

THE INDEPENDENT, JUNE, 22 2003

Don't wait till winter to visit Jamaica, says Janet Street-Porter. At this time of year you can find peaceful hiking routes and unspoilt beaches, or simply chill out with friends in a rented villa

Let me say straight away that Jamaica is not the place to go if you are a shrinking violet. It is brash, abrasive, full of surprises, unpredictable and exciting. You never forget your time there. I'm not talking about the kind of holiday where you spend two weeks inside a compound with guards on the gate and no contact with the locals. The whole point of Jamaica is to talk to people, soak up the way they see things. I'm not denying it can be risky - but no more so than many of the other Caribbean islands I have visited. Just remember this is an island with a lot of poverty and unemployment, so don't wear flash jewellery or be careless with your belongings.

I first went to Jamaica about eight years ago, staying inland from Falmouth on the north coast at a plantation house called Good Hope, which had been turned into a small luxury hotel. I spent my days hiking through fields of ugly fruit, sugar cane and corn, or driving for hours along dirt roads, getting hopelessly lost (accurate road maps of anything but the main roads in Jamaica are rare) and discovering the rarely visited Cockpit country, limestone hillocks where slaves fled their plantation masters and hid for years.

I drove all around the island, visiting Port Antonio in the north-east and taking a tiny back road over the Blue Mountains to Kingston. The tropical interior is like a land time forgot: dilapidated bridges, brightly painted huts, small churches and friendly people. Once I hiked all the way up the ridges of the Blue Mountains with a guide called Sweet Pea, gorgeously attired in a chiffon shirt and hilariously baggy shorts. Our route took us via papaya farms, a wedding reception, a village where they had just slaughtered a cow in the main street, via coffee plantations and a café where we feasted on homemade seed and carrot cake.

Over my 10 visits to the island, I've avoided tourist hangouts like Ocho Rios and Montego Bay, preferring to rent houses on the unspoilt south-west coast at Bluefields between the pretty town of Black River and the centre of the sugar industry, Savannah La Mar. There are relatively few places to stay on this coast because the area has been ignored by the big hotel chains. You can find unspoilt beaches and many of the elaborate old houses are belatedly being restored. There are small hotels such as Jakes down at Treasure Beach, or b&bs in the small towns. You can take a boat with a guide through the peaceful mangrove swamps and Black River delta to see tame crocodiles. The main road is gradually being upgraded, but travel at night at your peril: dead cows on the highway are a regular hazard.

This trip started with an unnerving grilling at Kingston airport because I did not have a return ticket back to the UK, but on to Los Angeles. I had to fill in a form detailing exactly what was in my luggage, so I wrote socks, shoes, clothes and knickers. That seemed to do the trick, assuring them I was not planning to take up residence. Then a 45-minute drive uphill to a resort high above Kingston called Strawberry Hill, owned by Chris Blackwell, boss of Island Records. I had not visited it since it was being built, when Chris took Christy Turlington, Kate Moss and me to a reggae festival in Kingston.

Since then Strawberry Hill has grown into a cluster of pretty white timber cottages facing spectacular views out over the Blue Mountains and surrounding hillsides, with a single-storey building that is the dining room and a large, inviting swimming pool. Our cottage was on two levels, with dark stained floors, a living room and a shady verandah. After a supper of curried shrimp I fell into a deep, sleep between crisp white sheets. Bliss!

What a view to wake up to. Later, Frank, who has worked for Chris Blackwell for 50 years, drove me up through the settlement of Newcastle to the Hollywell National Park, high on the ridge of the Blue Mountains. My guide was Norwood, a 25-year-old security guard. We followed a narrow trail to a small waterfall, walking through a tropical rainforest. Then we followed the Oatley Mountain trail, passing clumps of dark pink and white orchids. As the rain closed in and the views vanished, we stopped at the Gap café and had tea with home-made rum cake.

Back at Strawberry Hill I decided to have a massage, but found it something of a challenge to fill in the questionnaire to decide what kind of Ayurvedic type I was. My friend Glen had some sort of underwater treatment, which involved the therapist wearing a wet suit and operating a hose. He looked very pink and smelt lovely afterwards, whereas I was as oily as a pilchard. We rather undid the benefits of our purifying experience by drinking lots of Red Stripe as the sun set, followed by a delicious dinner of grilled snapper.

Next morning the sound of a tortured voice floated down from a nearby bungalow, cutting through the twittering birdsong like a rusty saw. Shaggy was apparently writing songs for his latest album. The traditional cacophony of early mornings in Jamaica is fantastic, from the sounds of different radio stations, barking dogs and honking car horns. Normally all this racket would be thoroughly tiresome, but here it is just a soundtrack to everything I love about the place. By 8.30am everyone has gone to school or work and silence returns. We repacked our luggage and started the long drive across the island to Bluefields. At the bottom of the hill we entered the heat, dust and chaos of Kingston. At Half Way Tree I asked the route to Spanish Town and got lost, but eventually rejoined the Mandela Highway as schoolchildren in smart uniforms thronged the streets. At every traffic light we were plagued by men selling everything from dusters to newspapers and bottled water. We climbed into the cooler air of the mountains and stopped for lunch at the Bloomfield Great House in Mandeville. Mandeville is a middle-class town and the seat of regional government. We ate grilled fish and chicken, savouring the calm before rejoining the grand prix on the main highway. The long hill down into Santa Cruz was a challenge, with cars overtaking on both sides, and the occasional stray dog and suicidal cow crossing without warning.

Everything quietened down as we crossed the reedy flats near Black River. At Middle Quarters, ladies in ancient straw hats waved plastic bowls of freshwater shrimps, hoping for a late-afternoon sale. We encountered pandemonium as we drove through the remains of the market in Black River's main street, a melange of blaring music, noisy schoolchildren, busy shoppers and dogs. Fishing charter boats were returning as we crossed the bridge over the river. It was good to see some of the beautiful old houses being restored here and a few more small hotels opening.

At Whitehouse we saw a strip of incredibly vulgar concrete palaces by the rocky beach, with elaborate metal grilles over every window: middle-class retirement homes for returnees. Through

Culloden and Auchindown, the pastureland on the hill above the sea was being subdivided into housing plots, not a good sign. Through sleepy Belmont with its assorted bars, and fishing boats and canoes lashed to wooden piers in the turquoise waters. Men sold string hammocks by the road.

At Bluefields, I saw that since my last visit four years ago, the highway has been moved back from the beautiful beach, making it quieter and safer. We stayed at Cottonwood cottage, one of several luxurious houses available for rent here. Right on the beach, they are owned by an American architect, Deborah Moncure, and her husband. A treat, if you can afford it, and over the years I have rented several with groups of friends, which makes it slightly more affordable. It was good to see the same people working here year after year.

I walked down the steps in front of the house and along to the white-sand public beach. My traffic-induced stress subsided as I floated in the silky waters. A few yards away a group of women from the village just stood in the sea, wearing shower caps and chatting. I went back to a tasty supper of lobster with plantain fritters and rice, and meringue coconut cake.

Next day, breakfast seemed to take ages, but this is a good thing. It forces you to chill out and adapt to the Jamaican time scale. I ate callaloo (a local version of spinach) with boiled green bananas and hot sauce. The drive to Negril took us through fields of sugar cane near Savannah La Mar, burning under a thundery sky and past the new "Negril Hill" golf course (another sign of tourist pollution). We turned left on to the headland before the main resort of Negril, passing the legendary Rick's Bar to arrive at the Caves. This is a cluster of individual cottages with names like Sun Dancer, Moon Shadow and Blue Dolphin, overlooking the sea, slightly hippy in tone. A well-thought-out series of paved paths snake around the cliff edge, providing secluded sunbathing spots and diving points. Ladders drop into the water for the more timid bather (ie, me). One hut is a blue and white painted spa where you can have treatments while looking out over the sea, and another larger structure houses the bar and restaurant.

Our two-storey lodging was octagonal, with a bedroom and bathroom upstairs and another downstairs. With stained woods and painted tables, I found it all a bit bijou. The noise from American students celebrating their spring break at Rick's Bar was somewhat intrusive. (Take my advice and do not go to Negril during this four-week period.) The best rooms at the Caves are the ones that people cannot walk past, beyond the restaurant or near the spa. It's expensive but chic - if tie-dye and batik is your thing.

Next morning I drove through the nightmare of bars and motels that is at the centre of Negril, strung out along one of the best white-sand beaches in the whole of Jamaica. The road was wide (for coaches) but soon deteriorated into the normal potholed, dusty track. At Lucea a diversion took us through the town centre, which has many beautiful Georgian colonial buildings and a pretty clock tower. The town is situated on a large bay and has a lively market. The drive to Round Hill took just one and a half hours, but we arrived hot and dusty from roadworks. The hotel is a group of 29 privately owned bungalows (which you can rent) as well as a block of luxury hotel rooms, on a promontory overlooking Montego Bay. The estate drops down a steep hill so, no matter where you are, there are fabulous views of the sea.

We stayed in cottage number 10, owned by a millionaire friend of Ralph Lauren's, and the place where Jackie Kennedy spent part of her honeymoon (yes, I have now bathed in the same tub as America's chicest former First Lady). It's a sunken 1950s-style number with pale-green terrazzo tiles.

Fay, the housekeeper, served us lunch on the terrace and regaled me with stories of the night Joan Collins (with her current husband, Percy, and her impressive wardrobe) came to stay. The gardens of all the cottages at Round Hill are spectacular and this one was no exception, with a 60ft lawn and a small pool tucked away on a lower terrace. Everyone from Bryan Ferry to Paul McCartney loves Round Hill because you can rent a house for privacy, but join in with stuff on the beach and in the hotel if you wish. It is expensive, but that depends on the time of year, and the size of the house. For a group of friends it could offer better value than staying in a luxury hotel because you can use your own kitchens. We ordered dinner from room service and watched videos before crashing out early.

After akee and salt fish for breakfast, I lay by the pool doing very little except for the odd feeble attempt at a stomach crunch. Later I was invited to a cocktail party up the road given by Lady Monson, who originally sold the Round Hill estate to John Pringle (he opened the resort in 1952). A dynamic 95-year-old, she was immaculately coiffed with a bunch of jasmine tied to her small walking frame and clutching a large drink. My kind of role model. Over dinner at the hotel I discovered Princess Michael had stayed here lately. Owners cannot sell their houses without the other shareholders in Round Hill agreeing. It has kept the place remarkably unspoilt for years.

And so, I reluctantly said goodbye to Jamaica and headed for the airport. In spite of the terrible roads, hopeless driving, laid-back attitude and rubbish, I adore it. My diet of yams, bananas and rum punches had piled on the pounds. But, frankly, who cares?