

Downtown Kingston: Pulsating hub of contradictions

The heartbeat of urban Jamaica, downtown Kingston, is always throbbing, in good and bad times.

It's the meeting point of people from every nook and cranny of the country, a significant confluence of the good, the bad, the pretty and the unsightly, a metropolis of juxtaposing contradictions. The high-rise buildings framing parts of the waterfront, along with the well-manicured open spaces edging the heavily polluted sea, give the city an air of opulence from afar. Not very far away, to the west and the east, to the north, decadence stares you in the face. Kingston has aged, and the derelict buildings are crying out for the push and shove of bulldozers. Yet, amid the dereliction, there is one thing that is always oozing life. 'Bend dung' plaza Downtown Kingston's 'bend dung' plaza, the informal commercial hub of the city, never ceases to amaze. It epitomises our entrepreneurial spirit and culture of hustling. But how can anyone possibly work in such noise and confusion? Vendors out-shouting each other, trying to get your attention by screaming at you, sometimes authoritatively. Religious music and dancehall sounds compete with horns, motor engines, and the cries of hawkers and peddlers. The din and clamour of activities are pervasive, and when the sun is hot, the environment can really be oppressing, to say the least. It's Babel at best. Brown faces atop black bodies are everywhere, and in the heart of 'Homophobia', men, some sporting pressed or creamed hair, promote the hairclips, brassieres and skirts they sell by wearing them. The lines are quite blurred in this rough-and-tumble place. You wonder who's who, but you don't stop to ask. For in the roadside 'beauty salons', transformations are taking place; false hair, nails, lashes, and tattoos are being applied. The sights of the market district, the biggest in the Caribbean, are equally as amazing, if not mind-boggling. Food selling right beside detergent and other cleaning agents. The very old and the young, vending side by side, competing against one another. Mangy mongrel dogs sleep in groups under old vehicles, or simply roaming as if they own the place. Pigs with giant nipples brushing the ground trot with a purpose, searching for the next fly-infested garbage heap, which may just be beside a load of June plums or a pile of yam. Jamaican expletives explode from angry lips from time to time, despite the sacred music blaring from mobile record shops selling pirated CDs. Then you might just see a big woman approaching with peppers in one hand, and brassieres in another. Peppered bras for sale? Make way, pushcarts, bicycles, motors and feet are jostling for spaces, with tarpaulins of 'goodies' on the ground. And when you can't take it anymore, to home, or the oasis up the road, you go. In this seaside concrete jungle, St William Grant Park, smack in the middle of Parade, is a retreat where people go to escape the heat, to meet for a romantic rendezvous, to espouse their religious and political philosophies, to play games, or just to laze the day away. This refuge is never empty, for in the evenings it becomes the home for the homeless and the destitute, who appear from everywhere to lay their weary backs against piss-drenched walls, and rest their heads on concrete pillows. Downtown Kingston - it festers and it breathes; it pulls you in, and it spits you out. Hospitality Jamaica