

## Jamaica to Get its First Unico Hotel, Announces Possible Hotel/Casino Projects

Written by Administrator

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Within the next three years, Jamaica will be welcoming new, over-the-water bungalows as part of the destination's first Unico Hotels property.

During an exclusive interview with Travel Market Report, Edmund Bartlett, Jamaica's Minister of Tourism, said Unico Hotels will represent the third and final hotel to be announced as part of a massive destination resort project in St. James Parish.

The AIC Hotel Group first launched the adult-only, all-inclusive Unico Hotels product back in 2016 in Mexico.

"The brand is very popular amongst millennials and Generation-X," Bartlett told TMR, "so it signals the start of a very strong move toward that demographic."

The other two hotels will be a Hard Rock Casino & Resort and a Ritz-Carlton Hotel Company property. The Hard Rock was the first of the three to be announced earlier this year, while the return of the Ritz-Carlton brand to Jamaica was announced at the recent Caribbean Marketplace conference in San Juan, Puerto Rico.

Ritz-Carlton left Jamaica nearly a decade ago when it stopped operating the Rose Hall resort in Montego Bay. Ritz-Carlton had managed the 427-room resort for the 13 years it had been in operation. The new build will also be located in the Rose Hall district, not too far away from Ritz-Carlton's previous location, said Bartlett.

All three hotels will make up about 2,000 hotel rooms. The groundbreaking will happen in phases over a three-year period, Bartlett added. Unico will be the first one to break ground, which he said could happen by the end of November.

Although construction will begin on the overall project without the Hard Rock officially being awarded a gaming license, Bartlett said projects that have applied for a casino license and started construction will be judged by how well the construction progress is going and if all

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requirements are being met.

He added that casino licenses are expected to be awarded soon to three hotels as there will be no standalone casinos in Jamaica.

“The casino experience within the tourism space is within the context of integrated development,” said Bartlett. “It’s to bring added value to the destination and to attract that demographic that is high spending.”

Bartlett said the first hotel that could see a casino in Jamaica is the Princess Hotels & Resorts property, which is under construction with its first 1,000 of 2,000 rooms near Negril.

“It is well on its way, and it is expected that it will be Jamaica’s first casino,” Bartlett said of the Princess. “We have narrowed it down to three licenses to be awarded. We are doing our final due diligence, but they are one of the three.”

Bartlett the Princess Hotels & Property announcement could come as early the end of this month, with the other two licenses also granted soon.

Hard Rock is an obvious choice set to be awarded one of the three licenses, but the third hotel project that could be awarded a casino license might come as a surprise to some.

Harmony Cove, the much-anticipated luxury project that is already expected to house a Tiger Woods-designed golf course, is the third project Bartlett said will most likely be allowed to operate a casino. Located on Jamaica's northern coast between Ocho Rios and Montego Bay, Harmony Cove is a 2,325-acre oceanfront resort.

“The critical importance of the model that Jamaica has adopted,” said Bartlett, “is that it will not be free standing, as to define Jamaica as a casino destination, but rather a destination where you can have a casino experience. So, we have embedded it into integrated development, so

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it's not just a casino, but also high-end rooms, food, shopping.”

March 9 was the deadline for responses to the government's request for applications (RFA) in its multi-billion-dollar integrated resort developments, which could see up to \$1 billion invested in Jamaica. The RFA was opened on October 6, 2021.

Such developments, which are made possible by amendments to the Casino Gaming Act, must have at least 1,000 hotel rooms, of which 500 must be luxury rooms.

The plans for a Hard Rock Hotel & Casino development represent about an \$800 million investment. The Ritz-Carlton will be a new build, but no other information regarding groundbreaking or a scheduled grand opening was available.

### **Flights News**

Frontier Airlines will launch new gateways to Jamaica, including from Denver, St. Louis and Chicago, in December, said Donovan White, Jamaica's director of tourism. That will bring the airlines total number of gateways to Jamaica in the U.S. to eight, he added.

Also in December, White told TMR that Spirit Airlines will launch service from Hartford's Bradley Airport. Finally, this winter, White said Delta Airlines will operate new flights from Boston to Jamaica.

### **Cruises Arrivals**

Just in time for the 2023-24 season, MSC Cruises will expand its presence in Jamaica, bringing the total number of vessels (from all lines) stopping in Jamaica to 16, said White.

“MSC is the only cruise line that is expanding [here] now and is doing phenomenal at the moment,” said White. “The cruise industry is coming back. We are expecting to pretty much see 2019 levels very soon.”

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### The Return of JAPEX

The Jamaica Product Exchange (JAPEX) is expected to fully return in 2023, said White. It was scheduled to return in November of 2021, as a hybrid in-person/virtual event, was then rescheduled to early 2022 and is now slated to fully return in early 2023.

“When we bring JAPEX back, it would almost feel like an explanation point on top of all the other recovery we have made from COVID,” said White. “And we are hoping that exclamation point comes very early in 2023.”

A location for JAPEX hasn't been determined yet, but White said “it is likely to be hosted at the Montego Bay Convention Center. It will be a very special event that will be highly celebrated.”

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