



Kingston, Jamaica's capital city tucked between the Blue Mountains and the Caribbean Sea, is seeing a creative rebirth as artists, chefs, and musicians open new ventures.

**TRAVEL**

# Kingston is making a comeback as culture capital of Jamaica

Bob Marley helped create a musical mecca. Now the city is betting that a vibrant mix of art, food, and heritage will restore its title as a cultural epicenter of the Caribbean.

By Matt Meltzer

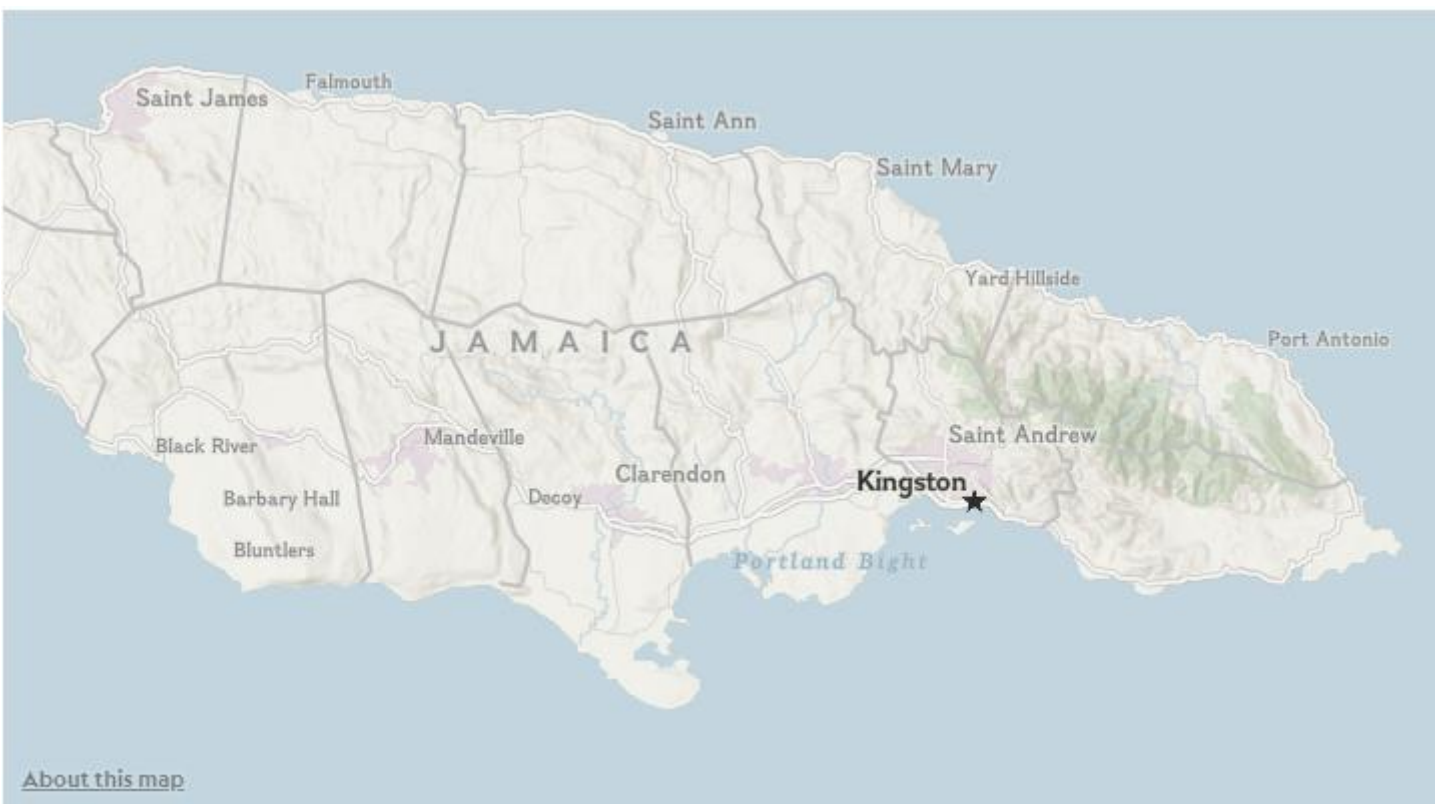
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In the 1960s, Kingston, Jamaica, was a musical mecca, where Bob Marley, Toots Hibbert, and other artists were drawn by the recording studios and record shops lining so-called Beat Street. But political unrest and rampant crime marred the following decades. Now downtown Kingston is forging a comeback as a Caribbean cultural capital.

“This place is just buzzing,” says Janet Crick, the deputy director of Kingston Creative. The nonprofit is responsible for the colorful concourse covered in murals of Jamaican landscapes and icons that runs from the National Gallery of Jamaica to the museum district. “We’ve done tremendous work in the past six years, and bit by bit we’re stripping off some of the negative images that have become attached to Kingston.”

While the tourist impression of the island is frequently limited to all-inclusive resorts and reggae music, Kingston is where the creative spirit of the island lives. It’s cleaned up its urban core so artists, chefs, and musicians throughout the region can showcase their talents. Here’s what’s new in Jamaica’s capital city.





# A new hotel signifies rebirth

The centerpiece of downtown's revival is the ROK Hotel, an acronym for "Rebirth of Kingston" but also a nod to a Scandinavian term for "room and kitchen." The capital's lone Hilton Tapestry property stands on the waterfront as an icon of urban resurgence; its restaurant Palate has won multiple awards as best in the nation.

"The vision is to bring Kingston back as this epicenter of the Caribbean," says Marlene Bruckridge, ROK's director of sales and marketing. "We're a city of culture, and it's important that people know Jamaica isn't just sun and sand."



Chefs at Palate at the ROK Hotel Kingston combine a farm-to-table ethos with the vibrant flavors of the Caribbean, featuring dishes such as jerk lamb lollipops and passionfruit coconut seafood crudo.

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY ROK HOTEL KINGSTON, TAPESTRY COLLECTION BY HILTON

As we sip pinot grigio beside the hotel's rooftop pool, she explains that the government plans to build along the waterfront and that Caribbean cellular giant Digicel has moved its offices a few blocks away.

"Kingston is the only place in Jamaica you can go to where everything is raw," says Bruckridge. "It's not watered down."

# A changing food culture

Port Royal, Kingston's historic seaport district, just opened a new cruise terminal, which Donovan White, director of tourism at the Jamaica Tourist Board, says has been instrumental in the city's recent revival. But on this cool night in early November, the ships are a distant afterthought as the Historic Naval Dockyard hosts its annual Jamaica Food and Drink Festival, which showcases Kingston's booming dining scene.

"The idea of going out to eat was not common," says festival director Alicia Bogues. "Eating out was a treat, and if you were going out to eat, it was fast food or Chinese food. Now we have complete eateries; you can go to any marketplace, and there's a whole slew of restaurants."

Chief among those spots is Broken Plate, where chef Damion Stewart takes culinary inspiration from his travels and incorporates Jamaican twists. Simon Levy and Doms Pearson of Roast Specialty Meats are putting similar spins on barbecue, slow smoking meats alongside sweetie peppers, bacon jams, and scotch bonnet rum. At Jamaica Food & Drink Kitchen, guests can take classes from chef Celeste Gordon on incorporating the island's flavors into global cuisine.

Despite the rise of chef-driven concepts, Bogues insists the city's Caribbean take on Chinese food is still its distinguishing culinary style, thanks to the island's sizable Chinese population.

"Scotch bonnet-infused soy sauce is mandatory at a Chinese restaurant," she says. "Each restaurant has their take on the popular dishes, but I think they're always incorporating elements of what we love as Jamaicans: big, bold flavors with heat."



Patties—golden crescents stuffed with beef, curry chicken, or vegetables—are still a must-try while in the capital, but they're far from Kingston's only street food to sample. Pan chicken is the late-night snack of choice, a modern adaptation of jerk chicken cooked over coal in a repurposed oil drum. For something more adventurous, sample chicken foot soup, a rich broth served with veggies like corn, peas, and carrots. Bag Dawg Sausages has recently introduced the aroma of grilled bratwurst and onions to Kingston's streets.

## Arts renaissance

Enjoy these delicacies while strolling mural-lined Water Lane, a testament to the visual arts' return to downtown. On the last Sunday of every month, Kingston Creative hosts a free public art walk where musicians and dancers join the artists who made the murals for a daylong cultural showcase. The new event has played a big part in bringing people back to the urban core.



More than 60 murals by local artists have gone up on the walls of buildings in downtown Kingston and Water Lane, many of which, like the one pictured here, celebrates Jamaica's musical heritage.

PHOTOGRAPH BY NORBERT EISELE-HEIN, ALAMY

“People were saying, ‘Hey, why don’t we turn some of these areas into art and create interest, so people would want to come and [experience] our culture?’” says Dwayne Little, curatorial assistant at the National Gallery of Jamaica. The gallery is downtown’s artistic centerpiece, a two-story museum carved out of an old department store.

White says new highways are connecting traditional tourism destinations like Ocho Rios with Kingston, so visitors to the beaches and waterfalls in the north can immerse themselves in Jamaican culture by driving only an hour south.

“There’s so much to do now,” says White. “With our cultural activities, music festivals, and access to the city, Kingston has turned into a metropolis in the Caribbean people want to be a part of.”