

Taino Art At Mountain River Cave, St. Catherine

In the lush green hills of Guanaboa Vale, in the parish of St. Catherine, there is a cave with large collection of petroglyphs (rock carvings) and pictographs (rock art) … evidence of the existence of Jamaica’s earliest inhabitants, the Tainos.

The Tainos, an Arawakan speaking people, settled in many different parts of Jamaica, enjoying a relatively peaceful existence, with a well organized societal structure. The arrival of the Spanish in 1494 signaled the beginning of the end for them, and the combination of overwork, abuse and exposure to certain diseases, resulted in their ultimate demise.

Mountain River Cave in St. Catherine is worth the visit, to see and feel a very special part of Jamaica’s history. The mile long trek to the cave from the main road passes over a winding river where you might see youngsters from the nearby community playing uninhibitedly in the clear waters oblivious of the historic nature of their surroundings.

Once you reach the caves you'll be amazed at the remarkably, well preserved drawings on the flat underside of the cave roof. Taino artist, using black pigment, created a group of pictographs depicting birds, turtles, lizards, fish, frogs, humans and some abstract patterns. The exact age of the artwork is unknown but archaeologists estimate that they may be between 500 and 1300 years old. The experts believe that the emphasis on food items suggests that the Tainos used the cave for religious rites intended to ensure successful hunting.

Mountain River Cave was first reported in 1897 by J.F. Duerden. In 1954 it was ‘rediscovered’ by J.W. Lee aided by Robert Cooper, whose family owned the land. Realising the potential of the site, the Archaeological Society of Jamaica acquired it in 1976, and with the assistance of some private individuals and institutions, began to develop it.

The protective grill at the entrance of the site and the guard rails were designed and installed by the Jamaica Defense Force (JDF). In May 1982, the Archaeological Society of Jamaica presented the cave as a gift to the Jamaica National Heritage Trust. The site was declared a national monument in April 2003.

The archaeological treasure that awaits you at Mountain River Cave is well worth the three quarters of an hour trek on uneven terrain. Cultivations of cocoa, jackfruit and other native plants provide shelter from the sun as well as excite the senses with their strong, distinctive smell. Take a break and enjoy the waterfall on the way to the cave and essentially bask in the smells, feel and sounds of nature all around you. To be more comfortable on your walk, sturdy shoes or boots are recommended.

Photos courtesy of Jamaica Heritage Trust.

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