

On your marks, get set, Jamaica: Bobsleigh, bars and Bolt on a classic Caribbean island

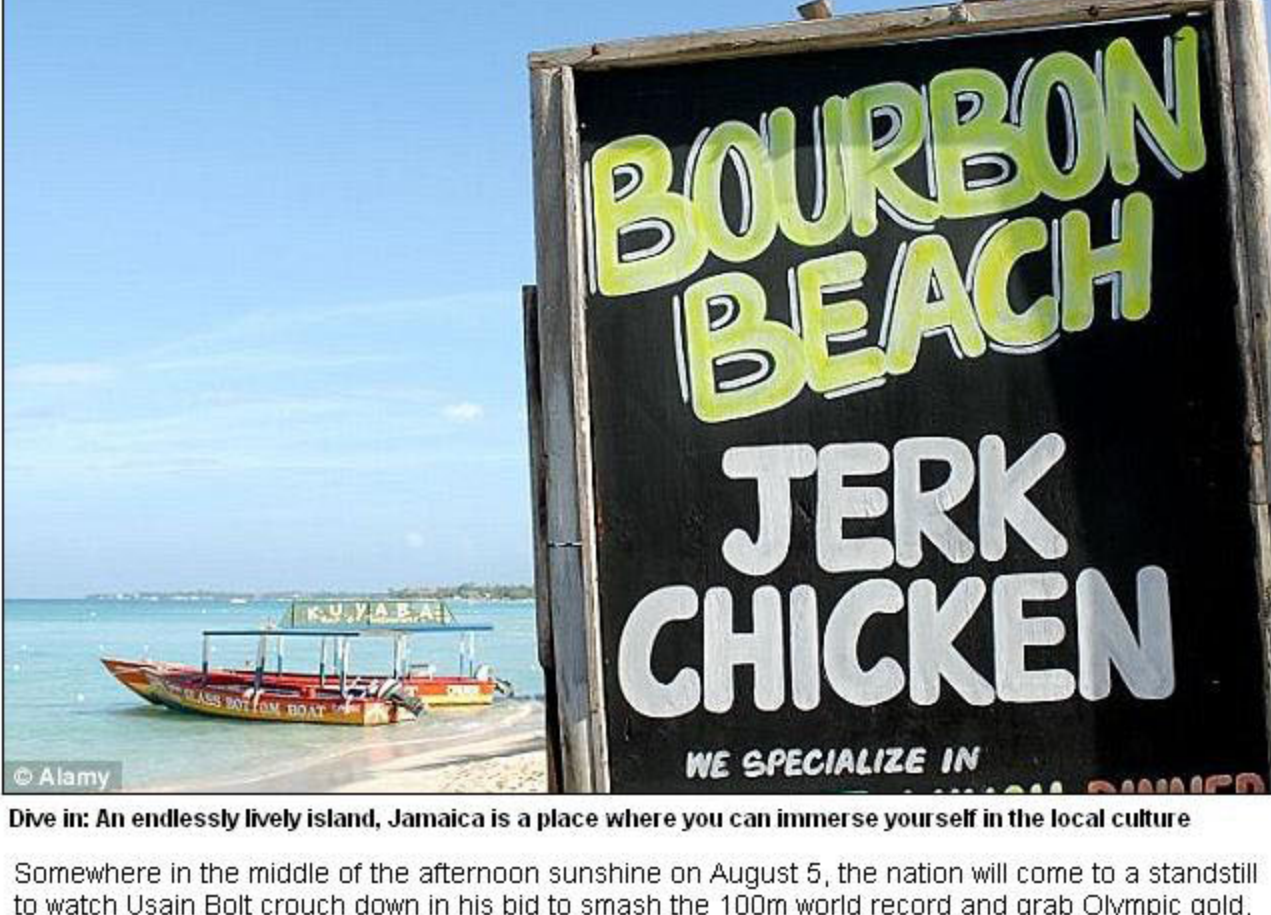
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What a year this is for Jamaica.

With the island having already caught the world's attention with Kevin Macdonald's excellent big-screen documentary on Bob Marley, the countdown is well underway to what could be the wildest 48-hour party the Caribbean has ever witnessed.



Dive in: An endlessly lively island, Jamaica is a place where you can immerse yourself in the local culture

Somewhere in the middle of the afternoon sunshine on August 5, the nation will come to a standstill to watch Usain Bolt crouch down in his bid to smash the 100m world record and grab Olympic gold, 4,700 miles away under the floodlit London sky.

Should Bolt blaze to glory – as is expected – it will trigger epic celebrations for the Jamaicans, who are primed to mark the 50th anniversary of independence the very next day. Amid all the anticipation of world records, this is excellent timing.

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- [A postcard from Port Royal, Jamaica's pirate hang-out](#)

Sport, music and partying are three prolific past-times that are readily enjoyed in Jamaica. Yet, there is so much more to this island paradise.

This is a country that leaves you feeling energised and inspired at almost every turn, but one that also rewards those willing to resist the sun lounger, even if only for a short while.

As the flight carrying my wife and I dips down towards Montego Bay, what strikes is just how green the land is. The lush, densely-packed hills burst out like giant heads of broccoli, offering immediate evidence that there is far more on offer here than just sun, sea and sand.

Montego Bay provides everything a sun-worshipper needs. But first, we head south through the mango and ackee trees, and past the tempting jerk chicken shacks that line the hilltop villages.



Sandy surprise: The island is also blessed with many miles of glorious seafloor

We eventually hit St Elizabeth – one of 14 'parishes' in Jamaica.

Stopping at Jake's at Treasure Beach, we are glad to put up our feet at a charming coastal retreat that has won recognition for its charitable reinvestment – a generosity that has helped revitalise the surrounding community. It also does a thumping rum punch at Dougie's Bar. Sitting here, watching the waves as they crash in from the ocean, is a fine way to finish any day.

After shrugging off the jetlag, it is time to explore. We take the short drive to Black River – which owes its name to the peat that darkens these undulating waters, which stretch for 33 miles.

The key advice here is to hop on a boat, and keep your fingers away from the waiting crocodiles.

They grow up to 14ft, with teeth that could crunch through metal. Chunks of raw chicken are snapped up and a boatful of onlookers holds on tight.

'Don't worry, they prefer posing for photos,' our guide chuckles. I'm not convinced.

Upstream, mangrove roots drop from great heights into the water, like giant dreadlocks. The country's name – *Xaymaca* under Spanish colonial rule, before the British took control – translates as 'land of wood and water'. It is easy to see why. Egret birds bounce from lily pad to lily pad, seemingly ignorant of the crocs that cruise nearby, eyeing their next meal.

With the day heating up, we decide that it is time for a dip. But not here. Not with those wide-jawed beasts lurking with intent. Instead, we head to YS Falls – a stunning seven-tier waterfall.



Fins are looking up: Jamaica is a great place to swim with dolphins

The brave can take a 700ft zipline all the way down – but I pass up this 'opportunity'. There is only one brave volunteer on our visit who takes the plunge, and I can only recount his verdict – 'amazing', mainly for the rolling view of the tumbling waters.

We opt to cool off in one of the adjacent natural pools, immersed in refreshing spring waters and surrounded by red ginger lilies. This beats any hotel.

We would have happily spent the rest of the afternoon there if we did not have a plan to watch the sun go down at Rick's Café, in the south of Negril.

This is a great place for those looking for more of a splash – if not a splash of their own making.

Here, you can grab a cold drink and settle down to watch the cliff divers who earn pocket money by making outrageous leaps into the water from swinging trees or rickety old platforms.

If you have enough spirit inside you – and I don't mean rum – you can even attempt a dive of your own. Again, we leave that to the brave...

Returning to the north coast, it is time to meet the locals. We are introduced to Ed and Ramadal, who are going to give us a tour around their home at Sandy Bay.

Both have four legs, and let out a snort as they bear the brunt of two British tourists making their debuts on horseback.

'Steady boy', our guide Tony tells Ramadal, as he threatens to carry me away at a gallop.

After a nervous start, we soon relax and enjoy the tranquil trot through hills lined with avocado and almond trees. Lime leaves scent the soothing breeze as the sun beats down on our backs.



Making a splash: Jamaica is also a place to try a horseback ride through water (left) - as Mike (right) discovers

Don't worry if, like us, you are a first-timer. These horses are ably cared for by accomplished staff and don't even flinch when a sand buggy (another big activity staged in the same place) roars past.

Our tour is a perfect introduction for those who are new in the saddle, and we even end with a ride through the sea. The animals – neck deep in the water – flex their leg muscles to fetch us back to dry land.

Next we head east from our base at Montego Bay to Ocho Rios and the home of Dolphin Cove, where we tick off a long-held dream by swimming with those magical mammals.

Ritchie and Misty – real names and real flippers – are perfect hosts, welcoming us with a kiss, before showing off their dance moves and 16ft leaps out of the water. All in tandem of course.

Greeting their visitors, the dolphins offer up their dorsal fins so that we can hitch a ride around their pool. And soon they are propelling us through the water and up into the air – by driving us forward with their noses pressed against the soles of our feet.

What a feeling. You don't need to be a kid to enjoy this.

Saying farewell, we take the mile-long canopy chairlift towards the Mystic Mountain adventure park. The views over Ocho Rios and back to Falmouth, visible at an ever-increasing height during this peaceful 15-minute ascent, are breath-taking.

And once you are there, you can race back down through the trees on a bobsleigh.

Yes, a bobsleigh. Remember the film *Cool Runnings* – that (true) tale of the adventures of the Jamaican bobsleigh team at the Winter Olympics? The winter sport remains a big deal on these tropical shores, and Jamaica is attempting to raise the profile even further with this rollercoaster ride.



Track royalty: Prince Harry was in Jamaica to meet Usain Bolt earlier this year

Cocooned in a small metal pod, I find myself thrown into corners – and feeling an impressive amount of G-Force. It is the fastest I will go on an island that defines the term 'laid-back.'

It is a slight relief to slow down at the idyllic Half Moon resort – where Prince Harry rested on his recent visit (after being pictured with Bolt as both threw the athlete's iconic 'To Di World' pose).

Feeling less energetic, we grab a cool beer and sit down in front of the fading sunset. It is an unforgettable end to an unforgettable holiday. This really is the year to make that trip to Jamaica.

Travel Facts

Virgin Atlantic (0844 2092 770; www.virginatlantic.com) flies three times a week from London Gatwick to Montego Bay, from £701 per person.

Double rooms at Jakes (001-876-965-3000; www.jakeshotel.com) cost from US\$234 (£150) per night.

A seven-night all-inclusive break at Sandals Royal Caribbean Resort & Private Island (0800 597 0002; www.sandals.co.uk) costs from £1,549 per person. Price is valid for travel between 20 August and 10 November 2012, and includes return flights and resort transfers.

Double rooms at Half Moon (001876 953 2211; www.halfmoon.rockresorts.com) start at £173 a night.

For more on Jamaica, see www.visitjamaica.com.