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# POST CARDS FROM THE EDGE

OLD-FASHIONED, RURAL JAMAICA IS  
ALIVE AND WELL ON THE SOUTH COAST.  
BUT FOR HOW LONG?

BY HERB HILLER



**Visitors to Jamaica's south coast come for the nature. Clockwise from opposite: Mullion Cove, a villa on Bluefields Bay, commands a dramatic seascape; Lovers Leap recalls a slave couple's 1,600-foot plunge; and a Black River safari penetrates the mangrove forest.**

**Overleaf: A rafter pauses along the Black River.**



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On a boat trip, you can dive in and gaze upon mountains that dwarf all but the imagination

A VISITOR ONE AFTERNOON asks Merrick Gayle when tourism came to the south coast of Jamaica.

"I'm not sure it has come yet," says Gayle, who runs a supermarket and hardware store in the hill town of Southfield.

"You see, when I built my wooden tourist cottage by the beach, everybody was shocked. They all told me, 'Concrete is the thing, Man!' They had never seen anybody put up a wood structure. Wood was the old way. Modern times now. Yet soon as I finished, everybody liked it.

"There's a feeling out here that tourism means tearing down trees and putting up concrete. That hasn't happened yet. So I don't know. What do you think?"

Tourism is definitely coming to Jamaica's south coast. Everybody already knows the north coast. Its resorts are urban and worldly, from Montego Bay's patrician style at Tryall and Round Hill to Ocho Rios's all-inclusive excitement at Couples and Sandals. From the '70s on, its harbors were dredged, reefs destroyed, cruise piers installed. Ships brought thousands who surged through craft markets, downed a Red Stripe to strains of "Day-O! Day-ay-ay-O!" and sailed on.

By contrast, the south coast only now awakens from a pre-Belafonte slumber.

From the spa at Milk River Bath in Clarendon west to Savanna-La-Mar in Westmoreland, a distance of some 85 miles across the parishes of Manchester and St. Elizabeth, visitors find only one passable hotel, the Treasure Beach, and that with only 16 rooms. The region south of Mandeville remains so undeveloped that a section of coast road that links Clarendon with St.

Elizabeth—a scenic stretch that lacks only the slipper of smooth surfacing to become a Cinderella highway—today defies passage across its twin ruts. A motorist passes five miles unsteady as a limp, skirting torpid streams, climbing up and dropping down, where flood-dug trenches heave the car with deep shudders.

Elsewhere the road abandons the coast altogether, leaving it wild beneath cliffs that plunge a thousand feet. Inland, the road climbs, until at last, it bursts free of the tropics, where even middays in fall stir cool. On one double-back, the road flings a veritable Lilliput across the horizon, a panorama you can imagine embraces all the land known as

Jamaica. In the grand sweep of valley and mountains, topped by fairwaylike pastures, one marvels at how agricultural the region is, how great the potential of the land, to say nothing of its people.

Something insistent about the people accompanies travels through the south, a region larger than entire Caribbean islands but unknown to most outsiders. When tourism comes, will it serve what the people want for themselves?

What they want is what they have, only blessed with more jobs. They're of two minds about the north coast. They wonder how to get the jobs tourism provides without having their place transformed into strips of urban blight, what the government's own reports term "misguided interpretations of upward mobility...new housing monstrosities that ignore the scale, form, and settlement patterns of the rural vernacular."

Visitors to the region, who today come mainly on day trips from the north coast or from Negril on the west, come for nature. Attractions, like 120-foot-high YS Falls, highest in Jamaica, provide summer spectacle. The cascades drop sheer as a skyscraper, an awesome crush of water upon water, surging, boiling, channel scouring. In winter, the flow trickles faucetlike, hypnotically thin.

They also come for boat trips up the 44-mile long Black River on South Coast Safari Tours operated by Charles Swaby. He takes visitors by motor launch up the lower reaches of Jamaica's longest river. Tall mangroves edge the banks, arches knuckled like the fingers of arthritic witches. Crocodiles laze. Early-morning fishermen dangle shrimp pots from dugout canoes in search of tiny crayfish. Dr. Donovan Bennett, who operates St. Elizabeth Safaris, will rent you a boat and oarsman to explore Black River tributaries, some scalpel narrow. You can dive in and lazily stroke your way along, gazing upon mountains that dwarf all but the imagination.

Along the coast near Southfield, Lovers Leap drops 1,600 feet to the sea. It's said that a young couple during slave times leapt from the edge in final embrace rather than



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face capture and return to bondage. Inland near Holland, Bamboo Avenue is a two-and-a-half-mile natural cathedral enshrining the road.

Speaking of the natural attractions, Charles Swaby says, "People come because it's undeveloped. We think there's a big future in environmental quality, different from the paved-over hustle of the north coast."

But the real attraction for anyone who makes a destination of the region is the rural look and traditional life that, especially in these woeful economic times, keep Jamaicans rooted and still hopeful there.

The characteristic look of this coast is long, deserted beaches with colorful fishing boats hauled up on dark sand, shady beneath the palms. Buildings nowhere crowd the shore. Hills slope to the sea where they drop, whoosh!, in ultimate tumbles of sea grapes, finally sand, the green sea, the blue depths.

The earth is bauxite red, the roadside green upon green, the people brown and dressed in the vivid colors of ripe fruits and showy bougainvillea, hibiscus, and oleander. St. Elizabeth is Jamaica's breadbasket with fields of carrots, pumpkins, scallions, melons, tomatoes, and onions. Rural Jamaicans farm at least some patch of coco (a staple in the Jamaican diet) or of yam, raise a few chickens, tend goats. Or they fish along this coast sometimes out two nights at a time 50 miles offshore (south of Portland Point) on the Pedro Banks. They return along beaches where mostly women wait, clambering up the sides of small trucks fitted with tubs the fishermen fill with their iced catch for immediate sale.

Others, with business in town, wait patiently for a bus sometimes three hours, sometimes longer. Sometimes the bus passes full. In town, they wait in bank lines, for license renewals, in a law office, or a doctor's waiting room. In Southfield or in Black River, the parish capital of St. Elizabeth and the first town on the island with street lighting, a line forever queues in front of each town's lone pay phone. Third World governments, you realize, regardless of party, have infinite power to afflict.

Jamaicans' great pleasure is to be res-

cued from waiting by the roadside—typically a bunch at a time—by an open passing truck. They laugh boisterously about their good fortune. Give someone a lift in your rental car and you're right away asked how you like their country, and is this your first visit. If you reply that you love Jamaica and wish you could settle, they feel prideful. To think someone might give up America to come to their little Jamaica!

Elsewhere in the region, old Jamaica, its hardships leavened by the look of the familiar, persists.

A fountainhead of authenticity is the Milk River Mineral Spa and Hotel that anchors the region east in Clarendon. The old-fashioned lodging of 24 rooms recalls a tropical barracks, white-porched beneath slanty red tin roofs, bougainvillea twining from shady verandas for the sun to suffuse them pretty red, lavender, orange. Floors are worn-smooth pine, ceilings high and trayed. Antique furniture dates the dining room ancient. Guests come for the baths, in use since the late 1700s and reportedly more curative than spas at Baden, Bath, Karlsbad, and Vichy. Folklore has it that a slave had escaped to here from a nearby plantation after a vicious beating. He bathed his wounded body in the gushing spring and was healed. He returned to the estate to share his good news with his master in exchange for no further punishment.

Nearby, the government is developing a national park along the Alligator Hole River that emerges from the base of a limestone escarpment along the northern edge of the Canoe Valley Wetland. Site wardens paddle visitors along the spring run where manatees and crocodiles hover in diamond-clear water. Prop roots of mangroves form churchly tangles. Beds of sharp watercress float free for the harvesting. Waterbirds skim the surface of deep pools, streaking dotted lines across the water that suggest tear-off coupons for petitioning God and government to preserve such scenes.

The Treasure Beach Hotel continues the same open-veranda style as the hotel at Milk River Bath. The grounds please with small structures of thatch, of shingle, of tile roofs, with walkway rails of split bamboo, and cut stone around the pool. Everything opens to the breeze—terraces, dining room, bedrooms. The hotel is free of bamboozle.

Visitors at the hotel and others who rent

The real attraction is the traditional rural life that keeps Jamaicans hopeful



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The south coast is full of country roads and pastoral scenes. Clockwise from top: Bauxite red earth carpets a mountain road, patches of green on green surround the town of Whitehouse, and local kids on foot hope to be rescued by a passing truck.

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nearly villas, plain to posh, don't complain that there is little to do. Contemplative sorts come, people who read and doze in hammocks, who visit nature attractions, and sightsee on their own. At night, though lanes are unlit, stars and maybe moon cast enough light to guide your way to one or another native restaurant. As you walk, goat and dog shapes pass in yards. You may see no one, yet if anywhere you call a friendly "hello," you're answered in like fashion by adults and children who sit by the roadside. Families abide together.

Properties like Blue Water Villas and South Sea View Guest House in Whitehouse provide locally styled, informal places to stay, with higher standards of food service and housekeeping than most. Best are the waterfront villas of American husband and wife Braxton and Deborah Moncure. Last year the Moncures added their fourth property along Bluefields Bay called The Hermitage (see *Caribbean Travel and Life*, March/April 1992), designed by architect Deborah Moncure in an adaptive Georgian style, furnished with antiques and exquisite reproductions by local cabinetmakers. Jamaica offers nothing better. Anywhere.

Now the scene is about to change. Three big projects loom for the southwest coast.

First likely to start is a resort by Jamaican hotelier Butch Stewart, founder and owner of the Sandals chain of all-inclusive hotels, on 280 acres in Auchindown in the Whitehouse waterfront area. The vicinity is locally known for its humble memorial to Belmont-born, slain reggae star Peter Tosh. Nearby Bluefields Bay was Captain Henry Morgan's departure point when he sailed to capture Panama City from the Spanish in 1670. In time this district of eastern Westmoreland will become the region's favored vacation zone. Low cliffs and dense forest edge the twisty road. It's heaven.

Sandals is proven, widely popular on

Jamaica's north coast, and expanding throughout the Caribbean. Rumors of plans flash quick as summer storms: 300 rooms? nothing higher than two stories? some hybrid of Georgian and Caribbean style? all-inclusive? not all-inclusive? a different name from Sandals? construction starts next month? soon? Regardless, people know something is sure to happen because the land lies politically favored in the constituency of the new Prime Minister, Percival J. Patterson.

A second project rumored near starting is a resort and upscale housing scheme also in Whitehouse. This project is on lands of Ronnie Thwaites and Peter Probst, an American married to a Westmoreland woman. Probst and his wife also own Natania's Guest House nearby. Plans are for at least 200 rooms, probably cottage style, plus a golf course.

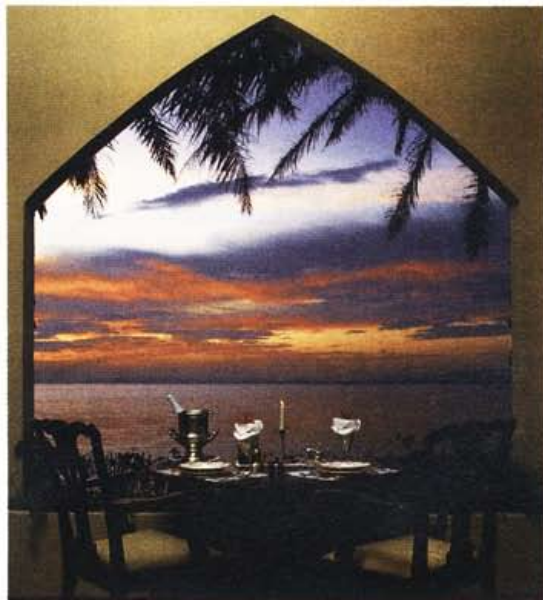
The third project, called Paradise Park by developer Tony Clarke, is about four miles from the Westmoreland Parish capital at Savanna-La-Mar. Clarke's plans call for a marina, an 18-hole golf course, an equestrian center, and a hotel, all awaiting detail.

Big plans move little plans.

In the sleepy sugar port of Savanna-La-Mar (known to the locals as Sav), housewife Carol Connell says that as soon as Sandals starts she will apply for the concession as hairdresser. "Maybe I'll need a loan, but whatever it takes," she says, "I want to work there." A hitchhiker along the road wants to be a tour guide.

Westmoreland native Ernest Pinnock, lately retired back to where he was born after a life's work in England, is putting up a 10-room guesthouse next to the Sandals site and is ready to expand his grocery in Belmont

**Hotels in the region are free of bamboozle, from the laid-back Treasure Beach Hotel (opposite top) to the funky Waterloo Guest House in Black River (bottom). Special pleasures include a romantic meal at the Moncures' San Michele villa (below) on Bluefields Bay (opposite bottom).**



JOHN TSANDES AND JEFFREY CRENSHAW

Now the scene is about to change—three big projects loom for the southwest coast



ROBERT M. FRIEDMAN

JONATHAN E. PITE

to take care of added business he expects from soon-to-prosper neighbors. Over a gin at a friend's bar, Pinnock states a preference for "more dignified tourists. We want decent people," he says, voicing concern about reports that migrants from Negril are starting to buy up local land. "We want no loud music, no little shacks one next to the other where people smoke coke. We're strictly for tourism."

Other recent start-ups reflect the confidence that Jamaicans do and don't have in authentic style. In Gut River, a palmy outpost at the western edge of where the coast road goes to ruin, two fellows from inland Mandeville have leased a few shoreside acres where, especially Sunday, a crowd gathers for high-amp reggae on popular Irie-FM radio. Lots of fried fish, chicken, and curried goat gets washed down with a lot of Red Stripe in a setting of hammocks strung between palms and chairs beneath canvas anchored in a stream bottom for keeping cool. Contrary to the image of Jamaican males ignoring their families, dads teach their kids to swim. Families carry coolers of beer and pots of food across a shallow stream for beach picnics. All is easy, mellow.

Patrick Reid, who runs a shoe store in Mandeville and has traveled the world, says, "You need to travel to be able to see the po-



HENRY CANBY

**A typical south-coast beach, beautiful Bluefields Bay is calm and deserted and shaded by palms.**

tential of a place like this. You can see we have no signs up. We don't even have a name for it. But people come from as far as Ocho Rios. I tell you, you tell him—one tells the other."

Reid and his partner Mitch Burey are preparing mountain hiking trails and maybe horseback riding. There's a reef about a mile offshore. They plan to hold live stage shows on a platform they'll build over the

stream edge. They're thinking about adding self-contained cottages late this year. "We'll build out of wood," they say, "log cabins. Not concrete. Concrete won't fit the atmosphere."

Derrick Rochester, at his Sea-Riv Beach Resort near Alligator Pond, has gone the other way. Rochester, member of parliament for South East St. Elizabeth, has put up a white concrete, two-and-a-half story,



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boxy hotel of 11 apartments on acreage scraped bare along the sea. In two ground-level units, the kitchens have no windows. The idea is for the hotel to anchor a 400-acre development meant to include upscale hillside housing for expatriates and locals, with horseback riding and a golf course in the future, as well as a cattle farm.

Defending the stark look of his structure, Rochester says that "additional buildings will take the traditional architecture more into account. This project is a start. Sometimes you get it right, sometimes you don't."

Villas like the Moncures' and guesthouses like Blue Water suggest that the problem about tourism along the south coast isn't the lack of appropriate models to draw on. Even Derrick Rochester now seeks to palliate his unfortunate stalag with bougainvillea and painted-on color. Rather the questions are whether the government will urge developers into projects that stylistically fit in, and whether through appropriate incentives will keep farming attractive to locals in the face of new competition for labor from hotels, and so ensure the pastoral continuity of the countryside. Both are necessary if the scale, pace, and style that have so far attracted visitors to the region are to last.

The fault isn't developers' alone. Disregard

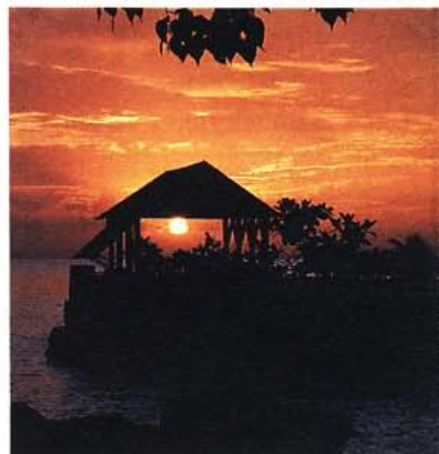
for the limits of natural resources affects "little" people as well as influential ones. Fishermen squirt Clorox bleach into lobster holes to blind their prey while destroying their habitat. Others dynamite the reefs. Still others—a few—have begun dragging the reefs with seines.

Lawyer Michael Clarke, former head of the Black River Environmental Protection Association, says that "it's one thing to employ a few people as waiters and bellboys. But even though developers may be conscious of what's needed to preserve the ambience that we have, the failure of tourism elsewhere has been the failure to uplift everyone, all together, economically."

Attempting to respond, the Bluefields Trust urges plans that help local people develop crafts and light industry skills, mariculture, and sustainable agriculture. Tourism consultant Janos Beyer, who works with the Central and South Tourism Committee, sees hope for government tourism policy that would require the south coast to develop according to local scale, historically and culturally enriched, environmentally sound, though he doubts anything but enlightened self-interest will constrain developers of projects near ready to start.

Enlightened approaches would see to it that craftsmen like Rasta Jah Calo in Belmont

could continue to operate their stalls across from cove beaches where, at dusk, fishing boats strain at their mooring lines. Wavelets reflect the setting sun, rolling in like shimmering silk, creamy, lustrous. Tinny soca sounds behind a couple of guys liming on



JOHN TSANDES AND JEFFREY CRESPI

a cut-stone bridge. The heavens array a great Crayola melt. Night rushes in darkly. ■

(service information on page 98)

*Herb Hiller is a longtime Caribbean hand and editor of the "Ecotourism Society Newsletter." He is the author of the award-winning Guide to the Small and Historic Lodgings of Florida.*

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**TRANSPORTATION:** Regular service to Montego Bay or Kingston is provided by Air Jamaica, American Airlines, Continental Airlines, and Northwest Airlines. A rental car is the best way to get around the south coast.

**REQUIREMENTS:** For entry into Jamaica, U.S. citizens must provide either a valid passport or birth certificate with a raised seal and valid driver's license. Departure tax is \$6.

**ACCOMMODATIONS:** Places to stay are few along the south coast, at least compared to the north coast and Negril. Best are the villas on Bluefields Bay operated by Braxton and Deborah Moncure (703-549-5276 or 202-232-4010). Newest of their four along the bay is **The Hermitage**, a veritable love potion dosed in four seaside bedrooms and open spaces luxuriously appointed for dining, library browsing, pool and beach swimming, and indulging in inertia. Also available are **Mullion Cove**, **San Michele**, and **Milestone**

**Cottage.** Rates range by the week between \$3,800 for up to four at Milestone Cottage in low season, to \$10,200 for up to 12 at Mullion Cove in high season. Rates include chauffeured pick-up and return to the Montego Bay Airport, all food, drinks (including liquor), and full staff.

Recently reopened, **Natan-ia's Guest House** (809-929-0067) in Little Culloden lies just down the slope from the main road by the edge of the sea. Its eight guest rooms are spartan but clean, while the dining room, bar, and patio are furnished with mahogany, tile, and straw, styled for good loafing. Rates are \$50 per night.

**Blue Water Villa** in Whitehouse (305-891-4859 or 809-955-2635) provides a sea-side main house and cottage with a pool stylishly set about in tiles and mahogany with attractive fish-scale shingling. Rates by the week range from \$1,200 for two in the cottage to up to \$5,000 for as many as 10 in the main house. Accommodations include all meals and unlimited rum punch, full staff, and round-trip trans-

portation from Montego Bay Airport. Rates for accommodations without meals are approximately one-third less.

**Treasure Beach Hotel** (809-965-2305) in its namesake community has 16 single-story, island-style rooms in outlying clusters with grass mats on tile floors, French windows, basic furniture, and attractive island wall art. The main house rises on a knoll, with a dining patio under a roof but open to the breeze and entertainment areas inside. The gardened hillside slopes to a pool and beach. Rates are \$65 per double, \$79 with breakfast, \$127 with breakfast and dinner, and \$142 with all meals.

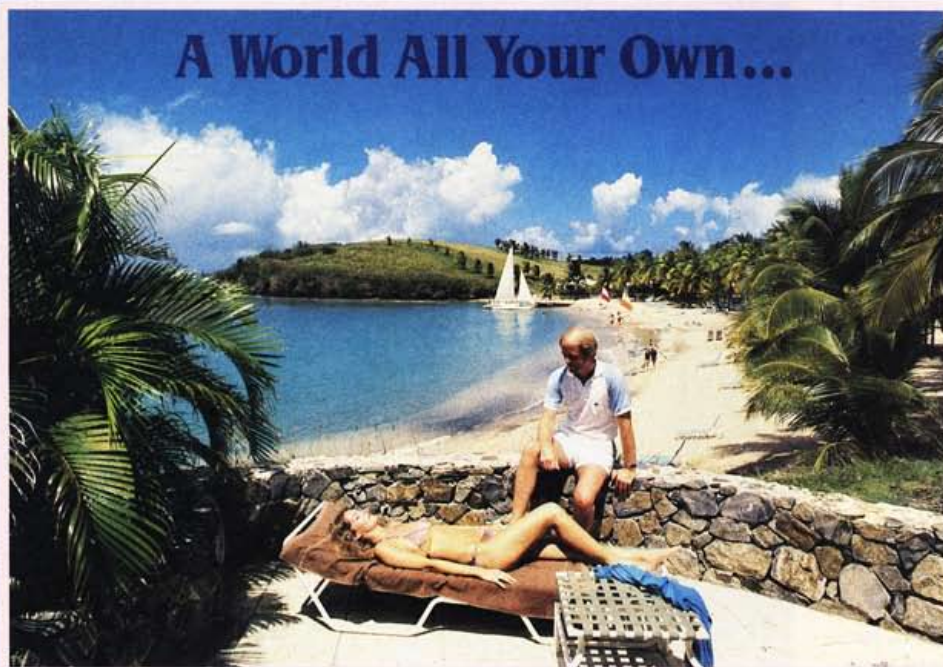
**Merrick Gayle's San Pedro Villa** in Great Bay, St. Elizabeth (809-929-2872, the phone rings at the Gayle Supermarket & Hardware), is an unpretentious one-bedroom cottage with shower, complete kitchen, small dining area, and a large patio under an immense lignum vitae tree shading views across a long yard that edges a protected beach by the sea. Its location is east across Great Bay from the Treasure Beach

Hotel. Its owner, Merrick Gayle, a prominent merchant in Southfield, is well informed about this part of the island. Rates are \$45 per night for two, though an additional bed can accommodate two small children for the same rate.

Dating from the turn of the century, the **Waterloo Guest House** (809-965-2278) in Black River is a funky, local place to stay. Soft beds make this Georgian-style, two-story, unembellished mansion a great find for the low-budget traveler. A room for two is just \$20.

**Ital-Rest Cottages & Campground** (reserve through Sense Adventures in Kingston, 809-927-2097) lies less than a five-minute walk from the beach in the Great Bay District of St. Elizabeth. Simple furnishings mark each of two cottage units, which share kitchen facilities; each has queen-sized beds and a veranda. Rates are \$20 per night double, \$40 for the two units. A campground is available for \$5 per night. There is no electricity here.

**Milk River Mineral Spa and Hotel** (809-924-9544) is situated a three-minute drive



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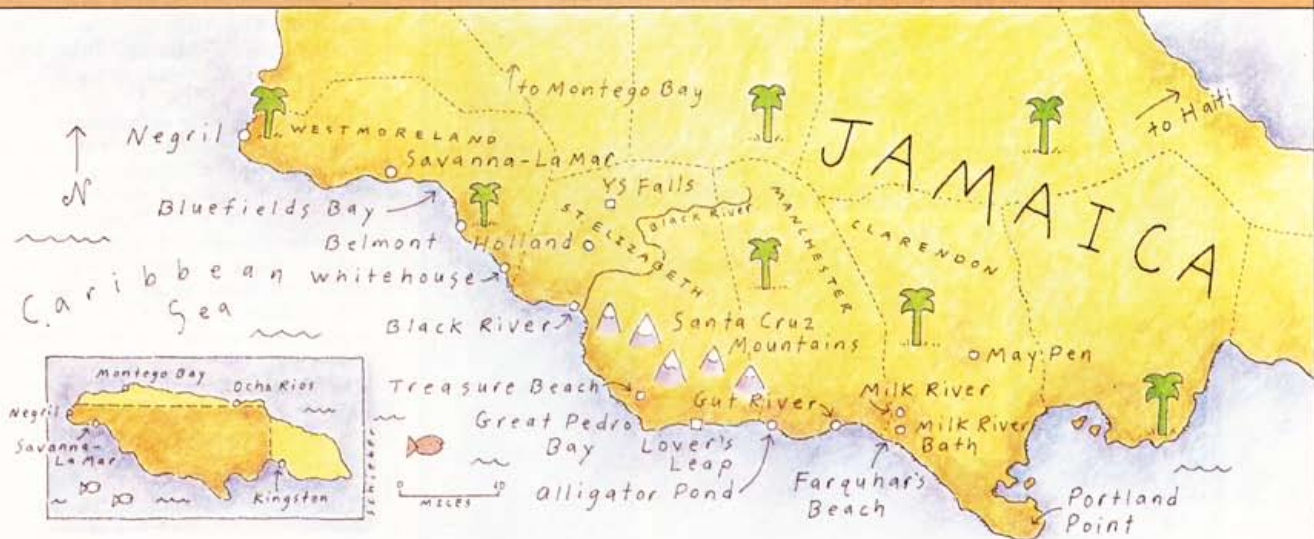
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from Farquhar's Beach, a south coast fishing village in Clarendon, an hour-and-a-half west of Kingston, 12 miles off the road from May Pen. Rates for its old-fashioned, minimally furnished rooms are \$44, or \$68 for two with two meals, including the baths. The site is removed from all nightlife. The baths alone are available for \$1 for a 15-minute immersion. The ultimate in relaxation!

**DINING OUT:** Most everything is native style: fresh seafoods simply prepared, fresh root crops and greens, simple salads, but rich, brothy soups. A typical meal of stewed fish at the **Sea Crab** in Great Bay, including an oily steamed snapper, callaloo, rice, tomatoes, cucumbers, avocados, watermelon, came to \$3, with tip. More formal serving in the dining room of the **Milk River**

**Bath Hotel** comes to about \$10, including tip. For \$10, it's also possible for two to feast on fish or chicken under a beach umbrella at an outdoor picnic table with a couple of Red Stripe beers at Gut River.

**SPECIAL ACTIVITIES:** Conservationist Charles Swaby offers boat trips by launch along the Black River through his **South Coast Safaris** (809-

965-2513). Swaby knows the region intimately—every piece of vegetation, every crocodile sunning spot—and is an informative guide. His standard river tours (approximately one and a half hours) take place daily at 9 A.M., 11 A.M., 2 P.M., and 4 P.M. except Mondays and Saturdays when the tours start at 11 A.M. Cost: just \$15 per person.

—H.H.

MAP BY JULIE SCHIEBER

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