

June 29, 2009

Circulation: 602,857

UMV: 4,716,123



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Jammin' in the isle

Jamaica's one big summer music & food fest

It may be called low season, but each summer a celebratory mood sweeps Jamaica, leading up to the week-long Independence Day-Emanicipation Day holidays from Aug. 1-6. Resorts slash rates and there'll be fairs and feasting across the island.

Montego Bay, however, will be hosting the biggest party of them all — the 17th annual Sumfest, July 19-25.

Aside from the obvious — great beaches, warm people — here are five good reasons to head to Jamaica now.

1 Sumfest. The world's premier reggae show draws up to 15,000 fans each night, and seeing Jamaican artists performing in the land where reggae was born makes Sumfest an exhilarating experience.

This year, the much-anticipated Dancehall Night on July 23 will again feature top deejays like the "King of Dancehall" Beenie Man, and Rodney (Bounty Killer) Price, whose attempts last year to incite the crowd with typical dancehall "badmanism" earned him boos during his performance — and an arrest immediately afterward. A three-day pass is \$106. www.reggaesumfest.com.



Damian Marley performs at a previous Sumfest.

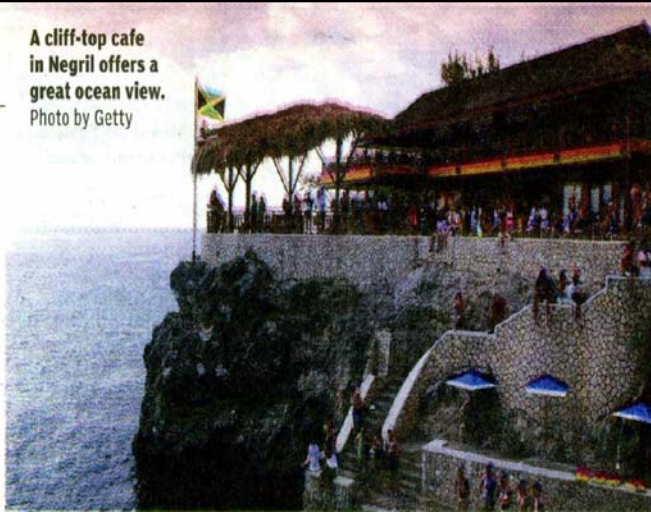
Stay: The worry-free comforts of Sandals Resorts make them ideal places to recuperate after Sumfest all-nighters. Summer rates start at \$133.50 a night per person for couples-only Sandals, and \$113.50 for family-oriented Beaches Resorts for three-day stays, meals and beverages included. www.sandals.com.

2 Little Ochie Seafood Carnival (July 12, Alligator Pond, Manchester). There'll be dancing on the beach at this authentic "cookshed-style" seafood restaurant with seating in thatch-roofed fishing boats.

Proprietor Everol (Blackie) Christian promises a nonstop party headlined by proto-reggae pioneers Byron Lee's Dragonaires, who appeared in the first James Bond thriller, "Dr. No," in 1962. Free admission; www.littleochie.com.

Stay: About a 40-minute drive away, Jake's is eclectic and offbeat. A chill-out zone for low-key celebs and creative types, this supercasual resort has tropical garden rooms and seafront Moorish fantasy cottages with rooftop day beds. Starting at \$95, Jake's is offering a fifth day free this summer. www.islandoutpost.com.

A cliff-top cafe in Negril offers a great ocean view.
Photo by Getty



3 Portland Jerk Festival (July 5, Folly Estate, Portland).

You haven't tasted real jerk until you've tried it in Jamaica, and Jamaicans agree that Portland is where you'll find the best. There'll be live music, rides and junkanoo dancers, but the real star will be the Jamaican-style barbecue, slow-cooked over pimento wood. (Admission: \$10 adults, \$3.50 children; www.visitjamaica.com.)

Stay: Once a playground for stars like Errol Flynn (whose widow still lives here), nearby Port Antonio is waking from its long slumber. Mockingbird Hill, an intimate, eco-friendly hotel, will arrange outings to the festival as well as to the natural beauties of the Blue Mountains and Frenchman's Cove. Rooms starting from \$135. www.hotelmockingbirdhill.com.

4 With Kingston getting its first contemporary high-design hotel, adventurous tourists will finally have a stylish base for exploring Jamaica's capital — the birthplace of ska, reggae and dancehall.

Nearby are the former pirate haven of Port Royal, Blue Mountain coffee plantations and the Bob Marley Museum. A

pilgrimage to the museum is a must, if just to grasp the reverence in which the late reggae star is held. Guides will show you around the 19th-century house that served as his home and recording studio (\$20). www.bobmarleyfoundation.com.

Stay: The just-opened Spanish Court Hotel has 112 rooms with Wi-Fi, cool furnishings and a terrace with a 50-foot lap pool and lounge. Starting at \$135. www.spanishcourthotel.com.

5 Negril doesn't need special events — there's more than enough to do in Jamaica's "capital of casual" — lazing on Seven Mile Beach, snorkeling or grooving to the sounds at beach bars like Alfred's.

Stay: Perched atop the cliffs near Negril Lighthouse, the Rock House certainly rocks when it comes to style — and surprisingly reasonable rates. Chic thatched cottages offer a 20-foot plunge into the clear Caribbean, and the infinity pool beats nearby Rick's as the place to revel in Negril's glorious sunsets. Starting at \$125. www.rockhousehotel.com.

For more information: go to www.visitjamaica.com. ♦