

Blue Mountains & Southeast Coast



Kissing the sky over the eastern half of Jamaica, the majestic Blue Mountains throw the rest of the island into sharp relief. Barely an hour's drive from Kingston, their slopes, crags and fern forests seem light years from the capital's gritty streetscape. Some 2000m above sea level, the ruggedness of the mountains forms the perfect counterpoint to beachside hedonism.

Hiking in the Blue Mountains is the best way to get to know them. Climbing Blue Mountain Peak rewards with striking panoramas (weather permitting) across the entire island; less arduous treks to Cinchona Gardens or through the Holywell Recreation Area offer wonderful samples of the region's plantlife. Sixty-five distinct species of orchid are among the more than 200 endemic plants that grace the mountains. The bird-watching here is equally stunning – look out for the yellow-billed parrot and the streamtail hummingbird (also known as the doctor bird). If you're really lucky, you may catch sight of the endangered giant swallowtail butterfly, the second largest butterfly on earth.

As for human life, you'll find the residents of the area west of the peak preoccupied with growing one of Jamaica's most famous crops: coffee. Several working plantations reveal the nuances of the cultivation process, culminating in a cup or two of Blue Mountain Coffee – which tastes even more heavenly when you can smell the beans from a nearby field.

Largely ignored by tourists, the parish of St Thomas lies in the shadow of the Blue Mountains. Site of the 1865 Morant Bay Rebellion, it is home to the ramshackle old spa town of Bath. If you have time for exploration, you should definitely try to make it through the mangrove fields to the lighthouse at Morant Point, the island's easternmost tip.

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Strawberry Hill** Reward yourself with a meal, spa treatment or night of romance at one of Jamaica's best hotels (p114)
- **Blue Mountain Peak** Set out before dawn for the greatest high in Jamaica (p119)
- **Old Tavern Estate** See how a red berry is transformed into the world's best coffee bean (p116)
- **Cycling from Hardwar Gap** Quicken your pulse with a rip-roaring descent from the high mountains, through coffee plantations and villages (p113)
- **Morant Point Lighthouse** Find your way to this remote beacon providing a privileged view of coast and mountains (p122)



■ AREA: 750 SQ KM

■ STRAWBERRY HILL DEC AVERAGE HIGH TEMPERATURE: 23.3°C

HISTORY

With their dense primary forests and forbidding topography, the prospect of life in the Blue Mountains has discouraged all but the most determined settlers over the centuries. During the 17th and 18th centuries, these same formidable qualities made the territory the perfect hideout for the Windward Maroons, who from their remote stronghold at Nanny Town resisted enslavement and British colonialism for more than 100 years. But this region's primary claim to fame has always been coffee cultivation; it has been a mainstay since the very first coffee factories were erected around Clydesdale in the mid-18th century. Meanwhile, back down at sea level, the southeast coast of St Thomas parish is notable for its long history of protest and rebellion, and the independent spirit of the region has kept it at odds with the government even up to this day.

CLIMATE

Moisture-laden trade winds blowing in from the northeast spill much of their accumulation on the Blue Mountains, which forms a rain shadow over Kingston and the southern parishes. The temperature drops 1°C to 2°C for every 300m rise in elevation (indeed, it can freeze in the early morning above 1700m). From June through to September you'll experience the best weather for exploring.

St Thomas parish, like Kingston, lies in the rain shadow and there's far less precipitation than up in the Blue Mountains.

GETTING THERE & AROUND

The Blue Mountains are best explored by private car. From Kingston's eastern fringe, public transportation runs from Papine, but service is disorganized and delays and cancellations are frequent. Public transportation is far more predictable on the southeast coast along the A4 road.

BLUE MOUNTAINS

Deriving their name from the azure haze that settles lazily around their peaks, this 45km-long mountain range looms high above the eastern parishes of St Andrew, St Thomas, Portland and St Mary. The

Blue Mountains were formed during the Cretaceous Period (somewhere between 144 and 65 million years ago) and are the island's oldest feature. Highest of the high-lights, **Blue Mountain Peak** reaches 2256m above sea level, and no visit to the area should neglect a pre-dawn hike to its summit for a sunrise view.

Unsurprisingly, the Blue Mountains' largely unspoiled character owes much to the difficulty in navigating around the area. Roads are narrow and – as often as not – dirt tracks that are utterly impossible to pass without 4WD, especially after heavy rains. If you are spending time in the area, contacting a tour guide or making arrangements with your hotel are highly advisable.

Activities

HIKING

The Blue Mountains are a hiker's dream, and dozens of trails lace the hills. Many are overgrown, but others remain the mainstay of communication for locals.

By far the most popular route is to 'The Peak,' which in Jamaica always means Blue Mountain Peak. The steep and exhilarating trail is well maintained.

These trails (called 'tracks' locally) are rarely marked. When asking for directions from locals, remember that 'a few chains' can mean several kilometers, while 'jus a likkle way' may in fact be a few hours of hiking. Within the Blue Mountains-John Crow National Park, hiking trails are categorized as guided, nonguided and wilderness.

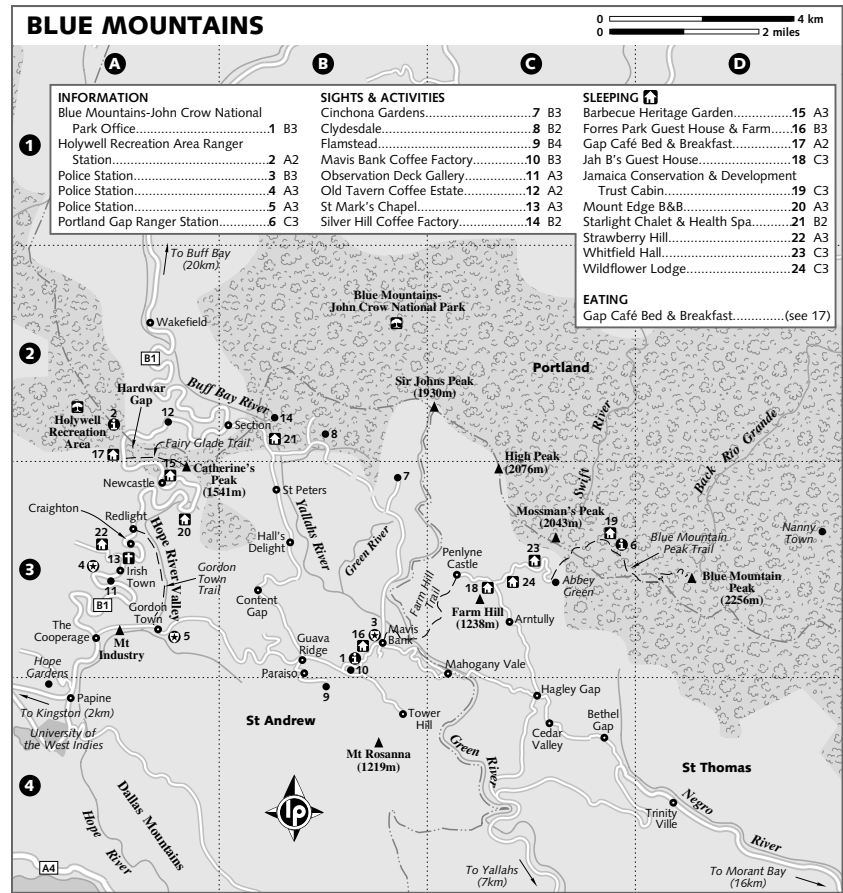
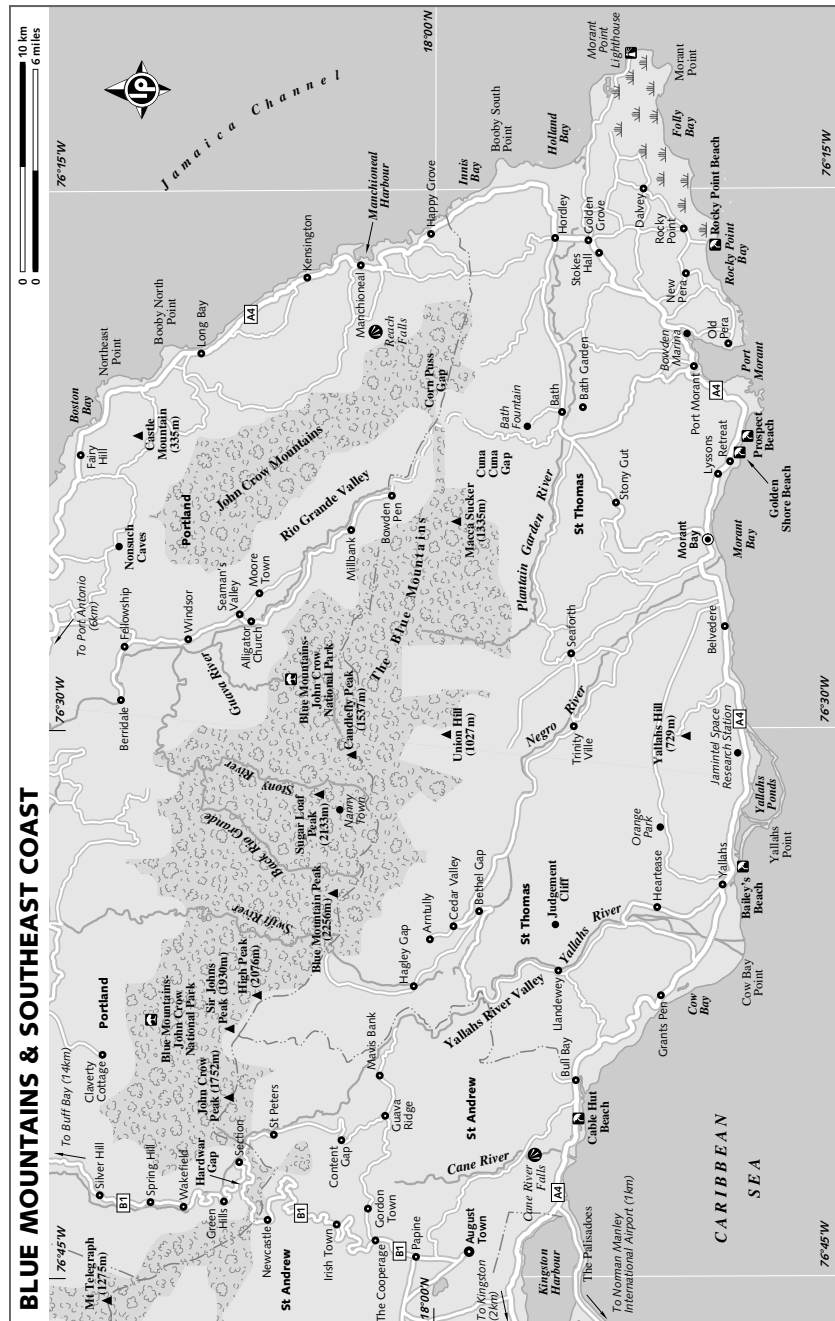
A Hiker's Guide to the Blue Mountains, by Bill Wilcox, is an indispensable guide for serious hikers.

Guided Hikes

Guides can be hired from most hotels in the area for about US\$35 for a half day, and US\$45 for a full day. Freelance guides hire themselves out at Penlyne Castle, Hagley Gap and Mavis Bank. On overnight trips you're expected to pay for the guide's food and accommodations.

In addition to others, the following offer guided hikes:

Forres Park Guest House & Farm (www.forrespark.com; Kingston ☎ 927-5957; Mavis Bank ☎ 927-8275) A good option for custom hiking trips. See p118.



INFORMATION		SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES		SLEEPING	
Blue Mountains-John Crow National Park Office	1 B3	Cinchona Gardens	7 B3	Barbecue Heritage Garden	15 A3
Holywell Recreation Area Ranger Station	2 A2	Clydesdale	8 B2	Forres Park Guest House & Farm	16 B3
Police Station	3 B3	Flamstead	9 B4	Gap Café Bed & Breakfast	17 A2
Police Station	4 A3	Mavis Bank Coffee Factory	10 B3	Gap B's Guest House	18 C3
Police Station	5 A3	Observation Deck Gallery	11 A3	Jamaica Conservation & Development Trust Cabin	19 C3
Portland Gap Ranger Station	6 C3	Old Tavern Coffee Estate	12 A2	Mount Edge B&B	20 A3
		St Mark's Chapel	13 A3	Starlight Chalet & Health Spa	21 B2
		Silver Hill Coffee Factory	14 B2	Strawberry Hill	22 A3
				Whitfield Hall	23 C3
				Wildflower Lodge	24 C3
		EATING		Gap Café Bed & Breakfast	
				(see 17)	

Mount Edge B&B (☎ 944-8151, 351-5083; jamaica.eu@kasnet.com; Newcastle) Offers trips to the peak (US\$60) and cycling tours (US\$45). See p115.

Strawberry Hill (☎ 944-8400; www.strawberryhillresort.com; Irish Town) Short tours and hikes from US\$40. See p114 for more details on Strawberry Hill.

Sun Venture (☎ 960-6685; www.sunventuretours.com; 30 Balmoral Ave, Kingston 10) Daylong hikes from US\$75 and hikes to the peak with lodging (US\$95).

Maps

If you're hiking alone buy the 1:50,000 or 1:12,500 Ordnance Survey topographic map series, available from the **Survey Department** (☎ 922-6630; www.nla.gov.jm; 23½ Charles St, Kingston). Four different sheets – numbers 13, 14, 18 and 19 – cover the area around Blue Mountain Peak; you may need to buy all four (US\$5 each).

CYCLING

An exhilarating way to see the Blue Mountains is by mountain bike – the sturdier the better as the going can be steep and arduous.

If you're not traveling with a bicycle, join a tour. **Blue Mountain Bicycle Tours** (☎ 974-7075; www.bmtoursja.com; 121 Main St, Ocho Rios; tour adult/child US\$93/65) will pick you up in Kingston or Ocho Rios and take you by bus to the Hardware Gap at 1700m up in the mountains. The downhill cycling tour then begins, and stops along the way include a coffee-roasting facility. You may be sharing the road with 40 other cyclists.

Mount Edge B&B (p115) offers a similar tour (US\$45) with smaller groups, also from Hardware Gap, but the bikes are a mixed bag. Check the brakes before setting out!

Tours

Hiking (see p111) and cycling (see p113) tours are described earlier. The following companies mostly conduct tours in vehicles.

Barrett Adventures (☎ 382-6384; www.barrettadventures.com; Rose Hall, Montego Bay) Customized tours by minivan.

Island Car Rentals (☎ 929-5875, in Canada 416-628-8885, in USA 866-978-5335; www.islandcarrentals.com; 17 Antigua Ave, Kingston) Personally chauffeured tours of the Blue Mountains.

Safari Tours Jamaica (☎ /fax 795-0482; safari@cwjamaica.com; Mammee Bay) Offers daylong 'jeep safaris' (US\$75) into the Blue Mountains. It also has a two-day mule ride and a hiking tour.

Getting There & Away

Traveling by your own vehicle is the best way to enjoy the Blue Mountains. There are no gas stations; fill up on gas in Papine at the east edge of Kingston or in Buff Bay on the north coast.

From Kingston, follow Hope Rd uphill to Papine, from where Gordon Town Rd (B1) leads into the mountains. At The Cooperage, the B1 (Mammee River Rd) forks left steeply uphill for Strawberry Hill resort (near Irish Town) and Newcastle. Gordon Town Rd continues straight from The Cooperage and winds east up the Hope River Valley to Gordon Town, then steeply to Mavis Bank and Hagley Gap, the gateway to Blue Mountain Peak.

Minibuses and route taxis arrive from and depart to the mountains from the Park View Supermarket on the square in Papine at Kingston's eastern fringe. The frequency of service changes from day to day depending on demand. For the two main routes, you can generally expect at least one morning run and one in the afternoon, but exact departure times are impossible to predict.

Destinations include Mavis Bank (one way US\$3, 15km, 1½ hours) and Newcastle (US\$3, 23km, 1¼ hours).

From the north coast, the B1 heads into the mountains from Buff Bay. During the rainy season, the road often closes following landslides, but it's always good to check its status before departing. When the road is open, there is no regular bus service from Buff Bay up the B1, and route-taxi service is infrequent at best.

The roads hug the mountainside in endless switchbacks and are narrow and often

overgrown with foliage. Many corners are blind. Do as the locals do and honk your horn frequently.

THE COOPERAGE

About 3km above Papine via Gordon Town Rd is The Cooperage, a hamlet named for its community of Irish coopers who made the wooden barrels in which coffee beans were shipped in the 19th century.

Buses to Redlight, Hardwar Gap and Gordon Town all pass The Cooperage. For details on the route to the Blue Mountains via Gordon Town, see p118.

IRISH TOWN

Mammee River Rd climbs to Irish Town, a small hamlet where the coopers lived during the 19th century. Potatoes are still an important crop, reflecting the Irish influence. Largely famous for one of the Caribbean's most luxurious resorts, it also contains **St Mark's Chapel**, a white clapboard church restored after damage from Hurricane Gilbert. Irish Town also has the pleasant **Observation Deck Gallery** (☎ 944-8592), which features arts and crafts as well as paintings by Jamaican artists; it can be found just below the town. There's also a **police station** (☎ 944-8242).

Further uphill is **Redlight**, a hamlet so named because it used to serve as a brothel for soldiers from the Newcastle barracks.

One of the finest resorts in Jamaica, and record mogul Chris Blackwell's pet, **our pick Strawberry Hill** (☎ 944-8400; www.strawberryhillresort.com; r/ste/villa US\$595/695/895; P ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) is a luxury retreat just north of Irish Town. Gaze at Kingston and the harbor 950m below from a deckchair by the infinity-edge pool, check out the small display of Blackwell's gold and platinum records, or roam the bougainvillea-draped grounds. The Caribbean-style cottages range from well-appointed mahogany-accented studio suites, each with canopied four-poster beds, to a four-bedroom, two-story house built into the hillside. A sumptuous breakfast is included in the rates, as are transfers. Bird-watching, hiking and other tours are available and Strawberry Hill also hosts a calendar of special events throughout the year. If you're having trouble relaxing, Strawberry Hill's renowned spa offers an 'elemental nature consultation' to determine your customized treatment based on five ele-

ments (earth, air, fire, water and infinity). No children are allowed.

Many Kingstonians make the tortuous drive to Strawberry Hill for some of the finest nouvelle Jamaican cuisine on the island (dinners US\$18 to US\$45). Reservations are advised.

In order to get to Irish Town, you can take a bus (US\$0.30) or route taxi (about US\$1) from Papine.

NEWCASTLE

Newcastle hangs invitingly on the mountain-side high above Irish Town. The road climbs to 1220m where, 21km from Kingston, you suddenly emerge on a wide parade ground guarded by a small cannon. The military encampment clammers up the slope above the square. Newcastle was founded in 1841 as a training site and convalescent center for British soldiers. Since 1962 the camp has been used by the Jamaica Defense Force.

With good fortune you may even arrive to watch recruits being drilled. Note the insignia (which dates back to 1884) on the white-washed stone wall, commemorating those regiments stationed at Newcastle. Visitors are allowed only around the canteen, shop, roadways and parade ground.

Three kilometers above Newcastle you reach **Hardwar Gap**, at the crest of the Grand Ridge. See p113 for information about the thrilling cycling in this area.

Activities

HIKING

Just across from the Gap Café Bed & Breakfast, you can pick up the Fairy Glade trail, which leads to Catherine's Peak 150m above the town. Green Hills Trail, Fern Walk Trail and Woodcutter's Trail also begin north of Newcastle.

Sleeping & Eating

Mount Edge B&B (☎ 944-8151, 351-5083; d bunk US\$25, r with shared bath US\$30-50, with bath US\$40, weekly US\$100-250; P ☎) This is a good budget option, especially for longer stays. The all-wood house has three rooms, including one with a four-poster king-sized bed. The spacious, no-frills lounge has a kitchen and wide glass windows on all sides. Meal packages are offered. The place is an official bird-watching station and organizes hiking and cycling tours.

Barbecue Heritage Garden (☎ 944-8411; cottage US\$65) Set 400m east of Newcastle parade

ground, this is a simple yet exquisite two-bedroom wooden cottage (with live-in caretakers) set in a coffee estate (circa 1750) with views toward Kingston. The bathroom has a claw-foot tub and hot water, and there's a kitchen and a TV lounge with sofa bed and phone. The old coffee-drying barbecues are now laid out as gardens.

Gap Café Bed & Breakfast (☎ 997-3032, 923-7078; r US\$70) On the hillside at 1280m near Hardwar Gap, just below the entrance to Holywell Recreation Area, the Gap Café Bed & Breakfast has a cozy Hansel-and-Gretel-style, one-bedroom, self-catering cottage with a veranda. Walkways lead through the beautiful gardens. The Full Moon Frolics (US\$70) are hosted here, drawing locals for festive get-togethers with music, dance, and fine dining. The café here (open 10am to 5pm Monday to Friday, 10am to 6pm Saturday and Sunday) is a fabulous place to rest and take in the vistas over a soda or cappuccino. It offers dining either indoors or alfresco on a wooden terrace. A 'Jamaican special' breakfast costs US\$12, and afternoon high tea is also served (US\$25). The eclectic lunch menu includes curried Caribbean shrimp, smoked pork chops, curry goat and sandwiches. Dinner is by reservation only.

The army camp store – the Tuck Shop – sells snacks.

BLUE MOUNTAINS-JOHN CROW NATIONAL PARK

The Blue Mountains-John Crow National Park protects 78,210 hectares and is managed by the Natural Resources Conservation Authority (NRCA). The park includes the forest reserves of the Blue and John Crow Mountain Ranges and spans the parishes of St Andrew, St Thomas, Portland and St Mary. Ecotourism is being promoted and locals are being trained as guides.

Camping is not permitted except at designated sites, listed on p116. Camping 'wild' is not advised.

See also p119 for details on Blue Mountain Peak.

Route taxis making the run from Papine to Newcastle (US\$3) can be persuaded to continue the extra 4km to drop you at the national park entrance in Holywell. Return transport from the park, however, is not assured; you may wish to negotiate with the route-taxi driver to be picked up.

Information

There are ranger stations at Holywell Recreation Area and Portland Gap (near Blue Mountain Peak), and at Millbank in the Upper Rio Grande Valley (p141). Entry to the park is free, except for Holywell Recreation Area. Here are other contacts:

Blue Mountains-John Crow National Park Office

(☎ 977-8044; Mavis Bank; 🕒 10am-4pm Mon-Fri)

Rangers are on hand to provide information on weather and trails; survey maps are on display.

Jamaica Conservation & Development Trust

(☎ 920-8278; www.greenjamaica.org.jm; 29 Dumbarton

Ave, Kingston 10) Provides management and supervision of the national park.

Sights & Activities

Holywell Recreation Area (adult/child US\$5; 🕒 10am-5pm Mon-Fri), spanning Hardwar Gap, protects 120 hectares of remnant woodland, lush with dozens of fern species, epiphytes, impatiens, violets, nasturtiums, wild strawberries and raspberries. The mist-shrouded uppermost slopes are densely forested with rare primary montane forest. Pine trees dominate. The **bird-watching** is fabulous. The ranger station is a short distance beyond the entrance. An orientation center hosts occasional live entertainment such as traditional music and dance, plus outdoor games, storytelling and a treasure hunt for the kids (contact the national park office for information). There are viewpoints and picnic spots.

Hiking trails lead off in all directions through the ferny dells, cloud forest and elfin woodland. The 1.2km **Oatley Mountain Trail**, which requires a guide (US\$10), has educational signs leading to a river good for bathing; the 2km **Waterfall Trail** leads down along a stream to a small falls.

Here, **camping** (per person US\$1.50) is allowed. There are water faucets and toilets. You can rent rustic **cabins** (2-/4-bed cabin US\$55/78) with twin beds (reportedly damp) and basic kitchens; bring your own bedding and food (there's a gas ring and fridge). Advance reservations are essential via the Blue Mountains-John Crow Park Office or the Jamaica Conservation & Development Trust (above). Book holiday/weekend stays several weeks in advance. There's a security guard at the ranger station.

SECTION

Heading northeast from Holywell, the road drops steeply toward the hamlet of Section and then curls its way down to Buff Bay, 29km

north. As soon as you crest the ridge, the vegetation on the north-facing slope is noticeably more lush. You'll pass several cottages with colorful gardens.

A turnoff to the right at Section leads 1.5km to the ridge crest, where the main road loops south and drops to Content Gap, eventually linking up with the road from Gordon Town to Mavis Bank. A steep and muddy dirt road to the left drops to the simple **Silver Hill Coffee Factory**, where tours are offered; 4WD is recommended.

Sights

OLD TAVERN COFFEE ESTATE

About 1.5km southwest of Section and some 1200m above sea level, there's a small, anonymous **cottage** (☎ /fax 924-2785; www.exportjamaica.org/oldtavern; 🕒 Sat-Thu) that you would surely pass by if you didn't know that its occupants, Alex and Dorothy Twyman, produce the best of the best of Blue Mountain coffee. Alex immigrated to Jamaica from England in 1958 and started growing coffee a decade later. Dorothy oversees the roasting, meticulously performing quality control by taste. The environmentally conscious Twymans keep their use of chemical pesticides and fertilizers to a bare minimum and compost all by-products before returning them to the soil.

Although the Twymans' coffee is widely acclaimed as the best on the island, until 1997 they weren't allowed to sell an ounce due to Kafkaesque government regulations. Finally, the Twymans were granted an exclusive license to grow, process, roast and sell a 'single estate coffee' under an estate label – the only estate on the island permitted to do so.

The Twymans welcome visitors by prior arrangement, except Friday. Visitors can sample the coffee and homemade mead, honey and coffee liqueur.

Contact either Strawberry Hill (p114) or Barrett Adventures (p114) to arrange a tour to the Old Tavern Coffee Estate. You can also call from Kingston to arrange a visit.

Sleeping & Eating

Starlight Chalet & Health Spa (☎ 968-3116; www.starlightchalet.com; s/d US\$80/90, ste US\$85-285) A rejuvenating sanctuary that makes a fantastic base for hiking and bird-watching. It's in the lee of the mountain divide at the turn-off for the Silver Hill Coffee Factory. Set amid a flower-filled hillside garden with dramatic alpine vistas, the

HALLOWED GROUNDS

Since coffee grows best on well-watered, well-drained slopes in cooler yet tropical climates, it is no surprise that it thrives in Jamaica's Blue Mountains. The region's distinctly flavored coffee is acclaimed by connoisseurs as among the world's best. To be designated 'Blue Mountain,' it must be grown – and roasted – in a prescribed area.

In 1728 at Temple Hall Estate, near the village of Castleton north of Kingston, governor Sir Nicholas Lawes introduced coffee to Jamaica and other planters followed suit, prompted by the growing demand in Europe. During the peak years, from 1800 to 1840, production rose to 17,000 tons a year and Jamaica became the world's largest exporter.

Emancipation in 1838 brought an end to many of the plantations. Many slaves left the estates and planted their own coffee. As steeper slopes were planted, coffee quality began to decline. The end of Britain's preferential tariffs for Jamaican coffee further damaged the industry at a time when high-quality coffee from Brazil was beginning to sap Jamaica's market share. By the close of WWII, Jamaica's coffee industry was on its last legs.

There has been a resurgence in the popularity of Blue Mountain coffee in the last decade, largely thanks to interest from Japan, where Blue Mountain coffee is a treasured commodity and sells for US\$130 or more per kilogram. More than 90% of Blue Mountain coffee is sold to Japan at a preferential rate, which means that the beans that make it to North America and Europe can be quite expensive, while much of the coffee you get in Jamaica is of inferior quality.

Sadly, the high prices the beans get abroad only encouraged deforestation at home. Tearing down trees brought coffee farmers more valuable land, but also chased away migratory bird populations – some of whom (ironically) prey on borer beetles and caterpillars that infest the coffee crop. Since 2006 wildlife experts from Humboldt State University in California have been working with park officials to convince farmers that the lack of trees ultimately makes coffee farming unsustainable.

modern, three-story plantation-style hotel has carpeted, modestly furnished rooms and oversized two- and three-bedroom suites. There's a small bar and restaurant where filling home-style meals are served by gracious staff. The no-frills spa has a sauna and massage rooms, and offers full treatments (US\$45 to US\$75). Nature walks and special-interest excursions are offered, as are yoga programs.

AROUND SECTION Clydesdale

This is a derelict old coffee plantation and a popular spot for budget accommodations. The much-battered waterwheel and coffee mill machinery are partially intact. It has picnic spots and a small waterfall where you can skinny-dip. The **Morces Gap Trail** begins here.

By prior arrangement with the Forestry Department of Jamaica, you can **camp** (☎ 924-2667; www.forestry.gov.jm; Forestry Dept, 173 Constant Spring Rd, Kingston; camping US\$5). There is safe drinking water and a natural pool in the Clyde River.

From Section take the horrendously potholed 'main' road toward Guava Ridge; the turnoff for Clydesdale is about 1km above the hamlet of St Peters. Then you will cross

over the Chestervale Bridge above the Brook's River and immediately reach a Y-fork. Take the left, steeply uphill road for Clydesdale and Cinchona Gardens. It's a terribly rocky drive, suited for a 4WD only.

Cinchona Gardens

Not the ubiquitous coffee plant, but the cultivation of Assam tea and cinchona (whose quinine – extracted from the bark – was used to fight malaria) led to the founding of **Cinchona** (☎ 927-1257; admission free, tip to caretaker/guide expected) in 1868. The grounds were later turned into a garden to supply Kingston with flowers. In 1903 the Jamaican government leased Cinchona to the New York Botanical Gardens and, later, to the Smithsonian Institute.

Today, the gardens are a little run down, but it's really the fabulous views that lure you up the 1370m. To the north stand the peaks, but you can also peer down into the valleys of the Clyde, Green and Yallahs Rivers. A dilapidated old house full of weathered antiques sits atop the 2.5-hectare gardens, fronted by lawns and exquisite floral beds. The **Panorama Walk** begins to the east of the gardens, leading through a glade of towering bamboo and

opening to staggering views. Half a dozen other tracks snake off into the nether reaches of the mountains, including the 16km **Vinegar Hill Trail**, which winds its way to Buff Bay.

If you've come with a sleeping bag, you can spend the night (US\$8): claim a spot on the floor in the main house or set up camp on the grounds.

Finding Cinchona is difficult and highly unadvisable without a guide. From Clydesdale continue uphill along the muddy dirt track for about 3km. There are several unmarked junctions; you'll undoubtedly take some wrong turns and need to backtrack. Ask at every opportunity. Don't underestimate the awful road conditions, with ruts deep enough to hang up your chassis and leave your wheels spinning in thin air. *A 4WD with low-gear option is absolutely essential.* Far easier is a more direct and populated route via Mavis Bank; you'll still need to ask directions.

Both Strawberry Hill (p114) and Barrett Adventures (p114) offer great excursions to Cinchona Gardens.

GORDON TOWN

Gordon Town, at 370m, is a hamlet centered on a wide square with a **police station** (☎ 927-2805), post office and tiny courthouse. It began life as a staging post for Newcastle in the days before the Mammee River Rd was cut from The Cooperage. To reach Cinchona, Mavis Bank and the trail to Blue Mountain Peak, turn right at the square and cross the narrow bridge.

The **Gordon Town Trail** begins in Gordon Town and follows the Hope River Valley via Mt Industry and Redlight. Another 21km trail leads from Gordon Town to Sugar Loaf (2133m) via Content Gap, Top Mountain and Cinchona, and a third 16km track leads via the Flamstead coffee plantation and Orchard to Mavis Bank.

There is nowhere to stay in Gordon Town, and the only eating options are a few simple rum shops and stalls.

Buses and minibuses operate from the Parade, Half Way Tree and Papine in Kingston (US\$0.30).

GUAVA RIDGE

This is the site of a ridge-crest junction for Content Gap and sights to the north, while Mavis Bank and Blue Mountain Peak are straight ahead.

A road to the right, signed for 'Bellevue House' 50m east of Guava Ridge, leads 6km through pine and eucalyptus forests to the coffee plantation of **Flamstead** (☎ 960-0204; peterking@flamstead.com; ☹ visits by prior appointment). This former great house of Governor Edward Eyre (see p30) was a lookout from which Horatio Nelson and other British naval officers surveyed the Port Royal base. Views over the Palisadoes and Kingston Harbour are fabulous.

MAVIS BANK

Mavis Bank, around a one-hour drive from Kingston, is a tidy little village in the midst of coffee country.

In the village center you'll find the **police station** (☎ 977-8004), a post office, a public telephone and the **People's Cooperative Bank** (☎ 977-8010; ☹ 9am-3pm Mon-Fri), which represents Western Union.

The **Mavis Bank Coffee Factory** (☎ 977-8015; tour US\$8; ☹ 9-11am & 1-3pm Mon-Fri), 1km southwest of Mavis Bank, is a working factory that has been producing Blue Mountain coffee for over a century. Ask the chief 'cupper' to demonstrate 'cupping' (tasting), the technique to identify quality coffee. You can tour the factory to see the coffee beans drying (in season) and being processed. At the end of the tour you can purchase roasted beans at bargain prices. For more on Blue Mountain coffee see the boxed text on p117.

The **Farm Hill Trail** begins at Churchyard Rd and leads uphill for 8km to Penlyne Castle and on to Blue Mountain Peak.

As you enter the village, you'll see **Forres Park Guest House & Farm** (www.forrespark.com; Forres Park ☎ 927-8275; Kingston ☎ 927-5957; cabin US\$75, r US\$75), a working coffee farm with an enviable hillside setting, amid lush gardens and tiers of coffee bushes flowing downhill like folds of green silk. It rents six rooms (with balconies) in the main lodge and three basic wooden cottages with red concrete floors and pine furniture. Meals are cooked by request. You can rent mountain bikes. Bird-watching tours are offered by appointment, as are guided hikes (US\$40 to US\$65) to Mavis Bank, Cinchona Gardens and Blue Mountain Peak.

Getting There & Away

A bus runs here twice daily from Papine via Gordon Town (US\$1). Route taxis operate more frequently (US\$2.50). A tourist taxi from Kingston costs about US\$25.

HAGLEY GAP & PENLYNE CASTLE

The ramshackle village of Hagley Gap sits abreast a hill east of Mavis Bank and is the gateway to the Blue Mountain Peak. The road forks in the village, where a horrendously denuded dirt road to Penlyne Castle begins a precipitous ascent.

Penlyne Castle is the base for 12km hikes to and from Blue Mountain Peak. Most hikers stay overnight at one of three simple lodges near Penlyne Castle before tackling the hike in the wee hours.

Bring warm clothing. One minute you're in sun-kissed mountains, the next, clouds swirl in and the temperature plunges.

Sleeping & Eating

Wildflower Lodge (☎ 929-5395; r without/with bath US\$13/33, cottage US\$55) About 400m east of the ridge crest at Penlyne Castle, this hardwood structure has 36 bunks in basic rooms with communal bathrooms with solar-heated water, plus three appealing private rooms with private bathrooms downstairs. A two-bedroom cottage at the bottom of the garden sleeps up to six. An atmospheric dining room has hammocks on the veranda and faces southeast down the mountain. Breakfasts cost about US\$5; lunch and dinner cost US\$6.50. You have use of a large but basic kitchen. The lodge offers horseback rides and guides for the climb.

Whitfield Hall (☎ 927-0986, 926-6612; www.whitfieldhall.com; camping per tent US\$8, dm adult/child US\$15/12, s/d US\$25/40, 4-person cottage US\$60) About 400m uphill from Wildflower Lodge, nestled amid pine trees, this former plantation dating from 1776 is a more basic option and has bunks for up to 40 people, with four to eight bunks per room. The dark, gloomy lounge has a huge fireplace (there's a US\$5 firewood charge) and smoke-stained ceiling. Gas lamps provide illumination. Guests share two basic bathrooms with toilets and tubs (cold water only), plus a small kitchen. If the hostel is full, camping is allowed on a wide lawn beneath eucalyptus trees. There are picnic tables, benches and a barbecue pit, as well as water and toilets. Locals will cook on request. You can hire guides (US\$40 to the peak).

Jah B's Guest House (☎ 377-5206; farmhillcoffee@yahoo.com; dm/r US\$14/30) This friendly place run by a family of Bobo Rastas has a basic but cozy wooden guest house, on the left 400m below Wildflower Lodge. It has sev-

eral rooms with four bunks apiece, plus a shared shower and flush toilet; there are also four private rooms. Jah B himself cooks I-tal meals (about US\$8) amid a cloud of ganja smoke and a nonstop volley of friendly banter. His son Alex now runs the outfit and offers transfers from Kingston in his beat-up 4WD and will guide you up Blue Mountain Peak for US\$55.

Getting There & Away

From Papine in Kingston minibuses and route taxis run regularly to Mavis Bank, but less frequently to Hagley Gap via Gordon Town. Avoid starting out on Sunday.

Most hotels (including Whitfield Hall and Wildflower Lodge) in the Blue Mountains offer 4WD transfers to Penlyne Castle from Mavis Bank (from US\$20 per vehicle) or Kingston (from US\$40). The Wildflower and Whitfield transfers are untrustworthy in late evening, when drivers often don't show up (or refuse to continue), stranding people in Mavis Bank. Be sure to arrange a transfer for no later than mid afternoon.

If driving, continue through Mavis Bank to Mahogany Vale and cross the Yallahs River.

Penlyne Castle is reached via a 5km dirt road that ascends precipitously from Hagley Gap. Only 4WD vehicles with low-gear option can make the journey, which is dauntingly narrow and rugged.

BLUE MOUNTAIN PEAK

From Penlyne Castle to the summit of Blue Mountain Peak (2256m) is a 950m ascent and a three- or four-hour hike one way. It's not a serious challenge, but you need to be reasonably fit.

Don't litter, and *stay on the path!*

Most hikers set off from Penlyne Castle in the wee hours to reach the peak for sunrise. Your guide will rouse you at about 2am. Fortified with a breakfast of coffee and cereal, you set out single file in the pitch black along the 12km round-trip trail (you'll need a flashlight and a spare set of batteries, just in case). Midway, at Portland Gap, there's a ranger station and cabin (see p120).

As you hike, reggae music can be heard far, far below, competing with the chirps of crickets and katydids singing to attract mates. Myriad blinkies and peeny-wallies will be doing the same, signaling with their phosphorescent semaphore.

You should arrive at the peak around 5:30am, while it is still dark. Your stage is gradually revealed: a flat-topped hump, marked by a scaffolding pyramid and trig point (in the cloud it is easy to mistake the real summit for a smaller hump to the left of the hut near the summit).

If the weather's clear, Cuba, 144km away, can be seen from the peak, which casts a distinct shadow over the land below. After a brief celebratory drink and snacks, you'll set off back down the mountain, arriving at your accommodations in time for brunch.

By setting out for the summit a few hours later, say 5am, you may still make the top before the mists roll in, and you'll have the benefit of enjoying the changing vegetation and scenery with greater anticipation for what lies ahead (and above). You pass through several distinct ecosystems, including an area of bamboo and primordial giant tree ferns. Further up is cloud forest, dripping with filaments of hanging lichens and festooned with epiphytes and moss. Near the top is stunted dwarf or elfin forest, with trees like hirsute soapwood and rodwood no more than 2.5m high – an adaptation to the cold.

Don't hike without a guide at night. Numerous spur trails lead off the main trails and it is easy to get lost. These mountains are not kind to those who lose their way.

Although hiking boots or tough walking shoes are best, sneakers will suffice, though your feet will likely get wet. At the top it can be icy with the wind blowing, and temperatures can approach freezing before sunrise, so wear plenty of layers. Rain gear is also essential, as the weather can change rapidly. Clouds usually begin to form in the early morning, followed by a cold breeze.

Guides can be hired locally at Hagley Gap or Penlyne Castle, or through most local hotels, for US\$30/40 per half/full day. For organized hikes, see p111.

Sleeping

Jamaica Conservation & Development Trust Cabin (☎ 960-2848/9, 920-8278/9; www.greenjamaica.org.jm; 29 Dumbarton Avenue, Kingston 10; beds US\$5) The Jamaica Conservation & Development Trust maintains a dimly lit cabin halfway up the trail at Portland Gap (4km above Abbey Green). You can camp (US\$5) outside, where there's a cooking area and water from a pipe; you'll need to bring your own tent. The terribly

run-down hut has a fireplace, but holes in the roof can douse the fire (a waterproof cover for your sleeping bag is a good idea). You need to reserve with the Jamaica Conversation & Development Trust.

SOUTHEAST COAST

Jamaica's southeast corner is the island's ugly duckling, viewed only in passing by most visitors as they hurtle from Kingston to Portland. Its narrow scrub-covered coastal plain has only unappealing gray-sand beaches and limited tourist infrastructure. Life revolves mostly around small fishing villages where the work is still performed by canoe and net. Surfers, however, rave about more than a dozen prime surf spots. (For specifics, contact the Surfing Association of Jamaica; see p56.)

YALLAHS & AROUND

Southeast of Bull Bay and the parish boundary between St Andrew and St Thomas, the A4 from Kingston makes a hairpin descent to Grants Pen, then winds through scrub-covered country until it reaches the coast at Yallahs, 16km east of Bull Bay. If you are traveling between Kingston and Portland parish, the jerk stands of Yallahs' Main St are a cheerful place to rest and regroup. Past Yallahs, a series of long, dark-gray beaches, with colorful pirogues drawn up, extends eastward to **Morant Bay**.

The wide gully of the Yallahs River, 3km west of town, begins 1370m up in the Blue Mountains. The boulders along the lower riverbed attest to the power and threat of flash floods.

Sights

YALLAHS RIVER VALLEY

A road leads north from Yallahs through the rugged Yallahs River Valley. About 5km northwest of town, you cross the river near Heartease, where it is said you can witness Revivalist spirit-cult meetings occasionally held on the eastern riverbank near the old bridge.

At the village of Llandewey, 11km northwest of Yallahs, you can gain a fine view of **Judgement Cliff**, which looms up a sheer 300m. It was formed by a 1692 earthquake that caused the mountainside to collapse.

The deteriorating road then claws its way up into the Blue Mountains, ascending sharply beyond the hamlet of Bethel Gap to Hagley Gap and Mavis Bank; you'll need a 4WD.

YALLAHS PONDS

Two large lakes east of Yallahs, the ponds are enclosed by a narrow, bow-shaped spit of sand. The ponds are exceedingly briny due to evaporation. Algae flourish and often turn the ponds a deep pink, accompanied by a powerful smell of hydrogen sulfide ('bad egg gas').

You can still see the remains of an old stone **signal tower** built on the sand spit in the 1770s by the English to communicate with Port Royal. It is listed as a national monument.

On the hillside just beyond Yallahs Ponds is the **Jamintel space research station**, linking Jamaica to the international satellite network.

MORANT BAY

pop 9900

Morant Bay, the only town of importance along the south coast, squats on a hill behind the coast road. Most of the town's early colonial-era buildings were burned in the Morant Bay Rebellion of 1865, led by the town's national hero, Paul Bogle (see p30), but a couple of gems remain.

October 11 is **Paul Bogle Day**, when a party is held in the town square and a 10km road race sets out from Stony Gut.

Information

Police station (☎ 982-2233; 7 South St) Next to the old courthouse.

Post office (☎ 982-2294; Queen St)

Scotiabank (☎ 982-1577; 23 Queen St) Opposite the Texaco gas station, with an ATM and currency exchange.

Sights

The **Paul Bogle statue** stands in front of the courthouse. By noted sculptor Edna Manley, it depicts Bogle standing grimly, hands clasped over the hilt of a machete. The **courthouse** was rebuilt in limestone and red brick after being destroyed in the 1865 rebellion. Bogle is buried beside the courthouse alongside a mass grave holding the remains of many slaves who lost their lives in the rebellion. The spot is marked by a moving memorial dedicated to 'those who love freedom.'

Diagonally across from the courthouse is a handsome, ochre-colored **Anglican church** dating to 1881.

The **Stony Gut Monument**, commemorating Bogle, stands opposite his **chapel**, 14km inland at the village of Stony Gut.

Sleeping & Eating

Morant Villas Hotel (☎ 982-2418; morantvillasja.com; 1 Wharf Rd; r US\$45-75, studio/ste US\$48/62) Sitting amid lawns and tall palms atop a bluff on the coast road just east of town, this hotel has 22 simple yet clean rooms with fans and private bath with hot water. There are also 10 studios with kitchens, plus suites. A restaurant and bar serves seafood for US\$6 to US\$12.

Getting There & Away

Minibuses and route taxis to Kingston (US\$2 to US\$3, two hours, three daily) and Port Antonio (US\$2.50 to US\$4, 2½ hours, two daily) arrive and depart from beside the Shell gas station on the A4 at the west end of town.

RETREAT

A small beachside residential community about 5km east of Morant Bay, Retreat draws Kingstonians on the weekends. It sits between two of the few pleasant beaches along Jamaica's southern coast. The aptly named **Golden Shore Beach** is hidden from view from the road. Watch for the hand-painted sign. Further east is **Prospect Beach**, a 'public bathing beach.'

Golden Shore Beach Resort (☎ /fax 982-9657; www.goldenshorehotel.com; downstairs r US\$47-62, ste US\$70; ☎ ☎ ☎) Located at Golden Shore Beach, this is a well-run hotel that offers 27 rooms in three categories in a condo-style unit amid landscaped grounds. The rooms are clean and boast refreshing, contemporary furnishings. The resort's gracious restaurant opens onto lawns fronting a beach.

Whispering Bamboo Cove (☎ 982-2912; www.discoverjamaica.com/whisper.html; 105 Crystal Dr; r US\$50-75, ste US\$90) A comfortable, contemporary villa-style hotel facing the beach in Retreat, it offers 10 airy, spacious and tastefully furnished rooms with tropical fabrics and antique reproductions.

BATH

This village, 10km north of Port Morant, lies on the bank of the Plantain Garden River, amid sugarcane and banana plantations. The

town owes its existence to the discovery of hot mineral springs in the hills behind the present town in the late 17th century. A spa was developed, and socialites flocked. Today its relative poverty attests to the pitiful wages paid to plantation workers.

The one-street hamlet has a post office, **police station** (☎ 982-2115) and Shell gas station.

A bus (US\$1) runs daily from the Parade in Kingston, as do minibuses and route taxis (US\$3.50).

Sights & Activities

BATH GARDEN

At the east end of town is an old limestone church shaded by royal palms that flank the entrance to a **horticultural garden** (🌅 dawn-dusk) established by the government in 1779. Many exotics introduced to Jamaica were first planted here: bougainvillea, cinnamon, mango, jackfruit, jacaranda and the famous breadfruit brought from the South Pacific by Captain William Bligh aboard HMS *Providence*. The garden has seen better days, but there's no admission charge.

BATH FOUNTAIN

Local legend says that in the 1690s a runaway slave discovered hot springs that cured the injuries he received while escaping. He was so impressed by this miracle that he returned to tell his master. In 1699 the government bought the spring and an adjoining 460 hectares; they created the Bath of St Thomas the Apostle, and then formed a corporation that would administer mineral baths for the sick and infirm. The waters have therapeutic value for skin ailments and rheumatic problems.

Two springs issue from beneath the **bath house** (20min bath for 1/2 persons US\$2.50/4.50; 🕒 8am-9:30pm Tue-Sun). The water here can be scorching (it varies from 46°C to 53°C). You soak in a deep, ceramic-tiled pool. The homey spa also offers a variety of massages. Arrive early on weekends, before the crowds arrive. To get there, turn up the road opposite the church in Bath and follow the road 3km uphill.

Pay no attention to the touts attempting to 'guide' you to the springs, offer 'massage' (to females only) or sell you dead swallowtail butterflies.

HIKING

A trail, for experienced hikers only, leads from Bath Fountain up over **Cuna Cuna Gap** to the Rio Grande Valley. Obtain Sheet 19 (showing St Thomas parish) and Sheet 14 (Portland parish) of the Ordnance Survey 1:12,500 map series from the **Survey Department** (☎ 922-6630; www.nla.gov.jm; 23½ Charles St, Kingston) for more detailed information.

Sleeping & Eating

Bath Fountain Hotel & Spa (☎ 703-4345; r without/with bath US\$30/40, deluxe US\$50) is your only option. It's a recently renovated, pink colonial hotel that dates to 1747 and contains the spa baths on the ground floor. The clinically white bedrooms are modestly furnished, lacking air-con and TVs. It has a small restaurant (breakfast US\$2.50 to US\$5, lunch and dinner US\$7.50 to US\$11).

GOLDEN GROVE

Golden Grove is 10km northeast of Port Morant (and 11km east of Bath). It's a desperately poor hamlet of corrugated-tin and wood huts on stilts, dominated by the plantations of Tropicana Sugar Estates, east of the road, and the banana plantations of Fyffes to the west.

On the A4 west of Golden Grove, a side road loops eastward via New Pera and Old Pera, and eventually deposits you at **Rocky Point Beach**, where fishing pirogues are drawn up. Locals pour in on any weekend to splash in the shallows and jive to ear-shattering reggae and rap.

MORANT POINT

Golden Grove is the gateway to Morant Point, a peninsula that juts into the Caribbean Sea. Erected in 1841, the 30m-tall, red-and-white-striped **Morant Point Lighthouse** (admission free) marks Morant Point, the easternmost tip of Jamaica. If he's in, ask the lighthouse keeper to show you the way to the top. The powerful view and the windy silence make for a profound experience as you look out over rippling sugarcane fields toward the cloud-haunted Blue Mountains.

The lighthouse is best reached by car; there's a turnoff at the gas station on the A4 in Golden Grove. It's a labyrinthine course, however, and completely unsigned. You'll absolutely need a guide to lead you; ask at the gas station. A 4WD is recommended during the rainy season.

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