

## CONTRIBUTORS

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### THE MANY FACES OF KINGSTON

By [Barbara Ann Rosenberg](#)

The music references to Kingston, Jamaica are legendary. How about The Kingston Trio and its rich colorful repertoire of folk music? Or Harry Belafonte singing, "There was a Little Girl from Kingston Town"?

Then along came Bob Marley and that "strong third beat" music known as Reggae. Marley and his followers started a whole new musical style that spread through the island of Jamaica - - then the other Caribbean islands, the USA, much of Europe and throughout the world.

In addition to Reggae music, Marley popularized dreadlocks as a hairstyle, Rastafarianism as a religion - - and became a national icon in the process.

But there's a great deal more to Kingston than folk music and near worship of Bob Marley and his style. Nevertheless, while they are in town, most people manage to sandwich in a stop at the Bob Marley Museum located in his former home, where it's interesting to check out the lifestyle - - and, in the interim try to gain some understanding of its appeal. According to the more or less strictly enforced rules, it's not acceptable to take photos inside the compound for some reason, although there's a strong, colorful mural that keeps cameras clicking on the outside of the fence that encloses the property.

When we told our friends recently that we were planning to visit Kingston rather than Montego Bay or Ocho Rios or one of our usual north coast luxury haunts on our next trip to Jamaica, they reacted somewhat predictably. First came a puzzled "Why?" quickly followed by "Isn't it dangerous? A giant slum?"

I'll deal with those questions now, in reverse order. A giant slum? A flat "no" is the only possible response to that. Kingston is, in every way, a middle class city of nearly a million people, with street after street of individual small, neat dwellings. There are some slums, sure; and some mansions, as well. Large, contemporary homes, mostly in the low reaches of the Blue Mountains that loom in the outskirts of the city, actually not far from the main commercial center.

Dangerous? Reputations diehard...the uprisings of the '60s are nowhere in evidence. Just as the uprisings in Philadelphia have subsided, Kingston is now quiet, mannerly, and comfortable. Drug sales? Not that I saw (but then it might be easy to fool me. Sometimes I don't even recognize what's going on in Philadelphia unless a transaction is pretty obvious - - or someone points it out-- so let's put that to rest, and dwell on the "why?"

For openers, there is serious culture in Kingston: a marvelous national museum and a world-renowned dance troop; History for another...and a small, interesting, ancient Jewish community, with a lovely, well maintained unusual synagogue.

Unusual? How unusual can a synagogue be? Well, for openers, the United Congregation of Israelites with its "Shaare Shalom" synagogue affords



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worship in two modes: both Ashkenazi and Separdi...meaning there is one bema in the center of the sanctuary - - and one on the eastern wall. And, in the manner of other Caribbean congregations, the floor is covered in sand. Dr. Ernest H. DeSouza is the spiritual leader of the group and there is another, handsome, learned middle-aged gentleman by the name of Ainsley C. Henriques who also serves as a "spokesman". Mr. Henriques is reputed (and I believe it, after having met him) to know everything about the Jewish community - - both its contemporary aspects and historically, over the 500 (or so) years that Jews have been on the island. He is happy to share his knowledge and welcomes visitors.

Hotels in Kingston? Adequate - - and a little better. Not the hedonistic extravaganzas of the north coast with, on the one hand, every delicious excess of "old" money hangouts such as Round Hill and Half Moon or "fantasyland" resorts (all inclusive or not) - -that cater to people of various tastes and income levels.

Kingston is, primarily, and rightfully so, as the capital of the country, a city of commerce, of diplomacy and sophistication (and its share of poverty, of course) Its hotels are most often commercial, more suited for business meetings (where men and women often do dress in suits, no matter what the weather, even for breakfast), than for gamboling at the swimming pool (although in that climate, all the hotels have pools, of course, and they are clearly put to recreational use...usually after business hours and on weekends.

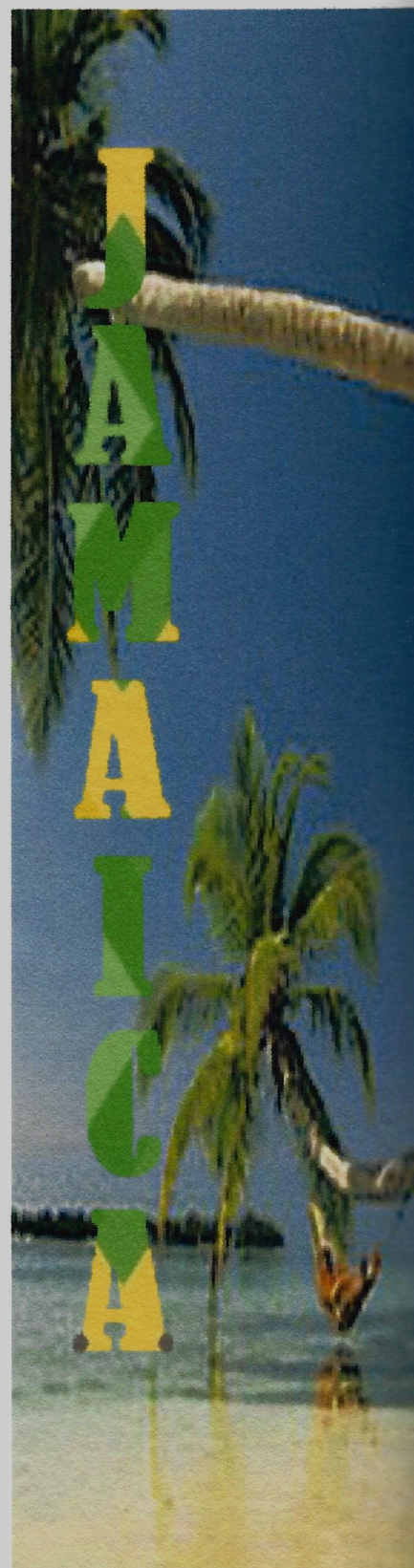
There is one startling exception to the hotel picture: It's called Strawberry Hill and it is located in the Blue Mountains, about an hour outside the city. The entire property looks as if it was an inspiration for the wildly colorful, flower embellished paintings of Gauguin. The entire property is unique in many respects, not limited to the extraordinary views over the capital city and out to the sea. The accommodations are all in luxury villas, some even with private Jacuzzis; the furniture is locally made reproductions of colonial antiques, including four-poster beds with impossibly white linens and down comforters. Yes, down comforters in a Caribbean island - -it can get chilly at night up in the hills! And the owners are busy building a luxury spa as "icing on the cake" of this luxury property. Many Kingston residents make the tortuous (but beautiful) drive to Strawberry Hill just for the Sunday brunch with its extensive buffet table including a lovely array of smoked fish, tropical fruits and several tempting desserts, including, of course, at least one made with the signature strawberries.

Getting around the city of Kingston as a tourist is not particularly easy, however, unless you enjoy the experience of renting a car and driving on the "wrong" side of the road and, particularly, navigating "roundabouts" approached from the "wrong" direction

Actually, it's far better to use local taxis as your means of transportation. The drivers usually know where they're going; they speak their own brand of Jamaican English; and you can usually negotiate a fair price that isn't too daunting. (Although if people require air-conditioned transport, it's necessary to hire the "luxury" vehicles that hang out at the airport...at much higher prices.)

As for shopping, it's not exceptional. Without the incentive of the tourist trade, there are few souvenirs such as they are that are found in Montego Bay or Ochos Rios. There are, however, some choice goods in hotel boutiques and art shops and at select shops such as the Grosvenor Gallery with some examples of so-called "intuitive" art (a term coined by Dr. David Boxer curator of the National Gallery of Jamaica when he was searching for a term to describe the work of self-taught artists). There will be some choice woodcarvings (far better and, perhaps, less expensive than at commercial art galleries) and a few paintings of the genre as well as pricey paintings by well-trained Jamaica masters.

There are also historical areas such as Spanish Town where there are beautiful, graceful buildings from the early days of the country (those that remain, that is, after the numerous earthquakes that have plagued the island over the years). And, embedded in a ramshackle wall reached through a weed infested field, there are a couple of early Jewish Hebrew inscribed headstones, simply preserved there for the present, but intended, eventually, to be used in a Jewish memorial being planned by Ainsley





Henriques for construction at some future date.

There is also a tiny fishing community known as Port Royal, reached via a long stretch of road bordered by sand (on which the airport has been built) leading to what was formerly referred to as "the wickedest city on earth". Port Royal was the refuge of buccaneers such as the infamous Captain Morgan who plied the seas around Jamaica for the riches that came from South America and Europe and destined for other ports. Port Royal, itself, sank 30 feet into the ocean in 1692 in one of the island's several major earthquakes. Its exact location has now been determined and a magnificently conceived tourist-oriented project is in the planning stage. Once realized, the project will enable people to descend 30 feet into the ocean by means of a waterproof tunnel and then to see the town as it once stood. Sort of an underwater Williamsburg cum Disneyland. There are additional plans to build a cruise ship dock and to offer shuttle service by boat to downtown Kingston; an archaeological museum and a variety of other projects that will result in the area's becoming a major tourist attraction.

The National Museum is located near the downtown Kingston waterfront at 12 Ocean Boulevard, not in the "uptown" area that is home to most of the hotels. It's wise for people to keep the taxi that brought them to the museum, and to go on from there...although if there's time it might be good to take a brief detour down the street and stroll along the colorful waterfront with its swaying palm trees and, perhaps, some local musicians strumming instruments. There's also a large local food market that's just a few blocks in the other direction. (Note: the local folk don't appreciate having their photos taken in the market)

The synagogue is perhaps a dozen or so blocks away from the Museum, on Duke Street, but it's somehow, a bit difficult to follow the relatively complicated directions to get there, so, again, a taxi comes in handy. There's a caretaker who is pleased to provide guide service and information.

There are a few sophisticated restaurants (mostly in hotels such as the Terra Nova and the Pegasus) but there is also one that doubles as an elegant jazz club. Red Bones and Blues is its quirky, misleading name. Its food is of the highest caliber prepared by a fine chef called Norma Shirley who also oversees Norma's at the Wharf house in Montego Bay and Norma's at the Beach...in Miami. As might be expected, fish is a major specialty - - and the presentations are artistic and beautiful!

Now, are there any more questions about "why Kingston?"

