



About Jamaica



The Island's History

Jamaica is the third largest English speaking island in the Caribbean (after Cuba and Puerto Rico), south of Miami. 144 miles long and 49 miles wide, it was first called Xaymaca meaning "Land of Wood and Water" by the Arawaks who populated the island about 1,000 years after the death of Christ-- having paddled, perhaps from South America, in their man made canoes.

Four centuries later, in 1494, Christopher Columbus landed in what is now Discovery Bay, and declared it "the fairest land his eyes had ever seen" claiming it for the King and Queen of Spain. Within 50 years the Spanish had all but extinguished four centuries of Arawak presence on the island. Finding no gold or precious metal after years of searching, they let the island fester in poverty for over 161 years.

The British easily conquered the Spanish in Kingston Harbor in 1655. By the 18th century, the British had transformed the island into the largest sugar producing colony in the world. Sugar barons and plantation great houses contributed the genteel underpinnings that still remain in present day life: croquet, tea parties, cricket and polo; while slavery and the slave trade formed the roots of Jamaica's true cultural life. This spirit remains alive and well in Jamaican reggae, art and cuisine which is laid-back on its surface yet understatedly complex -- aptly reflecting a people whose motto is "Out of Many, One People."

Jamaica shed its colonial past in 1962 when it was given official recognition as an independent nation. Today, our democratic government is fashioned after our British past, with a parliamentary system led by a Prime Minister and cabinet of fellow ministers. There are currently two major political parties: the ruling People's National Party (PNP) and the Jamaican Labor Party (JLP). The major contributors to the economy are bauxite mining, agriculture and tourism.

Map of Jamaica



[Click map for expanded view](#)

Before You Go

● **Resort Areas**

The most popular tourist areas are Montego Bay, Ocho Rios and Negril which are located on the island's Northern coastline. Montego Bay is home to Donald Sangster International Airport (SIA), the entry point for most visitors to the island. Coyaba is 10 minutes from SIA, Ocho Rios & Negril are approximately two hours away.

- **Passport & Visas**

As of January 2007, all U.S. citizens traveling to Jamaica will be required to carry a passport to facilitate immigration procedures. Canadian citizens are not required to carry a passport but must have a "Statement of Live Birth" certificate along with a government issued photo ID such as Voters' Registration or Drivers' License. British visitors need passports with validation of up to six months remaining after date of journey. German visitors need a valid passport. Visitors from other countries not mentioned here may contact the nearest Jamaica Tourist Board or consulate for entry requirements.

- **Language**

The official language of Jamaica is English.

- **Population**

Approximately 2.4 million--with approximately half living in Kingston, the capital, three hours drive from Montego Bay.

- **Currency**

The Jamaican dollar fluctuates based on market conditions. At present, the exchange rate is approximately J\$65 to US\$1. Currency can be exchanged at the airport, exchange bureaus, commercial banks or hotels. In resort areas, most prices are quoted in US dollars and US currency is readily accepted.

- **Temperature / Weather**

Year round our temperature varies between a balmy 27C - 32C (80.6F - 89.6F). The coolest months are December - March and the rainiest (mostly afternoon showers) are May to June and October to December. The hurricane season officially begins in June and runs through October, but in the last 40-odd years the island has received only four direct hits. Jamaica is linked to the U.S. National Hurricane Center in Miami, Florida which is equipped with sophisticated detection and tracking equipment, so early advice and warnings are the norm.

- **Getting There**

Guests staying at Coyaba or any of the island's main resort areas (Montego Bay, Ocho Rios, Negril) should fly into Montego Bay's Sangster International Airport. For more information on airline carriers from your area, please visit the Jamaica Tourist Board website at: www.visitjamaica.com