

Best places to golf in Montego Bay

Jamaica is one of the premier golf destinations in the entire Caribbean, behind only powerhouses Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic. Montego Bay, the island's second-largest city, offers a rich quantity and quality of courses.

Throw in a wide range of top resort options and Jamaica's unique culture, music and cuisine, and you have the makings of a great golf vacation. Even the many cruise-ship guests who visit Montego Bay just for a day can take advantage of one of four standout courses close to the city. The largest golf resort community is Rose Hall, a 7,000-acre former sugar-cane plantation that sits on a beautiful stretch of coastline. The property ascends inland to mountains so that, at every turn, Caribbean sea views are on display. The land and golf courses are dotted with historic agricultural ruins such as the remnants of mills and an arched-stone aqueduct that crosses a fairway. Rose Hall includes two major resort hotels, two golf courses, a wide range of restaurants and facilities, including the second-largest water park in the Caribbean — Sugar Mill Falls, and one of the premier tourist attractions in all of Jamaica — the Rose Hall Great House itself. A Georgian-style mansion built with tropical flair in the late-18th century, Rose Hall is legendarily haunted by the "White Witch" — the ghost of Annie Palmer, who is said to have murdered three husbands on the premises. Today it offers a popular daytime tour, a creepier nighttime tour, a museum and a dungeon turned into a pub; but for the traveling golfer, the main attractions at Rose Hall are the two fabulous coastal courses, the White Witch and Cinnamon Hill. With ocean views from 16 of its 18 holes, historic stone walls and seaside drama, the White Witch is generally the highest ranked course on the island and the must-play in Montego Bay, though Cinnamon Hills is not far behind. Both were designed by acclaimed golf architect Robert von Hagge, and both offer caddies. The White Witch plays along the waterfront, with lots of Caribbean exposure and never strays too far inland, while the Cinnamon Hill routing is more up and back, running straight down the hill to the coast before reversing and climbing upwards. With extensive sugar-plantation ruins and a brief but dramatic seaside stretch, the course has impressive elevation changes and scenic vistas, reaching 350 feet above sea level. Editor's note: The White Witch has been closed for several months for a major enhancement and reopens November 1, 2013. Lodging options at Rose Hall include two all-inclusive, full-service beachfront resorts: the Iberostar and the Hilton. Just across the road from Rose Hall is the Half Moon Resort, a 400-acre luxury resort filled with landscaped gardens and famed for its two-mile crescent beach — hence the name Half Moon. It has a swim-with-the-dolphins lagoon, equestrian center, lavish spa and is home to one of the older layouts on the island: a venerable Robert Trent Jones Sr., course extensively renovated in recent years, making it one of the longest in the region at 7,141 yards from the back tees. Like its neighbors, full caddie services are available, a common and luxurious feature in Jamaica but not so much in the rest of the Caribbean. The Half Moon golf club also has extensive practice facilities, including dedicated short game and full swing areas. While less dramatic than the nearby seaside courses and built on higher, flatter ground, it packs plenty of challenges thanks to its length, extensive bunkering, undulating greens and a unique two-loop figure-eight routing that causes the omnipresent trade winds to constantly affect play from different directions — something golfers need to constantly bear in mind while playing. The other classic Montego Bay layout is the all-villa luxury resort, Tryall Club, 12 miles east of Montego Bay. A former Spanish fort and plantation, the 2,200-acre property includes both agricultural and military relics, such as a waterwheel and cannons. Built in 1958 and considered one of the Caribbean's classic gems, the golf course is unusually short by contemporary standards (under 6,300 yards from the tips), but plays much more difficult than the length suggests. Vast expanses of unimpeded ocean exposure, plenty of wind, inland and shoreline water hazards, and severely sloped putting surfaces ramp up the challenge level. In 1992 the Tryall Club resort acquired additional oceanfront land and added the showpiece fourth hole, on the edge of the Caribbean; a decade later, it rebuilt all 18 greens with contemporary drainage and agronomy standards to ensure high-quality putting year-round. The result is a classic that has kept up with time — a course with over a mile of coastal exposure that starts dramatically near the water before climbing into inland hills, offers a bit of everything, and remains among the very best Jamaica has to offer.