Official Guide to Jamaican Place Names

As many tourists (and some Jamaicans) have found, when one is travelling through Jamaica a regular road map is often not very helpful.

In the same way many Jamaican persons are far better known by their nicknames than their official names, many places in Jamaica are better known by “nicknames” than the names actually found on a map. The following list of the “real” names of some places in Jamaica may come in handy the next time you get lost somewhere between Mocho and Gimme-me-Bit and a shifty-looking guy in dark glasses named Mongoose swears he’ll “ tek yuh exactly wish part yu waan go” if you will just follow him down this dimly-lit, unmarked, side road. Country: Any place outside of Kingston. (As far as Kingstonians are concerned anyway). “Country” even includes the second city of Montego Bay. So, if a Kinsgtonian tells you they are going to the country for the weekend it’s best to get details. Going to “Country” can mean an overnight stay with Mama (Grandma) in Rock River, Clarendon or it can mean a weekend for two in a 5-star, all-inclusive resort in Ocho Rios. Backto: Majesty Gardens, an economically deprived community near Three Miles in the parish of St. Andrew. In the song ‘Welcome to Jamrock’ Junior Gong states the glaringly obvious: “Sandals [Hotel] ah nuh Backto”. Thanks for the heads-up Gong. Cross the Waters: Community of Portmore, St. Catherine. I suspect the name ‘Cross the Waters’ comes from the fact that one way of getting into Portmore is by crossing the Causeway Bridge from Kingston (over what I think is part of Hunts Bay?) into Portmore. Although it is said that Portmore is the home address of almost 250,000 Jamaicans I’m not sure it’s quite accurate to call it their ‘home’ since many residents of Portmore only sleep there. Heavy traffic requires most to leave for work well before the “cock put on ‘im drawers” and return late at night. Downtown: In Jamaica “Downtown” is not just a physical space but a description of one’s socioeconomic status. Despite the fact that its the home of many large businesses and government entities it’s still often used as shorthand for “where the poor people live”. See Town and Uptown. Gaza: Community of Waterford, St. Catherine and hometown of dancehall DJ Vybz Kartel. Gaza is one half of the recently ended (?) Gully vs. Gaza/ Kartel vs. Mavado clash. Gully: Kingston is full of Gullies but this particular Gully is the ghetto community of Cassava Piece in Constant Spring, St. Andrew; hometown of dancehall DJ Mavado and the other half of the Gully vs. Gaza/ Kartel vs. Mavado clash. Gyaldeville: The sleepy town of Mandeville located in the cool hills of central Manchester. The “Gyal” (Girl) comes from the current Jamaican obsession with not saying anything with the word “man” it. e.g. Gyalchester and Gyaltego Bay. Matches Lane: Matthews Lane. Volatile, economically depressed community in West Kingston. Known as the former stomping grounds of its now-imprisoned “community leader” Donald “Zekes” Phipps. Mocho: Some people may be surprised to know that Mocho is the name of an actual town in the parish of Clarendon. In Jamaican parlance “Mocho” is shorthand for the darkest, most backward, uncivilised place you can find. As a result, there are people who will confess to a murder before they admit to being born in Mocho. Portie: One of the most beautiful places in Jamaica, Portland is a parish on the north eastern end of the island and also one of the hardest to get to. Getting to Portie usually requires a two-hour journey on the bumpy, winding roads of Junction during which your enjoyment of the scenery may be marred by car sickness and the destruction of your car’s suspension. Rema: Most will know Rema from popular dancehall artiste Beenie Mans lyrics “Nuff Gyal and Gyal inna Bungle…Gyal from Rema, Gyal from Jungle”. More properly known as Wilton Gardens, Rema is a volatile garrison community in South St. Andrew. It’s named for Wilton Hill, the Minister of Housing in the JLP Government of the 1960s. Jungle: Arnett Gardens. Volatile community in South St. Andrew. No lions and tigers here but this Jungle may be just as dangerous. Spain: Spanish Town. Large town located in the parish of St. Catherine. Former capital of Jamaica during the 16th-19th centuries. Current crime capital of Jamaica. Senty: The parish of Saint Elizabeth, found in the western end of the island between the parishes of Westmoreland and Manchester (Gyalchester), is well known for its pepper shrimp, “brownings” and dry weather. Also known as St. Bess. Tel Aviv: Rough community in downtown Kingston located not far from Matthews Lane. Tel Aviv is a part of Parade Gardens and is well known for its violent, long-standing feud with the neighbouring community of Southside (‘South’ which is also known for its association with the Greenbay Massacre in the 70’s). Like Gaza it is also named after a place marked by violent conflict. TG: Tivoli Gardens. Pronounced Ti-vuh-lee. (Not “Tivawli” as Renato Adams might have you believe) Tivoli Gardens, a community in West Kingston, is Jamaica’s most famous “Garrison” and might be the only “independent” state-within-a-state in Jamaica. It has its own ‘President’, its own laws and own government. Some say that when it comes to Tivoli, its Member of Parliament is more like a Governor General- a ceremonial Head of State having no real powers on the ground. Town: For ‘country people’ Town means Kingston. e.g. “Mi ah go ah Town go sell mi ganja.” But when one is in actually in Kingston, Town means Downtown Kingston, i.e. anywhere below Torrington Bridge and above the waterfront. e.g. “Mi ah go ah market ah Town go buy some country ganja.” Uptown: Where the poor don’t live. Any one of several communities in north St. Andrew where Kingston’s middle and upper classes live. See Downtown. If you can think of any other places in Jamaica that are commonly known by names other than their official names. Drop us a line…

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