



Colour central Endemic to Jamaica, the doctor bird is the national bird of the island nation ISTOCK.COM

Travel log



Getting there

There are no direct flights to Jamaica from India. You can transit through the US and take a flight to one of the three international airports in Kingston, Boscobel or Montego Bay. Ocho Rios is a popular port of call for cruise ships. Check www.ncl.com for the ships that call here.



Visa

It's visa on arrival in Jamaica for Indians, but check with the travel agent for transit visas.



When to visit

The hottest months are June, July and August. It's best to plan your visit in either November or December.

BLink Tip

US dollars work at stores and restaurants, but find out if they return the balance amount in Jamaican dollars (1 Jamaican dollar is equal to ₹0.54).

Oh, so exotic!

Ocho Rios, a Jamaican resort town, has more attractions than a shore excursion can pack

“On your right is the most sought-after hotel — once you check in you will never want to leave, and people are dying to get there,” said our tour guide Latoyah as she pointed to a large cemetery in Ocho Rios, a resort town in Jamaica. The travel group that I was part of — fresh off a cruise liner — burst into laughter.

There were many such moments of laughter, thanks to Latoyah's wry sense of humour. She, however, refused to take credit for her wit. It was an Ocho Rios (meaning 'eight rivers' in Spanish) trait, she claimed. We replied with “Ya mon” — Jamaican for “yes” and followed in her footsteps.

Having hopped off the *Norwegian Pearl* for a shore excursion, the Ocho Rios break was really more about the people than the sights. This is not to take away from the fact that Ocho Rios has metamorphosed from a sleepy fishing village to the busiest cruise destination in Jamaica, dotted with swanky resorts that let you experience the island life.

My first stop, however, was the statue of Christopher Columbus, who is believed to have been stranded here for over a year after losing two ships to a deadly storm. Driving on the beautiful ocean road along St Ann's Bay for a bunch of photo-ops, I headed to the Konoko Falls. It is Ocho Rios's very own Garden of Eden — with greenery that inspires poetry. Fed by streams and rivulets, it is a treasure trove of tropical plants and avian species such as the Jamaican barn owl and the Mountain Witch dove (from the Blue Mountains) and the doc-

tor bird, the national bird of Jamaica. Loss of habitat and illegal pet trade have led to a severe decline in the number of these species. Among the trees and plants at Konoko, I was particularly intrigued by the Blue Mahoe. The only other place it grows in is Cuba, where the inner bark was once used to tie bundles of cigars.

The Konoko Falls also has a museum, where I walked through Jamaica's history with the able assistance of maps, pictures and artefacts. This was also where I gained acquaintance with the seven heroes of Jamaica: Baptist deacon and social activist Paul Bogle, magistrate and politician George William Gordon, anti-slavery leaders Nanny of the Maroons and Samuel Sharpe, Jamaica's first Prime Minister, Alexander Bustamante, statesman Norman Manley, and activist-journalist Marcus Gravey.

The next activity was a drive through Fern Gully, the road that gets its name from the 500-odd varieties of fern trees that form a canopy over the three-mile stretch to Kingston, the capital. It was no surprise that the Fern Gully was at least 10 degrees cooler than the rest of the island, which was a warm 30 degrees Celsius in December.

Last but certainly not the least, the food of Ocho Rios — as delicious and hearty in the rest of Jamaica — took up a chunk of our time. The town is the mother of 'jerk' food — barbecuing

all kinds of meat over wood fire. Jerk is so big in Ocho Rios that it has an annual festival for it. The locals get their fill of the jerk meat from Mother's, the most popular fast food chain in Jamaica. There's also KFC, which, according to Latoyah, is the Jamaican way to “keep from cooking”.

The town is also dotted with churches — perhaps every street has one. “It is said that we have the most number of churches, closely followed by bars. No matter what, the spirit is always with you,” adds Latoyah.

Among the non-alcoholic beverages available here, the famed Blue Mountain coffee is a must have. It is available at every shop. And there are gemstones and diamonds — at attractive prices. Not everyone, however, lives for the sparkle of crystallised carbon. I, for example, was happy to sit back with a Blue Mountain coffee and watch other tourists trek up the Dunn's River Falls. Some chose to go tubing down a river while a bunch of people signed up for a vertigo-inducing bobsled ride down a mountain in the rainforest.

There was too much to see and do, and a shore excursion wasn't quite the best way to pack everything in. But they say that some good things must always be left for later. So long, Ocho Rios!

Columbus is said to have been stranded here for over a year after losing two ships to a deadly storm

BINDU GOPAL RAO is a freelance writer based in Bengaluru