


THE SUNDAY TIMES
TRAVEL MAGAZINE

Caribbean

Winter's a wonderland in the West Indies. Where to go? Trust us, we know...

The experts

Which island is for me? And **where should I stay?** When it comes to the crunch, these are the two basic — but baffling — questions **every Caribbean traveller** wants answered. Enter our experts — twelve **writers who know the islands like they were born there** (one of them actually was). Together, they've notched up several lifetimes in the Caribbean, **critiquing hotels and combing shores**. Here they are (with their most precious insider tips). Which island will they match **you** to?



Rob Ryan

Tip: Pop into Fond Doux bar, St Lucia, to grill owner (and party animal) Lyton Lamontagne for local party tips

Why Jamaica?



Expert Rob Ryan says:

Jamaica is the Caribbean amplified — larger, louder and lushier than most of the islands, with its vivid horizons of white beaches, the Blue Mountains, and all seemingly rendered in super-saturated Kodachrome. If you're a committed lounge-lizard, you'll miss out by not venturing beyond your (possibly sterile) all-inclusive. But Noël Coward and Ian Fleming didn't love the island because they got to wear wristbands for premium drinks — so like them, stay in a place that gives a proper taste of the place. The bar-strips of Negril and Ocho Rios are hustly, as are tourist spots, such as Dunn's River Falls (go very early). Instead, go river-rafting, horseback-riding, or birding and biking in the mountains — or head for Port Antonio and Treasure Beach and chill with rum and ragga at a local beach bar. Think twice about taking the kids — there are all-inclusives that cater for them, but this is really an island for grown-ups.

Jakes, Treasure Beach

Who'll love it: Laid-back bohos.
Because: There's no place quite like this. It has grown organically from a few quirkily hand-decorated cottages to quite a resort (ocean-facing rooms and the nearby villas are the best). It may not be the slickest of hotels, but it's the way it feeds into the community (and vice versa) that makes it feel like a proper immersion into the real Jamaica. There's a charming little spa and the chance to go cycling and boating and,

just as importantly, a first-rate funky little bar. Dougie's.

Travel's tip: The beaches and the pool on the property are not its strongest points and swimming in the sea can be dangerous. Try the beach outside Jack Sprat's shack next door.

Book it: Doubles from £66, room only (00 1876 965 3000, jakeshotel.com).

Rockhouse, Negril

Who'll love it: Younger couples seeking affordable relaxation in style.

Because: Rockhouse's elevated cliff-top location means that it's a no-no for families and the fact it hasn't got a beach (you snorkel/dive from the rock jetties or swim in the pool) rules out the beach-bunny brigade. Rockhouse makes a great play of its healthy dining, daily yoga and eco-cred, but the atmosphere isn't as precious as all that. The 34 rooms are pretty outings in wood, stone and thatch but, while comfortable, are not super-deluxe — think upgraded beach shacks. It's the setting and the resort's relaxed feel that are the attractions here.

Travel's tip: Even the best villas are spartan. Opt for a cheaper room — you'll get the same brilliant sunsets and you can blow your dosh on the spa or bar.

Book it: Doubles from £64, room only (00 1876 618 1533, rockhousehotel.com)

Jamaica Inn, Ocho Rios

Who'll love it: Nostalgia lovers.

Because: Jamaica Inn feels like it belongs to another era (pink gins, Black Tie for dinner, Noël Coward at the piano...). There are no TVs, radios or clocks in the rooms (although there

is free wi-fi on the property). Add a wonderful white beach, ocean views from every room, the best service on the island and the lack of a raucous bar scene, and you have a perfect resort for those seeking peace and quiet. In high season it attracts an older, more sedate crowd, but recently more families have been in evidence (although under-10s are not allowed). At its heart, it will always be circa 1950 at Jamaica Inn.

Travel's tip: Black Tie can still be seen at dinner, but the dress code these days is collared shirts and long trousers in the evenings (no T-shirts or shorts).

Book it: Carbtours (020 77510660, carbtours.co.uk) has seven nights' B&B from £1,545pp, including flights.

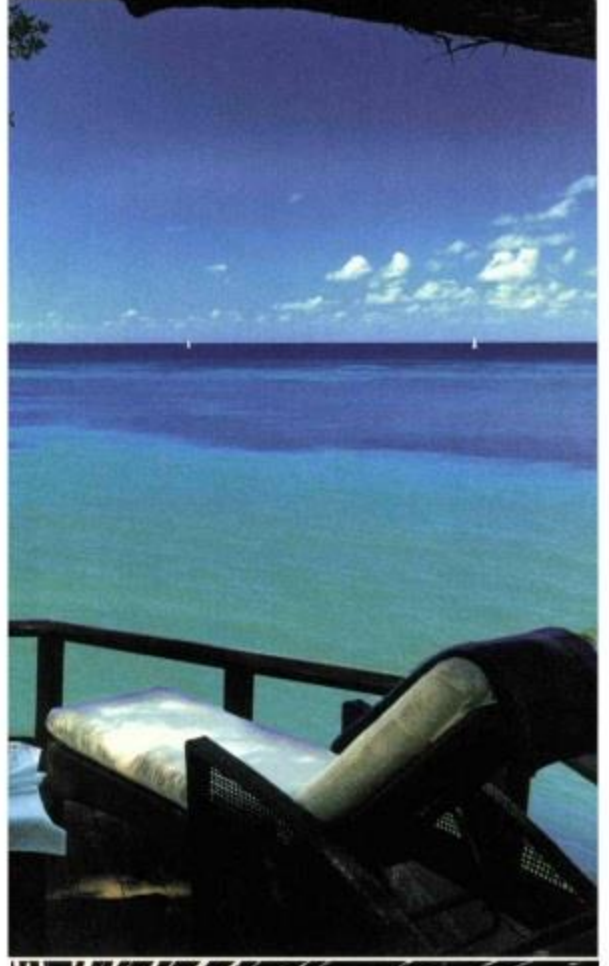
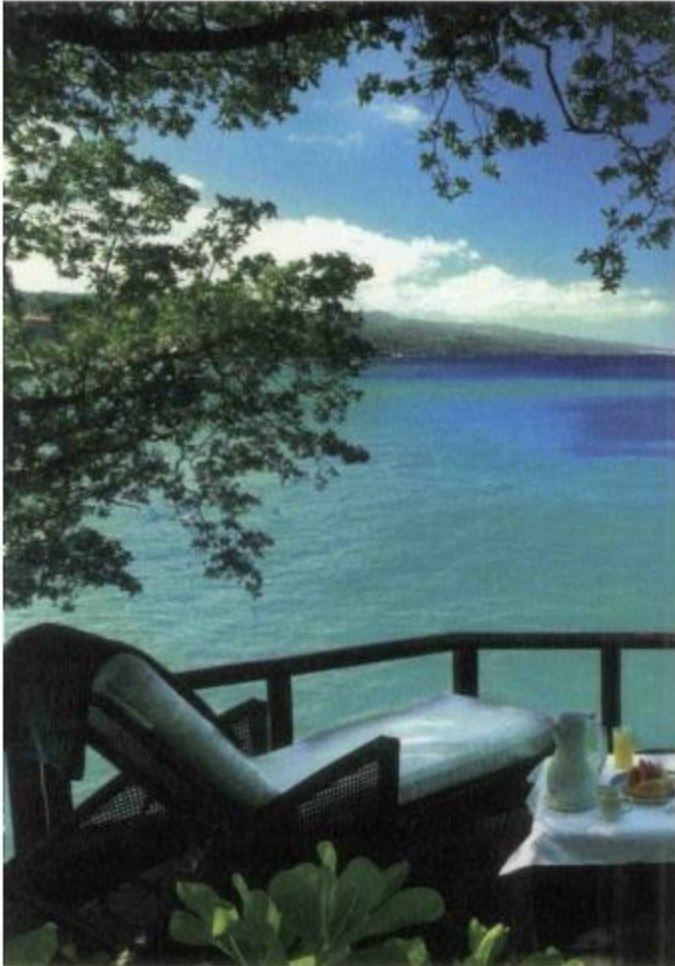
Geejam, Port Antonio

Who'll love it: Anyone with (pop) stars in their eyes.

Because: Geejam is an accidental hotel. Set up by music moguls, it's a recording-studio-with-rooms. It's tiny (just seven rooms, including a three-bed villa), yet is geared up like a larger resort, with first-rate guides who, used to pop stars' whims (Rihanna and Amy Winehouse have recorded here), are at the top of their game. The hi-tech cabanas don't have pools (although the villa does) and there's only one restaurant, but guests can use the facilities of sister-property Trident at nearby Port Antonio.

Travel's tip: The hotel has a small beach, but better is the idyllic Frenchman's Cove (the entry fee is waived for Geejam guests).

Book it: Scott Dunn (020 8682 5020, scottdunn.com) has seven nights from £2,073pp, B&B, including flights. ▶



TotalGuide | Caribbean

Basket work: bright ideas for sale by the sea; clockwise from below, interior at Geejam; bridge-crossing at Rockhouse; waiting for business at Negril; face masks for sale at a craft market; the view from a suite at Jamaica Inn; vibrant decor at Jakes

