



Travel

ANY MOOD WILL DO
If you're into adventure, you can negotiate a rain forest track in a dune buggy (above); or just lie back and contemplate the ocean (above, right); or hit a beach shack for some dancing (right)

FLOAT AWAY
Find yourself a small beach hideaway like this, and you'll get all the peace and quiet you need

RUM & REGGAE REEFS

Whatever you're looking for; whatever your mood, there'll be something to make you happy in Jamaica

by Rishad Saam Mehta



I WAS TRYING hard to understand what Lyla was saying. But I couldn't and it made me feel sad because she was trying so earnestly to have a conversation with me. Finally she decided I wasn't quite as intelligent as she was, so she rubbed her nose against my cheek, swam around me and dived beneath the surface of the water.

Lyla was a dolphin and here in Dolphin's Cove in Ocho Rios, Jamaica, I couldn't help but laugh at her antics. Swimming with her and her fellow dolphins, I realised there is truth in those documentaries that insist dolphins come second to humans in matters of intelligence. I felt as if they were trying to talk to me. It's just that the dialects differed.

This was my last day in Jamaica and I'd had a very hectic week. In fact I was now

wondering why Jamaica is considered a chill out zone. I had rushed from activity to activity with hardly a moment to savour the sea on a sun kissed beach, but then that is part of the charm of this island in the sun. You kick your feet up or let your hair down.

The choice is yours! Yah mon! Welcome to Jamaica.

PLANTER'S PUNCH

The minute I stepped out of Sangster International Airport at Montego Bay, I realised Bob Marley was alive and well. At least three of the vans parked there to collect guests were playing his songs.

The airport itself shares its name with another Jamaican – one that can also become your passage to dreamy flight – Sang-



DIVING AMAZES ME EVERY TIME I DO IT. THERE IS A WHOLE DIFFERENT WORLD BENEATH THE SURFACE OF THE WATER



ster's Original Jamaica Rum Cream. A cream liqueur much like Baileys, it is more potent and has more intense flavours. Mark, my van driver around Jamaica, told me it was invented by Dr Ian Sangster, a Scotsman who arrived in Jamaica in 1967 with a contract to lecture at the University of the West Indies, and quickly fell in love with the beauty and mystique of the island.

So reggae and rum – that was pretty much my welcome to Jamaica.

The very evening I landed I decided to jettison jetlag with some fresh sea breeze and went down to Montego Bay's Hip Strip. Here, in the rest-o-bars that line the Caribbean Sea, the party is always on. As soon as the sun goes down, the neon lights come on, Jamaican rum starts to flow and exotic cocktails are shaken and stirred. The best, Planter's Punch, a popular drink throughout the Caribbean, is a delicious

HAVE A GOOD TIME MON
(Clockwise from below, left): Swimming with dolphins; diving at Negril; partying at the pubs in Montego Bay's Hip Strip

combination of rum, orange, lime and pineapple juice, with just a trace of cinnamon and nutmeg.

TAKING THE PLUNGE

Jamaicans themselves are an extremely friendly people. Almost everyone I passed on the street while legging the Hip Strip smiled and said "Yah mon! You doin' good?" or something in that vein.

Jamaica is a medley of cultures, which is why you'll see Asians, Africans and Europeans on the roads, and not all of them are tourists. It is this blending of many peoples that gives Jamaica its motto – Out of Many, One.

From Montego Bay I drove to Negril on the west coast. Negril is where Jamaica goes into a slow gear. The properties are small but drop dead gorgeous, and very exclusive. The Caves, where I stayed, was set into a sea wall above a series of actual caves, and has the air of a pirate hide out.

Negril has some of the best reefs and clearest waters to be found around the isle so it was here that I put on my scuba mask, strapped on a metal lung and took the plunge. Diving amazes me every time I do it. There is a whole new world below the surface of the water and this time I swam with trumpet fish, giant sting rays and inquisitive shrimps.

TREASURE ISLAND

The less touristy and more bucolic Jamaica revealed itself on my drive from Negril to Treasure Beach in the south and it is here that I found what I consider the loveliest corner of Jamaica – Jake's Resort at Treasure Beach.

An arty and rustic collection of cottages scattered across a craggy beach front, this place is what I will always associate Jamaica with. The owner of the property, I was told, is an artist and so every cottage is funky done up. There are airy rear terraces that look out to the deep blue sea, open air showers and colonial style beds complete with four posters and mosquito nets. The swimming pool is actually a big hole in a huge rock and is replenished by filtered sea water.

A little walk down the beach is the fishermen's village where you can see boats coming back after a day out fishing.

If I was to compare my time in Jamaica to a yoga class, then Jake's Place was the *shavasana* – the *asana* in which you just lie flat and loose, feeling your muscles melt off your bones.

ADRENALINE THERAPY

Two days later I was wrestling with the steering wheel of a dune buggy. I'd had enough of peace and quiet and wanted to get some adrenaline going. The ideal therapy for that was available at Chukka Caribbean Adventures back in Montego Bay (Jamaica is very small and distances



easily covered).

Chukka is where you go for intensive adventure like horse trekking, ATV riding or dune buggy trips through a rain forest. Of course you are led by a guide, in my case, a Jamaican lass called Kaylie. Since the engine is mounted almost over – and drives – the rear wheels, you have to lift off the throttle pedal to corner; otherwise there is a massive understeer. Long suspension travel means that the buggy stays stable through big and deep ditches or ruts on the track. Plus there is hardly any protection like fenders or flaps, which means that within five minutes I was covered in slush and mud as we splashed through puddles and roared across streams. The best moments were on the corners where the rain had turned the track into the consistency of porridge. The front wheels felt almost disconnected from the track if I didn't lift off and all the while they threw mud at me. The rear wheels had the bite, but the slimy nature of the ground made them shimmy like the castanet-playing lead singer in a reggae band.

Finally, splashing around a lagoon with Lyla brought an end to my five days in Jamaica. It may be but a speck on the map of the world, but it offers experiences that will take your breath away. There is a wide choice of accommodation from all-inclusive resorts to little hideaways. You can scuba dive, go for a trek, swim with dolphins, pet a shark or just lie back on a beach and take in the sun.

Yah mon, go to Jamaica.

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YOUR PLAN

- While Jamaica offers a visa on arrival, getting there will depend on whether you have a US or a UK visa. You can get to Jamaica from both these countries and they require valid visas even for transit. Air Jamaica has daily flights from New York's JFK airport to Montego Bay and Kingston. Book online at www.airjamaica.com
- British Airways and Virgin Atlantic have flights to cities in Jamaica from London.
- The country's currency is Jamaican Dollars (JMD) but US dollars are widely accepted and sometimes even preferred.
- For more information on Jamaica go to www.visitjamaica.com and to find out more about little hidden resorts like the Caves and Jake's, go to Island Outpost at www.islandoutpost.com

