

TREK into HISTORY - Mountain River Cave

Filled with a large collection of Taino art, the Mountain River Cave, located in Cudjoe Hill, St Catherine, is at the end of a four mile-long river, that supports a forest of native trees. The journey to the caves is as adventurous as what you will discover at the mouth of the cave.

Mountain River Cave was first discovered in 1897 by JF Duerden and pinpointed in 1954 by JW Lee aided by Robert Cooper. After the potential of the site was realised, the Archeological Society of Jamaica (ASJ) acquired the site in 1976 and with the assistance of some private individuals and institutions, the development began. In May 1982, ASJ presented the cave as a gift to the Jamaica National Heritage Trust and the site was declared a national monument in April 2003. Not yet fully open to the public, our tour guide Monica Wright led the way. Along the way through the steep slopes of Cudjoe Hill, which was named after the brother of Jamaica's national heroine, Nanny, various trees could be seen. Cedar trees and guango trees; which are used to produce furniture; the log wood tree is used to produce the finest coal; queen tree, which produces seeds known as shakers often used as an instrument called maracas. The calabash (goad) tree was used to make bags and the leaves of the tree were also used to make bowls called calabash. Green Thatch, which was used to make brooms and a number of other herbs that are used as traditional medicines and antidotes, can also be seen on the trek to the cave. The river is a combination of three streams and is approximately two to 12 feet deep, starting from Point Hill, which is approximately four miles long from Cudjoe Hill to Spring Village. The cave represents the most outstanding Taino art site in the island. On entering the cave made of limestone and granite, you will be fascinated by the 148 pictographs, which can be seen at the entrance, the walls and on the roof. The cave is approximately 100-feet long and 30-feet deep and many well preserved pictographs which depict birds, fish, turtles and abstract patterns can be seen on the flat underside of the cave and on the walls. The exact age of the art work is not known, however, according to experts it may have been done about 1000-1450 AD. To preserve these pictographs they have to be cleaned with a toothbrush or cotton and a non-ionic solvent known as Orvus, sometimes a little alcohol as these do not leave residue on the drawings and carvings. According to Evelyn Thompson, senior conservator of the Jamaica National Heritage Trust: "It is important to remove what is absolutely necessary because of conservation for the stabilisation of the object." It is believed that the emphasis on food items suggests that the Tainos used the cave for religious rites to ensure successful hunting. Mountain River Cave is not only an opportunity for Jamaicans to learn about their heritage, but also an opportunity to appreciate our history. Contact the Jamaica National Heritage Trust at 922-1287-8 for more details.