

One Basks in the Sun



The summer between my son's high school graduation and freshman year of college seemed just right for a mother-son bonding trip. Attracted by cooler temperatures, interesting cities and beautiful lakes, I was working on a Canadian itinerary. My son Harris was suggesting one tropical island after another.

When he asked, "How about Jamaica?" I don't know whether I was just worn down or I wasn't that excited about Canada either, but I agreed to investigate the possibility.

Summertime is low season for many an island paradise. I easily found reasonable fares and hotel rates. Harris might have chosen the locale, but I was going to pick the resort.

Royal Plantation, in Ocho Rios is smaller than many properties in Jamaica. Its 80 rooms and suites attract the quiet, sophisticated traveler. More Jackie-O than Paris Hilton, it's not the place for wild honeymooners with a lust for, among other things, drinking games and karaoke. On the other hand, Nick and Jessica Simpson stayed here, so it had the right cool quotient.

In mid-June after a quick flight, we headed to Royal Plantation's airport lounge, one of many hotel reception areas in the airport. An informative driver in a Mercedes came for us, and in an hour, delivered us onto a tropical movie set. The hotel's entrance was *Architectural Digest* meets *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*. Entering the wide-open front doorway, guests look directly through the lobby -- skimming past the colorful tile floor, potted orchids, the rattan chaises, a sculptured fountain -- until their eyes lock onto the sparkling sapphire sea on the far side.

Jamaica's heat demands a slow pace. Hotel check-in is a triumph of hospitality over paperwork. Before exchanging credit cards for keys, smiling hotel staff seat guests in a cozy reception room and ask about their journey over

chilled strawberry-pink and mango-yellow drinks.

As soon as we entered our room, my sun-worshipping teenage son jumped into his swimsuit and ran down the stairs to the beach. As I unpacked I could see him planting a royal blue flag in the sand to attract a 'beach butler,' who soon returned with the first of an army of smoothies.

When I came downstairs, I took a cushioned seat on the terrace for a bite to eat, and commented that the sun was too strong for me. 'No problem, mon' -- yes, Jamaicans really do say that, often. A waiter pointed me to a pathway that led to a shaded beach where the water sports center is based.

At both beaches, white trimmed royal blue crocheted hammocks swing from grape-leaf trees. For me, that was the ideal post for reading, relaxing, and watching Harris enjoy swimming and water sports. Royal Plantation doesn't offer all the amenities of larger resorts, but with kayaks, wind surfing, sailing, snorkeling, and scuba diving, who notices?

Peacocks thrive here, and fit in nicely where the walls are mint green, coral, and sunshine yellow, sometimes all in the same space. Much of the bright white trim is stenciled and the yellow breakfast china is scattered with butterflies.

Through unscreened windows I looked down at the beach, where staffers raked pale sand around two perfect rows of white deck chairs topped with thick royal blue cushions.

Although surrendering to the Royal Plantation was seductive, Harris and I had a deal: as long as he got plenty of time in the sun, we would do one or two other activities together each day.

Whether playing a round of golf, swimming with dolphins, or taking an excursion to Dunn's River Falls, we avoided crowds by scheduling off-resort activities when cruise ships were not in port. Concierges and shopkeepers know the cruise schedules.

We also knew that teeing off in the early morning would mean less sun and more breeze. But don't expect golf club caddies to keep score. "Just have fun, mon," one advised repeatedly as he snacked on fallen mangoes while we walked the course.

One of the golf pros came from Detroit to live in Jamaica eleven years ago. He said, "My wife and I live on the second floor of an apartment building. Each morning at about 6:00 we sit in amazement at the view before us. The trees, the

sea in the distance, ships arriving, birds of all sizes and calls jabbering, whistling and cooing are but a few of the reasons we love living in Jamaica."

I wasn't as worried about the sun as I was about money when we went to Dolphin Cove. A dolphin is an expensive date, so I watched my teenage son have the time of his life while I chatted with the owner, Marilyn Burrowes. After our conversation, I understood why the cost is so high. Jamaica owns its coast and leases waterfront property to businesses.

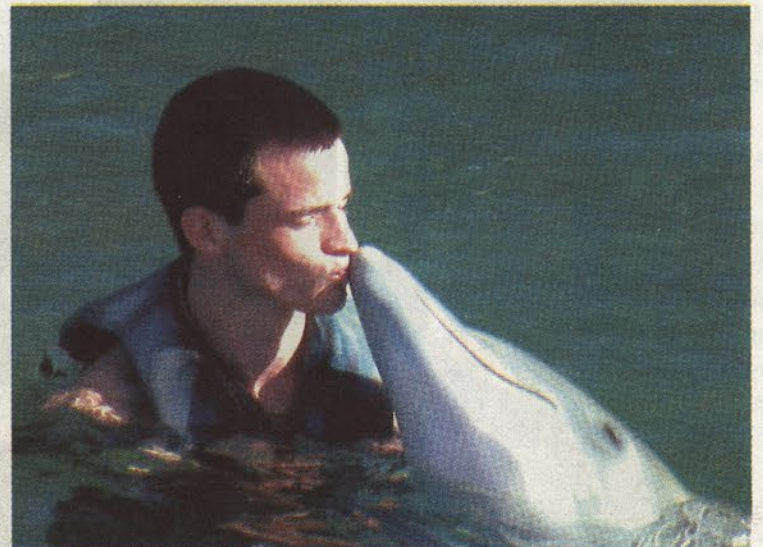
Dolphins, unless born in captivity, are also leased. Hers are from Mexico, and their Mexican veterinarian flies in for emergencies and monthly check ups. If there is a hurricane, trainers and handlers carry the animals on stretchers to designated pools on the island. Marilyn pointed out an opening in the cove. The dolphins could easily leap over this low wall to freedom at sea. "But why would they," asked Marilyn, "when they have so much food right here?"

Human interaction with dolphins has its proponents and objectors. Many autistic children enjoy the dolphins. My sometimes-moody teenager emerged from his session saying, "Mom, it was incredible. No one could be in a bad mood after being with dolphins. It's ten times better being next to them than looking at them, even close up."

But there is more to Jamaica than dolphins.

For a coffee addict like me, traveling four thousand feet up into the Blue Mountains was bliss. Although it was difficult to tear our eyes away from the hairpin turns on narrow roads that border sheer cliffs, the scenery was too breathtaking to miss. It was also fun to spot tiny beauty shops, some no larger than a closet, and the Cherry Oh Baby nightclub.

Two hours from Kingston, we made it to a coffee plantation, a cobbled together house and roasting facility. A young adult sat by an open fire, stirring coffee beans in a cast iron skillet, while Mama tended the counter, and a brother Tick Tock handled sales. After politely declining his marijuana, we purchased bags of ground and whole beans for about \$10 a pound and braced ourselves for the downhill ride to lunch.



One in the Ambience

At 3,000 feet above Kingston, we ate outdoors in the cool mountain air at Strawberry Hill. Famous for its New Jamaican food, this inn and restaurant has been a labor of love for Chris Blackwell, the founder of Island Records who launched Bob Marley. Rates are lower in the summer, but you won't find bargain pricing here. Guests staying in any of the twelve cottages can enjoy a 360 degree mountain view from their deck. The décor is crisp white linens, mahogany furniture, white painted wooden fretwork, and brown leather.

Another day, we visited Appleton Estates. Appleton owns 11,000 acres of sugar cane fields in the middle of the island. They are a 'green' company, recycling, used Jack Daniels barrels for aging Appleton rum. One year of aging in Jamaica equals three in a cooler climate. The same might be said for sunbathing.

The estate dates back to 1655 when the English captured Jamaica from the Spaniards. Frances Dickinson, whose grandsons Caleb and Ezekiel are the earliest known owners of the Appleton Estate, took part in that conquest, and it is believed that Appleton Estate was part of the land grant that Dickinson received as a reward for his services. The first documented rum production at the Appleton Estate was almost a century later, in 1749.

I was interested in was the great houses of Jamaica, and chose to visit one that was built in 1760. Annandale has something for every mother and teenager: horseback riding and tea. While Harry rode and I sipped tea, I chatted with the lady of the house.

Annandale was empty for six years before the Maitland-Walkers bought it. They started restoring in November 1999 and will probably never be done. Ceilings had collapsed and floors rotted, but re-plumbing and re-wiring came first.

Monika Maitland-Walker gives tours after tea, and her Harrods riding pants added to the gentrified atmosphere. She told me, "The hard part was finding craftsmen and the cedar and mahogany lumber we needed. All the wood

paneling and windowsills and frames were painted. We had two men here for three years just to strip off the paint." She chose authentic Georgian colors for each room. The Georgian Society visited from England in February 2004, validated her color selections (Whew!) and declared Annandale the finest Georgian great house in the Caribbean that is still in private hands.

Cattle roam the pastures all year. Vegetable gardens are fertilized with chicken and goat manure. The horses are well-behaved beauties, perhaps due to the skills of a 'horse whisperer' trainer.

We got a taste of another type of resort thanks to friends staying at the nearby Grand Lido Braco. Larger and far more lively -- for better or worse -- Braco is all-inclusive right down to free wedding packages. There were many restaurants to choose from; you could grab fast food or dress for fine dining. While Harris bathed in the sun alongside lots of other teenagers, my girlfriend and I indulged in massages



by the sea, where a sign pointed down a path to a nude beach. For this travel-embargoed American, it was a treat to hear a Cuban band at dinner that night.

Music is reason enough for many people to travel to Jamaica. In addition to reggae, there's ska, calypso, and rap. Resorts, hotels, inns and restaurants of almost every type have live music. At Royal Plantation and Grand Lido Braco, musicians entertained at breakfast, lunch and dinner.

Jamaican cuisine is so much more than jerk chicken, but jerk chicken is on every restaurant menu and at ubiquitous roadside stands. For picky eaters who may not appreciate curried goat or salted cod in all its glorious variations, a good excuse for comparing and contrasting jerk chicken, like judging clam chowder on Cape Cod. You can vary the menu with fried plantains or interesting salads.

If you like heat in your food, Jamaica's scotch bonnet peppers are so



fired up they often are just dipped uncut into a soup or stew. Vegetarians don't have any problems here. Soups, salads, and entrees are often all-vegetable. Avocados, mangos, papayas, sweet potatoes, callaloo greens, and plantains are among the plentiful produce. Don't be shy if you need an explanation for Solomon Gundy, a thick smoked herring paste; escoveitch, a hot spicy vinegar for fried fish; or coconut rundown sauce. In keeping with island style, there would be no quick meals here. Even at breakfast, the service is graciously paced.

There is the poverty in Jamaica, and you may feel guilty escaping it as you drive into one of many resorts, most of which are an hour or more drive from an airport. Along the way, you will see cement houses with openings where windows (and sometimes doors) should be, corrugated tin shelters, and children playing with skinny dogs in dirt yards. Nature provides Jamaica with enough mango and other fruit trees that I almost believed it when a young hotel worker told me, "All the children in Jamaica eat well, regardless of family income."

Harris drank his share of fruit. In one day he consumed eight tropical smoothies.

In sync with the slower pace of this hot island, the hospitality industry is well represented by charming, friendly, cheerful workers. What they lack in efficiency they make up for in warmth and poetic language.

On our way back to the airport, the driver observed my son and me interacting and shared things about his mother. He told us of the importance she placed on setting a good example. According to Mr. Clue, "A child is a speaker of your truth to the universe, telling others, 'my mom does --or doesn't --do that.'"

On this trip, Harris and I were blessed with luxurious surroundings and opportunities for life lessons in planning and cooperation, too. But for a mother with a teenager about to head for college across the country, the real luxury was time together, just the two of us. When he is asked about our vacation, Harris might say, 'my mom doesn't do sun,' or 'my mom is really into history,' but when he speaks my truth to the universe, I hope he says that his mom loves him so much that she places a high value on time together, under the Jamaican sun, or anywhere at all.

Photos/Ann Cochran

