

There's a side to Jamaica many tourists never see

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For *The Financial Post*

PORT ANTONIO, Jamaica — Montego Bay for the music and Negril for the skin, but for touch of serene peacefulness you must follow your compass to Jamaica's northeast coast to discover the sleepy town of Port Antonio. Once a haughty and naughty playground for the likes of Clara Bow, Bette Davis and Ginger Rogers, Errol "in like" Flynn reportedly described it as "more beautiful than any woman I've ever seen."

Flynn did exaggerate a bit, but ever so slightly. Undeniably, Port Antonio is still an attractive holiday haven for the rich and famous who prefer the town's tranquil beaches and unsophisticated tourist infrastructure to Negril's hedonism and Montego Bay's pulsating nightlife.

A 2½ hour drive from Kingston, Port Antonio, population 15,000, rests north of the verdant Blue Mountain Range, high above the twin harbors of Puerto San Francisco and Puerto Anton.

Virtually undiscovered by mass tourism, Port Antonio has probably not changed much since Flynn and friends held night parties rafting down the Rio Grande, the island's longest river.

Unfortunately, downtown Port Antonio itself is not a welcoming sight for tourists. The 30-odd streets, framed with makeshift merchant stalls and unkempt buildings, dress the town in a rather grey light. And it has little to offer for shoppers. Apart from the farmers' and craft markets, where you can buy a few souvenirs and music tapes, there are no designer shops to be found.

Port Antonio has remained a sleepy fishing village with several churches, a tax office, a courthouse, five banks, bakeries and one historic monument to mark the main intersection at Harbor Street. There are many family-run eateries that serve only Jamaican cuisine, but most visitors tend to frequent the hotel dining rooms. As far as nightlife is concerned, the Roof, a dingy, reggae disco is virtually the only place for after-hours activity.

But when we speak of Port Antonio, it's not the business centre that's referred to. For most



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The castle of the Trident Hotel offers Victorian charm at US\$7,000 per night.

visitors, Port Antonio means four things: the Rio Grande, the Trident Hotel, the Blue Lagoon and eco-tourism.

Rafting down the Rio Grande is a meditative experience. For US\$45 (for two), a raftsman skillfully navigates you down the quiet river on a 2½-hour scenic journey through one of Jamaica's lushest territories, telling stories of how the locals once floated bananas down the Rio to market, and tales of Flynn's frolics. If you're lucky you might be able to see women washing laundry on the river and bathing their children.

The Blue Lagoon Resort, completely destroyed by Hurricane Gilbert in 1988 and rebuilt in 1995, boasts its own helicopter landing pad, 12 palatial waterfront villas that rent for US\$3,000 a week, a mineral pool and its main attraction — a 60-metre, soft-blue lagoon, a favorite spot for water sports.

Aside from its ecological attraction, safety is important to upscale travellers who deliberately choose to stay in Port Antonio's finest guest houses or hotels, which provide 24-hour security service.

One of the most famous of the high-priced

hotels — an attraction itself really — is the Trident, which has served such guests as John F. Kennedy Jr., Tom Cruise and Whoopi Goldberg. A regular guest is Flynn's widow, Patrice Wymore, who lunches most Sundays with property owner Earl Levy.

Trident is not elegant by European standards, but it does offer Victorian charm and grace. It has been the choice for many Hollywood films, including *Cocktail* and *Club Paradise*. Each room has a view of the sea. Guests can go to sleep dreaming of the waves pounding against the rocky volcanic coast.

But the Trident's real gem is its eight-bedroom white castle, built by Levy as his personal getaway home 12 years ago. The castle is rented out for US\$7,000 a night. Villas rent for US\$700 a night.

A sorry reminder of a bad investment is Frenchman's Cove. Built in 1956 by Grainger Weston as the ultimate luxury resort for the wintering rich, it couldn't sustain his vision. All that remains is its beautiful beach.

Since the 1880s luxury has been a big selling point for Port Antonio, but it now wants to mar-

ket itself more aggressively as an eco-tourist destination.

Although three-quarters of Jamaica's forests have been depleted, 77,000 hectares of forest reserve in the John Crow Blue Mountain National Park have remained relatively untouched and unexplored.

To date, mostly European tourists have ventured this far to trek cold mountain trails to catch sight of the largest butterfly in the Americas — the Giant Swallowtail, with a 15-centimetre wing span — and the Jamaican Hutia, a rat-like mammal. The area also has many caves including Non-Such caves, popular with spelunkers.

In keeping with the "leave nothing but footprints, kill nothing but time" concept, a new Port Antonio hotel, the Mocking Bird Hill, is catering to environment-friendly tourists. Unlike other hotels, the Mocking Bird asks its guests to be kind to this earth by taking batteries home with them. The hotel uses reusable cotton laundry bags instead of plastic and garbage is sorted daily for recyclables.

Unfortunately, neglected road maintenance makes the journey along the coastal road a treacherous one, with plenty of fast drivers, hairpin curves and dangerous potholes.

If you're driving to Port Antonio from Kingston and need to take a break from the rough ride, stop off at Boston Bay, 20 minutes east of Port Antonio. This is the place to come for the island's best jerk pork — made from a 19th-century recipe.

An expensive option to surface travel is to hire a helicopter to lift you from Kingston airport to Port Antonio. Available at US\$700 an hour, the pilot will fly you and a companion to Port Antonio in less than 15 minutes.

The Arawak Indians called Jamaica the land of wood and water, because of the island's many forests, rivers, waterfalls and streams. Unfortunately, only a few tourists are familiar with this side of Jamaica, but as the island experiments with the concept of eco-tourism, and holidayers abandon the idea of amusing themselves to death with artificial surroundings, Port Antonio can once again become the belle of Jamaica's high-end travel destinations.