



### **Economic reforms**

New free trade agreements and an Economic Recovery Task Force are helping the Caribbean island to rebound from the impact of Covid-19.



### **Remittances stronger**

Responding in the country's greatest time of need, remittances from the US and UK surged by more than 20% to nearly \$3bn in 2020.



### **Travellers ready to return**

At the global forefront of destination assurance, Jamaica has created an environment where travellers can feel safe, secure and pampered.

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# JAMAICA

Awakened from the worst of Covid-19, the country takes measures to boost growth and investment







Jamaica now exports more than \$40m worth of rum a year to over 50 countries



A little-known member of the gourd family, the chayote is a hit in Jamaican dishes

## The CARIFORUM-UK Economic Partnership Agreement strengthens post-Brexit bilateral bonds

All the building blocks are in place to help the UK-Jamaica bilateral relationship thrive in a post-Brexit and post-pandemic world.

In December 2020, the British High Commissioner to Jamaica, Asif Ahmad, perfectly summed up post-Brexit British-Jamaican bilateral ties: "People in Jamaica should almost stop reading about our local internal political difficulty with Europe," he told the Jamaican economist Ralston Hyman, "because we have an agreement fully ratified and agreed with all the Caribbean countries."

It's an agreement that's particularly strong with Jamaica. "When an amendment was needed over the question of Northern Ireland, it was ratified by the Jamaican cabinet in 48 hours." All the building blocks for stronger ties are there, he added. "The infrastructure is there, the quotas available for Jamaican exports are there. It's just a question of businesses here waking up."

While British-Jamaican ties have scarcely been stronger – more Britons visited Jamaica in the first quarter of 2019 than ever before – Brexit and the Covid-19 pandemic have complicated things. Though cultural ties have never been greater, bilateral trade has somewhat withered. Not only has Jamaica slipped to become the UK's third-largest trading partner in the Caribbean after the Dominican Republic and Trinidad and Tobago; the UK is only Jamaica's fourth-largest trading partner after the US, the Netherlands and Canada.

What's more, as the high commissioner highlights, Jamaica exports to the UK, while beloved, have also slipped. After exporting more than \$110m in goods to the British Isles in 2011, chiefly rum and food products, this figure had fallen to \$15m in 2019. All of which is to say: the CARIFORUM-UK Economic Partnership Agreement, first signed in 2019, offers huge opportunities to get UK-Jamaican bilateral trade back on track – in addition to preferential treatment for every state in the economic partnership agreement.

Not only is the UK-Caribbean food market now worth over £100m, a new generation of chefs in the UK are ensuring that Britons are served up the Caribbean's finest. In addition to sauces, condiments, roots and tubers, teas and gluten-free flours flying off the shelves, demand for cosmetics, hair and skincare products is also booming.

In October 2020, Jamaica National Bank opened its first full-service bank in London. And tourism is finally resuming, too. In December 2020, British Airways, Virgin Atlantic and TUI all increased their seat load capacity to Jamaica for the winter season. British Airways now flies to Montego Bay and Kingston, while Virgin kept its service open to Jamaica in 2020 even when it wasn't carrying passengers.

Sure, there is room for improvement. At present, Jamaica is the only Caribbean country requiring both entry and transit visas in the UK, a measure that ought to be reconsidered. And though designed to meet every other year, the UK-Caribbean Forum hasn't met since 2016. But, while it's still unclear how much cuts to UK development aid (from 0.7% of GDP to 0.5%) will affect the region, London did earmark £5m for Covid-related relief.

In the meantime, says High Commissioner Ahmad, Jamaican farmers should do more to export the country's wonderful pineapples and papayas to the UK. "I'm a huge fan of Jamaican pears," Ahmad fondly admitted. "It would be absolutely stunning for the market if this product reached the UK in a good state." There's room for these and so much more.

from the US represented 67.1% of the total received, with the UK contributing 12.7%. Research from the University of Oxford also suggests that British people with Jamaican heritage send more money back to the country of their ancestors than any other community in the UK.

At 1.7% of GDP, remittances from Britain not only kept Jamaica from greater economic fall out last year, but this constant inflow serves year in and year out as one of the largest sources of long-term investment into the country.



Before the pandemic, tourism represented around 34% of Jamaican GDP. Although well on its way to recovery, global travel restrictions in 2020 impacted the sector, leading to an economic contraction of at least 10% that year.

Remittances from the UK are second only to those from the US in terms of value: in 2020, inflows

the economic fallout from the pandemic. Let's not forget the most important thing of all: though containment policies impacted the economy, they also saved countless lives within the country. And, although the immediate economic picture remains subdued until tourism totally recovers, it's worth considering how far Jamaica has come in the past decade.

Despite everything, foreign currency reserves have more than quadrupled since 2012, when they stood at nearly \$900m, while the public debt under Holness was reduced from 145% of GDP in 2014 to merely 94% in 2019. Prior to the pandemic, the country was also on track to reach a ratio of 60% by 2026, according to the International Monetary Fund.

Unemployment was also at an all-time low in 2019, at 7.8%. Though Covid reduced these achievements, it pushed Jamaicans to digitise in ways they never had before, helping to prime the engines for future recovery.

media and other key policy communities such as the World Health Organization and the Pan American Health Organization, not to mention local live public health data streams. Though the epidemic did not reach a first plateau until late May 2020, a sizable part of that was due to the late repatriation of cruise-ship workers stranded abroad or at sea. But schools were shut down, healthcare workers sent to every province and the slow, hard work of raising awareness in every corner of the country quickly begun.

Not only was public faith in science sufficiently high for people to socially distance and take the recommended precautionary measures, trust in institutions was also high enough to convince people to follow the Prime Minister's and health ministry's prerogatives.

The country's vaccination campaign began in March with a series of vaccination blitzes in public places such as the National Arena in Kingston, the Celebration Church in Portmore and the Montego Bay Convention Centre. To combat some initial hesitation among the wider public to get vaccinated, councillors and members of parliament were made individually responsible for ensuring as many got the jab as possible.

This often included giving individual public officials quotas of at least 100 people, not to mention a commitment to ensuring they receive transportation to and from the job. The good news is that the country's health system held up remarkably well during the pandemic and continues to be reinforced for the future. This September, for example, Chief Medical Officer Dr. Jacqueline Bisasor-McKenzie revealed the progress that the country has made in its pursuit of the digital transformation of Jamaica's health sector.

"Jamaica is utilising digital health technologies in medical education and to improve access to specialist care. Increasing access to healthcare through a mobile app is another utilisation of digital health technology that is advancing," she said.

"Jamaica's approach to data and interoperability will enable artificial intelligence, geospatial technologies, data science and other emerging technologies to improve healthcare delivery and health systems management," according to Bisasor-McKenzie, who also noted that international support was needed for "capacity building, protection of human rights in digital health, digital health literacy, knowledge sharing and strategic partnerships."

Also in September, Minister of Health and Wellness Dr. Christopher Tufton stressed the ongoing requirement to expand the promotion of health beyond the healthcare sector. "Health in all policies must now not be a cliché that we call upon when convenient, it must become a way of life," he asserted.

## Economy could rebound this year

With sound financials, resilient construction and manufacturing, and tourism bouncing back, Jamaica's economy could grow by 10%.

Despite contracting at least 10% in 2020, the Bank of Jamaica expects the country's economy to grow by between 7% and 10% during the current fiscal year, which ends in March 2022. Although its economy is not expected to reach pre-pandemic levels until next year, the worst is over.

After peaking at 12.6% in June 2020, unemployment has begun to come down and the country's financial institutions have remained sound throughout the distressing period, according to the bank's governor, Richard Byles.

Non-performing loans were merely 2.8% in September 2020, while deposit-taking institutions have remained more than adequately capitalised. Though tourism unsurprisingly collapsed, the economy was supported by "stronger than expected remittance inflows and a dramatic fall in imports as well as lower levels of private capital outflows," said Byles. By curbing inflation to nearly 5% and keeping current account reserves at nearly \$4bn, the country's fundamentals are ripe for a rebound.

As Richard Pandohie, outgoing president of the Jamaica Manufacturers and Exporters Association, recently pointed out, neither construction nor manufacturing took much of a hit in 2020, which was crucial to protecting employment in two key sectors.

Also keeping Jamaica's economy from going off the rails was the reelection of the Labour Party's Andrew Holness as Prime Minister in September 2020 by his largest margin of victory yet. Apart from moving quickly to set up a Covid-19 Economic Recovery Task Force, Holness helped balance the budget in a time of existential need, boost remittances by 30% between April-October 2020, and maintain Jamaica's B+ sovereign rating from Standard & Poor's, keeping borrowing costs down. Strategic interventions by the government and Inter-American Development Bank also minimised



"Let us not drop the baton on the last leg of this long ordeal. We are a resilient people and I have absolute confidence that we will overcome."

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## Jamaica's government was ready well before Covid struck

Decades of experience in contact tracing found the government very well prepared.

Given its location smack between two of the world's poorest-performing countries when it comes to the pandemic, Jamaica appears to have been spared the worst of the Covid-19 outbreak. While some of this is thanks to happenstance, much more is due to rapid and intelligent response mechanisms by the government and health authorities. After shutting down schools in early March 2020, Jamaica closed its borders on the 20th of that fateful month and set about a rigorous surveillance, case identification and contact tracing regime.

To be sure, it was not the first time it has had to do so. The Ministry of Health and Wellness has done there before: first to rid the island of malaria in the 1960s, and second in its fight against AIDS in the 1990s.

Equally important, the government also coordinated parallel initiatives to prepare for large numbers of patients needing quarantine and/or intensive care by building additional hospital capacity, boosting PPE supplies, setting up new intensive care facilities, repurposing a variety of buildings such as

Social trust and public faith in institutions were also high enough to convince people to follow the Prime Minister and health ministry's prerogatives.

sports arenas and empty hotels, and increasing testing capability and capacity, says Terrence Forrester at the Centre for Solutions for Developing Countries at the University of West Indies in Kingston.

None of this would have been possible, says Forrester, without the active collaboration of the Prime Minister, the special leadership of the Minister of Health and Wellness, the Chief Medical Officer, the Chief Epidemiologist and their support staff, along with Jamaican academia, the private sector,



The Bank of Jamaica is one of the most respected central banks in the western hemisphere

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Smart travellers have long taken to secluded parts of Jamaica's coveted northern coast

## Jamaica already proves itself a leading player in resilient tourism

By June 2020, Jamaica had trained 20,000 workers and opened 'Resilient Corridors' where every business was trained in the strictest safety measures, bringing travellers peace of mind.

It is hardly worth downplaying the impact of the pandemic on Jamaica's tourist industry: after a record 4.3m visitors contributed at least \$3.7bn to the island's economy in 2019, the country counted itself lucky to receive 385,000 visitors in the last six months of 2020. While hugely welcome after it reopened its doors to visitors on June 15, 2020, the latter brought an estimated \$650m to the sector – helpful but nowhere near sufficient to support the 25-30% of the workforce employed in tourism.

This is why Minister of Tourism Edmund Bartlett's newfound focus on destination assurance is so important. "When you visit a destination, you want that security that you are going to be well taken care of, that destinations are Covid-compliant, responding to protocols and, more importantly, that you are not likely to get infected," he said.

This is why he calls the new discerning travellers Generation C, a group that collapses all the other arbitrary designations – Gen X, Y, Millennials and so on – into one: Gen C. This traveller is far more discerning and health conscious than before, which is why countries that adapt early will do that much better.

### Government that cares

Jamaica, if Bartlett gets his way, will be one of them. For starters, the country has already established two 'Resilient Corridors': the first along the northeast coast of the island that runs from Negril to Port Antonio and the second from Milk River to Negril along the southeast coast. Within these,

only businesses that have had their staff members trained and which have been certified as being compliant with Covid-19 protocols are allowed to operate.

In order to protect the industry's workforce, the government was also quick to establishment a set of stimulus packages for both furloughed workers and those who saw their working hours drastically cut back, which went respectively by the acronyms of BEST and SET. Third, the government established a small grants programme for smaller tourism operators that would have otherwise been obliterated by the downturn.

From the beginning of the pandemic onward, especially since June 2020, the government enacted a rigorous eight-point protocol to ensure that the most rigorous safety measures were adhered to. These included testing upon arrival, sanitisation stations, temperature checks, social distancing and 100% mask compliance. Cash transactions were also greatly reduced and digital payment methods boosted across the entire economy.

Communication and Covid tracking were massively ramped up as well, allowing rapid transfer of data between government, tourism and healthcare workers, visitors and members of the community. "We also trained 20,000 workers online in 11 different disciplines in relation to health logistics and customer care," Bartlett told The Guardian, measures which allowed the country to reopen by June 15.

### The epitome of resilience

All of these factors combined to make Jamaica the



With strict health requirements, social distancing has never been easier in Jamaica

epitome of "tourism resilience," Minister Bartlett told the Jamaica Gleaner in January 2021. Not only did its 'Resilient Corridors' cover 85% of the country's tourism hotspots; the country even went out of its way to cover the quarantine expenses of travellers who got the virus while on holiday. Even if that is "a situation that, in all fairness, we have to reexamine," according to Bartlett, it's still a sign of Jamaica's extraordinary commitment to responsible and resilient travel in the age of Covid.

Part of what makes Jamaica so perfect for resilient travel is the semi-isolated nature of much of its tourism industry. Secluded in the country's most beautiful geographical locations, tourists can get all the culture, music, cuisine and colour of the country without any of the traffic, noise or congestion of many developing cities and regions.

Since tourists do not interface directly with the community, Minister Bartlett reminds us, they are in a bubble of sorts. In normal times, this means no traffic, noise or unwanted solicitations. In stranger times such as these, this means far less exposure to Covid-19 – and far better quarantine conditions than anywhere else on earth should they contract it.

### Inclusiveness, safety and security

Few would deny how disastrous 2020 was for the country's industry. But as Minister Bartlett has repeatedly said: "Amid its disruptive effect, however, this crisis has presented us with a unique opportunity to craft a new vision for the future of the sector – one which will be built around inclusiveness, safety, security and seamlessness."

Among the recovery strategies the government has already implemented are the Agri-Linkages Exchange (ALEX) Project, which helps local farmers sell their produce to local hotels, resorts and restaurants; and the Rediscover Jamaica campaign, which is encouraging Jamaicans to take up local staycation packages to discover their own country and help make up for the plunge in international arrivals.

The latter has already shown great promise and prompted many hotels to plan for more permanent domestic demand going forward.

While officials originally feared the sector might not recover until 2023 or even 2024, advances such as these have given grounds for more cautious optimism. Not only have vaccination drives been highly successful in the US and UK, typically two of Jamaica's three-largest sources of international visitors, they also have by far the largest Ja-

maican diaspora communities.

As a source of remittances but also soft power, a million Jamaican-Americans and 300,000 in Britain help ensure a steady flow of traffic to the island, no matter the prevailing winds. In addition, airlines such as British Airways have increased their traffic to Jamaican airports, increasing the ease of travelling to the island.

As a final economic measure to protect workers in the sector, the government has also recently created the Tourism Workers Pension Scheme. Collecting 3% of employees' paychecks with matching contributions from employers, this figure goes up to 5% after three years, eventually allowing employees to contribute up to 20% of their income tax-free.

### Investors still keen

Minister Bartlett is right to point out that 90% of planned investments to increase hotel capacity are taking place despite the pandemic. "We are very comforted by the level of confidence that our investment partners still have in the destination," he told The Guardian.



"When you visit, you want that security that destinations are Covid-compliant, responding to protocols and, more importantly, that you are not likely to get infected."

Edmund Bartlett, Minister of Tourism

Not only are developers still able to break ground on the 2,000-room Princess Hotel in Green Island, a community just west of Montego Bay Airport, but the expansion of Oceans by H10, a five-star hotel in Trelawny, is also going forward, while the Hard Rock Casino is breaking ground on a 1,700-room facility 10 minutes east of the airport.

If investor sentiment is anything to go by, Jamaica could be back in action long before many had anticipated.



Jamaica's renowned musical legacy continues to influence new generations of artists

## A worldwide audience for Jamaican culture

Few nations can rival the rich and varied musical or culinary impact of Jamaica.

Jamaica's highly diverse and uniquely vibrant culture has an outsized international impact – especially when it comes to music: over the last 50 years, the island has been the birthplace of multiple genres that have been embraced by the world. These include mento, ska, rocksteady, dub, dancehall, ragga and – of course – reggae, which in 2018 was listed by UNESCO as an intangible cultural heritage icon of global importance due to its "contribution to international discourse on issues of injustice, resistance, love and humanity."

Indeed, since the late 1960s when Bob Marley and the Wailers, Toots and the Maytels, Lee "Scratch" Perry, Jimmy Cliff, Prince Buster and many others started breaking into the UK mainstream, reggae has contributed significantly towards the development of multi-cultural Britain. Over that time, the sound of Jamaica has also been a constant influence on UK artists from the Beatles through punk, Two Tone and drum 'n' bass to today's grime and contemporary jazz.

The impact of Jamaican music explains why Kingston's biggest tourist draws include the Bob Marley and Peter Tosh Museums, plus the original nucleus for reggae: Trench Town Culture Yard. Visiting music lovers are also keen to investigate Jamaica's current and future stars at one of the country's world-famous festivals like Reggae Sumfest and Jamaica Jazz and Blues, or at the many smaller events that take place during the year. Following in the footsteps of the early greats and later pioneers such as Shaggy and Sean Paul, a name on everyone's watch list is Koffee, who at 21 became the youngest recipient and first-ever female winner of the Best Reggae Album Grammy in 2020. At the vanguard of a new wave of reggae, Koffee has taken Jamaica by storm and was due to play Coachella and other international festivals before Covid caused their cancellation. Luckily, the pandemic has just delayed her plans to take her rightful place on the world's stages.

### Spicy, flavourful and fresh

Competing with music for the title of the most globally impactful element of Jamaican culture is one of the New World's finest and most diverse cuisines, which amalgamates indigenous traditions with a wide palate of African, Spanish, British, Indian, Chinese and other influences to create fabulous foods and drinks. What the world has the biggest appetite for at the moment

is jerk. Invented by runaway slaves in the 16th century as a way of cooking pork in covered fire pits to avoid smoke being spotted by Jamaica's British colonialists, many meats, fish, crustaceans and other edibles are now jerked, often in an oil drum, creating crisply barbecued treats, richly seasoned with hot peppers, allspice, thyme and ginger among other delights.

Today, anyone worth their salt has a jerk recipe, including Jamie Oliver, Nigella Lawson, Yotam Ottolenghi and James Cochran, the leading Caribbean-Scottish chef behind London's 12:51 restaurant who won the BBC's Great British Menu 2018 with his buttermilk jerk-spiced chicken served with scotch-bonnet pepper jam. Unfortunately, wherever you eat it in the UK, it's likely to be missing a key ingredient: the aromatic allspice wood used as fuel over which jerk is cooked at roadside shacks, family restaurants and fine-dining establishments all across Jamaica.

This variety of excellent eateries coupled with a burgeoning number of local chefs gaining international attention has made the island a foodie paradise for those wanting to go beyond jerk to experience more specialties, such as the national dish saltfish and ackee, a fruit that's also hard to find in the UK in its fresh form. An extensive bounty of other freshly harvested tropical fruits, vegetables, herbs, spices, shellfish and meats appear on Jamaican menus that are devised by chefs who are increasingly focused on organic farm- and sea-to-table experiences. A great place to taste the breadth of its cuisine and one of the world's best ice creams is the country's first gastronomic centre at Kingston's historic Devon House mansion.

Further products with global fans include award-winning chocolate, stunning coffee grown in the glorious Blue Mountains and unbeatable white, gold and dark rums. These are still made traditionally with local sugarcane and molasses by distillers like Wray & Nephew and Appleton, which dates back to 1749 and is the Caribbean's second-oldest rum producer. All these goods can be enjoyed in the comfort of your own home. Alternatively, you could sample them at the beautiful plantations where they are created by taking one of the country's gourmet tours or attend the annual festivals for coffee, rum and chocolate, where producers and chefs showcase their wares for locals and guests, giving you the opportunity to discover the full extent of Jamaica's cultural assets.

## Track and field's royalty

How has Jamaica achieved such a dominant position across a range of top-level sporting activities?

In August 2016, the world held its breath for 9.81 seconds as Usain Bolt shot down a track in Rio to become the first man to win the Olympic 100m three consecutive times. At the end of those games, the greatest sprinter in history also left Brazil with his third 200m Olympic gold, second 100m-relay gold and as the world record holder in all three events. According to Minister of Tourism Edmund Bartlett: "He's an outstanding ambassador for Jamaica. Bolt's talent and charismatic personality embody the spirit and resilience of Jamaican people."

Bolt is far from being Jamaica's only athletic ambassador, as it has punched well above its weight at the Olympics since 1948 when Arthur Wint won the 400m. Just a few of the phenomenal performances its stars have given us are Deon Hemmings' 400m hurdles win in 1996; Shelly-Ann Fraser-Pryce, Sherone Simpson and

Alia Atkinson made history as the first black woman to win a swimming world title in 2014. The list goes on, covering top-level accomplishments in netball, boxing and many more sports, including – as immortalised in the 1993 film *Cool Runnings* – bobsledding.

How does a nation of only 2.7m consistently produce this degree of sporting excellence? Various explanations have been put forward relating to elements such as genetics and environment. For Bolt, the answer is simple. "It's just that we have a good system. For years to come, we will have the great athletes to win."

Jamaica has indeed created a vast nurturing ecosystem for sport, with world-leading coaches, schools, sporting bodies, local communities and the government all dedicated to encouraging talent. A clear demonstration of this is the annual ISSA-GraceKennedy Boys and Girls Champs, the world's biggest high-school

"Bolt's talent and charismatic personality embody the spirit and resilience of Jamaican people."

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Kerron Stewart bagging all three medals in the 100m in 2008; and Bolt, Yohan Blake and Warren Weir achieving the same feat in the 200m at London 2012.

Overall in Rio, Jamaica netted 11 medals, putting it third on the athletics' medal table behind the US and Kenya. Despite Bolt's retirement, it hauled in another nine in Tokyo, with the standout performance probably being the one-two-three from reigning-champ Elaine Thompson-Herah, Fraser-Pryce and Shericka Jackson in the 100m.

But Jamaica's sporting prowess extends far beyond track and field. For example, the legacy of cricketers such as Courtney Walsh, Michael Holding and Chris Gayle lives on in players like Stafanie Taylor, currently captain of the West Indies women's team. In another much-loved sport, football, Jamaica became the smallest nation to win a FIFA World Cup finals' match when the Reggae Boyz beat Japan 2-1 in 1988, while

track-and-field competition. Every Spring over five days, more than 30,000 appreciative spectators create a carnival atmosphere in Kingston's National Stadium, while hundreds of young Jamaicans bid to become the next athletics superstars.

The island's visitors can also watch or participate in a myriad of other sporting activities, with its stunning scenery being the perfect backdrop for hiking, cycling or water sports, for instance. One joy-filled experience is December's Reggae Marathon, when thousands of global professionals, enthusiasts and beginners run to the beat of steel bands and sound systems. The marathon is a recent International Event of the Year for both Women's and Men's Running magazines, and the latter sums up Jamaica's unique offering: "Given a pre-dawn send off by a crescendo of drums, the atmosphere is infectious and the finish along Negril's famed seven-mile white-sand beach is definitely one you won't forget."



Jamaican athletes proved their strength the Tokyo Olympic Games



# A robust pandemic response prepares Jamaican tourism for strong rebound

We spoke with Donovan White, Director at the Jamaica Tourist Board, to discuss how the country's long-term advantages will help it overcome short-term Covid-related setbacks.

In 2013, Jamaica's political and economic leadership launched a bold and ambitious set of reforms to remake its economy, chiefly by reducing debt and fuelling growth. Both measures were widely praised in international financial markets. Then Covid-19 struck.

In the four years leading up to 2019, Jamaica saw annual growth rates in tourism of 6% a year and earning gains of nearly 10% per annum. "We were certainly on a trajectory to reach our goal of achieving five million arrivals and five billion in earnings by 2021," states the Director of the Jamaica Tourist Board, Donovan White. But fast forward a year, however, and travel was down by at least 75%. Its cash receipts of \$1.1bn – compared to nearly \$4bn in 2019 – were not far behind.

The country did see some progress in the last half of 2020, with 385,000 tourists spending some \$650m from June through December, but Director White does not expect things to reach 2019 levels for some time. "Looking further out into 2022, we are anticipating somewhere about 2.5m in total arrivals and about \$2bn in revenues," he says.

Of course, things could pick up even before then, White adds, "based on a number of factors that include the pace of vaccinations and how comfortable travellers become at returning to somewhat normal behaviour of vacationing and travelling for business." But all things remaining constant, he reckons a full recovery is unlikely to occur before late 2024 or 2025.

## Destination assurance

Historically, growth in tourism was contingent upon increasing bulk arrivals. But in the wake of Covid, says White, reassuring weary customers is the new key. "We have been one of the vanguards in destination assurance," he comments, "creating an environment where travellers feel a level of safety, security and seamlessness in terms of getting in and out of the country and moving around when they're here."

Just as people desperately want to eat and socialise within their 'social bubbles', Jamaica is positioning herself to become a destination bubble. Which is something she already has a great deal of experience in. With world-class Covid-preparedness training for over 20,000 tourism staff, the island has ensured that visiting its two 'Resilient Corridors' is as safe as visiting your neighbourhood grocery shop in any North American or European city.

"We are creating a destination that provides that assurance to travellers," says White, a destination that he hopes will pick up where it left off in 2019 when record numbers of British travellers visited. So far, the signs have been promising.

"In December 2020, our UK airline partners, British Airways, Virgin Atlantic and TUI, all increased their seat load capacity to Jamaica for the winter 2021 tourist season," he states.

"That gives us great confidence that the market will continue to grow." And while Jamaica has not specifically designed a digital-nomad-friendly visa,



A combination of sea, sun and adventure tourism offers travellers the breath of air they need



"As a vanguard in destination assurance, we have created an environment where travellers feel a level of safety, security and seamlessness when they're here."

Donovan White, Director of Tourism Jamaica Tourist Board

he says, some visitors can stay up to 90 days without any onerous paperwork.

## The real draw

The real thing that keeps people coming back to Jamaica is her greatest asset of all. As White and many others remind us: "Our most treasured value is our people. The stories we hear are replete with visitors being enamoured by our natural magnetic personas, deep-hearted kindness and our knack for going beyond expectations."

The numbers back this up. Jamaica has a repeat rate of 42% for travellers who visit the island. This is one of the reasons why travel of every kind flourished in the run-up to Covid-19: not merely personal and business, but meetings, incentives, conferences and exhibitions (MICE) travel too.

To be sure, the latter will have a difficult time recovering. For the time being, at least, we inhabit the

UK and US are also perfect conduits for spreading the word about the island's wonders, White points out. Not only do they return with frequency to the island, each time they come and go they reinforce the centuries-old bond between the two countries. "We are very grateful to our fellow Jamaicans who live outside of Jamaica, especially those in Britain. We work actively in the marketplace with them; we have a presence at and sometimes even sponsor diaspora events, which gives us even more access to markets."

When the world finally returns to normalcy, they will be the tip of the spear in getting their northern compatriots to come and relax a little in Jamaica. "Having been locked down twice or three times," White says, "when the markets do fully open up, holidaymakers can return to our shores to enjoy themselves and take a break from being in a pent-up situation."

In the meantime, the Jamaica Tourist Board is doing everything it can to prepare the country and industry for welcoming as many weary sun-seekers as soon as possible. "We know it's going to be a gradual recovery," he admits. "We are prepared for that. We are ensuring that we do all we can from an infrastructure perspective to protect ourselves, and to protect our natural resources and assets. We look forward to seeing UK visitors in Jamaica in 2021, and certainly in 2022 and beyond."

Business travel, to be sure, will take longer. "We know it's been hard trying to conduct business virtually, sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't," White says, "but we look forward to seeing those travellers as well making their way across the Atlantic to spend time with us doing business."

Though Jamaica's vaccination campaign only got underway in March, its mask-wearing, social-distancing measures and general hygienic practices have hugely mitigated the effect of the virus, he reassures potential visitors to the island.

## A little sun, a little solace

In taking stock of the last year and a half, one mustn't beat around the bush: every aspect of Jamaica's economy was deeply affected by the pandemic. Amidst these trying circumstances, however, the resolve of Jamaica's people shone through.

"Jamaica is and has been at the forefront of travel, at the forefront of tourism, and one of the most progressive and forward-thinking nations in the region," White comments. The huge investments being made in human and infrastructural capital are further evidence that her tourism sector will reach its goal of five million visitors sooner rather than later.

Until that happens, however, those who can get in now should consider themselves lucky: not every day is one of the world's greatest marvels not only safe and open for business, but devoid of crowds and too many holidaymakers as well. It's a perfect storm, one might say, of sand, beach, sun and music. Few places on Earth will be happier to see you once you are Covid-compliant.

age of Zoom and awkward failure-to-mute Skype sessions. But this shouldn't detract from the long-term investments in MICE infrastructure that will help the country rebound once travel itches are scratched. "Our investors and partners have invested heavily in their conference facilities," according to Director White, "and the amenities are attractive to MICE buyers."

The Jamaica Tourist Board's MICE sales team is also engaged with many large corporations that provide incentive travel as part of their employee compensation packages and as a way to motivate their global workforces, he states.

Add this to the country's natural attributes – "our music, our culture, our people" – and Jamaica is an ideal location. "We also have two large international airports that facilitate air connectivity into the island," says White, "which is second to none in this region." With easy access to Europe and North America, "it is relatively easy to connect into Jamaica from just about anywhere in the world."

This is why many are hopeful for a speedy recovery to MICE and other forms of business travel, too. The World Free Zone Organization is also scheduled to have its annual conference in Jamaica in 2022, a competitive bid it won two years ago in Barcelona.

Thanks to tireless work, thousands of workers in the industry were able to receive the training they needed to get the Resilient Corridors up and off the ground quickly. That comes as no surprise from a country that is consistently voted a top Caribbean destination. The Jamaica Tourist Board has also been voted number-one organisation of its kind in the Caribbean for 15 years running.

## The right stuff

Jamaica's thriving diaspora communities in the

# New UWI-based research centre to lead global debate on tourism resilience

Struck in partnership with the UN, World Bank, and IAD, UWI's Mona Campus now houses the most rigorous research centre in the region.

Housed at the University of the West Indies (UWI) in Kingston, the Global Tourism Resilience and Crisis Management Centre (GTRCMC) was established to address the most pressing issues facing tourism-dependent developing economies in a sustainable manner.

Born out of the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), the government of Jamaica, the World Bank Group and the Inter-American Development Bank at a conference on Jobs and Inclusive Growth: Partnerships for Sustainable Tourism in 2017, GTRCMC's goal is to "generate toolkits, guidelines and policies to assist with preparatory and recovery efforts of tourism stakeholders affected by climatic, pandemic, cyber-crime and cyber-terrorism related disruptions," said founder and co-chair of the GTRCMC, Minister of Tourism Edmund Bartlett.

For starters, the Centre aims to work in tandem with regional governments, universities and non-governmental organisations to track and anticipate climate-, terror-, pandemic- and other crisis-related disruptions and build a database of rapid-response policy measures to model how best to respond to each crisis' needs. Only that way can these disruptions be managed successfully and, if possible, averted, "not just in real time, but in nano time, so as to ensure the stability of the region," according to Bartlett.

From its headquarters at the Mona Campus of the UWI, it intends to coordinate the widest range of relevant policy discussions surrounding the issue of resilient tourism. As part of this effort, GTRCMC has also launched its own journal, the Journal of Tourism Resilience, which looks likely to become one of the most internationally recognised scholarly and technical journals when it comes to solving real-world problems for global tourism.

As with all Caribbean nations, Jamaica is particularly vulnerable to climatic and other natural disruptions. No one can afford to be complacent, least of all Jamaica. But despite the twin threat of climate change and global pandemic, Minister Bartlett is not only hopeful but downright optimistic about the broader Caribbean's prospects going forward, especially when seen in light of the powerful new research and coordination being carried out by GTRCMC.

"In the difficulties we have there's a promise," he told an online lecture audience of 80,000 in September 2020, "a promise for creativity and innovation and the real application of the human genius, which we're all instilled with. And that genius will come to work as we recover – and recover well." To do this, however, requires a global response. "The current situation facing [tourism-dependent] economies across the world of developing nations can only be described as a humanitarian crisis," Bartlett said. Not only did these economies

lose an average 12% of GDP in 2020; 130 countries in total had yet to receive a single dose of Covid vaccine by the end of that year.

Now, however, the situation is more positive. Jamaica has been receiving shipments of vaccines since March and Bartlett himself has played a prominent role in lobbying the global community on the issue of vaccine equity and its implications for inclusive worldwide recovery from the pandemic.

"It is imperative that the sector survives beyond this current crisis so that it can continue to fulfil its vital role as a significant catalyst of global economic recovery and growth. The solution lies within us all, but it is a matter of collective will, collective wisdom and collective innovativeness that will see us through," Bartlett believes.

The GTRCMC is seen as being a crucial collective hub for this solution, as it is focused not just on the current

"The solution lies within us all, but it is a matter of collective will, collective wisdom and collective innovativeness."

Edmund Bartlett, Minister of Tourism

crisis, but also on future challenges and new opportunities for the sector that will improve the tourism product as well as ensure the sustainability of tourism across the world.

Although only recently opened, GTRCMC has already broadened its geographic footprint with the establishment of collaborative satellite centres in various international regions. These are focused on issues relating to those regions, act as think tanks to develop possible solutions and they seamlessly share information with the central GTRCMC hub in Jamaica.

A key illustration of these satellites is located at the renowned Kenyatta University in Kenya and has responsibility for East Africa. This campus is now collaborating with the GTRCMC in Kingston to develop policy and conduct relevant research on destination preparedness, management and recovery from disruptions and crises.

Partnerships like this are "a huge leap for policy research and a truly exciting opportunity," according to Bartlett. "This is particularly relevant as we navigate and respond to the challenges brought on by the global Covid-19 pandemic. We must be at the forefront of coordinating responses, surveillance and monitoring, and organising economic relief efforts within and across borders. Collaborations such as this are both critical and timely."



Jamaica's two leading international airports compete every year to outdo one another

# Jamaica's airports stop at nothing to connect the dots

Even last winter, mid-tier cities across Europe and America added new flights to Jamaica.

Now with three fully serviced international airports, Jamaica is more accessible than at any time in its 500-year history. While Kingston boasts 18 nonstop destinations to 13 countries around the world, Montego Bay has direct flights to 37 cities in 14 countries worldwide. Not only can holiday makers from St. Louis, Calgary, Minneapolis and Montreal fly directly to Montego Bay; those in Zurich, Milan, Manchester and Amsterdam can too. From May-August 2019 alone, US airlines added an additional 100,000 non-stop seats to Jamaica, proof that the world's largest economy was more than sold on the Caribbean paradise: it was positively enamoured.

While 1.6 million people docked on the island during cruise stopovers, more than 2.7 million flew into one of Jamaica's three international airports in Kingston (Norman Manley), Montego Bay (Sangster), and Ocho Rios (Ian Fleming) in 2019. The number of international overnight stopovers represented an increase of 8.4% on the previous year, a number that was also reflected in the larger take-home Jamaicans got from every tourist dollar spent (an increase of 30 cents on the dollar in 2016 to 41 cents by 2019, according to the Ministry of Tourism). While the northeast of the US accounted for the greatest increase in flights to Jamaica, Belgium and Holland also saw their seat numbers increase by 5.6% that year – further proof that those from the greyest and wettest parts of the North Atlantic seem keenest on treating themselves to a little Jamaican sun.

"Sangster boasts direct flights to the US, UK, Mexico, Canada, Germany, Peru, Italy, Holland, Switzerland, Panama, Russia, Belgium and the Cayman Islands."

Audley Deidrick, President and CEO Airports Authority of Jamaica

Sangster International tells a different Jamaican success story. With non-stop flights to dozens of provincial American, Canadian and British cities, it's the first thing many see when they disembark in Jamaica. Providing direct access to Montego Bay, Ocho Rios and Negril, Sangster is in the business of dreams. Boasting direct flights to the US, Mexico, Canada, the UK, Germany, Peru, Italy, Holland, Switzerland, Panama, Russia, Belgium and the Cayman Islands, Sangster welcomed 4.8m passengers in 2019, up from 3.8m in 2015. Lastly, Ian Fleming International Airport caters to private jets visiting the northern coast's seaside communities.

Jamaica has a long and storied aeronautical tradition, with the island receiving its first commercial flight on Pan American Airways in 1930. Remarkably, its two largest airports, Norman Manley International, which serves Kingston, and Sangster International in Montego Bay, were both founded in 1948. Though Montego Bay, which serves the tourist-friendly northern coast, went on to become the busier –



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