

AAH ... the good old Days

St. Jago De La Vega, or Spanish Town, once the capital city of Jamaica, is rich and full of cultural heritage.

Once the largest city in Jamaica, it was the hub of all trade and commerce and, as a result, has the finest collection of historical buildings as well as the country's archives. Against this background, Spanish Town is considered a town of significant historical value in this hemisphere. According to Earl Hyde, chairman of the St Catherine Parish Development Committee, new development plans will have to be drafted to renovate the historical sites in the town, but primarily those located in Emancipation Square. These sites, he said, would be ideal for Jamaica's heritage-tourism product. "The square has always attracted tourists. They would go there and take pictures," Hyde told a Gleaner Community Forum held recently in the old capital. "However, because of the violence, the tour companies stopped taking them there. The violence has now been abated and we actually see a few tourists coming and taking pictures," he added. **RICH HISTORY** Spanish Town boasts the oldest iron bridge of its kind - erected in 1801 at a cost of £4,000 - in the Western Hemisphere. The town also has one of the first Spanish cathedrals, built around 1525, to be established in the New World. Most religious denominations have churches or meeting halls in the town. In addition to the Anglican Cathedral, there is a Roman Catholic Church, Wesleyan, Baptist, and Seventh-day Adventist chapels, as well as a mosque - the only one of its kind in the island. Hyde said the aim is for tourists not to just take pictures, but to go inside the buildings and relive what happened inside them. He said plans were already in place to start the refurbishing in stages, once adequate funding had been identified. "We are targeting the Tourism Enhancement Fund to assist us with this project, and already, the Spanish government is ready to begin working with us in redeveloping the square. We also believe that this may arouse the interest of the British government," Hyde reported. **Heritage facts** Built on the west bank of the Rio Cobre, Spanish Town lies 13 miles from Kingston. Its history was shaped by two significant colonial periods: Spanish rule from 1534-1655; and the English, from 1655-1872. After those periods, the capital was relocated to Kingston and the Anglican Church took over the 16th-century cathedral. In the town, standing untouched in character, is a historic alms-house, a public hospital, and a maximum-security penal institution built in the 18th century. In the neighbourhood are five sugar estates, only two of which are still operational. There is a planned restoration of the Taino Museum in White Marl, St Catherine, which has been closed for about eight years. There are tours of caves which have been identified throughout the parish. Jamaica Gleaner