

LAT / LONG: 18.0690° N, 76.7129° W

ROOTS WOMAN

This page: Ocho Rios,
on the north coast.
Right: the author
Alexia Arthurs
in Kingston

IN
search
OF
21st-century
KINGSTON

For many years, the world’s view of Jamaica has centered on beaches, Usain Bolt and Bob Marley. But the Caribbean island’s cultural heart goes much deeper. *How to Love a Jamaican* author ALEXIA ARTHURS returns to her childhood home to meet the locals putting their country’s thriving artistic scene on the map



Photography:
Rose Marie Cromwell

DESTINATION
JAMAICA IN



When I travelled to Kingston, one of my personal goals was to find and eat an apple. There are different kinds of Jamaican apples, but I love the ones with deep red skin and white flesh. I was born and raised in Mandeville but my family moved to New York when I was 12.

While many of the foods from back home are easily found in Caribbean communities, I'd never seen a Jamaican apple in Brooklyn, so I hadn't tasted one since I was a child.

Staying away from Jamaica wasn't my intention – it was due to my family's immigration status. It's why for 14 years I travelled to Jamaica only through my imagination, through my writing. This summer I published *How to Love a Jamaican*, my debut book of short stories about the anxieties of Jamaicans who live in Jamaica and in the USA.

Outside of the National Gallery of Jamaica on Kingston Harbour, only a few hours after I've landed, I find a fruit vendor selling guineps, plums, and the red apples I had been hoping to find. Sometimes it seems that everything in my childhood tasted sweeter, or maybe this is the nature of memories, but the fruit tastes good. It reminds me of a time my siblings and I picked apples by hand in the next-door neighbour's yard. I have the feeling that the trip is starting on a positive foot.

I speak with senior curator O'Neil Lawrence about what it means to be a Jamaican writer who lives primarily outside of the country. He has the perspective that since more Jamaicans live outside of the island than on it, the diasporic experience is inherent to who we are as a people. At the gallery, I take a photograph of a quote from 1893 that was originally published in a letter to local newspaper, *The Gleaner*. "I never knew how beautiful the world could be until I saw Jamaica. If ever a country looked as if it were waiting to make any man rich who could undertake the



cultivation of it, that country is Jamaica. I was never so surprised in my life, sir, never."

That quote reminds me of why I write about Jamaica. There are the more obvious reasons, such as cultural pride and needing to process my Jamaican-American identity, but I also have a desire to get the story right – to interrogate what people believe to be true about Jamaica. So much of what is known about Jamaica is tied to tourism, but Jamaica is more than a beautiful place.

And that's why I was thrilled about the opportunity to travel to the capital to meet people working in food, music, art and literature. I wasn't very familiar with Kingston – my memories of the capital from my childhood are rides to and from the airport – and I was looking forward to experiencing a deeper understanding. For many travellers, seeing Jamaica only means staying in Ocho Rios or Montego Bay, but Kingston is one of the most energetic places on the island. There are significant cultural places to visit, such as the Bob Marley Museum and the National Gallery.

As a child, I thought of Kingston as the place my parents visited to do important adult things, and now, as an adult myself, the drive from the airport with views of the Caribbean Sea feels familiar in the way that a body remembers. It had been warmer in New York, but here the sun feels brighter. We stop for coconut water. The man selling the coconuts teases my taxi driver. Hearing Jamaicans speak – the lilt and malleability of the language, I feel that I am home.

Christina Wellington, the manager of the laid-back Stones Throw bar, explains the key distinction of Jamaican hospitality to me – it's not a polite "How are you?" It's more familiar, more Yardie, than that. The bar draws a mixed crowd – tourists who come for Afro-centric beats on Tuesdays and art students in Kingston who want reasonably priced beer. Once, Idris Elba came for a post-filming afterparty. ☺

MANY RIVERS TO CROSS

From top: rising reggae star Koffee; Phillip Lobban, a Kingston-based DJ at Ocho Rios; view from the Blue Mountains

DESTINATION JAMAICA IN

Wellington laughs, recalling how someone called to ask if it was true that Elba was there because, if he was, they were coming over.

The next day, I drive to the Blue Mountains – 45 minutes from my hotel in Kingston. It's where coffee farms and waterfalls are to be found. I have always wanted to go. When I was a child, someone told me that it was the only place on the island where it gets cold enough to snow. Now, I know that isn't true, but it was still exciting to see all of that sky and rolling green.

Up there, I meet Robyn Fox, founder of EITS Café, a fusion restaurant at the side of the road whose name stands for 'Europe In The Summer'. It's so elevated, I feel as if I am in a treehouse. It's part of 17 Mile Post, her father's creation, which includes Mount Edge Guest House and Food Basket farm, which provides produce for the café. Fox chats with me as I eat barrel chicken – a similar, though slower, cooking process to jerk chicken. The food at EITS is a fusion of Jamaican and European flavours – another dish I loved was the tomato bruschetta served on 'bammmy



bread', a traditional Jamaican flatbread made from cassava. The food at EITS feels Jamaican and international at the same time. With an elegant, easy way, Fox says she always knew that she wanted to join her father in the mountains: "I love our culture," she explains, tears in her eyes. "We're an island that's so diverse and people are now appreciating it more. Before, people used to see Jamaica as sand, sun, sea. But we have beautiful forests and rivers, and the culture is not just reggae music. There is dancehall, street dances, all of that energy. I love the option to be

able to go Kingston every day, which I do. It's not too far, but in the mountains it's even more magical."

By chance, sitting in the café is artist Deborah Anzinger, one of the board directors of art initiative NLS (New Local Space), which supports visual artists through residencies, an exhibition programme, studio space, collaboration and community engagement in Kingston. Anzinger greets me in a fabulous grey-print bodysuit, with her small daughter by her side, and invites me to her table, where she is having lunch with artists Troy Dell, Leasho Johnson, and Andrew Jackson.

I ask them how their artwork and their national identity intersect. Johnson – a sculptor and a painter whose dynamic, sometimes controversial, work informs and is informed by Jamaican culture and politics – explains how, growing up in the 1990s, he absorbed American, British, and Asian culture in books, television and music, and initially found those foreign experiences to be aspirational. ☺

TAKE IT EASY

From top: Christina Wellington, outside her bar Stones Throw on Mannings Hill Road in Kingston; view from Skyline Drive lookout; Justine Henzell, filmmaker and co-founder of the Calabash literary festival





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“But after a while I started to critically engage my own culture because there was a kind of wholesale divorce, especially at the art school I was attending,” he says. “People didn’t know anything about [the folklore of] Anansi, or [the poet] Miss Lou. I am now able to critically engage in my culture. It’s become part of my language.”

I then go to Jack’s Hill overlooking the city to meet up-and-coming reggae singer Mikayla ‘Koffee’ Simpson. She first caused a sensation when she wrote *Legend*, a song about Usain Bolt, which went viral last year when Bolt shared it on social media. I expected her to look like a dolled-up pop-star. But, earnest and adorable, she looks like the 17-year-old she is, which surprises me. She sounds years older when she talks about her songwriting. “I believe in the power and influence of music,” she says. “Just as some people think that negative music has an impact on society and it causes reactions and certain movements, I think that positive music has the same power and influence. If I put out positive music, what are the limits, you know?”

She cites reggae artists Protoje and Chronixx as inspirations, and her single, *Raggamuffin*, released earlier this year, is an ode to reggae, in which she calls on the Jamaican government to do more for the youth: “What a gwaan a Jamaica/parliament tun

ISLAND RECORDS

Clockwise from top:
The beach at Ocho Rios;
Robyn Fox of EITS Café;
view from Kingston over
St Andrew parish and the
distant Blue Mountains

Photographs: Alamy. *Includes breakfast, excludes taxes and fees

di paper/fi ghetto youths them nuh cater/that’s why di country nuh safer.” Her debut EP is currently being mixed and there’s an album due next year.

The island’s literary scene is also growing and diversifying. This June, writer Sharine Taylor, also from a Jamaican background, wrote an article for lifestyle site Shondaland expressing what she believes to be a Jamaican literary renaissance, listing the authors Nicola Yoon, Yrsa Daley-Ward, Nicole Dennis-Benn, Kei Miller, Marlon James and me. I have the sense that there is a contagious energy around book appreciation, particularly for Caribbean writers. One night I have dinner and a signing with Rebel Women Lit – a feminist book club – and on another I meet with Justine Henzell, the co-founder of the Calabash literary festival, which since being established in 2001 encompasses three days of music and literature on Treasure beach.

I had been nervous about meeting Henzell because of her status in the Jamaican literary community but, as we talk at her home in Kingston, she is warm and familiar, as though we have met before. “There are writers who say to me that they have work that they wrote before Calabash and after Calabash,” Henzell tells me. Acclaimed Jamaican writers Marlon James and Ishion Hutchinson took formative workshops there as young writers, and went on to international success.

Calabash, too, has come a long way since its infancy. It started with 300 people, and today has grown to 3,000, with people already booking accommodation for 2020. The festival has also brought tourism to the area, reshaping the economy in Treasure Beach, a small fishing community. “Marlon won the Man Booker prize – that’s incredible – first time a Jamaican has ever done that,” said Henzell. “But also, the farmer gets to pay school fees for the next year from what he has sold that week. The benefits are layered.”

Calabash is international, so acclaimed writers of any background are invited – in the beginning, the fact that Caribbean writers weren’t given priority was met with some resistance. But Henzell sees the stage as aspirational: “We are going to programme the best poets and writers that we can, so that the Jamaican writers have a chance to experience that level of writing in person.” Her words seemed to echo those of all the artists I met: “If I have a mission, it is telling Jamaican stories in our own voice. Making sure that the gaze is not always from outside.” Now, even more than before, I have the same mission. ■

✉ @alexiaarthurs

How to Love a Jamaican by Alexia Arthurs is out now.

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