

Riding a bobsled — breathtaking!

The bobsled has etched an indelible mark in the minds of Jamaicans, spurred by the memorable exploits of the island's historic 1988 Olympic bobsled team.

And in an effort to recapture that moment in time, Mystic Mountain Rain Forest Bobsled Jamaica has offered the only place in Jamaica where a working machine fashioned off the original design can be found. Excited bobsled patrons

When Mystic Mountain opened its doors to the public in July 2008, visitors were fascinated with the enchantment of the 99-acre park and its three tours — the Zip Line Canopy Tour, Rainforest Sky Explorer and Bobsled Jamaica. Conceptualised by managing director Mike Drakulich, the bobsled was designed for the stainless steel track on which it runs. And although it differs in many ways from the actual sport bobsled, with modern mechanics akin to that of an automobile, it captures the essence of the original, made popular at the Olympics. Bright green and gold-branded on black plastic, Drakulich's bobsled glides through the 1000metre gravity-driven run, the St Ann rain forest providing a natural backdrop for an authentic Jamaican experience. "Everything is as Jamaican as possible at Mystic Mountain, we went the extra mile and installed everything by helicopter so as not to disturb the environment," Drakulich revealed. "We designed the bobsled tour to mimic as best as possible the Jamaican bobsled team experience to give people a real feel of what bobsledding is like," he told Auto. "I'm glad we were able to achieve the braking and the gravity powered system, and my greatest satisfaction is the positive reaction from the Jamaicans who have been on the bobsleds," Drakulich added. Michelle Thame, director of Human Resources at Mystic Mountain shared that the bobsled is the most popular tour at the theme park. "The movie Cool Runnings did a lot in terms of publicity for Brand Jamaica, lots of our visitors have seen the movie so they can appreciate the culture behind the Bobsled Tour and are fascinated by the bobsled machine" she said. With 25 custom-made "cars" in the fleet, a driver can take a single bobsled or attach another car and pilot the course by pushing the steering lever forward to get both cars going. "The bobsled is an amazing machine, it gives you this energy, like you want to just let loose and drive, and the braking system is so precise that you can determine your own speed and stop or slow down whenever you want. It is breathtaking," commented Mystic Mountain employee Remone Danhai. Each bobsled is equipped with self-administered brakes, similar to a regular car's disc brake, but shaped to the track. Once applied, by pulling the steering lever back, it clamps the track and the bobsled comes to a halt. Bobsleds go up to 25 mph on a dry day, but according to the Mystic Mountain team, when the conditions are wet the speed will increase due to the rubber-covered wheels. "Additional force must be applied to the brake to stop the bobsled on a wet day. The centrifugal braking system will automatically reduce the speed to a set number, once it goes over 25mph," said Glenfield Harrison, engineering supervisor at Mystic Mountain. Safety of the track and the seat-belt-secured driver is further guaranteed, with the installation of a magnetic field comprising six electromagnets that gauge the speed of the bobsled. Movement of the bobsled is controlled by a 12mm cable, that pulls each sled to the loading area after it has completed its descent. A 75-horsepower electrical motor drives the cable, powering the bobsled's gearbox. Another safety feature is 'photo-eye' sensor that shuts down the track if it detects a problem in the movement of the sleds should a car become stationary for too long. Trip wires are also installed beneath the track as a safety mechanism; if the cable derails and falls off the track, the circuit will be broken and the entire system will shut down, protecting the bobsledder and giving the engineer a chance to repair the affected area. In contrast to Mystic Mountain's sleds, the original sport bobsled (bobsleigh) design packs fantastic speed and offers very little in safety features. This ice cruising machine is designed for a two-or four-person team, consisting a driver, optional crewmen (add weight to the bobsled) and the brakeman, seated from front to back. Equipped with two brake push bars on either side of the opened back end, the sport bobsled has a steel frame, a fibreglass hull, a moveable set of front runners, collapsible push-bars for driver and crewmen. Power for the sport-bobsled is purely manual as sledders use muscle power to push-start a race with gravity the only source of speed for the duration. There are weight regulations for bobsledding, similar to motor sports, as bobsleds weigh hundreds of pounds, which can prove a disadvantage at the start of the race, as heavier bobs are harder to push. Like a racecar they are branded by sponsors, but unlike a racecar the heavier a bobsled, the faster it goes, as the run is mostly downhill filled with curves, twists and turns to propel the machine through the ice-laden track. Its aerodynamic design allows the sport bobsled to reach speeds of 80mph, even around curves, offering even more thrills than the controlled 25mph of our replica.