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Portland Parish and Port Antonio: Jamaica's Magnificent Northeast



Boston Bay is one of the prettiest areas of Jamaica, with gorgeous water and two great beaches.

Almost everyone knows Montego Bay. Ditto for Ocho Rios and Negril.

But for many visitors, the eastern end of Jamaica is almost unknown. Which is a shame, because it's one of the most captivating and beguiling areas of this beautiful country; a region of quiet, almost empty beaches, excellent food and outstanding, independent hotels.

Here's one frequent visitor's suggestions on great things to see and do in Portland Parish and northeast Jamaica.

BEAUTIFUL BEACHES

Boston Bay is a true gem; a quiet spot a few minutes east of Port Antonio along a beautiful coastline. There are massive headlands on both sides, giving the bay plenty of protection from big waves. It's a great spot for swimming, and they also have change rooms. When I was last there, the fellow who runs the concessions told me the government is building a new road that will help open the region up to more visitors. Another outstanding stretch of sand can be found at Frenchman's Cove Provincial Park, a small sliver that's been gently placed between a pair of high cliffs. A small, freshwater stream can be found behind the beach, complete with a rope swing. Idyllic doesn't begin to describe this beach.



The Trident Hotel is a sleek and stylish spot in northeast Jamaica.

HOTELS AND RESORTS

Goblin Hill has a series of understated units that sit high on a bluff overlooking a beautiful bay. There's a truly relaxed, Jamaican feel to the place, as well as a pool, a pretty nature trail and vast, green lawns that are a perfect place for kids to burn off some energy. Condo-style units have full kitchens.

The Trident Hotel is a posh spot on the water owned by Jamaican-Canadian Michael Lee Chin that feels more Miami than Montego Bay; with gleaming, modern touches all around and a sleek, sexy feel. There's a protected lagoon for swimming and snorkelling. My room had a private plunge pool just a few feet from the ocean. Excellent food and superb craft cocktails can be found at the restaurant, Mike's Supper Club. There's also a spa, and a remarkable castle next door.

Perched on a plateau alongside Boston Bay, Great Huts is a truly wondrous spot that features treehouse-like units that make you feel like you're Robinson Crusoe, as well as beautiful rooms in a standard building style. Expect to find plenty of gorgeous African and Jewish art amid a jungle-like setting that you have to see to believe.



A rafting trip down the Rio Grande River is a marvellous way to enjoy Jamaica's natural charms.
DELICIOUS DINING

Geejam serves a restaurant, hotel and recording studio all in one; a striking spot on a hill overlooking the water. Past visitors include Tom Cruise, Alicia Keys and Drake. Try dinner at the Bush Bar, where you can enjoy wonderful, fresh cuisine (I had a creamy shrimp dish that was marvellous) overlooking the coast.

Jerked food is said to have had its origins around Boston Bay, where escaped slaves or folks hoping to avoid capture by slave traders would hide in the woods and cook their food slowly, without any visible smoke that might give away their location. Boston Bay is home to several authentic jerk stands that serve sizzling chicken or pork served over local food. The hot sauce here packs a wallop, so go easy your first time.

Back near Port Antonio, Dickie's Best Kept Secret is a delightfully ramshackle restaurant that spills down a small hill towards the blue Caribbean sea. The interior is filled with all sorts of bits and pieces of furniture and crazy knick-knacks, including bobblehead baseball dolls and Barack Obama photos.



Musgrave Market is a great place to buy local spices in Port Antonio, Jamaica.

OTHER THINGS TO DO

A rafting trip down the Rio Grande river on a flat, wooden raft lets you enjoy beautiful valley scenery and a few minor rapids that local guides navigate with ease. You'll probably stop for a fine lunch on a nice stretch of beach before you resume your trip down the river. Be sure to tip your guide; these guys work awfully hard.

Check out Musgrave Market in Port Antonio for everything from fruits and veggies to wildly-coloured running shoes and local nutmeg. A bag of jerk spices will cost a fraction of what you'd pay in Canada. Friday and Saturday mornings are busiest.