

THE INDEPENDENT

5th March 2016

Jessica Barrett

CARIBBEAN

Way to stay happy in the sun

From bohemian Negril to rural Treasure Beach, Jessica Barrett gets a flavour of Jamaica's celebrated coastline

It's hard not to walk around in Jamaica with your phone glued to your hand because you want to document every little thing you see – every view from the cliffs, every coconut stall on the side of the road, every multi-coloured shack serving cold beer in the sun. I had to remind myself that my own memories would last far longer than the “likes” on Instagram. And so, I put the phone down.

From the moment we arrived in Montego Bay, it became clear we wouldn't ever be stuck for help, advice or a chat. We were offered cigarettes, help with our luggage, even a lift from people waiting outside the airport. Our own ride soon appeared and, as we loaded our bags into the back of the car it started to rain; we panicked. “It's just a little tropical refreshment,” explained the driver. “You get five minutes of refreshment per day. It's nothing to worry about!” She was right: the weather was perfect for the rest of the week.

I'd been to Jamaica 21 years previously and, even though I was only 11, the holiday had stayed with me. I had thought about it a lot: the memories of sitting in the cool, steep, Blue Mountains, with reggae echoing off the hills from neighbouring villages, were still vivid.

This time I wanted to experience the island's justly celebrated coastline, starting in the bohemian, laid-back west coast resort of Negril. Here, the craggy, limestone coastline is plugged with dozens of stylish boutique hotels, including the popular Rockhouse above Pristine Cove. It's understated but cool, its stone and thatch villas opening on to private terraces with stairs leading down into the sea. The restaurant menus read like something you'd find at a trendy pop-up: green juices for breakfast, kale, ginger and jerk chicken

for dinner. It's the perfect spot to spend a few days doing absolutely nothing, other than perhaps a morning yoga class.

We did just that, but while it was tempting to sit by the pool in the sun drinking drunken coconuts (filled with rum – a lot of rum), there was plenty to explore nearby. We started at Zimbali's Mountain Cooking studio at the Zimbali Retreat, a hotel and kitchen garden on Canaan mountain that offers cookery demonstrations twice daily. A 30-minute drive, up a road so pot-holed we nearly fell into one entirely, delivered us to a glorified treehouse surrounded by tropical trees and flowers. It was calm (perhaps something to do with the cloud of weed smoke hovering above the communal area), quiet and cool.

Owner Mark – a dreadlocked American expatriate – had been a stressed-out stockbroker living in Chicago before deciding to move to Jamaica in search of a more spiritually enriching life. He has certainly found it at Zimbali. We were led into his kitchen-garden. It was abundant with lychee trees and pineapple plants, basil and plantains – and a group of retired pals from Minnesota who joined us on the tour, while smoking an enormous spliff. Then we watched the chefs cook innovative Jamaican cuisine: plantain and salsa, coconut and mango sushi and fish steamed in banana leaves with freshly made bread. We devoured it in the glorious treetop restaurant with icy bottles of the island's favourite beer, Red Stripe.

From there, we ventured south (you can pretty much get anywhere around the island in two-to-three hours, if the road is smooth). Where Negril

is a swanky hippy retreat, the south coast is rural and raw. We were staying at Jake's hotel on Treasure Beach, opened by artist Sally Henzell in the

early Eighties after she bought what was essentially a shack on a deserted beach. The sun was setting as we arrived and we were ushered into sun-loungers with a rum punch to hand. Jake's is more basic than the boutique hotels on the Negril cliffs, but you're by no means slumming it. Each room is different, decorated with hand-picked local art. Henzell based the architecture loosely on Antoni Gaudi's work in Barcelona and the interiors are more Moroccan souk than Caribbean retreat, bright colours tying everything together perfectly in the sun.

The hotel's restaurant – Jack Sprat – is signposted at the corner of almost every major road around the island, a marker of its renown – happily, it lives up to its reputation. The food is simple: jerk chicken, rice and peas and celebrations (a type of dumpling), but was so good that I had to go back the next night for more. As we ate under strings of fairy lights, a big screen showed the film *The Harder They Come* (written by Sally's husband Perry Henzell) under the stars.

It's hard to visit Jamaica and avoid rum, but the Appleton Rum Estate makes an interesting diversion. Regardless of the fact that we arrived at

10.30am, we were greeted with the strongest rum punch of our whole trip, and then another before we learned about the history of the estate's sugarcane plantation and the production process. A dozen different bottles of rum were laid out in front of us to sample. Luckily, we had a driver who wound the windows down to sober us up for our next stop: YS Falls, the perfect tonic. The waterfalls lie near the unfortunately named town of Maggotty; after a short trailer ride through the forest, we arrived at a picturesque series of cascades and rocky pools, into which the very brave were jumping from one level to the next.

Another local recommendation took us to the MVP Smokehouse in Montego Bay. In any other circumstances, we'd have driven past this corrugated shack next to a dual carriageway without a second glance. However, it served some of the best food of our trip: jerk chicken salad, peppered shrimp and tofu wraps, all fresh, delicious and healthy.

Our last stop was Rose Hall, a Georgian mansion in Montego Bay located on a former slave plantation that is now a museum, and is said to be haunted by a previous occupant, Annie Palmer, who was rumoured to have killed three husbands there during the 18th century. At night, actors tell her story via an amateurish haunted-house set-up amid polished mahogany floors, delicately painted silk wallpaper, chande-

liers and antiques.

A phrase I'd heard a lot during our stay – “way up, stay up” – chimed in my mind. It's the name of a Beenie Man song, and means you're happy and you'll stay happy. It's a phrase that was definitely true of my week in Jamaica.

TRAVEL ESSENTIALS

Getting there

The writer flew with Thomson Airways (0844 871 0878; thomson.co.uk), which offers return flights from Gatwick to Montego Bay from £605. Montego Bay is also served by Virgin Atlantic (0844 209 7777; virginatlantic.com).

Staying there

Rockhouse (rockhouse.com/escape) has doubles from US\$109 (£72), room only. Jake's (jakeshotel.com) has doubles from £65 per night for a one-bedroom garden view villa; beds at Jack Sprat, Shack start at £17, room only.

More information

visitjamaica.com



Treasured beach: (clockwise from main) the white sands of Negril; YS Falls; Jack Sprat restaurant at Jake's hotel