

Usain's bolthole: life in the slow lane in Trelawny, Jamaica

Laidback Trelawny Parish in Jamaica is the birthplace of many Olympic sprinters, including Usain Bolt, the fastest man on earth, as well as Veronica Campbell-Brown and Ben Johnson



Fastest on two legs ... Usain Bolt in Jamaica. Click on the magnifying glass icon to see a map of the island showing the area where the sprinter grew up. Photograph: Karen Fuchs / Rex Features

In 2008, just weeks after Usain Bolt's colossal Olympic victories, I took a diversion off Jamaica's well trodden tourist trail and headed into the lush green wilds of Trelawny Parish in the north of the island. In contrast to the hedonistic party spots of Negril and Montego Bay, Trelawny is perhaps like the Oxfordshire of Jamaica: sedate, serene and beautiful.

In the village of Sherwood Content, where Bolt grew up, I watched residents prepare for his homecoming – a family-friendly festival at his primary school – and later a euphoric dancehall rave, where he took to the stage, dancing and whipping up a fervour. If Bolt wins the 100m final again on Sunday, the village will party once more, before slipping back into its usual languid pace.

When I returned recently, on a sort of Bolt pilgrimage, Sherwood Content was little changed. The hilly roads, greenery and streams were as tranquil as ever; the rainforest, Cockpit Country, which it borders, was alive with tropical birds, butterflies and flowers. When I asked residents where Bolt grew up, their faces lit up, and they happily pointed me down a sandy track busy with chickens and cows.

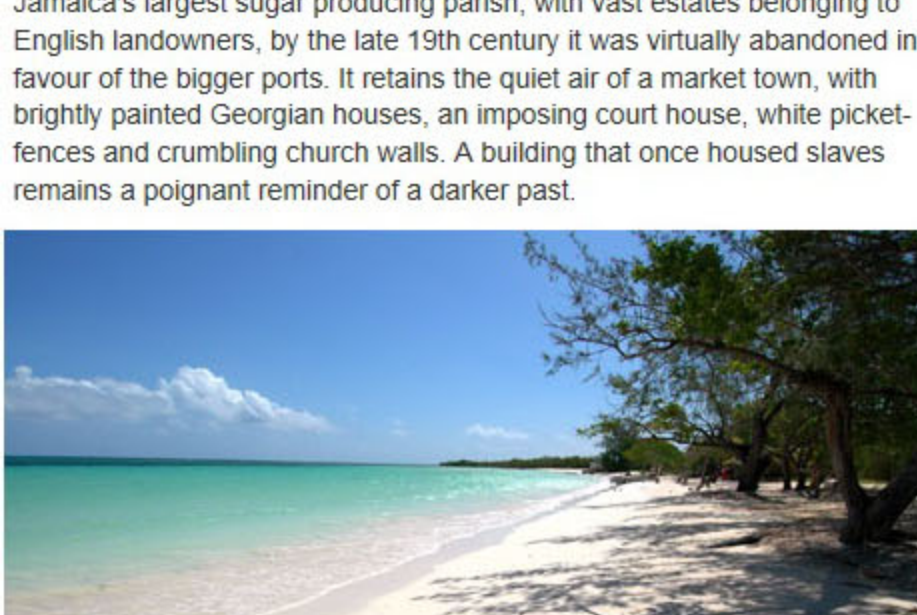
These are country folk, a world away from the bling and officiousness of Jamaica's city-dwellers. Reserved and composed, they do things more slowly. The relaxed, happy demeanour Bolt shows on the track has its roots here.

In the village, I photographed myself outside the home of his parents, Wellesley and Jennifer Bolt, which is painted pink and green. They have said that they will never leave the village. I kicked a ball on the muddy pitch where the young Bolt played, before he traded his football boots for running spikes, and moved to Kingston, the capital, aged 16 to begin training. He visits when he can, and his car is often seen speeding off to Montego Bay.

Ending my pilgrimage, I turned, and drove the 12 miles back to Falmouth, the parish's picturesque coastal capital, on a spectacular route over grassy plains where cows and donkeys graze, through thick forest under a canopy of foliage, and beside the wide pale emerald Martha Brae river.

Falmouth is a good base to explore the interior and the pristine beaches of the north coast, and shows an alternative side of Jamaica, away from the nightclubs and gift shops selling Bob Marley fridge magnets.

A former slave port, Falmouth feels different, more colonial. Once Jamaica's largest sugar producing parish, with vast estates belonging to English landowners, by the late 19th century it was virtually abandoned in favour of the bigger ports. It retains the quiet air of a market town, with brightly painted Georgian houses, an imposing court house, white picket-fences and crumbling church walls. A building that once housed slaves remains a poignant reminder of a darker past.



Burwood public beach, near Falmouth. Photograph: Heidi Zech/Getty Images/Flickr Open

Trelawny's attractions include Burwood public beach, five miles from Falmouth, a bay with perfect white sand and turquoise water, where freshly caught fish are barbecued, seasoned with salt and a squeeze of lemon and eaten in the shade of a ramshackle fisherman's hut.

In Jamaica public beaches are rarely used by tourists, who tend to be sucked into paying private resorts to use their facilities. But the sands at public beaches are clean and usually more serene. Cruise ships do visit Trelawny, but deposit their passengers further along the shore at Discovery Bay, avoiding the splendour of Burwood.

Cockpit Country is another attraction, inhabited by owls, bats, frogs, snakes and parrots. Huge trees, rocky limestone cliffs and deep caves create a near impenetrable terrain, which the Maroons (slaves who escaped to freedom) used in the 1700s to launch guerrilla raids on English forts, forcing a peace treaty in 1739 following a slave rebellion. Hiking tours of Windsor Great Cave – a 3,000m underground roost with colonies of 13 species of bat – are an exhilarating activity in this wild landscape.

Cockpit Country Adventure Tours in Albert Town, a friendly hillside village on the southern edge of the forest, arranges trips. I also took an excursion to Martha Brae Rafting Village, and idled away a morning messing about on the river on a raft, powered by a gondolier. For a couple of hours, I lay back on the bamboo raft spotting hummingbirds and lulled by lapping waters.

Without entering the resorts, it is difficult to find fine dining in Trelawny, but I found the food at "cook shops" – small unmarked stalls – more interesting: barbecued, fried or jerk chicken, curried goat, sliced pork, all sold with rice and peas and a refreshing coleslaw-style salad. A few weeks on this diet might leave you out of shape to run the 100 metres but it is seriously tasty. To find the cook shops you just keep your eyes peeled or ask a local resident, as the stores come and go.

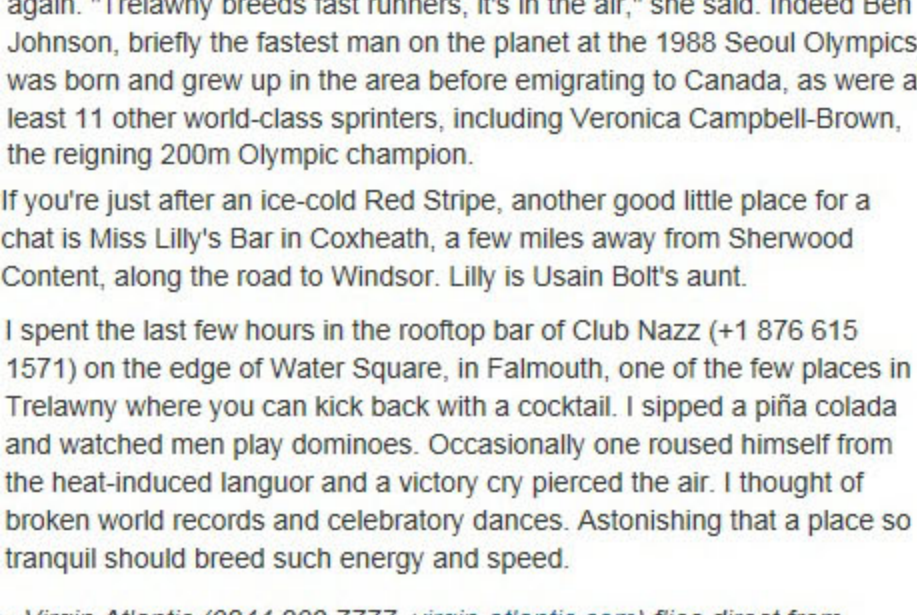
I discovered an excellent peaceful place, Gloria's (+1 876 353 1301), on the outskirts of Falmouth, doing a great red snapper in a spicy sauce with peppers. Gloria told me that she was confident Bolt would bring home gold again. "Trelawny breeds fast runners, it's in the air," she said. Indeed Ben Johnson, briefly the fastest man on the planet at the 1988 Seoul Olympics, was born and grew up in the area before emigrating to Canada, as were at least 11 other world-class sprinters, including Veronica Campbell-Brown, the reigning 200m Olympic champion.

If you're just after an ice-cold Red Stripe, another good little place for a chat is Miss Lilly's Bar in Coxheath, a few miles away from Sherwood Content, along the road to Windsor. Lilly is Usain Bolt's aunt.

I spent the last few hours in the rooftop bar of Club Nazz (+1 876 615 1571) on the edge of Water Square, in Falmouth, one of the few places in Trelawny where you can kick back with a cocktail. I sipped a piña colada and watched men play dominoes. Occasionally one roused himself from the heat-induced languor and a victory cry pierced the air. I thought of broken world records and celebratory dances. Astonishing that a place so tranquil should breed such energy and speed.

• *Virgin Atlantic (0844 209 7777, virgin-atlantic.com) flies direct from Gatwick to Montego Bay from around £650 return. Falmouth Resort (22 Newton Street, +1 876 954 3391) is central, with friendly staff, en suite rooms, some with a view. Car hire from Island Car Rentals (islandcarrentals.com) around \$37 per day. Martha Brae Rafting (+1 876 952 0889, jamaicarrafting.com). Further information: visitjamaica.com*

Happy Birthday! Celebrating Jamaica's 50th at home and in the UK



Jake's hotel's Farm to Table Dinner, in Pedro Plains near Treasure Beach

Independence day, Birmingham

Celebrating half a century of Jamaican independence (Monday, 6 August), this weekend the Custard Factory in Digbeth (custardfactory.co.uk, Saturday and Sunday, 10am-7pm) hosts Jamaica 50th in the Factory, a festival with food stalls (including a Jamaican breakfast on Sunday), kids' activities, and roots, reggae, jazz and blues from the local Jamaican community. Also check out Jamaica 50 exhibition at Birmingham Museum (bmag.org.uk, until 30 September) and the Jamaica in the Square festival in Victoria Square (until 6 August).

• visitbirmingham.com

Farm dinner, Near Treasure Beach

The terms organic and locally-sourced are so overused these days they've almost lost their meaning, but the Farm to Table Dinner, held in Pedro Plains, Jamaica's "breadbasket", couldn't be truer to these principles. Held on the closest Saturday of the month to full moon, dinner kicks off with a mango bellini cocktail, standing under the very tree the fruit was picked from, overlooking the Caribbean Sea at sunset. Diners then make their way down a dirt track to a lantern-lit table on Dule McLean's farm, the only 100% organic farm in the area, where they are served dishes using locally grown and caught ingredients, such as smoked marlin salad with avocado, mangoes and coconut, and penne with lime basil. The dinner is run by Jake's hotel, one of Jamaica's most forward-looking, community-based hotels.

• jakeshotel.com/events. Dinner \$95pp, inc transfers from Jake's; the next one is 24 November, after the hurricane season

Walking The Blue Mountains

The Blue Mountains are famous for their delicious coffee, and the Strawberry Hill hotel, in the rainforest high above Kingston, now offers three guided walks, including a Coffee Estate Tour through historic coffee plantations.

• Half-day walks from \$65-\$160. islandoutpost.com/strawberry_hill