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Sun, sea... Sandals

PILOTS' egos never usually need any encouragement but as a packed 747 touched down in Montego Bay last week, something happened that could only have given our captain a little boost.

There was a round of applause – because the mostly Jamaican passengers were so pleased to be home they might as well have cranked up the Bob Marley.

And why wouldn't they be? It is a beautiful island. Lush green rainforest, sedate rivers and tumbling waterfalls make for a tropical paradise – and that's before you get to those famous white beaches.

Rare butterflies and brightly coloured birds flutter by in the Blue Mountains and the Caribbean Sea has turtles, dolphins and countless varieties of fish. Scuba divers rate it but you can see plenty with just a snorkel and mask.

The trouble is, unless you're visiting family or friends, most of the accommodation is in big resort hotels, many of them all-inclusive. And another rum punch is just a flick of the wrist away, so there's a lot less incentive to leave the sun lounger.

But now one of the biggest chains on the island – and the Caribbean – wants to change all that.

Sandals, founded by the Stewart family nearly 30 years ago, have revamped their excursions product, adding tours that showcase the Caribbean's natural beauty, its food and its people.

Rafting

Dubbed Island Routes, it has just been rolled out in Jamaica and St Lucia, Antigua and the Bahamas will follow early next year.

I went along to Sandals Dunn's River for the official launch and some of the excursions on offer – such as the gentle rafting tours along Martha Brae River – are as old as the hills.

Others – like the canopy tour and bobsled run on Mystic Mountain are brand new.

And yes, you read that right: Bobsled run. This rather unconventional roller-coaster celebrates the 1988 Jamaican Olympic bobsled team – the Cool Runnings story – but in an eco-friendly style that is in keeping with the natural surroundings.

After a 15-minute chairlift through rainforest you emerge at an open-air museum charting the island's sporting successes, from cricket and basketball heroes to sprinter Usain Bolt, the fastest man in the world. There's a restaurant too, but the bobsled is the main attraction. It's like a normal rollercoaster, although the cars are a little smaller and powered only by gravity. But don't think you won't get up any speed. Just like a real sleigh, you decide when to apply the brakes. It's a hoot.

Island Routes tours can be a few hours or a full day and most are outdoors but none require any great fitness; just a sense of fitness; just a sense of adventure.

I put that to the test with a horseback tour at Chukka Cove. None of our group was especially experienced and I figured it would be gentle enough. And it was – to begin with.

We progressed at a stately pace through gorgeous countryside and I got along with my steed called Famous, well, famously. Then we got to the beach, where the saddles came off and we rode out into the sea. Only then did I discover what my horse was famous for – a wild streak.

It was like riding in an enormous washing machine. I don't know how I managed to stay on but I'd definitely do it again to find out.

You could also try quad biking or river kayaking, but there are plenty of sedate options. My last treat was lazy punt down the Martha Brae River. Bamboo rafts have been winding their way downstream since the Sixties and it's easy to see why.

Our guide Delroy was a real character, singing and pointing out flora and fauna. He even persuaded me to part with 20 US dollars (£12) for one of his wood carvings – Jamaica was obviously rubbing off on me.

Island Routes isn't the only way to see the Caribbean but it is a good start. It would be nice to see a tour of a town or village but you could easily book a taxi to somewhere like Falmouth for a bit of Jamaican life.

Even easier is a trip to Scotchies' barbecue, just over the road from Sandals Dunn's River, where £6 will buy you the best jerk chicken or pork on the island.

Add a couple of Red Stripe beers – essential after a taste of their chilli sauce – and you've got the perfect end to a Jamaican trip.

It might even get a round of applause from me too next time.

MATTHEW HAMPTON

Go: Jamaica

GETTING THERE/ STAYING THERE:

Virgin Holidays offer seven nights all-inclusive at Sandals Dunn's River in Jamaica next month from £1,489 per person, including flights from Gatwick with Virgin Atlantic and transfers.

See virginholidays.co.uk or call 0844 557 3859.

Island Routes tours can be booked in the resort or in advance – see islandroutes.com for full listings. Horseback tours are from £52 per person, Martha Brae rafting is from £50 and Mystic Mountain half-day trips are from £84 per person.

