

Negril, Jamaica: Capital Of Casual

The Amazonian Giant Centipede, the six-foot Yellow Jamaican boa, the Hutia, a small, squat rodent once popular as a food source for the Taino people -- all are indigenous to Jamaica.

But put that out of your mind right now. When you visit Jamaica, chances are you won't cross paths with any of these lovelies. Instead, you'll be surrounded by an azure sea, lush tropical scenery and some of the nicest people you can ever hope to meet. Jamaica, the third largest island in the Caribbean, was once a Spanish possession known as Santiago. In 1655, it came under the rule of England and was named Jamaica. The country achieved full independence from the U.K. in 1962, thus it's commemorating its 50th anniversary this year. Celebrating this same half-century anniversary? That British secret agent we all know and love. His author, Ian Fleming, lived in Jamaica and repeatedly used the island as a setting for his James Bond novels, including *Live and Let Die*, *Dr. No* and *For Your Eyes Only*. Two Bond films were made in Jamaica, and *The Man with the Golden Gun*, his 1965 novel, is centered in the resort town of Negril. Located in Westmoreland, the westernmost parish in Jamaica, Negril is small and intimate, with a population of just over 3,000. It's thought that the name comes from the black eels found along the coast. Spaniards called the area Negro Eels, shortened to Negrillo and finally to Negril. The coastline, commonly referred to as Seven Mile Beach, is actually just slightly more than four miles in length -- but who's counting? Here are found the island's finest beaches, rated among the top 10 in the world, and ideal for diving and snorkeling along its protected reef areas. Nightlife in Negril is full of possibilities -- lots of restaurants, live reggae shows on the beach and of course, visiting both Jimmy Buffett's Margaritaville and Rick's Café (with its fearless cliff divers) is a must. Capital of Casual

The town is quaint, with no traffic lights, only one round-about. The road leading into the center is two narrow, winding lanes crowded with traffic. As my taxi zipped along, confidently maneuvering the treacherous blind curves, the driver noticed my white knuckles clutching the back of his seat. In that wonderful Jamaican lilt, he reassured me, "No problem, Mon, we're used to it!" The road was lined with goats, dogs, chickens, brightly-colored dwellings and small stores with vibrant, rainbow-hued clothing -- dresses, pareos, t-shirts, skirts -- all flapping in the breeze. I had to get a photo so I hopped out of the cab and began snapping. A young gal peered out from between the garments, asking if she could help me. Saying I just wanted a picture, she said, "Ok, but if you want, I can braid your hair." Sensing that my beach-blown coif needed help, yet unable to channel a Bo Derek moment, I declined. Smiling warmly, she wished me a nice day and I was on my way. No pressure, no hard-sell. I was quickly getting the sense that Negril, known as "The Capital of Casual," lives up to its name. Rasta Man

I visited a small, rural village tucked high in the mountains of St. Ann Parish where reggae singer Bob Marley, one of Jamaica's most esteemed citizens, was born in 1945 and later laid to rest. The community is owned and operated by the singer's family and my tour started with a walk through the house he lived in as a boy. My Rastafarian guide shared with our group many little-known insights from Marley's childhood and career. We visited Mt. Zion Rock which he used as a meditation spot and finally we toured the mausoleum, his final resting place. On the Rocks

While in Negril I visited its newest luxury resort, Moon Dance Cliffs, perched on a rocky precipice leading to the sea. Its sister property, Moon Dance Villas, is just a few miles up the coast on a private stretch of this famed beach. The Cliffs' setting, the very northwest corner of Jamaica, offers picturesque views with a benefit: hurricanes typically hit the east coast, not this region of the country. Located about an hour and a half from the Montego Bay airport, the resort offers a pick-up service as well as a yummy rum punch the moment you arrive. Resort concierge Richard Gordon gave me a tour of the sprawling property and then handed me a cell phone. "Press this button," he instructed, "and 24 hours a day you can reach your personal butler. He'll take care of everything." The Cliffs' staff is friendly, attentive -- and a lot of fun. Each morning my waiters Hassan, Omite and Johnny Walker made what could have been a merely routine breakfast a really cool happening. They spun all my reggae requests and engaged in good conversation with charming Jamaican patois. The "let's get together and feel alright" ambience was infectious. Love the Life you Live

Moon Dance Cliffs is famous for the myriad destination weddings it hosts. All decisions can be coordinated with their wedding planner beforehand so when the couple arrives, they're free to simply kick back and enjoy the resort with family and friends. A wedding was planned while I was there and it was amazing to observe Tim and Lisa, the wedding couple, frolicking in the pool, dining with their guests, catching some rays, all without the slightest frisson of stress. Everything had been handled in advance. I had the chance to experience the couple's Rehearsal Dinner which the resort took great delight in planning. It was a traditional meal with tasty offerings from each of Jamaica's parishes; for example from St. Elizabeth Parish there was fried bammy (cassava) and from Portland Parish, curried goat. I saw many guests lined up at the buffet for this particular delight. Me? I made a bee-line for the dessert table. Live the Life you Love

I awoke the next day to the solitude of a sweet Jamaican morning, a warm breeze rustling tall palms, the shimmer of a glass-like Caribbean Sea. A significant factor for this cherished calm is that Negril is still fairly underdeveloped. However, this may not last for long as a new highway from Montego Bay and an improved infrastructure will ultimately bring many more tourists, hotels and tour operators. That's a most compelling reason to visit Negril, Jamaica now. Source:

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