



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

THE CARIBBEAN

## BACKGROUND

**Land and Climate.** Jamaica is part of the Greater Antilles, a chain of islands that forms the northern boundary of the Caribbean Sea. Its nearest neighbor is Cuba (about 90 miles, or 145 kilometers, to the north). Only 51 miles (83 kilometers) across at its widest point, Jamaica covers 4,244 square miles (10,991 square kilometers) and is just smaller than Connecticut. Eighty percent of the island is mountainous. Less than 20 percent is suitable for continuous cultivation. Jamaica has a tropical maritime climate, but rainfall varies depending on the region. The rainy seasons occur in May and October. Hurricanes are possible from June to November. The tropical island climate prevents extreme temperature variations; temperatures generally are 80 to 90°F (26 to 32°C). A natural port on the southern coast is home to Jamaica's capital, Kingston.

**History.** Jamaica's original inhabitants were the Arawak Indians, who called the island Xaymaca, meaning either "land of wood and water" or "land of springs." Columbus landed on the island in 1494. The Arawaks were virtually decimated within a few decades by European diseases and the harsh life settlers imposed on them. The Spanish occupied the island until 1655, when it was captured and colonized by the English. By the late 17th century, the English had established sugarcane plantations and were importing large numbers of slaves from Africa. Slavery was abolished in 1838. Some Spaniards stayed in Jamaica and eventually mixed with the African peoples. Today, these people are called the Maroons, a group that has some political autonomy.

In the 1860s, Jamaica's status was upgraded from colonial possession to British crown colony. During the 1930s, people began calling for self-determination. In 1938, serious social unrest was stirred up by long-standing injustices and labor

problems. Alexander Bustamante, aided by Norman Manley, championed labor's cause, sparking important social change. The two also formed today's major political parties. A new constitution in 1944 ended rule by the British crown colony government and granted adult suffrage. However, Jamaica remained under nominal British rule until it gained full independence in 1962.

During the 1970s, Manley's son Michael headed a social-democrat government that concentrated on social issues and help for the poor. However, severe economic problems led to a 1980 victory for Edward Seaga and his conservative Jamaican Labour Party (JLP), which dominated government throughout the decade.

Most elections in the 1980s and 1990s were marked by fraud and violence, as political parties strove to maintain control over communities known as *garrison constituencies*, in which political parties joined forces with urban gangs to force citizens to vote for certain candidates. National elections in 1989 brought the social-democrat People's National Party (PNP) to power. A PNP leader, Percival James Patterson, became prime minister in 1992, stepping down in 2006. He was replaced by Portia Simpson-Miller, Jamaica's first female prime minister. When the Labour Party took power in 2007 elections, Bruce Golding became prime minister. Jamaica faces the challenges of a struggling economy and crime, with one of the world's highest murder rates.

## THE PEOPLE

**Population.** Jamaica's population of over 2.8 million is growing at 0.8 percent annually. The majority of people are of African ancestry (76 percent). Significant minority groups include

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Afro-Europeans (15 percent) as well as Afro–East Indians and East Indians (3 percent). The population also includes whites of European descent (3 percent), some Chinese, and other groups. More than half of the population lives in urban areas. Kingston and Montego Bay are the largest cities. Because many people leave to seek greater opportunity, nearly as many Jamaicans live outside of Jamaica as on the island. Most expatriates live in England and the eastern United States.

**Language.** English is the official language of Jamaica. However, a Jamaican's ability to speak and understand standard English may vary depending on the person's level of education. *Patois*, an English-based creole with West African influences, is commonly used in everyday conversation. Jamaican speech, in English or *patois*, has a distinctive rhythmic and melodic quality.

**Religion.** Most Jamaicans (61 percent) are Protestants, and many major denominations are represented on the island. The Anglican Church is the official national church, although only about 5 percent of the population belongs to it. Other groups include the Church of God (21 percent), Baptists (9 percent), Seventh-day Adventists (9 percent), and Pentecostals (7.6 percent). Four percent of the people are Roman Catholic. Jamaicans commonly use the term *Christian* to mean practicing members of a Protestant (often evangelical) church. Non-Christians may practice ceremonies and rituals that have roots in India, China, or Africa but that have become uniquely Jamaican. There is also a long-standing Jewish community, whose first members arrived with Columbus as ship hands to escape the Spanish Inquisition.

Religious education commonly is included in school curricula. Religion plays an important role in society through the spiritual values and social opportunities it provides. Ecumenism (unity among all churches) is the norm among Jamaicans. The vast majority of Jamaican churchgoers are women and children; church gatherings are particularly popular among rural women.

The political and religious Rastafarian movement originated in Jamaica. Only about 5 percent of Jamaicans practice Rastafarianism, but it has had a profound impact on Jamaican and Caribbean culture. Adherents generally believe they should separate themselves from white people and regard Africa as the promised land. They consider Ethiopia's late ruler Haile Selassie I an incarnation of "the living God." Many also observe Old Testament laws, including dietary restrictions, and regard marijuana as a sacred herb.

**General Attitudes.** Jamaicans enjoy spending time together and having lively conversations. People are generally outgoing, warm, and hospitable; however, they may be reserved with strangers. It is considered important to be thoughtful, neighborly, and charitable. Selfish or standoffish behavior is looked down upon. Jamaicans have a fairly flexible approach to life. A common, good-natured answer to life's challenges is *No problem, man*, even if there is no solution at hand. Flexibility is also evident in attitudes toward time and schedules. A common phrase is *Soon come*, which can mean anything from five minutes to next week. Events and meetings often begin late, although people are more punctual in urban areas.

Jamaicans appreciate honesty and hard work. They are increasingly building a strong professional atmosphere in Urban areas. Financial security, prestige, homes, properties, and motor vehicles are valued possessions.

**Personal Appearance.** While Jamaicans may dress in a variety of ways, women generally try to keep themselves and their

children well dressed, especially at church. Older women and women belonging to some religious sects usually wear dresses or skirts. Professional women wear business suits and skirts. Institutions such as banks and insurance companies may provide employees, particularly women, with uniforms. Children also wear uniforms for school. Men wear casual clothing for most occasions. Youth fashions are often brightly colored and commonly follow trends from the United States and the music industry. On weekends, many young people wear *dancehall* (a popular form of music) outfits, which reflect current trends.

Rastafarians do not cut their hair, wearing it in long dreadlocks. Clothing and accessories worn throughout the island often feature Rastafarian colors (green, red, and gold).

## CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

**Greetings.** Jamaicans consider it important to recognize and greet others and to be recognized in return. Greetings range from a nod to a slap on the back to a kiss—depending on the people involved and the occasion. Strangers being introduced usually shake hands and say *Good morning*, *Good afternoon*, *Good evening*, or *Good night*. Professional or formal titles (*Mr.*, *Mrs.*, *Miss*) are used with the surname unless people are well acquainted. Children usually refer to adults who are not family members as *Sir*, *Mr.*, *Mrs.*, or *Miss*.

Elderly people in rural areas may bow or curtsy when greeting. It is considered rude not to greet someone properly before beginning a conversation or asking a question. Friends and acquaintances passing on the road often call out greetings. A common phrase is *Whaapun?* (What's happening?) or *Alright*, *alright* (as if to bypass asking and responding to "How are you?"). Common parting phrases include *Later*, *Tomorrow then*, *Next time*, and *God bless*.

In casual situations, people often use nicknames. Jamaicans (particularly men) might have many nicknames given them by various friends or groups. The nickname usually refers to a physical trait or station in life. Examples include *Fatty* (a fat person; it is a compliment because it indicates life is treating that person well), *Whitey* (white person; also not an insult, but references to the "blackness" of a black Jamaican may be considered insulting), or *Juicy* (man who sells juice on the street). Family members more often call one another by a *pet name* or *yard name*, which often is a shortened or slightly altered version of a person's given name (*Nicky* for Nicholas).

**Gestures.** Jamaicans can be very animated when speaking and tend to use hand gestures to help make a point (especially men who are talking about cricket or politics). People sometimes show respect for or approval of shared ideas by touching fists. They emphasize greetings by holding on to an initial handshake or by touching the person's arm or shoulder. To hail a taxi, one keeps the hand down (rather than holding it above the head) and waves.

To get someone's attention, one may clap hands or tap on a grill or gate of a home. Some people say "pssst" to attract another's attention, but this can be considered rude. Sucking air through the teeth may express exasperation or the idea of "Give me a break," but it also may be considered a rude way to say "You don't impress me."

Traditional social courtesies are common. Men offer seats on a bus to older women, women with young children, or pregnant women. Seated passengers commonly offer to hold packages or children for standing passengers. Men open doors for women in urban areas. Chewing gum, combing one's hair, or kissing extensively is not common in public.

**Visiting.** Informal visits take place at the house gate. Visitors simply knock, ring a buzzer, or otherwise call attention to themselves. Only close friends or relatives of the home's occupants will approach the door before being greeted and invited past the gate. Conversations held on the street are called *meet-and-greet* activities.

Visitors inside homes usually are offered a drink and sometimes a meal. Guests sometimes bring their hosts a small gift (fresh produce, garden flowers, a bottle of wine). Families and friends get together often. Because telephones traditionally have been rare in Jamaica and many rural homes still lack them, visits commonly are unannounced. Surprise guests nearly always are welcome.

**Eating.** Rural families tend to eat dinner together each day after 4 p.m., while urban families may eat together only on weekends because of work and school schedules. Many Jamaicans say a prayer of thanks before or after meals. Meals are usually sociable and not overly formal when guests are present. Buffet meals are popular, as is eating outdoors. Jamaicans eat in the continental style; the fork is in the left hand and the knife remains in the right. While family meals may be casual, good table manners in public are considered an important social refinement.

Restaurant bills usually include a service charge, but if not, one leaves a tip of 10 to 15 percent. Caterers, restaurants, and street vendors often sell *take-away* (take-out) meals served in boxes. Roadside stands or carts commonly feature pineapples, melons, and water coconuts sold as quick snacks or thirst quenchers. Because eating while walking is considered inappropriate, people often eat snacks on the spot.

## LIFESTYLE

**Family.** The family structure varies in Jamaica according to several factors, including one's social standing. For example, families in lower socio-economic groups usually are larger than those in the middle or upper classes. In addition, some women in lower-income groups have several children by different men, known as *baby fathers*. The fathers refer to these women as *baby mothers* (as opposed to "wives" or "girl-friends"). Although baby mothers are common, many women prefer the social approval that comes with being married to their children's father. However, it is considered normal for both men and women to have more than one relationship, perhaps resulting in children, prior to marriage. While some associate motherhood with femininity or blessings and fatherhood with virility, caring for children generally is seen as a serious responsibility and financial commitment. Women assume the primary responsibility for child care, but children often live with grandparents, relatives, or godparents when the mother works outside the home. Therefore, in these circles the extended family plays a crucial role.

**Housing.** The quality and style of housing vary considerably in Jamaica. Luxurious mansions of the rich contrast with the basic shacks of the poor. These shacks are almost always erected in defiance of stringent building codes put in place to offer protection against severe weather like hurricanes and natural disasters such as earthquakes. Of course, the vast majority of Jamaicans live in accommodations that fall somewhere between these extremes. Many middle-class families live in two-to-four room houses or condominiums. Some families live in apartments, particularly in Kingston where there is an extensive program of government subsidies. Many homes have verandas, which tend to be used for entertaining visitors.

Houses with yards are usually fenced in. Many people grow fruit trees in their gardens.

**Dating and Marriage.** Young people socialize at dances, movies, parties, church functions, the market, and on the street. Wealthier Jamaicans often date in pairs and marry in their twenties, before children are born. Lower-income youth tend to socialize in groups that often include neighbors, cousins, and close friends. Marriage ceremonies often are prohibitively expensive, with a church ceremony that includes decorations, formal clothing, a motorcade, and a party with much food, drink, and music. Therefore, lower-income couples may marry only after years together as a couple, usually after children are born. Family and neighbors may also help pay for the wedding. A formal marriage is sometimes associated with joining a church, giving up vices, and leading a responsible life.

**Life Cycle.** To a large extent life-cycle rituals are a function of a family's religious affiliation and socio-economic standing. After birth, Rastas tend to give their children the most creative names (for example, *Profile*). Among Protestants and Catholics, baptism typically occurs soon after birth, and communion or confirmation follows years later. Most Jamaican funerals are highly elaborate affairs. After a memorial service in a church, synagogue, or mosque, the burial or cremation takes place. After that, there is usually a large meal for the mourners. Often, people close to the deceased will deliver lengthy commemorative speeches. Mourners wear formal dress. For men, this means suits, and for women it means white, black, purple, mauve, lavender, or lilac dresses. In rural areas or poor towns, it is common for a wake to precede the funeral service.

**Diet.** Jamaican food generally is spicy. Breakfast often includes *saltfish* (salted, dried cod), which is the national dish. It may also include *ackee* (a rich red fruit) when it is in season. Fish may be eaten two or more times a week. Stews and curries (such as curried goat) are popular. *Jerk* (spicy barbecued pork or chicken, roasted in open pits or on makeshift grills) is often served with a bland, hard bread or with yams. *Bammy* (cassava bread), a staple food, is still prepared in the style of the Arawak Indians. *Bammy* or *festival* (fried dough) with fish is a frequent combination.

Many people enjoy Indian and Chinese dishes. *Box food* (food eaten out of a box when away from home) generally consists of fish, chicken, or goat served over rice and *peas* (any one of a variety of legumes). Boiled green bananas or fried dumplings are popular side dishes. Fruits (mangoes, bananas, papaya, pineapples, grapefruit, oranges, tomatoes) are plentiful, and one or more types of fruit usually are in season. Vegetables also play an important role in the diet. A typical salad includes lettuce and tomatoes or cabbage and carrots. Coffee, herbal teas, fruit juices, drinks made from boiled roots, and a variety of alcoholic beverages are common. All hot drinks (coffee, cocoa, green tea, etc.) are called *tea*. Beer and white rum are especially popular. Women usually drink less than men and do not generally drink alcohol from the bottle.

**Recreation.** Cricket and *football* (soccer) are the most popular sports in Jamaica. Many people also enjoy table tennis, field hockey, tennis, and *athletics* (track-and-field). Girls play netball (a game similar to basketball) in school. Dominoes is the favorite game among men and may be played indoors or outdoors. People attend discos, community centers, and clubs. A frequent pastime is listening to music from stereo systems outside of bars. Other leisure activities include going to movies and enjoying spectator sports such as boxing or team competitions. Various festivals, church activities, and community

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events provide entertainment and recreation. Jamaicans also take advantage of the outdoor activities their island offers, such as hiking and swimming.

**The Arts.** The most famous Jamaican musician, Bob Marley, used reggae music to advocate tolerance and justice. An annual festival commemorates his birthday (February 6). Reggae is still the most popular form of music, but Jamaicans are also fond of jazz, calypso, and gospel. Young Jamaicans enjoy *soca* (a mixture of soul music from the United States and calypso); *soca* is especially popular during Carnival. Another popular form of music is *dancehall*, which incorporates elements of reggae, disco, and rap.

Theatrical comedies performed in *patois* are popular. Galleries throughout the island display local fine art, and open-air markets sell folk art. These folk arts are produced primarily for tourists and include basketry, pottery, and textiles.

**Holidays.** Jamaican holidays include New Year's Day, Ash Wednesday, Easter (Friday–Monday), Labor Day (23 May, a day for community improvement projects), Independence Day (first Monday in August), National Heroes Day (the third Monday in October), Christmas, and Boxing Day (26 Dec.). Boxing Day is a day to visit family and friends. Maroons celebrate 6 January as their independence day. Carnival is a springtime festival involving parades, costumes, and parties.

## SOCIETY

**Government.** Jamaica's government is based on the British model of parliamentary democracy. The PNP and JLP are the only major political parties. Elections must be held at least every five years. The voting age is 18. Parliament consists of an elected House of Representatives with 60 members and an appointed Senate with 21 members. The prime minister (currently Bruce Golding) appoints 13 and the opposition appoints 8. The cabinet, led by the prime minister, holds executive power. Although Jamaica is independent, it is part of the Commonwealth of Nations and recognizes Queen Elizabeth II as its head of state. She is represented in Jamaica by a governor-general (Kenneth Hall).

**Economy.** Bauxite (an aluminum ore) and tourism are key elements of the economy. Bauxite, aluminum, bananas, rum, coffee, and sugar are important exports. However, recent drops in sugar prices on the international market have led to a scaling back of that industry. Agriculture employs more than 20 percent of the population. Jamaica is part of the Caribbean Basin Initiative (CBI), a program designed to improve economic relations between Caribbean nations and the United States. It is also a member of the Caribbean Community and Common Market (CARICOM), a regional economic association. The currency is the Jamaican dollar (JMD). A growing portion of the population earns a livable income, but unemployment is high. Slow economic growth inhibits greater prosperity, and both urban and rural poverty remain a challenge. About a fifth of the total population lives below the poverty line.

**Transportation and Communications.** Cars and buses are the most common form of transportation. Following the British tradition, traffic moves on the left side of the road. Most roads are paved but are often in poor repair. Buses serve all parts of the island and can be crowded; accurate schedules are not always available. *Route taxis* follow set local routes with set fares. Regular taxis, with negotiated fares, are plentiful.

## POPULATION & AREA

Population ..... 2,780,132 (rank=139)  
Area, sq. mi. .... 4,243 (rank=161)  
Area, sq. km. .... 10,989

## DEVELOPMENT DATA

Human Dev. Index\* rank ..... 101 of 177 countries  
Adjusted for women ..... 89 of 156 countries  
Real GDP per capita ..... \$4,291  
Adult literacy rate ..... 84% (male); 86% (female)  
Infant mortality rate ..... 17 per 1,000 births  
Life expectancy ..... 70 (male); 75 (female)

Jamaica's communications system is modern and adequate, although rural homes seldom have phones. Public phone booths, usually found near police stations and post offices, require phone cards, which are purchased at post offices and some stores. There are several radio and television stations as well as various daily newspapers.

**Education.** When and where children attend school may depend on their economic background. Lower-class children ages three through six attend basic schools, followed by primary schools until age twelve. Upper class children usually begin attending preparatory schools at age six and continue until age twelve. Secondary schools for youths ages twelve through seventeen include high schools, as well as technical, comprehensive, and vocational schools. Secondary enrollment is limited and admission is determined by competitive examinations. A lack of money for fees, uniforms, lunch, and transportation makes attendance difficult for some, although some government aid is available. More than 90 percent of children who enter school finish the primary or prep level. About 60 percent of all eligible youth are enrolled in secondary schools.

Most Jamaican adults have completed at least five years of education. Young women increasingly recognize the economic benefits of an education. More young women than young men attend secondary school and graduate school. Higher education is provided at teacher-training colleges; community colleges; a college of agriculture, science, and education; a college of physical education and sports; schools of music, art, dance, and drama; the University of Technology, Caribbean Northern University, and the University of the West Indies. The Caribbean Institute of Technology trains Jamaicans in programming and software development. University graduates who fail to find work in Jamaica often seek opportunities in North America or Europe.

**Health.** Most large towns or cities have a hospital. Medical clinics are community-based and available across Jamaica. The public healthcare system covers basic care for all citizens at low cost or for free. Payment might be required in some cases, especially for more complicated care. Private facilities are available. Piped water is safe to drink. Life expectancy has risen in recent years.

## AT A GLANCE

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