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Why Port Antonio is the new Jamaican hot spot



Boston Bay is a tremendous swimming and surfing spot on the eastern end of Jamaica. JIM BYERS PHOTO

PORT ANTONIO, JAMAICA - Errol Flynn is said to have called this part of Jamaica the prettiest woman he ever met. She's gone through a bit of a mid-life crisis, but she's turning back into a beautiful, engaging destination, with one of the Caribbean's most striking coastlines and a wide array of attractions.

Over the course of a three-day visit earlier this year I slid down a gurgling, shallow river on a wooden raft surrounded by lush vegetation, met up with a guy who runs a wild, ramshackle restaurant that clings to the side of a hill and stayed in a sumptuous hotel owned by Jamaican-Canadian Michael Lee-Chin, a property that Beyonce and Jay-Z enjoyed not long ago.

Here's one visitor's suggestions for the best things to see and do and top places to stay in the Port Antonio area.

DOING

Musgrave Market is the commercial heart of the town of Port Antonio, a whirling mass of people snapping up endless numbers of sneakers, hot peppers, red beans and beautiful nutmeg. One of the locals was selling jerk spices for a dollar; a bag that likely would cost \$10 at Loblaws or Sobeys if you could find it.

The Blue Lagoon is a pretty spot where you can have a local pilot take you around by boat. It's also great for diving and snorkelling. There's a huge tree in one corner of the bay that kids use for leaping into the water, often from dizzying heights.

Rafting down Jamaica's Martha Brae River a couple years ago was fun, but fairly short. My Rio Grande rafting trip was probably two hours long; three if you include a delicious barbeque lunch on the shore. The African tulip trees were in riotous orange bloom when I was there, and the rock formations around a passage called Lovers Lane were quite something.

Beach lovers will adore Boston Bay, which is protected by headlands and has warm, toasty water and change rooms. Colin Bell, who runs the concessions on site, told me he doesn't want the Port Antonio region to stay a secret. "The government is building a new road but we need more employment here. I mean, our nature and environment? There's nothing like it. If there's ever been a garden of Eden, this is it." There's also a stunning beach at Frenchman's Cove Provincial Park that's wedged between two high cliffs. You'll find change rooms, shady nooks and a rope swing over a freshwater stream.

DINING

Dickie's Best Kept Secret is a truly wondrous place, where it looks like the owner found shipwreck wood and whatever pieces of timber he could find and hammered it together. The floors are uneven and almost as sloped as a pitcher's mound, and the shelves are filled with everything from pictures of Barack Obama to bobbleheads of former baseball stars. But it's got undeniable charm, plus lovely views of the water. They weren't open for dining when I stopped in but I hear the food is good.

Geejam is a combination hotel, restaurant and recording studio on a hill overlooking the water, a place used in the past by the likes of Drake, Alicia Keys and (for sleeping) Tom Cruise and Katie Holmes. I stopped in for dinner at the Bush Bar and had creamy shrimp on a deck overlooking a fading sunset and twinkling lights along the coast.

Jerked food is said to have originated around Boston Bay, where escaped slaves or folks hoping to avoid become one would hide in the woods and slowly cook their food without creating visible smoke. You'll find a half-dozen or more stands barbecuing pork or chicken over local wood. The stuff I had was much spicier than what I've had at touristy spots such as Scotchie's.

SLEEPING

Trident is a posh, all-white, South Beach-feeling place perched on the shores of the Caribbean. There's a lovely, protected lagoon for swimming and snorkelling and gleaming villas with all the latest amenities. Best of all was my plunge pool and the view out to the ocean, with hardly a building in sight. The food is excellent, too. I had a wonderful drink called "My Name Is Bond," with rum, lime and amaretto.

Goblin Hill features condo-like villas on a hill, with expansive lawns and gorgeous views down to a beautiful bay. My unit had a full kitchen and comfortable if not luxurious rooms. The outdoorsy lobby area has a lovely place to eat, and there's also a nice pool and a nature trail through the woods. Fabulous for families or folks who want to cook their own meals and save money.

WORTH NOTING

I didn't get to stay at **Goldeneye**, but it's a marvellous property founded by author Ian Fleming, who wrote the James Bond books. There's a nice beach but I was struck by the units on the lagoon, where you can swim in a fresh-water river and paddle along in a kayak. You can even swim to the spa for your afternoon massage. Likewise, I didn't get to stay at **Great Huts** but it's a truly astonishing property alongside Boston Bay, an eco-tourism spot that features everything from "normal" rooms to tree-house like units in a jungle setting that are filled with African and Jewish art. I missed a chance to hear the legendary Jolly Boys sing and play, but I did meet up with a couple of band members in Port Antonio. Check listings or ask your hotel when they're playing.

DEAL OF THE WEEK **Tourism Yukon, Air North and the Yukon Astronomical Society** have launched a new program where you can see the northern lights from an airplane 36,000 feet in the air. There are a variety of packages for flights, slated to take place Nov. 24 or 25, 2017.