



JAMAICA

REGGAE RIDE: WHERE ONE LOVE MEETS ONE ROAD

by Lisa Evans

If I were to pick one word to describe my three-day cycling trip to the island of Jamaica, it would be *irie* — a Jamaican slang word meaning “everything is great.” From the moment I landed in Montego Bay and was met by Jennifer Hilton, owner of Holiday Services and the organizer of the Jamaica Reggae Ride, any concerns I had about the three-day, 175-mile ride slipped into the shimmering turquoise waters of the Caribbean Sea.



Jennifer Hilton



Lisa Evans

I was picked up from the airport and delivered to the Holiday Services offices where I met the five guides who would accompany our group of 12 international cyclists. Leo (Masters Tour of Colombia sprint champion), Fowly (Jamaican Masters racer and racing coach), Martin (multiple-time Jamaican Masters champion), Breezeman (current member of the Jamaican National Team), and Dahlia (National women's champion). To say these credentials were intimidating would be an understatement. Riding alongside National champions was an experience I had yet to add to my cycling resume.

The Pros quickly got to work, assembling our bikes and loading them onto the back of the van that would transport us to Negril, a small beach-resort town located on the west end of the island that was the preferred holiday retreat spot of flower children in the 1950s and '60s. This former hippie haven remains an out-of-the-way vacation spot with a laidback atmosphere where dressing for dinner can mean pulling a T-shirt over your swimsuit and where travelers and locals interact freely on the seven-mile-long public beach.

With our bikes safely stored in our hotel rooms, we headed out to dinner at Pushcart Restaurant. "Pushcart" is the name given to the wagons used for street vending in the Caribbean. While the menu draws from Caribbean street food, this open-air cliffside eatery serves up traditional Jamaican home-cooking favourites such as curried goat and oxtail, providing the perfect venue to become acquainted with our new Jamaican friends and fuel up for our ride the next morning.

After a continental breakfast at Rooms Negril overlooking the Caribbean Sea, Jennifer and our sag vehicle driver Michael rounded up the troops with their cowbell, and at 7:30 a.m., we pushed off onto the A1 north coast main road for Montego Bay.

When I pictured riding in Jamaica, I admit that I imagined rougher terrain with a fair share of potholes and gravel stretches, but was surprised to find the roads were even smoother than those in my hometown of Toronto. I stopped being wary soon after we began the day's 88km/55-mile ride, though we did have to watch out for the occasional roadside goat. Even cycling on the opposite side of the road felt like "no problem" (Jamaica follows British road rules).

The first day's ride was relatively flat, with a couple of rollers for a minor challenge. Our first stop, approximately 20 miles out of Negril, was in the town of Green Island, where we were treated to bananas, peanut butter sandwiches, cold water and Gatorade refills. From there, we headed to Lucea for a market stop, where we drank from coconuts prepared for us by a farmer named "Sugar." The cool water was refresh-

ing and the natural electrolytes gave us the energy we needed to get through the next half of the ride. Once we were finished slurping up all the water from our coconuts, Sugar chopped them up, allowing us to feast on the gooey insides. No need for recovery gels when you have roadside coconuts!

With 20 miles still to go and the hot sun rising to the top of the sky, we jumped back on our bikes, rolling into the tourist strip of Montego Bay (Mo'Bay if you want to sound

Jamaican) by noon.

The second day of riding was more challenging than the first. More longer hills awaited us on the 99.2km/62-mile ride, as did a little headwind. While a few Category-Four hills can raise some panic in less experienced cyclists (me included), not in Jamaica. Riders who ran out of steam midway uphill could settle into a low gear and wait for their Jamaican pushcart service — our National champion guides who placed a firm hand on our backs, helping to push us up the more difficult climbs. Even our police escorts, Farrakhan and Winky, helped out, giving some struggling riders a boost of motorcycle fuel.



Lisa Evans

(top) Stunning scenery along the A1 north coast road.

(opposite) A welcome site along the way;
(left) Gearing up for a waterfall massage at Dunn's River Falls.



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Jennifer Hilton



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(top) The gang celebrates at the ride's ending point, Frenchman's Cove.

(above left) Each day was filled with great riding, along with Jamaican culture and history.

(above right) Our cheerleader, Michael, giving two riders a helping hand on Spring Hill.

(right) Catch of the day.



Jennifer Hilton

JUST THE FACTS

Jamaica Reggae Ride, www.jamaicareggaeride.com

Jamaica Tourism, www.visitjamaica.com

Dunn's River Falls, www.dunnriverfallsja.com

The Jamaican pushcart was just one of the services offered by our tour guides. Although we had rest stops every 32km/20 miles to fill up water bottles, riders who ran out of water on the road could simply hold their bottles in the air for the guides to take to the sag van for a top-up, sprinting them back to us in no time. As we reached mid-day and temperatures began to climb, our guides came around with their own bottles filled with ice-cold water offering refreshing showers.

Day Two's ride also offered a glimpse into Jamaican history. We rode through Runaway Bay, where slaves escaped by boats; Discovery Bay, where Christopher Columbus first set foot on Jamaican soil; and

Falmouth, the oldest town in Jamaica and the most architecturally stunning.

During the late 18th and early 19th centuries, Falmouth was one of the Caribbean's wealthiest towns. As many as 30 tall ships could be seen on any given day in the harbour, many of them delivering slaves transported from Africa and filling up with rum and sugar manufactured on the area's plantations to export to Britain. Many of the town's early buildings are still standing, including the Falmouth Court House and St. Peter's Anglican Church, one of the oldest churches in Jamaica.

A rest stop in the town of Rio Bueno offered a special opportunity for us to connect with Jamaican culture. We arrived at the gallery and home of renowned Jamaican artist Joe James to refuel with sandwiches and fruit, and were treated to a special presentation by schoolchildren. After entertaining us with folk songs and poetry, the children lined up on the side of the road and cheered as we continued on our way to Ocho Rios, a former fishing village that is now the second-most popular resort town (second to Montego Bay).

We spent the afternoon at Jamaica's most famous landmark, Dunn's River Falls, a 600-foot waterfall that provides Nature's best massage. Leaning back into the falls, the pounding water quickly soothed aching muscles, and then we engaged in such thrilling tricks as falling backwards off a cliff and sliding down one of the mini-waterfalls created by weathered rock.

Day Three brought us to the eastern part of the island where mountainous terrain is home to spectacular coastal views, lush vegetation and the most anticipated climb of the three-day excursion — Black Hill. The half-mile-long Category-Four climb peppered with hairpin turns had been talked about by our guides since Day One. "Save your energy for Black Hill," they warned. The hill lived up to their warnings and indeed was a tough climb, but excitement was high as we reached the top and began the long descent down to the shoreline — my favourite part of the day's ride.

After surviving Black Hill, we breezed through small towns along the coast heading to Port Antonio, ending the day at Frenchman's Cove, a once-exclusive resort area of the rich and famous in the 1950s. After a barbecue lunch on the beach, we soothed our sore muscles in the crystal-blue waters while our bikes were disassembled and packed into our bike boxes. Then we headed back to Ocho Rios for a final dinner and the presentation of our certificates of completion. Despite a few aching muscles, everyone was feeling *irie*.

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