled by anything more pressing than where your next rum cocktail is coming from. But paradise clichés will only get you so far. Look a little closer and the Jamaica of everyday reveals itself to be a far more interesting, exciting and complicated place than you could 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.

I Am Bolt (2016) Feature-length exploration of the Usain Bolt phenomenon, following him all the way to Rio 2016.

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

Best in Print

A Brief History of Seven Killings (Marlon James; 2014) An intricately woven, bloody tapestry of Jamaica in the 1970s.

Here Comes the Sun (Nicole Dennis-Benn; 2016) Debut novel exploring the underbelly of Jamaican resort life from one of Jamaica's newest literary stars.

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

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

Global Position

Modern Jamaica looks less and less to Britain, its old imperial ruler, and has turned 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. In recent decades 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 17% of the economy in 2013.

Jamaica carries an enormous external debt, and much political and economic work goes toward managing it. It's no easy job when the economy is dominated by imports and only a handful of industries generate hard currency of any volume. Tourism is the most important player here, and Jamaica certainly isn't the only Caribbean nation currently looking nervously at developments in Cuba to see how they'll be affected by the new exciting tourism kid on the block.

The island's economy has stabilized recently, however, and once crippling high interest rates are now at the lowest they've been for years. For all this good news, in 2016 the Jamaican people kicked out the incumbent People's National Party and prime minister Portia Simpson-Miller in favor of the Jamaica Labour Party, led by Andrew Holness.

Talking Reparations

One complicated area where politics and economics meet – along with Jamaica's troubled colonial history – is the issue of slavery reparations. In 2015 Jamaica followed the lead of the Caricom Reparations Committee to request nonconfrontational discussions with the Brit-