

‘We take the business of social inclusion very seriously’

INTERVIEW

Jamaican Prime Minister **Portia Simpson-Miller** speaks exclusively to *Global* on reducing the national debt, catering for the most vulnerable people in society and the country’s sporting achievements

Jamaica’s first female Prime Minister was initially elected to office in 2006. After just a year Portia Simpson-Miller’s party, the People’s National Party, narrowly lost a general election, consigning her to five years in opposition. Re-elected in 2012, Simpson-Miller – a graduate of Harvard and the Institute of Management and Production in Jamaica – stood on an agenda of republicanism and gay rights.

Global: This is your second term in office. What did you learn from your first term, and what are you doing differently this time around?

Portia Simpson-Miller: People value a record of performance, but they are also excited by change. My year and a half as Prime Minister was not long enough to accomplish what was necessary in 2006-07. My administration received a mandate in 2011 for a more united, disciplined and ‘joined-up’ approach to governance, involving more communication with the people – and we have been adopting that approach during the last year and a half.

We have started to strengthen the mechanisms for reducing corruption. We have already commenced the legislative process to establish a single anti-corruption agency

While addressing the National Association of Jamaica and Supportive Organizations in July, you stated that the government has to take “some serious, hard and bold decisions which have serious consequences for all of us”. What are these decisions, and what effect do you believe they will have?

The “hard and bold” decisions involve severely reducing our level of indebtedness,

with the attendant increase in taxation, contraction in government expenditure, and improved facilitation of investment and job creation. In the early stages of our Economic Reform Programme, there is inevitably some loss of jobs, cost of living increases and slow economic growth. We have also been doing everything possible to protect the poor and the most vulnerable. But we have to keep our attention focused on the medium- and long-term goals and maintain our resolve to do what it takes to return our country to economic buoyancy and social equity.

On 31 July, you signed – on behalf of the government – the Partnership for Jamaica Agreement (PFJ), the first ever social partnership agreement in Jamaica. You emphasised that this agreement marked a critical point in the nation’s history. Can you elaborate further on this?

The signing of the Partnership for Jamaica Agreement is the beginning of a national assault on the factors which are inhibiting

growth. It was possible because leaders in major sectors of national life have come to the realisation that concerted action, with a national rather than a sectoral focus, is absolutely necessary. We know that the real work lies ahead, but it is significant that government, the private sector, the union movement and civil society organisations have come together to commit to a national programme.

Social partnerships are a means by which countries can cope with harsh economic circumstances. Success lies not only in concluding the partnership, but in maintaining it as well. How do you intend to ensure that this partnership is sustained?

The partnership will be sustained by maintaining the focus on the agreed targets, the agreed modalities of dialogue to a purpose, and the spirit which has been shown within the Partnership Council throughout the year. We also intend to engage the broader society through the Partnership Council as a body and through its members in their respective spheres of influence, knowing that understanding each other, the ability to disagree respectfully and an emphasis on agreed specific outcomes all facilitate our working on solutions – rather than complaining about problems.

Distrust in social and political institutions – largely resulting from perceptions of widespread corruption and mismanagement – is a major challenge to nation building. What changes do you believe need to be made to social and political institutions to regain public faith?

We are doing a number of things. We have started to strengthen the mechanisms for reducing corruption. We have already commenced the legislative process to establish a single anti-corruption agency and we are also working to change the mindset of the society as a whole to make corruption so abhorrent to the individual that we will resist it at all costs.

Jamaica’s public debt burden is a major challenge, with a debt-to-GDP ratio of more than 130 per cent – one of the highest debt interest burdens in the world. What is your administration doing to reduce public debt?

We have signed an agreement with the

International Monetary Fund (IMF), which supports our efforts on economic reform. We are aware that the programme is painful, but we are determined that succeeding generations must not be burdened by the unsustainable debt ratios which now cripple our economy, stifle our growth prospects and negatively impact our quality of life.

Earlier this year, the IMF agreed to a new loan package, which included a fiscal adjustment programme introducing reforms to social welfare. What measures have been put in place to protect the most vulnerable groups in society?

We take the business of social inclusion and protection for the most vulnerable in our society very seriously. Our policies and programmes for the elderly, for persons with disabilities – in health care and housing – have been carefully developed and executed to ensure that the critical provisions are in place for those who are most in need of them.

You are the first Head of Government in Jamaican history to endorse civil rights for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender citizens. Has any progress been made in achieving LGBT rights?

In 2011, I made it clear that there would be no discrimination in or by my administration in relation to persons on the basis of their sexual orientation. There is a specific law which I committed to review. There has been a great deal of public discussion on issues relating to alternative lifestyles which will add value to the parliamentary debates on the subject. Discrimination against any person is strongly denounced.

Jamaica has made significant progress towards gender equality, equity and women's empowerment. You are the first female Head of Government of Jamaica, and only the third in the Anglophone Caribbean. How do you see Jamaica moving forward in terms of gender equality, and what role do you hope to play in this process?

We have very vibrant women leaders in our country, serving in the civil society and business sectors. I have ensured that within the government and the parliament we have promoted women on merit. I believe we are making satisfactory progress. Through education, improved parenting and family life, we are working towards the full development of the potential of both genders.

In your inaugural speech, you stated that Jamaica should remove the Queen as



Portia Simpson-Miller, Jamaica's first female Prime Minister, wants the country to become a republic

Head of State. Why do you believe this is important?

As I said on the occasion of my swearing-in last year, my admiration for Her Majesty is beyond question, and I stand by that. There is no doubt that she has been a gracious and engaging Queen and a model of dedication to duty, which has been a feature of her entire reign.

In our 50th year of political independence, the government of Jamaica announced a decision to act on one of the aspects of constitutional reform which has been in serious contemplation for almost 20 years. We decided to ensure that all the elements and symbols of our governance system are fully representative of Jamaica. This is why we are beginning the process to have a Jamaican national as our ceremonial President and our official Head of State.

It is now time for Jamaica to take a stand on our system of government, after 51 years of political independence.

Your love of sports and appreciation of Jamaica's athletes is well known. With all your responsibilities of office, do you still manage to find the time to enjoy your nation's sports?

I make the time to enjoy the performances of our sportsmen and women. This is important not only for me as a person who loves sport and supports our sportspeople, or even as the Minister for Sport, but because sport is also a great motivator of our people, old and young, as well as a significant contributor to the promotion of our country internationally. Sport adds significant value to brand Jamaica and is the most powerful, unifying force in the world. ●

Old ghosts haunt modern times

Jamaican politics is dominated by the Jamaica Labour Party and Portia Simpson-Miller's People's National Party. The current government is more interested in trying to foster closer ties with China than maintaining old colonial ties with Britain

Richard Seymour

Today, the beautifully lush Caribbean island nation of Jamaica is renowned throughout the world for its astonishing capacity to produce what seems like an assembly line of some of the fastest humans in the world. Usain Bolt, Yohan Blake and Veronica Campbell-Brown are the latest in a long line of brilliant sporting figures. But perhaps an even larger number of outstanding athletes with Jamaican roots wear the national vests of a dozen or more countries to which they, or their parents, emigrated.

"But a Jamaican is always a Jamaican, no matter how many generations ago his people leave the place," says Justin Walker, a second-generation Jamaican plying his trade as a musician in London. "We love the place, but lack of opportunity forces most to leave," he explains.

Chronic underemployment, drug-related crime and a widening income gap are the major political challenges that face the government led by Prime Minister Portia Simpson-Miller. Virtually the same problems faced her predecessors in office going all the way back to independence in 1962. The roots of Jamaica's political legacy can be traced back five centuries to first the Spanish and later the British colonial eras. Thanks to sugar produced through large-scale slave labour, Jamaica had

become the most valuable colonial possession in the world during the 18th century but the system had also set, seemingly in stone, sharply etched social and economic classes.

The modern shape of Jamaican politics began to show during the late 1930s with the emergence of two leaders whose influence on the future direction of Jamaica cannot be overstated. Cousins Norman Manley – who founded the People's National Party (PNP) in 1938 – and Sir Alexander Bustamante, who formed the rival Jamaica Labour Party (JLP) in 1943, both fought for and achieved universal suffrage, but their movements were to take vastly different courses over the years. Both these parties continue to dominate the island's political landscape.

Although Norman Manley's PNP, which negotiated independence from the British, was in power until shortly before independence was gained in 1962 – and instituted a number of social reforms during this period – the honour of becoming Jamaica's first post-independence prime minister fell to Bustamante. Since then, control of the government has switched between the two parties and, although several other parties have emerged over the years, none have so far been able to mount anything like a successful challenge to the dominance of the PNP and JLP.

While the two parties began their lives as ideologically similar, they grew apart as the 1970s went on, with the JLP aligning itself with business interests both at home and abroad, and the PNP going back to its socialist roots under the premiership of Michael Manley, son of Norman. Manley was openly hostile to the capitalist system, blaming it for the poverty of the majority on the island and other ills. He initiated a raft of reforms, much loved by poorer Jamaicans, but quite alarming to the middle classes and, in particular, the US president at the time, Gerald Ford. With the USA's anti-communism hysteria rising to a fever pitch, Manley's increasingly close relationship with Fidel Castro sent alarm bells ringing. Manley further agitated the wealthy when he brought in a minimum wage structure, opened education up to everyone and set about improving health care.

The reforms failed or, depending on whom you believe, were sabotaged. Inflation soared, there were food shortages, and a terrifying level of violence led to a state of emergency, prompting high levels of unemployment and, in the end, a change of government. However, there is still a good deal of nostalgia for the Manley government, whom some Jamaicans consider the best Prime Minister they had, lamenting that



“his enemies, at home and abroad, were too powerful”.

Manley was succeeded by the JLP’s Edward Seaga, who could not have contrasted more dramatically with his predecessor. He embraced capitalism and put in the foundations for the modern financial system the country has now. Despite being one of the architects of modern Jamaica, having been active before and after independence, he is still dogged by the suspicion he was the puppet of the USA and its anti-communist, pro-capitalist agenda.

The challenges for the current PNP government, led by Prime Minister Portia Simpson-Miller, and opposition parties are as great as any faced since independence. The island was badly affected by the banking collapse of 2008. Bailouts by the government to prop up failing sectors of the economy have left a crippling debt burden, which is rendering it difficult to deal with the most pressing issues of the day.

Simpson-Miller is the second prime minister in Jamaica to serve two non-consecutive terms after a brief time in the top office. She was the first female to attain the office when she replaced P. J. Patterson in 2006, only to lose the general election the following year. Simpson-Miller is a republican, she is also a supporter of gay and lesbian rights in a country where this is an especially controversial topic. Perhaps more significantly, Simpson-Miller has been courting closer financial and political ties with China, which she hopes will lead to much needed infrastructure improvements.

A recent agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for financial assistance should, on the face of it, ease the stress on Jamaica’s economy. However, the

Key Data

- **Population:** 2,751,000 (2011)

- **Ethnicity:** Predominantly African descent (91%), with minorities descended from European, East Indian and Chinese ancestors, and some people of mixed descent (2011)

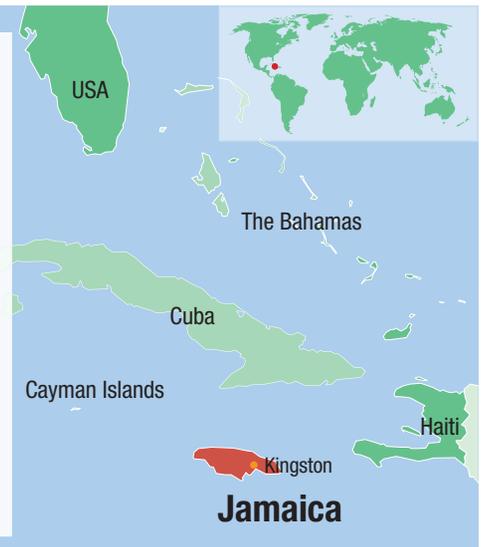
- **Life expectancy:** 73 years

- **Land area:** 10,991 sq km

- **GDP:** US\$14.5 billion

- **GDP percentage growth:** -0.6% pa 2007-11

- **Primary school enrolment:** 82% (2010)



money comes with several caveats, which require the government to bring in a slew of reforms to cut the deficit still further and to balance the budget within a strict time-frame. These imposed austerity measures will do little to address the growing menace of unemployment, violent crime and drugs

improvement of Jamaica’s infrastructure and system of welfare faces ruin in the current economic climate, which put an end to the period of economic growth that began under his premiership.

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Since independence, Jamaican politics has been shaped by towering personalities and charismatic leaders whose visions for the country caused it to lurch from left to right

which the government cannot ignore, but, at the same time, is struggling to deal with.

This deal undoes much of the work credited to P. J. Patterson, who served three consecutive terms until 2002. It was he who established a rare degree of economic independence for the island by ending its ties with the IMF. Likewise, his sweeping

ties and charismatic leaders whose visions for the country caused it to lurch from left to right and undergo dramatic periods of change. Experiments with socialism were followed by unabashed capitalism. Today’s Jamaica is facing problems that, perhaps, transcend old political lines. But the legacy of its past leaders continues to be felt. ●



Jamaica farewell

Closely tied to the economic health of its main trading partners, Jamaica struggles to control its own financial fate. A major source of income is remittances sent home by the nation's three million-plus diaspora, but this, in turn, is dependent on host countries having jobs available for Jamaican immigrants

Neil Ford



Street vendors in Falmouth rely on the tourist trade, but many visitors are reluctant to leave their resorts because of the country's high crime rate

In common with many other Caribbean countries, the government of Jamaica has its fingers crossed over the health of the global economy. The three pillars of its domestic economy – bauxite/alumina, tourism and overseas remittances – are all famously sensitive to slight changes in GDP in just a handful of major trading partners. Stronger growth in China would drive up demand for alumina, while a sustained recovery in the United States would encourage more US citizens to opt for a Caribbean holiday and enable more US firms to employ Jamaicans, who are then able to send money back to the island.

The economic output of all three sectors contracted in the second quarter of this year. GDP declined by 0.4 per cent in the three months to the end of June and by 0.8 per cent in the year up to the end of June. The recession has increased the national debt, which now stands at 140 per cent of GDP, making it unsustainable by most measures.

In addition, Jamaica's dependence on imports has helped to fuel inflation and currency depreciation over many years.

Since regaining power in December 2011, Prime Minister Portia Simpson-Miller's People's National Party has sought to tackle the debt through a new agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The previous standby agreement with the IMF was suspended as a result of a lack of implementation by the previous government. However, a new four-year US\$932.3 million extended fund facility has been agreed, with each tranche of the loan released once the government has completed specific reforms.

Kingston has agreed to cut total state outgoings by reducing social spending and freezing the wages of government employees. The government must also increase the resources available to Tax Administration Jamaica to increase the tax take. If sufficient progress is made on

restructuring, the existing debt exchange programme will be widened. The IMF hopes that the reforms will increase long-term growth and reduce unemployment.

The scale of the problem remains daunting. Three months into the IMF agreement in August, the IMF chief of mission for Jamaica, Jan Kees Martijn, said: "Overall policy implementation thus far under the programme has been strong and structural reforms are progressing. All quantitative performance targets and indicative targets for end-June were met, including the floor on social spending." But he added: "Recent economic developments mostly confirm the challenges of the Jamaican economy."

Conceding that the country's image needs to recover, Finance and Planning Minister Peter Phillips said: "I can say that we are seeing the slow but steady and significant re-building of this confidence, certainly, in the international community. The successful conclusion of this first review will add

to that level of confidence. So, what we have to do is sustain our commitment to the path and not lose heart or become overwhelmed by the immediate painful difficulties which we face. The reason we have a four-year programme is because we know that there is a whole series of reforms in many areas... to be implemented.”

However, the economy has been growing during the second half of this year, as increased capital spending under the Jamaica Development Infrastructure Programme begins to kick in. The main priority is upgrading several hundred kilometres of the country’s road network. Simpson-Miller visited China in August in order to secure preferential loans to help fund the programme.

The government is also keen to develop the port of Kingston as a transshipment hub by taking advantage of the country’s location on shipping routes through the Panama Canal. The widening of the canal, which is scheduled for completion in 2015, will increase the volume of cargo passing through the region.

But in the short term, much will depend on growth in the main three sources of revenue. There is little that Kingston can do to influence remittance inflows, which average \$2 billion a year at present. Despite the existing range of financial incentives, the government also has limited influence on the future of the bauxite/alumina sector. The country produces about five million tonnes of bauxite a year, but alumina output – which is refined from bauxite – fell from 1.95 million tonnes in 2011 to 1.75 million tonnes last year. There is also little prospect of attracting investment in the third stage of the bauxite-alumina-aluminium production chain – aluminium smelting.

The government can, however, improve long-term growth prospects in the tourist sector by tackling the country’s violent crime

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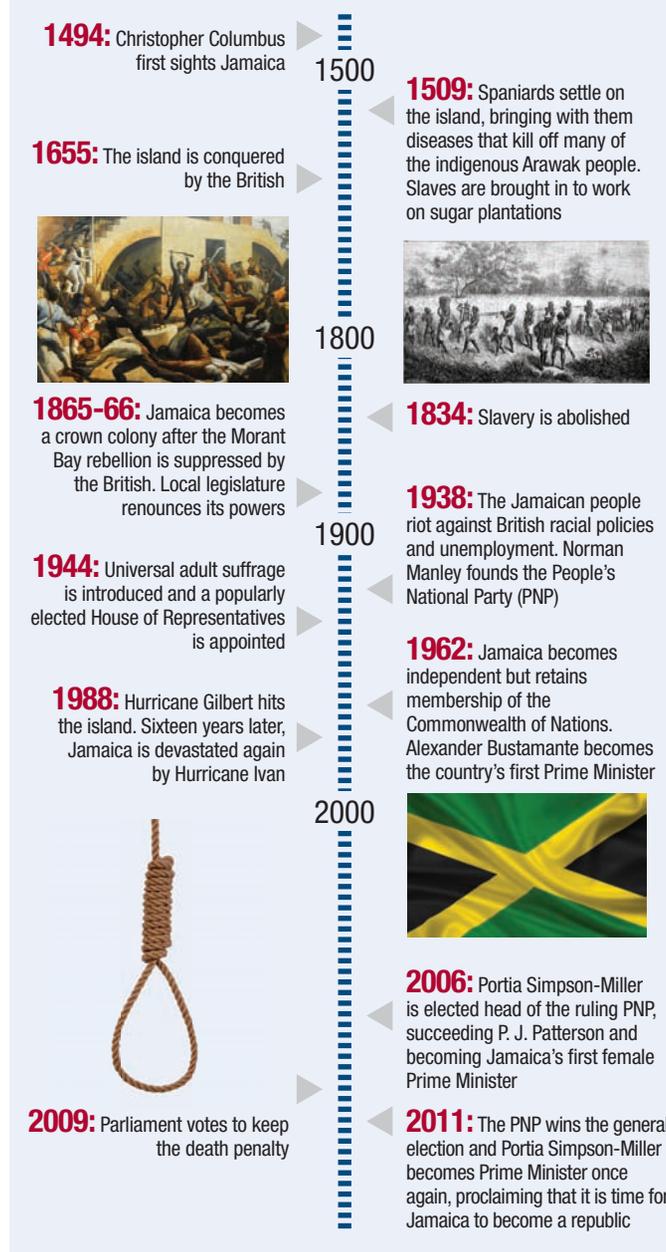
problem. Some steps have already been made in this direction, but more progress is required if the country is to compete more effectively with neighbouring islands.

Each year since 2010 the country has registered a record number of visitors – reaching 3.3 million last year – drawn by its attractive climate, world-class beaches and a unique culture. Yet the sector is not as important as on many other Caribbean islands, partly because of Jamaica’s much larger population in relation to the number of visitors. Moreover, too many holidaymakers do not leave their resorts because of the country’s high crime levels.

Wider distribution of visitors would increase the country’s tourist capacity and help to tackle an unemployment rate that reached 16.3 per cent in July. New cafés, guesthouses and other tourist businesses could generate more employment in some of the least developed parts of the country, which are currently dependent on the production of sugar, sugar-related goods such as rum and molasses, bananas and coffee.

Stephen Vasciannie, the Jamaican Ambassador to the United States, says: “The loans have been helpful to bring stability, but now we are looking towards enhancing production. Our economic problems stem largely from the fact that there is a high unemployment rate and from the fact also that the country tends to consume more than it produces, so what we are trying to do in government is

Jamaica through history



raise the employment level and also open up the country to foreign investment so that we can raise production and productivity.”

The key to economic diversification could be the manufacturing sector, but the clothing industry has failed to expand as hoped. Kingston is now looking to Jamaicans living abroad to return to the country to set up manufacturing businesses. The country has a population of about 2.6 million, while at least as many Jamaicans live overseas, particularly in the UK, USA and Canada.

The government hopes to encourage many of those expatriates with business success to return home. Vasciannie adds: “Jamaica benefits from the fact that there are so many of our nationals in the diaspora, because they send money home in the form of remittances, and some also take part in the investment projects.”

Yet the economy would be a great deal more secure if growth were driven by those actually living on the island. ●

Island in the sun

With its deep lagoons, warm climate and richly perfumed tropical plants, Jamaica's history has, since the 15th century, been strongly influenced by the waves of visitors who have arrived on its shores and decided to make the island their home

Juliet Highet

I had forgotten how spectacularly gorgeous Jamaica is – black volcanic beaches on the road to Port Antonio, on which long scented trails of jasmine drift; wild hibiscus and gladioli romping around the little farms with their lacy fretwork balconies edging deep verandas. In the evenings, old ladies with weathered faces sit in their rocking

handsome the people are in all their diversity, with a gene pool that includes the original Arawak, African, European, Arab, Chinese and East Indian. Little wonder that the island's national motto is: "Out of many, one people." Most visitors head straight for the north coast of Jamaica, to the resorts of Ocho Rios, Montego Bay and Negril,

After Christopher Columbus had 'discovered' Jamaica in 1494, claiming it to be "the fairest island that eyes have beheld", the thriving colony of Arawak people was all but wiped out. In the centuries that followed, Jamaica was settled by a variety of people, including the Spanish in 1509, who were responsible for the introduction of slavery – importing West Africans to work on the sugar plantations.

Christopher Columbus 'discovered' Jamaica in 1494, claiming it to be "the fairest island that eyes have beheld"

chairs and men in dreadlocks puff gently on strange-smelling 'cigars'. American actor, Errol Flynn, who ended his days in Jamaica, said of it: "Never had I seen a land so beautiful."

I had not remembered, either, how

with their celebrated silver crescent-moon, palm-fringed beaches.

But Jamaica has so much more depth and history than any other Caribbean island. This raunchy, piratical land's 'photogenic opportunities' conceal much melancholy.

A more endearing aspect of Jamaican history stems from an elegant, somewhat decadent set who came to holiday in the 1940s and 50s, some of whom chose to stay. One of them was Noel Coward, that master of acerbic British wit, who described Jamaica as "the island that has given me so much happiness and peace and time to work". His home, called Firefly Hill, set in the gardens where he was buried 1,000 feet above Blue Harbour, was one of the first



places I visited while staying at Ocho Rios. I was escorted round by Coward's butler, who obviously admired Coward's style and, as he put it, "breadth of vision". He told me how Coward used to love to paint there and wrote *Private Lives* in that modest rustic seclusion, an escape from his Monte Carlo lifestyle. Nevertheless, Coward used to entertain Laurence Olivier, David Niven, Errol Flynn and Ian Fleming – the latter two of whom had villas along the coastline – and even Britain's Queen Mother.

At the Carinosa Gardens, on the edge of Ocho Rios, 14 crystal-clear waterfalls crash down the mountains, the dense foliage around them starred with wild lilies and ginger, spotlighted by shafts of sunlight. If the atmosphere of Ocho Rios is, despite tourism, mercifully still that of a charming small town, Port Antonio's is positively somnolent. Once the cradle of Jamaica's tourist trade in the days when Hollywood stars hung out there, the town itself seems to have changed little since then, with relics like the disused railway station still intact, as well as creaking, deserted wharves from which the bananas that once made this town prosperous were exported.

But now there is a shopping centre painted so imaginatively with *trompe l'œil* that you wonder whether the arm hung languidly out of a window is real or not. The older local people recall glamorous parties frequented by the likes of Ginger Rogers, Bette Davis and – earlier still – Clara Bow. But Port Antonio still is the playground of the seriously rich and famous, who hide away in discreet palatial villas on the shores of the allegedly bottomless Blue Lagoon.

A mongoose scuttles across the road on the way to Montego Bay, and lines of goats on leads trail disconsolately behind school children. Some of them carry plastic bags of yellow ackees, a delicacy of a fruit even for Jamaicans, for whom it is their national dish when blended with salted codfish and plenty of hot pepper.

Montego Bay, or Mo'Bay, is the venue for reggae's international showcase, the annual Sunsplash. It's Jamaica's second city, and the island's tourist capital, with some of its finest hotels, splendid villas to rent and golf courses, on one of which we spot a retired couple chasing goats off the putting green. In spite of the fact that it undergoes an annual invasion of hundreds of thousands of sun-seekers, its downtown area has preserved the authentic atmosphere of one of the island's oldest settlements, with many buildings dating back to the 18th century.

Drugs fuel island's dark side

In 2009 – with an average of 63 murders per 100,000 people – Jamaica had the third highest murder rate in the world. The following year, police efforts following the surrender of one of Jamaica's most powerful drug lords, Christopher M. Coke, saw the murder rate fall to 40 per 100,000. Jamaican authorities suggested that Coke's surrender assisted in breaking up gun and drug networks, which allowed the country to work on longer-term projects including community policing and violence reduction. The murder rate has continued to fall in the years following this – in the first half of 2013 there was a six per cent reduction in murders compared to the same period in 2012.

However, rising levels of violence this summer are threatening to undo the work that has been achieved over the last three years. National statistics reported 251 homicides between 30 June and 31 August, an average of four a day, compared to an average of 2.9 during the first half of the year. The island is also infamous for its high incidence of violent homophobic acts. On 28 August, a 41-year-old man was stabbed to death in a homophobic attack before having his house set on fire with his body still inside.



Jade Fell

According to the wine merchants' bills from this period, it would appear that much merrymaking went on among the

Older local people recall parties frequented by the likes of Ginger Rogers

plantation set. At the 1765 Town House, which has been a restaurant for centuries, press cuttings show that everybody seems

to have eaten lobster there, from Queen Victoria to the Rolling Stones. That other face of Jamaican history is evident in the elegantly restored Sam Sharpe Square, named after the man who led his fellow slaves in a revolt. The surrounding streets, also grand relics of former times, are stunningly painted in jonquil yellow and cobalt blue.

One of them leads down to the Fustic Street Market, 'fustic' being a dye produced from a tree. This is a real Jamaican market, as opposed to the tourist Craft Market, in which the female traders ruthlessly rule the roost. They're called 'higglers' and you too have to haggle relentlessly with these women, who keep their money buried in their capacious bosoms in cloth 'threadbags'.

Apart from the fact that pirate 'Calico Jack' and his female fellow buccaneers were captured at Negril in 1720, this fourth north coast resort has little claim to fame in history. However, the town and its famous seven-mile beach have built their own reputation as a centre of hedonism.

The town is known as 'Funky Negril' and sees the local residents mix more readily with visitors than in any of the other resorts. This is arguably because at the all-in resorts, residents rarely stray off the property – a source of great annoyance to local traders. But they do get to meet each other on a more equal footing than that of server and serviced on Negril's glorious beach. It seems that the whole of Negril goes to Rick's Café at sunset to drink Rum Bamboozles and watch youths dive 100 ft from the cliff top to the water below, with a backdrop of "the best sunset in the world".

All while listening to reggae, naturally. ●



Jamaican reggae artist Alborosie