

## BLUE MOUNTAIN PEAK.

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BLUE Mountain Peak is the highest point in Jamaica. One of my maps gives its height as 7,402 feet, another has it as 7,360 feet, and in a book I have been reading recently it is given as 7,388 feet. You can take your choice. The average figure happens to be 7,383 feet.

Jamaica is mostly mountains—or hills, as I suppose they should really be called—the highest of which are at its eastern end. There is no snow and no ice, and so far as I know no crags worthy of the name, so you must not expect this to be a story of mountaineering adventure. Nor, because of this, should you conclude that the Jamaican mountains are wholly dull and uninteresting; in fact they possess considerable natural beauty and well repay a visit.

Jamaica is roughly 145 miles long from east to west, and at its widest, 50 miles from north to south. Kingston, the capital city and principal port, lies on the south coast, a little over 40 miles as the crow flies from the easternmost point of the island and quite close to the Blue Mountains. Soon after I arrived in Kingston I made inquiries about the possibility of getting up into the mountains. I could tell at once that any such inquiry was unusual and that I was deemed to be hopelessly eccentric, if not quite mad! It was impressed upon me that the ascent of the highest peak was an arduous and difficult undertaking and that a guide was essential. I remained very sceptical of all these difficulties. Several tourist concerns were contacted and eventually Mr Keith Roberts of "Jamaica Tours" agreed to make the necessary arrangements for me. These were really quite simple. I should have to go by car to Mavis Bank, a village in the hills 15 miles from Kingston; then on horseback to Torre Garda, a small guest-house 4,100 feet up and about 5 miles from Mavis Bank and 7 miles from Blue Mountain Peak. At Torre Garda I should have to stay for one night. On the following morning I could go up the peak and then



return to Kingston in the afternoon. All this was quickly arranged. Friday morning, January 26, 1951, was dull and cloudy, but hot nevertheless.

Soon after I had finished breakfast Mr Roberts arrived at the hotel with his small Morris 8 in which he was to take me to Mavis Bank. At 8.40 A.M. we were away. It was the morning rush-hour, but here an unhurried rush suited to the slower tempo of the tropics. In the city there is a speed limit of twenty miles an hour; beyond the city limits, our speed was limited by steep hills, hair-pin bends, and potholes. Tyres, I was told, will seldom last for more than 4,000 miles, and I could well believe it. Near Kingston the hills end a few miles north of the road between Kingston and Spanish Town, the former capital, which is 15 miles away to the west. From the air their termination appears quite remarkably abrupt. South of the Kingston to Spanish Town road lies a coastal flat—the Ligonea Plain—on which, and at other places mostly near the coast, are grown the sugarcane, the bananas, and the coconut palms which form the staple crops of the island. Kingston stands on the eastern edge of the plain and its suburbs straggle out to the hills. We passed no plantations on our drive to Mavis Bank. By the time we had reached Gordon Town, somewhere between 6 and 7 miles from Kingston, we were well up in the hills, following the narrow defile cut by the Hope river. The hills on either side of us were steep, and except where small clearances had been made, were clothed from base to summit in a riot of tropical vegetation. Many people, mostly women, were walking along the road in the Kingston direction, probably bound for the market, carrying on their heads bundles of vegetables wrapped up in cloth or packed in baskets. Others, mostly men, were riding donkeys with laden side-panniers. Walking or riding into the city is known as “going road.” After a drive of just over one hour we arrived at Mavis Bank, which turned out to be an untidy collection of wooden shacks, some of them homes and some small stores. Like all Jamaican villages it teemed with children—negro, Chinese, and European; black, coffee-coloured, cream and white, but of course mostly



coloured, as only 2 per cent. of the population is white. As likely as not more than half the children were illegitimate—such is life in the Caribbean! Two saddled horses were tethered outside one of the stores and we guessed rightly that they were waiting there for me. Their owner, a middle-aged negro—Claudie McDonald—was with them. I mounted the larger of the two, a mare named Flora; Claudie rode the other animal. Fully twenty years had passed since I last sat on horse-back and it took me only a few seconds to realise that what little I had learnt about riding had long since been forgotten. Claudie tried now and again to urge the horses into a trot, but a gentle amble suited me better. We started off downhill to the Yallahs river. The track was narrow and uneven. At any moment, I thought, Flora might stumble and throw me off over her head, but she was reasonably sure-footed and I remained firmly in the saddle. Soon the Yallahs river was safely forded. About half a mile farther on we forded the Green river, and from there the track wound steadily and steeply uphill. Though no longer in any danger of being thrown over Flora's head I felt there was now every possibility of a backward slide over her tail! Despite the heat I should have been far more comfortable and far happier on foot. Claudie greeted all passers-by with simple courtesy—"Good morning, Mr Jones"—"How d'you do, Mrs Brown?" His grave punctilio never permitted him the use of a Christian name. Small wooden habitations were sprinkled haphazardly about the hillsides, each with its patch of cleared ground on which the owner could grow his small crop of maize, bananas, yams, coffee, gungue peas, onions or other vegetables. Gungue peas I had never seen nor heard of before; unlike our garden peas which climb up sticks, these were small, dark-green bushes covered with bright orange flowers. The coffee crop used to be of greater importance than it is to-day, but plant disease, the development of other areas, and possibly the innate laziness of the negro growers have lessened its value. Many people will tell you that Blue Mountain coffee is still the best in the world. We arrived at Torre Garda guest-house at 12 o'clock, having taken exactly two hours for the ride from Mavis Bank.



The house, the name of which by the way is Spanish and means "Watch Tower," is beautifully situated on the crest of an outlying spica of the Blue Mountain range. It is a bungalow built mainly of wood, and was designed by the owner, Miss Stedman. From the front door one could look down on the tiny houses and small white church of Mavis Bank, and across to the forest-covered hills between Mavis Bank and Kingston. A gap between the hills revealed the blue Caribbean sea. Behind the house, on the far side of a deep valley, rose the long high ridge of the Blue Mountains. Blue Mountain Peak itself was cloud-capped. While I was standing in the garden admiring the view a tiny sprite of a bird hovered on whirring wings in front of a nasturtium flower, inserted its long thin beak into the flower and either sipped the nectar or delicately removed some minute insect from the corolla. It was the first humming-bird I had ever seen. Butterflies—yellow ones striped with black, small blue ones, dark browns, and others resembling fritillaries flitted about amongst bright, sweet-scented azaleas.

After lunch I went out for a walk, but soon returned soaked by a heavy shower which yielded half an inch of rain in the half-hour of its duration. As soon as the weather had cleared I went out again. I had not gone far before I was stopped by a tall negro carrying two tree branches balanced on his head. He was a very worried man. The police had recently searched his home but had found nothing incriminating, and he now wished to know whether he could consider himself free from the risk of legal proceedings. I told him he would probably be fairly safe. He had obviously mistaken me for Miss Stedman's partner, Mr Ross, who was formerly a police official. No doubt the police had suspected him of growing "Janja," a plant from which a highly intoxicating drink, similar to the Indian "bhang," can be brewed. I walked for about a mile along the track to Blue Mountain Peak, as far as Whitfield Hall, a small house standing in a grove of Australian gum trees which Miss Stedman occupied before she built Torre Garda. On the way back a boy passed me playing a home-made bamboo flute. Dinner was served at 7 o'clock. I was the only guest. Towards 9 o'clock a



stiffish breeze sprang up from the north-west and Mr Ross became gloomy about the prospects for the immediate future. However, come sunshine or rain, after the sticky heat of Kingston it was most delightfully cool up in the hills. I was able also to enjoy a peaceful night's sleep undisturbed by barking dogs and screeching cats and the raucous crowing of innumerable roosters which in Kingston make the night air hideous.

In the morning I was called at 4.30 A.M. and was out about an hour later. To the south over the distant sea the Southern Cross was shining brightly, but a great mass of cloud was lying heavily over the Blue Mountain ridge and a gusty wind was blowing. Cicadas and whistling frogs were still loudly trilling among the trees. I had not walked more than ten paces before I felt a spot of rain blown into my face; this was not encouraging. Half an hour later it was drizzling steadily, and even the wildest optimist would have lost all hope of any improvement. Daybreak came suddenly soon after 6 o'clock. By this time I had reached Abbey Field, some 2 miles from Torre Garda and the last habitation on the way to the peak. Here, I had been warned, the track bears to the left and zigzags up the hillside; I must not on any account continue straight ahead across the "barbecues." "And what is a barbecue"? I had to ask. In the West Indies a barbecue is a flat concreted area, in this instance about the size of a tennis court, on which coffee beans are spread out to dry. The way to the summit was well defined all the way, though in places wet and somewhat overgrown. Above Abbey Field the track entered uncleared forest, which extended right up to the summit. Often it was difficult to tell whether it was actually raining or not, owing to the incessant dripping from the leaves. Many trees were heavily festooned with Spanish moss, while ferns and orchids flourished on their trunks and branches. There was a merciful freedom from biting insects. It was too wet to stand about bird-watching or to risk damage to a borrowed pair of binoculars, so although birds appeared to be abundant I was able satisfactorily to identify but one species—the Jamaican Woodpecker. The summit was reached at



8.35 A.M. after an easy, unhurried walk of three hours, ten minutes. Near the summit, on a stretch of level ground, stood a small concrete hut with two small rooms, each fitted with bunks for six persons. In one room there was a stove. The bunks were broken and dilapidated. It was certainly useful as a shelter from the driving rain, where I was able to have a bit of food in reasonable comfort. The rain was now pelting down harder than ever, and visibility was limited to about 50 yards. On very clear days it is possible to see the mountains of Southern Cuba 130 miles away to the north. On this day there was nothing to tempt one to linger on the summit. At 9.50 A.M., exactly one hour after leaving the hut, I was back at Portland Gap. Portland Gap, mentioned now for the first time, is the lowest point on the Blue Mountain ridge between Blue Mountain Peak to the east and the next peak westward. Below the Gap the weather gradually improved and I slackened pace. A sudden burst of sunshine combined with a light drizzle formed a rainbow of the most dazzling brilliance across the hillsides below Abbey Field, a heartening splash of colour after the grey clouds, the dark forest, and the rain. I was back at Torre Garda a little after 11 o'clock. A warm bath was at once made ready for me, and very welcome it was too after the morning's exertions; the bath itself was a queer little affair made of wood into which one of the servants emptied a huge cauldron full of hot water. Cold water was added from a tap. Claudie McDonald and Flora called for me immediately after lunch, and we left Torre Garda at 1.25 P.M. Ten minutes on horseback was more than enough for me, so Claudie, who had brought no mount for himself, was able to ride down while I walked. That the Green river could be crossed easily enough on foot by a precarious-looking bridge formed of three tree branches I knew quite well, but I was not so sure that there was any easy way across the Yallahs river. So after crossing the Green river I took over Flora from Claudie, and while he struggled over the Yallahs by way of some large boulders Flora carried me comfortably across. I dismounted again shortly before we reached Mavis Bank. That Flora might decide to finish the journey at a



lively and uncontrolled canter along the village street seemed to me a definite possibility and a far from pleasing prospect. In fact nothing of the sort happened; she walked in slowly and sedately with Claudie up. There followed a longish wait for Mr Roberts, who had been held up by the heavy Saturday afternoon traffic on the tortuous road. He arrived eventually, not in the Morris 8 but in a large Studebaker with which he had been unable to negotiate some of the bends on one lock. A few minutes earlier the local bus had left for Kingston. For those who are prepared to endure it, a ride on this bus is said to be a most entertaining experience and to cost only a tiny fraction of the expense of a hired car.

Now, perhaps, is the time to pause and consider the financial aspect of this outing. The cost, as might be expected, was relatively high owing to the brief time spent at Torre Garda. The most expensive item was the car, at sixty shillings for the double journey; ordinarily the charge is seventy-five shillings, but Mr Roberts reduced this for me as he himself thought the rate excessive. Claudie's fee was ten shillings each way for Flora, plus a further ten shillings each way for portage. Finally there was the forty shillings paid to Miss Stedman for board and lodging.

Though much plagued by politics and by poverty Jamaica has much to offer, from blue mountains and palm-fringed coral beaches to hotels providing every conceivable luxury, deep-sea fishing for tuna and marlin and tarpon—and, of course, Jamaica Rum. It is a very beautiful island but extremely expensive. For those who wish to forsake the fleshpots of Kingston and the "North Coast" for cheaper and simpler living the Blue Mountains provide a peaceful and pleasurable opportunity.