

GUIDEBOOK → JUST BACK



A jutting cliff at Rockhouse makes a perfect platform for a dive into the waters below.

ZACH STOVALL

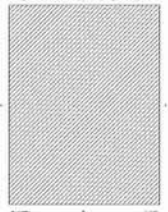
Double Happiness

In Negril, Jamaica, quiet cliffside inns and bustling beach hotels offer the best of both worlds.

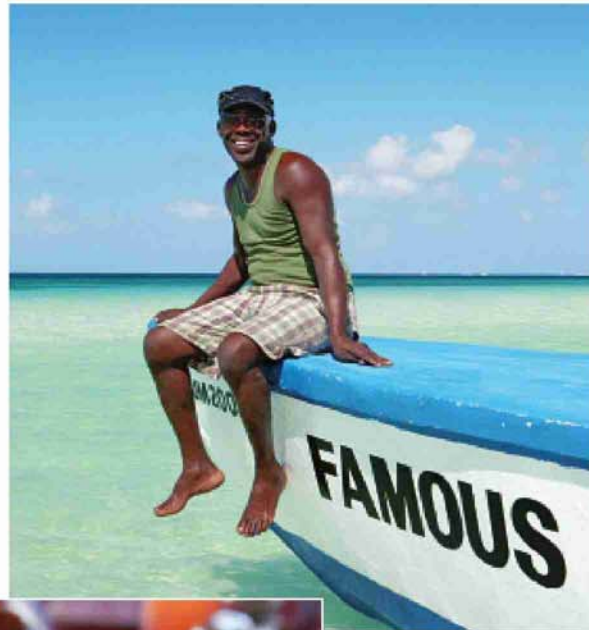
BAD EIGHTIES ROCK BLARES OVER THE SOUND SYSTEM AS THE crowd of onlookers thickens at the water's edge. Above them, a sunburned woman wearing a black bathing suit that looks as though it's been shredded by a tiger's claw teeters on a small stone platform set into the cliff, working up the courage to launch herself into the sparkling blue water 30 feet below. Nervously she peers over the edge. She hands her Red Stripe to her husband, steps off the platform and literally takes the plunge, shrieking at the top of her lungs the whole way down. It's a scene that's been playing out for 37 years at **Rick's Café**, the classic Negril happy-hour hot spot that clings to the cliffs like a beauty mark on the westernmost end of this, the westernmost city in Jamaica. The affable bar is famous for the island's best sunset views, but even more so for its pre-dusk entertainment: tipsy tourists leaping into the sea and Rick's own crew of toned expert divers, who somersault into the water from heights of up to

100 feet, encouraged by the cheers (and tips) of the mesmerized crowd.

Sunset at Rick's is a must-do experience in this laid-back resort town, which has drawn sun-seeking bohemians since the 1970s. Today there's only one pressing decision facing visitors: whether to stay on the sandy shores of the seven-mile strip or in one of the petite inns lining the craggy West End. Beach resorts put you within wading distance of the azure sea, but what the West End lacks in sand, it more than makes up for in setting. Perched dramatically on limestone cliffs, hotels here are generally smaller, more hip and less conventional than their brand-name beachfront counterparts, and most have pedestals with ladders that offer direct access to the >>



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clear turquoise water. But there's really no need to compromise: Split your stay between both locations, and enjoy both sides of this perennially popular town.

Rock On Among the most chic resorts on the West End is **The Caves**, which transports guests to a whimsical fairy-tale world where rooms set in baby-blue- and purple-painted buildings are embellished with wooden moldings of vine and flower cutouts, headed lamps, brightly painted trunks and mosquito-netted beds. Stone paths wind serpentine-like through the lushly vegetated property, which comes by its name honestly; the cliffs upon which it sits abound with secret caves and crannies. For the most romantic meal of your life (we promise), request dinner in the cave where a table for two is carved out of the bedrock. Dine by the glow of dozens of tea lights, with the nearby crashing surf the only sound.

Farther west is West End newcomer **Moon Dance Cliffs**. Unlike most of the area's hotels, which are situated directly on the edge of the cliffs, Moon Dance is set back from the shore and features a gigantic labyrinthine pool and a pristinely manicured lawn perfect for weddings. The 33 rooms and villas, decorated in an earthy color palette of oranges and greens, are redolent of the local cedar used to make the modern furnishings, and flat-screen TVs share wall space with local art.

Eastward Bound As you make your way from the West End to the beach, stop for



dinner at **Rockhouse**. The boutique inn, well-loved for its comfortable thatch-roof villas and philanthropic efforts in the community, serves some of the best food in town. Take a seat on the cliff's-edge, tiki-torch-lit deck and order the Dapper Snapper, a steamed red snapper fillet wrapped in a banana leaf. Afterward, pop into the resort's small gift shop to browse a well-edited selection of clothing, jewelry, artwork, candles and essential oils, almost all of it handcrafted in Jamaica. Ladies will covet the adorable Callaloo line, featuring breezy sundresses

and handbags of bright, flowered fabrics embellished with sequin butterflies.

Downtown, on the main road toward Savanna-la-Mar, enjoy some of the best escovitch fish ever to scorch your palate at **Sweet Spice**, a lunchtime spot popular with locals and in-the-know visitors. The decor is best described as eclectic, with plastic flowered tablecloths, white lace curtains straight out of grandma's house and glass Christmas ornaments dangling from the ceiling year-round. But don't let the ambience distract you from the sumptuous food. Tuck into the fried escovitch

- **EAT** // **Kuyaba**; lunch from \$9; 876-957-4318; kuyaba.com // **Rick's Café**; entrées from \$14; 876-957-0380; rickscafejamaica.com // **Rockhouse**; entrées from \$10; 876-957-4373; rockhousehotel.com // **Sweet Spice**; entrées from \$7; 876-957-4621
- **STAY** // **Beaches Negril**; from \$398 per adult in low season (\$414 high), from \$105 per child; 888-232-2437; beaches.com // **The Caves**; from \$445 in low season (\$608 high); 800-688-7678; islandoutpost.com // **Moon Dance Cliffs**; from \$185 in low season (\$260 high); 800-621-1120; moondanceresorts.com // **Sandals Negril**; from \$453 per person in low season (\$478 high); 888-726-3257; sandals.com
- **PLAY** // **Famous Vincent**; two-hour tours from \$65; book at hotel.

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Sunbathe on the rocks at the new Moon Dance Cliffs resort. Opposite, clockwise from right: Capt. Vincent declares his renown; enjoying a snapper sandwich at Kuyaba; a whimsical welcome to The Caves.

drizzled with a spicy vinaigrette or a plate of curried chicken, then wash it down with a homemade drink, such as Irish Moss — a local delicacy made of seaweed that’s believed to boost virility.

Seven-Mile Sojourn Seven miles — give or take — of warm, welcoming sand fringes Negril, its western end rich with small guesthouses and restaurants such as **Kuyaba**. Snag one of the hammock swings that sub for bar stools at this funky joint, or grab a seat on the multilevel waterfront wooden deck for a lunch of brown stew chicken or a snapper fillet sandwich.

Farther along busy Norman Manley Boulevard, the main drag that runs parallel to the shore, **Beaches Negril** resort is a boon for those traveling with kids in tow. The beach here is wide and dazzling white, and there’s no shortage of things to do, from Xbox playoffs at the gaming

center to scratching school at the DJ Academy. The water park alone, with two enormous slides, should keep kids happy for days. With five restaurants, the requisite palapa-shaded swim-up bar and a Red Lane spa, the enclave will please parents as much as little ones. (Be sure to snap shots of dad posed in the trash can next to a statue of Oscar the Grouch.)

Couples seeking romance flock to **Sandals Negril** — think of the adults-only resort as the heavily spiked rum punch equivalent to Beaches’ Shirley Temple. Six restaurants, five bars, a spa and three pools keep lovers entertained. The one-bedroom Crystal Lagoon suites, with mahogany four-poster beds, cozy sitting areas and a swim-up pool right outside the patio door, are the ultimate luxury. Food can be an afterthought at some all-inclusives, but Sandals impresses with eateries such as Sundowner, where the

pumpkin soup, smoked marlin appetizer and pork tenderloin are divine.

Water World Get on the water aboard one of the many glass-bottom boats that ply the sea just offshore. You can’t miss **Famous Vincent**’s vivid ride — just look for his name splashed in bold capital letters on both sides of his small red and blue boat. He’ll pick you up at your hotel — beachside or cliffside — and ferry you to the reef for snorkeling or take you on a tour of the West End to check out the cliff-hugging properties from the water. The best part of the outing is Vincent himself, who happily entertains guests with stories of his past. “How did you become ‘Famous?’” you may ask. “I was captain of a boat named *Cecilia*,” he says. “I thought, why not paint *Famous Vincent Cecilia* on her side?” He’s one of a kind, just like Negril. — BECKY STRAUSS