



The powdered-sugar sands of Seven-Mile Beach make a great place to celebrate finishing the race, no matter if you have run 10 km, a half-marathon or a full marathon.

# Running to the beat in Jamaica

**REGGAE MARATHON:** Friendly atmosphere makes for a great race and there is plenty to do afterwards as well

CATHERINE ROSCOE BARR  
FOR THE PROVINCE

It's 5 a.m. and I'm walking through the gathering crowd, stepping to the beat of reggae music blasting from speakers that are out of sight. It's already over 20 C, so warming up my muscles before the race is a fairly easy task.

More than 1,400 people from 36 countries have registered for the Reggae Marathon and, in 15 min-

utes, will begin a 10 km, 21 km or 42 km run past the resorts that dot Negril and its powdered-sugar Seven Mile Beach.

The energy is electric and despite the dark sky and early hour, people are friendly and forthcoming.

I see a group of four, a woman and three men, with temporary tattoos on their cheeks — a Jamaican flag on one, a Canadian flag on the other — and make my way toward them. They're from Winnipeg and decid-

ed that since they were already in Negril for a wedding, they'd do the half marathon together.

The woman, Denalda, produces another fake Canadian tattoo from her pocket and with a squirt of water from the bottle anchored to her hip, presses the tattoo onto my bare shoulder.

I spot a Minnesota man I met the night before at the aptly named World's Best Pasta Party (with delicious jerk chicken alfredo, beef

lasagna, tuna spaghetti, vegetarian penne and, of course, Red Stripe beer) and head over to wish him a good run.

Burt is 87 years old. This is his 320th marathon and 12th Reggae Marathon.

I say hello to Michelle from Toronto, who was on my flight to Jamaica two days earlier. She's doing the half marathon this year after doing the full marathon last year.

Finally I take my place between

Pete from Calgary, an avid marathoner in Jamaica for the first time to do the half, and Tricia from Kansas City, who's done the Reggae Marathon every year since it began in 2001.

After running one full and nine half marathons, she elected to do the 10 km distance the past two years, telling me it felt like more of a vacation that way.

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# The music is never very far away

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The music stops and race director Alfred Francis says a few words before the start signal sounds. The music returns, Bob Marley's Jammin' filling the air, and everyone sings along as we stream into the darkness, past a line of volunteers lighting our way with torches.

Jamaica is known for its short distance runners, most notably Olympic sprinter Usain Bolt (who coincidentally ran the Reggae Marathon in 2001 as part of his school's relay team), but Kingston's Jamdammers Running Club started the marathon event to develop mid- and long-distance running in Jamaica, and to promote a healthy lifestyle through the sport.

The double looped course, which runs along Norman Manley Boulevard and is closed to traffic between 4 a.m. and 12 p.m. on race day, begins and ends at Long Bay Beach Park, stretching south to the town of Negril and north towards Salt Creek, with views of the turquoise Caribbean Sea.

There's an impressive turnout of spectators and some have arrived by the side of the road still in their pyjamas.

Every mile is marked with a hydration and aid station, manned by a group of incredible volunteers, many of them bright-eyed youngsters.

Every mile reggae music pumps from a car stereo or even a live band, so as you pass the music

and it begins to grow faint, you hear more in the distance, drawing you forward.

I haven't run this far in years — and I'm only doing the 10 km — but I feel great, instantly energized as I pass the Silver Bird Steel Orchestra just beyond the 8-km mark.

I pick up my pace and race towards the finish line, crossing the final timing mat beaming ear to ear. Immediately a finishing medal is placed around my neck and then I stand in line for coconut water, straight from a fresh coconut hacked open with a machete.

I need both arms to finish my recovery drink, then I have a good stretch, pick up a Red Stripe, and chat with Patrick, a race director from Magog, near Montreal, who ran the 10-km in 46 minutes, pushing his young daughter in a stroller, while his wife did the half-marathon.

Next I wander over to the massage tent on the beach to have my weary legs worked on, while watching happy finishers jump into the warm ocean water.

Marvia, my adept massage therapist, was totally worth the 75-minute wait in line. I practically skip back to my all-inclusive resort, Beaches Negril, less than five-minutes down the beach and sit down beside the pool to an enormous breakfast of scrambled eggs, bacon, toast with marmalade, fried plantain and hearty Jamaican callaloo greens, with coffee.

At first glance, Beaches Negril might seem like an odd place to stay without a young family — their services for kids are wildly impressive — but their proximity to Long Bay Beach Park and roster of amenities are first rate.

After breakfast, I stop by my room to change into my bathing suit, sign up for a free snorkelling excursion at the water sports hut, and then sink into a lounge chair on the beach while I wait for the boat to arrive.

I board the vessel with two families travelling together from Ontario, each with two young girls, and our guide Ricardo takes us out to middle shore reef where we hop in the water for a spectacular underwater adventure before heading back to shore, where I rejoin my group of runners.

With only 48 hours left in Jamaica we make the most of our remaining time, and set off to watch the sunset at Rick's Café, a Negril institution where daredevil cliff jumpers draw curious crowds.

The next morning, our driver T'Mamu picks us up for an excursion to YS Falls, a two-hour drive away. We stop in Savanna-la-Mar for sugar cane, and chew the fibrous treats as we head into the lush interior towards the falls.

I'm happy to take in the scenery and play photographer as my thrill-seeking comrades swing from ropes into the deep pools, and even more happy to stop for lunch at the roadside market in

Scott's Cove, also referred to as Border because it marks the border between Westmoreland and Saint Elizabeth Parish.

It feels like a true Jamaican experience as vendors swarm our bus with fresh food in hand, vying for our purchases. We take our spread to the nearby beach and feast on deep-fried parrot fish, goat fish and snapper topped with pickled onions and scotch bonnet peppers, balmy (fried Jamaican flatbread), festival (Jamaican doughnut), boiled shrimp and boiled corn.

It's 5 a.m. again and I'm walking towards the powdered-sugar beach for the last time. I've borrowed a yoga mat from the 24-hour fitness centre and lay it on a towel for some sunrise salutations. An hour later I see my friends Pete and Megan and we grab three boards and head out for a stand up paddle, before catching our shuttle to the Montego Bay airport and heading home. As we look back toward the resort, the sun is rising above the palm trees and we smile big, happy smiles, knowing we are blessed to be here.

Registration for the Reggae Marathon, held the first Saturday every December, is \$60 for the 10-km, \$85 for the half-marathon and \$95 for the full marathon and includes admission to the Marathon Expo, the World's Best Pasta Party and the post-race Victory Beach Bash at Long Bay Beach Park. Visit [www.reggaemarathon.com](http://www.reggaemarathon.com).



A snorkling excursion to an offshore reef is just the thing for relaxing after running a 10-km race.

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A wide variety of fish and other foods is available at the roadside market in Scott's Cove.