

About the Jamaica Series:

My first trip to the island of Jamaica was made during February of 1989. What had started out as a few snaps taken while on vacation with my wife and kids has turned into a full blown project--I'll soon be making my sixth trip.

I think that I initially became enamored of Jamaica and its people purely for visual reasons. It was quite a challenge and very exciting for me to ride around in the car searching out the material for my photos. At first I was content in merely traveling the island with no particular purpose in mind, motivated solely by the desire to make interesting portraits. Fortunately, this ambivalent attitude persisted only until the fourth excursion.

On my fourth trip I made some new friends who became interested in introducing me to the whole of the island. We traveled around for almost three weeks and stayed away from the coastal regions which had been my former stomping grounds. While traveling the interior of the island, my eyes were opened to the plight of the Jamaican people and I became aware of the realities of their situation.

Most Jamaicans are born into a life of poverty from which there is little or no hope of escape. The marginal quality of the educational system and the distinct lack of vocational opportunity forces much of the populace into a life typified by hard physical labor and a strong belief in God. Those that are lucky enough to find employment have to work without much monetary reward. The average wage of a seasonal sugar cane worker translates to less than fifteen U.S. dollars per week and even a person that holds a much coveted position such as hotel desk clerk is likely to earn less than fifty U.S. dollars per week. Inflation is rampant and the cost of food and clothing is rather high because many of the basic necessities need to be imported from abroad.

The further one lives from tourist areas the less likely one is to find regular employment. Most people living in the interior scratch their living from the soil via a network of community farm co-ops. An option that relatively few exercise is to abandon their home towns and leave for the cities and tourist areas to seek work but many find no jobs there either and end up hustling on the streets.

In my travels around the island, I am kept in constant awe by the remarkably resilient and proudly individualistic spirit which is maintained by much of the population. They manage successfully to combat their adverse environmental circumstances with a mixture of ingrained tenacity and religious conviction.

Religion takes many forms in Jamaica and even the smallest village is likely to sport three or four houses of worship. These churches range from established forms like Catholicism to more unconventional sects such as the Rastas who use marijuana as their sacrament. Religious activity in Jamaica is as pervasive as the poverty and anyone who receives the calling is likely to start up a church based on his own unique interpretation of biblical lore. Naturally, this disparity of belief sparks many an argument and is a principal source of evening conversation. I am interested in exploring the role that religion plays in Jamaican life--what it gives them and what it takes away.

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