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RECONNECTING YOU WITH YOUR ISLAND

Dear Reader,

Letter from Jamaica No. 8 Kingston uncovered

This month, I thought you might enjoy a visit to your capital city. This Letter from Jamaica encourages you to see Kingston in a different light. It's a city I have visited many, many times over the course of 20-odd years. I hope the Letter encourages you to plan a visit soon – and to enjoy the many delights.

But, if I had listened to the waitress at breakfast, I'd have spent the day inside the safe, air-conditioned environs of the quintessentially English hotel opposite Emancipation Park in New Kingston. "Don't go Downtown, dem will have your money, maybe your life!" Well, I've heard the tales of begging, robbery and violence many times before. And to me, old Kingston has so much to offer.

Fortified by the fresh fruit and deliciously delicate ackee & saltfish breakfast, I set off to walk the mile and a bit to Downtown – armed only with my floppy WICC maroon sunhat and expensive camera. With almost no cloud and 30 degrees at 8am, the hat is vital. The air is crisp and clear. Traffic is heavy; crawling, but still honking. Honking almost incessantly; but not aggressively. "Jamaica, no problem!" honking is a more subtle form of communication than the irritated and aggressive horn blowing so often heard in Britain.

Passing down the increasingly less glitzy Half Way Tree and Slipe roads, I enter Orange Street and almost immediately feel the refreshing cool breeze coming out of the world's seventh largest natural harbour. If this is the Gulf Stream that keeps Britain warmer than much of northern Europe, it's doing well at cooling me down!

In Jamaica's 50th year of independence from Britain, I am here to record some of the sites of the capital. Ward Theatre on the northern side of St. William Grant Park is an Edwardian relic that has seen better days but still pulls in the crowds. Unlike some other old buildings, it's far from a shell. Inside the park, the statues of Alexander Bustamante and his cousin Norman Washington Manley are of immediate interest. As we all know,



they each founded a political party, in the late 1930s / early 1940s – the Jamaica Labour Party and the People’s National Party respectively. These two of Jamaica’s seven “National Heroes” also played pivotal parts in the writing of our constitution - and the National Pledge and National Anthem. Even now, children across the island still learn the last two by rote.

I soon encounter what seems like an endless stream of interruptions. Persons calling out or tapping me on the shoulder. What are they after? Was the waitress right all along? Highway robbery or Kingston’s myriad of beggars, aged five upwards? But, no, persons are simply asking whether I might take their picture. They turn out to be extremely good at posing for the camera. Having now acquired a fan club of young females, for good measure I snap the statue of Queen Victoria.



Heading north up nearby East Street I reach National Heroes Park, in Heroes Circle. Not having visited previously, I am stunned by the setting. I have neither heard about nor seen anything quite like this anywhere in the world. The body of each of the seven

heroes lies in its own mausoleum, together spanning half a mile or so of the former national horse racing track. Each mausoleum is uniquely designed to convey the grandeur of the hero, but in a modern setting. Apart from the two aforementioned, herein lieth Marcus Garvey, Nanny of the Maroons, Sam Sharpe, Paul Bogle and William Gordon. All bar the former fought – and died – in struggles against slavery, slave masters and the British in general. Garvey, of course, fought oppression, writing much and helping to form the Pan-African movement. Despite the demands of many of us, Bob Marley is not yet a National Hero. But like Marley, Usain Bolt doesn’t need the official title to be regarded as such by most of us!



As the mid-day sun approaches, I flag a taxi to get back to the hotel. Local taxis - as distinct from those based at tourist hotels - across the island are cheap and frequent. That said, you do have to share the space with lots of persons and their shopping. I squeeze into the back.

Collecting my own car from the hotel car park, I am soon heading east along the harbour. With wind in my hair, sun on my skin, I am almost breathless as I admire Long Mountain. Picking up speed, I imagine myself in a James Bond scene – of which quite a few have been shot on the island, not least for “Dr No” in 1962. Turning south after a

few miles, I am on to The Palisadoes – a thin, very long strip of land that arcs back around Kingston, like an enormous arm keeping the waves at bay. Geographers call it a “tombolo”.

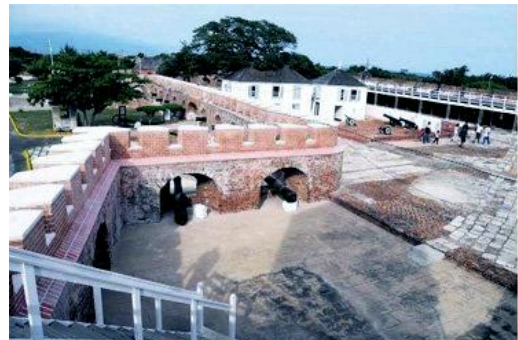
The Palisadoes contains an incredible array of micro - and not so micro - wildlife. In



Britain, it would be a Site of Special Scientific Interest, or some such. In Jamaica, lots of persons – both volunteers and international bodies - are helping the Natural Environment and Planning Agency to protect and restore habitats. But the tense relationship between environmental protection and the life of a modern city are all too evident in the enormous boulders that are being installed to bolster the protective barrier.

I am briefly reminded of the environmental delights of the Royal Botanical Gardens in Hope Pastures, near the old university. But that is for another day. I continue, passing Norman Manley International Airport – the place where James Bond first arrived in film anywhere outside Britain - then known as the Palisadoes Airport. Heading on and on for several more miles, I near the end of the road – and the end of Jamaica itself. Port Royal hosts a marine laboratory and a few houses and shops. But I am here to see Fort Charles, with its canons still poking out to the Caribbean Sea, guarding the country from pirates and any would-be Spanish re-invaders for the last 350 years or so. Nearby there’s also the Giddy House – a prime example of our tendency to be quite literal when naming things or people, as in “Hey, Short Man!”. The Giddy House is half sunken, now standing at an acute angle to the ground.

As dusk begins to settle, I head for the bar at nearby Morgan’s Harbour Hotel. This is the place where Byron Lee and the Dragonaires play “Jump Up, Jump Up” in “Dr No”. Sitting by a low sea wall sipping rum, admiring the enormous Blue Mountains as they shelter Kingston from twenty miles to the north-east, my eye is suddenly aware of movement very close to me. I sense a sizeable object that seems to be in the water, but I cannot understand the lack of noise. Perhaps a James Bond-style submersible? On closer inspection, I am both startled and mesmerized by the size and elegance of the almost circular Stingray fish gliding just under the surface of the clear, blue sea.



Instead of dining at Morgan’s Harbour, I head back Uptown. Beyond my hotel and past the numerous glitzy shopping malls, where Waterloo Road meets Trafalgar Road, is Devon House. Here there are two excellent restaurants, both with good wine. I opt for Grogg’s, where you can dine under an ancient tree with the only discernible noise in the

midst of this still busy city coming from the constant “cricking” – almost humming – of hundreds of unseen, seemingly invisible crickets. Forget the nearby traffic, you could be in deepest bush. As always, the staff offer excellent service. Customer service across Jamaica is seen as a chronic, near endemic problem. In fast-food places, high street and corner shops, parish council offices and the like, staff (and managers) often seem to lack any understanding of service to the customer, or of the customer being king. But if you pay a near-western price, you will often get very good service – even if the staff still don’t get much more than the £40 or so a week minimum wage.

After the meal of steamed snapper and mashed sweet potato, I wander around the elegant terrace and shops that form the rest of Devon House – the former home of the first West Indian millionaire of African descent, the Hon. George Stiebel. Even at 9.30pm, the queue at the local ice cream parlour (selling “I-Scream”) seems as long as ever – and for very good reason.



Just a few blocks away is Red Bones Blues Club. The live music plays most nights and can be out of this world. You can also dine there. With the British High Commission also round the corner, you are likely to encounter a few British civil servants among the many jazz aficionados. Once midnight has passed, you will find many motorists failing to stop at traffic lights – an unofficial way of bolstering their security, if not their safety. There are, however, plenty of security staff at most venues along with plenty of police officers on the beat.

Returning to the Courtleigh Hotel in Knutsford Boulevard, I am looking forward to tomorrow’s West Indies’ game at Sabina Park – and dreaming of a great day just gone.

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PS. If you enjoyed this Letter from Jamaica, please forward to friends - and encourage them to register by emailing me. Thanks, Stuart