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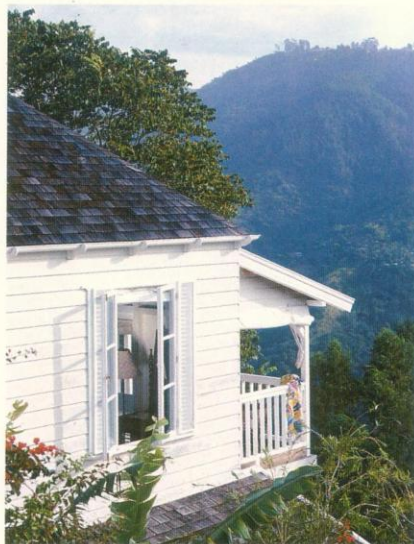
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★ **Star attraction:**
Relaxing



**Shaggy, Grammy
Award-winning pop star**

When I'm not touring, I love just chilling out back home in Jamaica. For total relaxation, I book into the amazing

Strawberry Hill (left; islandoutpost.com; doubles from £145, B&B), overlooking Kingston. Then I'll drive to Hellshire Beach for snapper or parrotfish on the beach at Screechies shack. At the weekend, I'll go for a drink downtown; the nightlife in the capital is always exciting. I love to party at Fiction (fictionloungeja.com) – it's where all the celebs go – or Usain Bolt's Tracks & Records (tracksandrecords.com), a huge warehouse-turned-sports bar serving jerk chicken and sweet-potato fries. It's very relaxed with everyone eating at the bar, watching the six-metre screen.

★ **Star attraction:**
The perfect sundowner



**Chris Blackwell,
Jamaican music mogul**

I love sunset drinks at Noël Coward's old mountaintop home, Firefly (firefly-jamaica.com). It's got magical sea views

and loads of historic charm. When Coward lived there, the entire world came to see him – Liz Taylor, Laurence Olivier, even the Queen Mother.



Experts' Picks

STTM writers – and clued-up locals – help you make a splash...

WOWIEST POOLS

Hermitage Bay, Antigua

The private pools are the USP at this hill-hugging resort in a remote southwestern corner of the island. Clinging to one side of each bougainvillea-clad suite, they come with infinity edges that disappear into a glittering ocean hemmed by gentle hills. You could wallow here for days – only getting out to doze poolside in your own shady *cabaña*. *Doubles from £60 per night, all inclusive* (00 1 268 562 5500, hermitagebay.com).

Hotel Nacional de Cuba, Havana

A swimming pool made for peacocking, this Art Deco number overlooks the simmering Malecón seafront. Rita Hayworth soaked her famous auburn locks here, Winston Churchill waded cigar in hand, and Ava Gardner swam naked after dark for a smitten Frank Sinatra. Eighty years on, the weather remains sultry, the Mojitos cold and the music loud (a hot Cuban trio provide a fusion-salsa soundtrack as you paddle and parade). *Doubles from £107, B&B* (00 53 7836 3564, hotelnacionaldecuba.com).

Viceroy Hotel, Anguilla

Of the three pools at this starry retreat, the best is the infinity stunner that hangs over the sea, delivering views of truly



**Twilight zone: the
pool at Amanyara,
Turks & Caicos**

exquisite sunsets. Romantics go for twilight dips, while the snap-happy head for nibbles and fizz in the nearby lounge, where palm trees frame the pool and sea-myth-inspired sculptures adorn the bar – there's any number of memorable shots to capture. *Doubles from £370, room only* (00 1 264 497 7000, viceroyhotelsandresorts.com).

Ladera, St Lucia

Like something out of a '70s Bond movie, the 32 rooms at Ladera resort have private plunge pools fed by trickling waterfalls, with swing chairs for two. But what really packs a punch is the view as you swim – out towards the Pitons, St Lucia's famous pointy peaks. When you get bored of your own company, there's a larger

communal infinity pool with the same stop-in-your-tracks vistas. *Doubles from £270, B&B* (00 1 758 459 6618, ladera.com).

Amanayara, Providenciales, Turks & Caicos

Olympic in length, with inky black tiles, Amanayara's pool is like a dark lake. Lounging *salas* (pavilions) at each end rise like cathedrals devoted to sybaritic sun worship. Take a twilight dip with a Champagne-laced Mojito in hand – and watch the sun descend below the rocky shoreline beyond the pool. *Doubles from £805, including private transfers, snorkel trips, yoga classes and afternoon tea* (00 1 649 941 8133, amanresorts.com). >

Power shower: heavy
rain over Jamaica's
Blue Mountains

I SPY THE DELICATE
PETALS OF LILAC
FAIRIES, AND
HIBISCUS-LOVING
HUMMINGBIRDS

THE BEST ISLAND FOR...

Mountain treks? Jamaica

Golden raindrops float down the car window as we cruise into the Blue Mountains. 'Liquid sunshine,' says my driver, Dave Dale, in his rich Jamaican accent. The mountain road is rough, but he takes it easy on the bends, leaning back coolly in his seat, so that I'm free to gawp through the trickles.

On the backseat beside me is my tour guide, a dynamic American lady named Lynda Lee. She is reeling off the names of flowers, pointing out patty shops and rum shacks. She regales me with tales from the rainforest – like the time she and Dave procured a wedding's-worth of purple hydrangeas from the side of the road. They used them to decorate Strawberry Hill, the mountain retreat I'm staying in, and one of the most blissed-out places on Earth.

It's as green as can be up here. The liquid sunshine melts away and a mist lifts swiftly as we get out of the car. We're hiking up an old trail to a historic coffee plantation – it's a beautiful ascent, beneath a shady canopy

of ferns. Dave has fashioned me a walking stick and carries our picnic lunch in a bag.

Lynda Lee points out more than my eyes can absorb. There are a gazillion flowers: fiery red poinciana; pointy coral heliconia, with butter-yellow tips; delicate petals of agapanthus-like lilac fairies. There is fern upon fern (over 400 types). And Lynda Lee wants me to see one of each kind of hummingbird (three). She tells me they love hibiscus, but it doesn't sharpen my spotting skills so she spies two – fluttering, fleeting, hovering – on my behalf. I'm dazzled.

Delicious things grow well in Jamaica, too: mangoes, coconuts, bananas, cocoa. Up here, the coffee is some of the best – and priciest – in the world. I've been drinking it every morning at Strawberry Hill and it's so good I wake up thinking about it. Blue Mountain coffee has protected status, like Champagne, and the real deal is only grown over some 370sq m of land. At Clifton Mount Estate, the 19th-century home where we stop to unwrap our picnic, there's a particular patch dedicated to the cream of the crop,

the Grand Cru (and every bean is earmarked for a wealthy customer).

Noting my appreciation for a good bean, Dave drives me up to Old Tavern, the little coffee house that supplies Strawberry Hill. Berries are plucked from the tree and sent down to Kingston to be dried. The husks (like red peanut shells) can then be peeled off, and the beans are ready for roasting. I get close to the roaster – it heats to 200°C and only 30 seconds stand between a medium and dark roast. Owner David does it all by sight and smell, pottering in the garden until it's time to press stop.

Eventually, it's time. We sit on garden furniture on a sliver of terrace. This isn't the Caribbean experience I'd imagined. I can't see the sea, I'm not in a hammock, and there's not a rum punch in sight. I'm high in the mountains, giddily sipping beautiful, just-roasted black coffee. I feel wonderfully happy. I buy five bags.

Get me there: Virgin Atlantic (0844 573 2451, virgin-atlantic.com) flies Gatwick to Montego Bay from £725 return. A week at Strawberry Hill costs from £660pp, B&B, with transfers (00 1 876 944 8400, islandoutpost.com). A Blue Mountain coffee tour costs from £125pp with transport (00 1 876 357 1225, jamaicatoursociety.com).

Laura Goodman >