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Feeling irie in the authentic Caribbean

TRAVEL Jamaica is the Caribbean's most diverse destination. And a host of new ways to enjoy it has boosted arrivals, writes **Gary Noakes**.

I T MAY NOT BE as popular with footballers and reality show judges as Barbados is today, but 60 years ago Jamaica was the great celebrity hideaway.

Its association with former residents Sir Noel Coward, James Bond creator Ian Fleming and their set is often overlooked in favour of Jamaica's most famous name, Bob Marley, but the period enjoyed by the two

authors is just as important in shaping the island's history. The other great historical influence, the plantation era, may be less palatable, but it adds another dimension to what is undoubtedly one of the most culturally rich Caribbean destinations.

Next year, Jamaica becomes the first Caribbean island to mark the 50th anniversary of independence, an event in which the three names will doubtless figure heavily.

A raft of tourism developments will also mark the anniversary. Chief among these is the Palmyra and Celebration

Jamaica projects, a real estate and hotel development along a kilometre of beachfront at Rose Hall near Montego Bay. Celebration Jamaica, at \$1.8 billion, is the island's largest ever private investment. The developers believe the 65-acre site will transform the image of this part of the island. It will include Jamaica's first casino hotel, a 1,500-room property that will be run by a major brand; plus a 13-acre water park, luxury yacht marina and entertainment complex. Villas and suites at The Palmyra Solis Resort & Spa are already being marketed under the banner of The Leading Hotels of the World.

Sandals, the best-known Jamaican hospitality brand, is meanwhile working on its 13th property on the island, a renovation project in Port Antonio, which will be run under the Beaches family brand. Sandals chairman Butch Stewart, who has bet big on his homeland, describes its location as "probably the prettiest spot in Jamaica."

Sandals is spearheading the upgrade of the island's accommodation. "We have spent, over the last four and a half years, in the area of \$260 million upgrading, modernizing, refurbishing and refining," Stewart says. With his "Luxury Included" mantra, Stewart says he has made it his business to provide more than guests expect, and business that grew through the recession and industry-busting repeat custom is evidence, he says, that people like what they get.

The flurry of investment from big-name hotel companies follows an appeal from tourism authorities.

"Tourism couldn't grow unless we had more hotel rooms," says Elizabeth Fox, the Jamaica Tourist Board UK and Northern Europe regional director. The

appeal saw Iberostar alone recently open three properties at once in Montego Bay. It has paid off: visitor numbers were up 14% year on year in February.

Other developments mean Jamaica now offers two very different ways of arriving. Since last month, the world's two biggest cruise ships, Royal Caribbean's 5,400-passenger Oasis of the Seas and Allure of the Seas have docked at a renovated former sugar and slave port, now known as Historic Falmouth Port, between Ocho Rios and Montego Bay.

In contrast, two boutique resorts are now more reachable by air. Jake's, a rustic hideaway on the south coast, now has its own airstrip, cutting a four-hour transfer from Montego Bay to 45 minutes. The former Boscobel Aerodrome, 10 minutes from the newly renovated and extended GoldenEye Hotel & Resort, where Ian Fleming lived, re-opened in January. The airstrip, renamed after him, now accommodates private jets.

In Kingston, there is now a long-overdue boutique alternative to big chain hotel brands. The Spanish Court Hotel's colonial exterior belies its zen interior, although the glass mosaic infinity pool is a hint of what's inside.

Away from the cities, Jamaica's history and biodiversity invites exploration. Perhaps the most famous natural attraction is Dunn's River Falls, one of the world's few waterfalls to empty into the sea, but a less crowded alternative is the YS Falls on the south coast. Deeper inland are the Blue Mountains, peaking at 7,500 feet, which provide a rare opportunity in the Caribbean for some serious hiking. Part of this area is the Caribbean's premier coffee-producing region and the location of Strawberry Hill, a plantation house that

overlooks the lights of Kingston.

Strawberry Hill is another property converted into a boutique hotel by Island Outpost, which also runs Jake's and GoldenEye. Owner Chris Blackwell made his fortune from his Island Records label, as much a part of Jamaica as jerk chicken, but Blackwell is most famous as the man who brought reggae to the world in the shape of Bob Marley.

Marley's music is ubiquitous in Jamaica, but to really understand his influence culturally and politically, you must visit his house in Kingston, now

a museum of his life, complete with "medicinal herb" patch.

The music, street slang and lifestyle in Jamaica should make it an easy sell to grumpy teenagers as a family holiday, particularly when you add around 170 adventure options, including quad biking, tubing and swimming with stingrays. What will probably grab them most, however, is careering down Mystic Mountain on the famous bobsled run. Sir Noel might have flinched, but Ian Fleming would doubtless approve.