

Jamaica Swamp Safari Village

An 18-foot anaconda, a Burmese python and three green iguanas should make the country's newest attraction, Jamaica Swamp Safari Village in the historic town of Falmouth, Trelawny, their permanent home.

They join 15 other mammals, bringing the total to approximately 100 birds and animals at the amazing attraction that puts you in touch with the wonders of nature. Jamaica Swamp Safari Village, the latest addition to the country's roster of magnificent attractions, sits on 50 acres of natural mangrove habitat, and is home to over 30 endangered American crocodile, the Jamaican boa constrictor (yellow snake), and the once thought extinct Jamaican coney. The project is being operated by River Raft Limited, operators of Rafting on the Martha Brae. Both attractions are run by Montego Bay-based businessman Johnny Gourzong, who leased the property two years ago from its owners, the Tourism Product Development Company (TPDCo). Gourzong is renowned for his role as executive director of the international festival Reggae Sumfest. Before River Raft took over the lands, Charles Swaby of Black River Safari fame operated a similar attraction there.

DIVERSITY OF ANIMALS With a different strategy, aimed at capturing the attention of cruise and land-based visitors, locals, and particularly students, Gourzong says he wanted to offer a diversity of animals from the region and has succeeded in doing this through permission from the Government. His guests have at their disposal, the green-rumped parrotlet (*Forpus passerinus*), a small parrot that is a resident breeding bird in tropical South America, and from the Caribbean regions of Colombia, Venezuela and Trinidad south and east to the Guianas and Brazil. Close to that group are the Chinese goose (*Anser cygnoides*, a breed of the domesticated goose descended from the wild swan goose and the kinkajou (*Potos flavus*), a rainforest mammal of the family procyonidae related to coatis and raccoons. Native to Central America and South America, it may live up to 40 years in captivity. Its omnivorous diet consists mainly of fruit. Even more interesting on the walk was the revelation that Iguanas and Agoutis can live together, and will share the same housing, while it became quite understandable why the white-faced capuchin (monkey) had to be given his own space. Showing off his skills, this very self-centred animal, was seen swinging and dancing and even kissing, while eating tangerine. Jamaicans visiting the Jamaica Swamp Safari Village should try not to miss the popular rodent, reportedly eaten by the people in St Thomas and Portland, the Jamaican Coney. Thought to be extinct, this rodent was rediscovered in the early 1980s. Ideally, Jamaica Swamp Safari Village has added to the unique host of attractions in the parish of Trelawny and is distinctive to the western end of the island. "We have crocodiles at every stage of their development, from babies, juveniles and adults to the very mature," he said, revealing that the oldest on the property answers to the name Jeremiah and is about 50 years old. In fact, a number of the crocs are named in honour of the most colourful Jamaicans, including the character 'Riging' in the Jimmy Cliff movie *Harder They Come* and an albino, whose burnt-out complexion has earned him the name 'Vybz'. According to Gourzong and his team of experts, a visit to the Jamaica Swamp Safari Village is actually a venture into Jamaica's only walk-through aviary, where one can view several species of rare local birds. A guided tour of the facility puts you into 'contact' with the lesser anteater, the capuchin monkey, collared peccary, two grey foxes, mongoose, raccoons, agouti and coatimundi.

SHAKIRA "Get up close with Jeremiah, who is a 14-foot monster crocodile, or Japeth, his buddy, and you will not be allowed to depart before meeting Shakira, our 18-foot anaconda," was the invitation that came from the man who feeds the animals without fear, Lyndon 'Beenie' Montaque. For the last 10 years, he has been working with animals and he admits to preferring to work with them than humans. "As for the snakes, I sit right next to them until they are fed," he said. Feeding the nine snakes on the property requires 30 small chickens once per week, he confided. He says the crocodiles eat any type of meat, and "I am not afraid to feed them, because if you ever become afraid, you will never be able to work with them." As if the animals weren't enough colour at the Village, the lore of Agent 007 and the famous crocodile-jumping scene in the James Bond film *Live and Let Die*, which was shot on location at the attraction in 1972, is being re-enacted in the museum and gift shop named after the famous Ross Kananga, who performed as Roger Moore's stunt in the movie. Kananga was reportedly bitten by one of the crocodiles during the filming. In addition, the Village offers local cuisine at the Safari Jerk restaurant and beverages at the Village Bar. Open daily to the public from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., the attraction is equipped to accommodate guests in wheelchairs and is a definite 'must do' for nature lovers and families. Hospitality Jamaica