A FREE GIFT FROM THE BEHARIE LETTER

20 Jamaican phrases every visitor should know

From "Wah gwaan?" to "Walk good": say the right thing, and watch Jamaica open up to you.

Jamaicans will forgive a tourist almost anything, but they never forget the visitor who greets them in Patois. A few words, said with a smile, turn a transaction into a conversation and a stranger into a friend.

Patois is not broken English. It is a living language with its own grammar, rhythm and humour, born from Africa, Europe and three centuries of island life. You do not need to master it. You only need to show you care enough to try.

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Greetings & getting around

PHRASES 1–10

01 Wah gwaan?

wah-GWAHN

What's going on? The all-purpose "Hi, how are you?"

Use it with anyone, anywhere. It is the key that opens every door.

02 Mi deh yah

mee deh YAH

I'm here / I'm doing fine. The classic reply to "Wah gwaan?"

Add "yuh know" at the end and you sound like a local.

03 Irie

EYE-ree

Good, great, all is well. A feeling as much as a word.

"Everyting irie?" means "Is everything alright?"

04 Big up / Respect

big UP · ree-SPEK

Hats off to you. A greeting, a thank-you and a compliment in one.

"Big up yuhself!" for anyone who has done something well.

05 Bredren / Sistren

BRED-ren · SIS-tren

Friend, brother, sister. Someone you feel close to.

Earned, not given. Smile when someone calls you this.

06 Soon come

soon KUM

I'll be there soon. Soon. Eventually. Possibly.

Bring patience. Jamaican time runs on its own clock.

07 Tek time

tek TIME

Take it easy, go slowly, be careful.

Advice, a warning or a blessing, depending on the tone.

08 Weh yuh a go?

weh yuh ah GO

Where are you going? Friendly curiosity, not suspicion.

Taxi drivers and neighbours will ask. Answer with a smile.

09 A how much fi dis?

ah how MUCH fi DIS

How much is this? Your opening line at any market stall.

Asking in Patois often gets you a better first price.

10 Gi mi a bly, nuh?

gee mee ah BLY noo

Give me a break, please? Asking for a better deal or a chance.

Laugh while you say it. Bargaining is a friendly game.

GOOD TO KNOW

Tone carries as much meaning as the words. Jamaicans can sound loud or blunt to Norwegian ears, but it is usually warmth and energy, not anger. Match the energy, keep smiling, and you will fit right in.

Food, home & goodbyes

PHRASES 11–20

11 Mi belly a bawl

mee BEL-ly ah BAWL

I'm starving. Literally, "my belly is crying."

Say it near a jerk stand and someone will feed you.

12 Nyam

NYAHM

Eat. One of the oldest words in Patois, with roots in West Africa.

"Mek wi nyam!" means "Let's eat!"

13 Mi full up

mee full UP

I'm full. You will need this one at any Jamaican table.

Expect to be offered "likkle more" anyway.

14 Mi nuh know

mee noo NOH

I don't know. Simple, honest and very useful.

"Nuh" turns almost anything into a negative.

15 Pickney

PICK-nee

Child, children. "Di pickney dem" means "the kids."

Every pickney in Jamaica has an auntie watching them.

16 Yaad

YAHD

Home. Your house, your yard, or Jamaica itself.

"Back a yaad" means "back home in Jamaica."

17 Wi likkle but wi tallawah

wee LIK-kle but wee TAL-la-wah

We're small, but we're mighty. Jamaica's pride in five words.

Say it after a Jamaican Olympic win and watch faces light up.

18 Likkle more

LIK-kle MORE

See you later. Literally, "a little more" time until we meet.

The easy, warm way to leave a conversation.

19 Walk good

wahk GOOD

Take care, travel safely. A goodbye and a blessing.

The perfect last words before you head home.

20 Bless up

bless UP

Blessings to you. Thank you, goodbye and good wishes in one.

Use it to sign off a message, a visit or a phone call.

Want to understand the people behind the words? Good Luck With That!

A Guide to Understanding Jamaicans, by Colin Beharie. Paperback and Kindle on Amazon, and from Norli in Norway.

cbeharie.com/good-luck-with-that

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Walk good. Come back soon.