

ISLAND HOMES ★ OWNERS SHARE SECRETS

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# ALL IN GOOD TIME

*The easy-going rhythm  
of Jamaica's southern coast*

BY PETER ZAREMBA • PHOTOGRAPHY BY GREG JOHNSTON



A photograph of a person riding a bicycle down a dirt path lined with tall, thin trees. The path is dappled with sunlight and shadows. The rider is in the lower right foreground, moving away from the viewer. The trees form a canopy overhead, with sunlight filtering through the leaves.

“MY MAMA JUST WANTS  
dandy shandy!”

Stationed under a stand of palm trees, the Mighty Beeston Spring Mento Band was singing the praises of the once-popular mixture of soda pop and beer, and filling the soft night air with the sounds of banjo, guitar and *shake-shake* (maracas). One guy was even using the neck of a broken stout bottle as a kazoo. As wavelets slapped gently at the shoreline only steps away, the band effortlessly reeled off a set of unvarnished blues, country-western and Jamaican folk tunes, taking the audience deep into the evolution of reggae.





Sandals Whitehouse (above) boasts Jamaica's largest pool; Black River great egret. Opposite: Villa San Michele on Bluefields Bay. Opening spread, from left: Alligator Pond Beach; biking Bamboo Avenue.

THE BAND'S ROOTSY SOUND cast a pitch-perfect tone over a torch-lit dinner of grilled lobster tails and "stamp and go" (cod fritters) on the beach at Sandals Whitehouse, the chain's out-of-the-way retreat that opened last year. Not only is Sandals alone on a beautiful two-mile stretch of beach, it's the sole major resort on the entire south coast. And yes, it's big and shiny, but the hotel is set within a 500-acre nature reserve, and its sleepy southwest setting is just right for a nostalgia trip.

The Whitehouse area is "the way Jamaica was when I was a kid" says Sandals impresario Butch Stewart, who often drove past this hidden gem of a location in his former life as an appliance salesman. Seven restaurants, 360 all-inclusive rooms (butler service optional) and the country's largest swimming pool later, Whitehouse and its environs manage to retain



their unhurried appeal.

Focused on agriculture and considered remote, the southwestern coast has always been mostly left to itself. That's partly because much of the shoreline is unappealing, with rough water and dark sand — though white-sand Whitehouse Beach is not the only enticing stretch. When Jamaicans themselves long

for a bit less of the tourist-centered north-coast liveliness, they pop over the island's mountainous spine from Montego Bay and seek out the laid-back rhythm of this less-trammeled precinct, where the country's fabled "no problem" attitude toward neighbor and visitor alike remains an everyday reality.

EIGHT MILES WEST OF Whitehouse, Bluefields Bay is possibly the south coast's most beautiful, with turquoise and cobalt waters backed by lush green mountains. The name derives from a 17th-century Dutch buccaneer, Abraham Blauvelt (known as Blewfields to the English), who hid out here. Now the site of a small fishing village, this quiet spot has played a pivotal role in world history. In 1670, Captain Morgan marshaled his fleet here before setting out to devastate Panama, and it was at Bluefields Greathouse that Lt. Governor Campbell and Captain Bligh hatched the idea for HMS *Bounty's* voyage to Tahiti. One of the original breadfruit trees brought back by the indomitable Bligh still stands nearby.

"I remember Negril when it was like this," recalled Mr. Wallace, owner of Casa Mariner, a locally popular seaside cottage inn-cum-

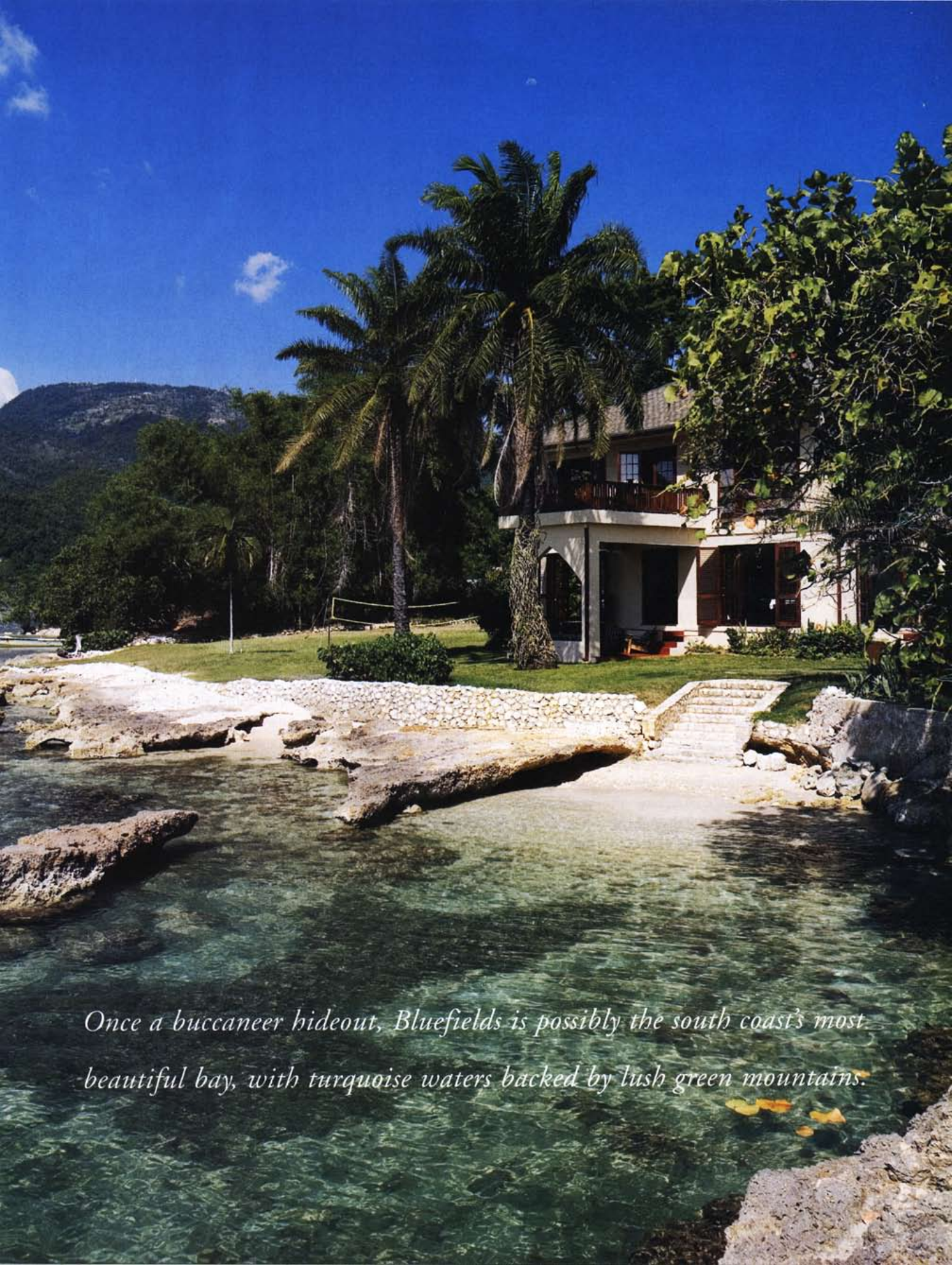
restaurant that's typical of the south coast. Small-scale and blending into the landscape, the hotel expresses a pioneer spirit that meshes with the region's sense of individualism verging on eccentricity. Take German expat Frank Lohmann, who stumbled upon Shafston Greathouse "with water coming through the roof and goats living in it" but saw its potential. Having resurrected Shafston as an inn, Lohmann now spends his days rigging cables to send visitors zipping over the forest canopy in an aerial bobsled.

I met up with Vaughan Turland, co-owner of Reliable Adventures, at the Bluefields Peoples' Community Association, where fishermen beach their boats under the seagrape trees and discuss the day's catch. These same fishermen guide Reliable's tours of the bay, encountering dolphins and even the occasional manatee. This community-based approach to tourism is designed to expand job opportunities and preserve traditions by providing authentic experiences for visitors — an idea that's being put into practice across the south coast.

On a two-hour hike up into the







*Once a buccaneer hideout, Bluefields is possibly the south coast's most beautiful bay, with turquoise waters backed by lush green mountains.*





*The guests at Villa San Michele looked as if they had thoroughly enjoyed the*

woodlands with Turland, we encountered six of Jamaica's 27 endemic species of birds without trying, including the beautiful little emerald and crimson Jamaican Tody. As we ascended, increasingly spectacular vistas of countryside and sea opened before us. Eventually, we reached the tiny hill community of Belvedere, where walking and donkeys are still the principal modes of transportation. Nestled among pimento trees, the cottages here are often equipped with old concrete platforms known as barbecues for drying the seeds we call allspice. We stopped for a cool drink at Bob's Café, as typical a Jamaican country place as can be found.

Back at sea level, just steps from the water and almost hidden in jungle-like gardens, the five fully staffed Bluefields Villas epitomize the kind of style that years ago made Jamaica the birthplace of the luxurious Caribbean getaway. Open to expansive sunset views, they incorporate traditional Jamaican materials like gungo wood and local marble,

and are filled with fine West Indian antiques such as mahogany four-poster beds. The guests at Villa San Michele looked as if they had thoroughly enjoyed the simple pleasure of spending their entire holiday in their bathing suits. With Negril 45 minutes and a world away, one supremely relaxed guest quipped that Bluefields enjoyed "all the nightlife you can make."

By day, the ambitious can stroll from the pool to the beach, or wet a line with one of the local fishermen. "Just ask for Herman," the villa guests recommended — good advice judging from the five-foot kingfish they'd caught with him and were devouring for lunch. While I checked out another house, Cottonwood Cottage, a staffer asked, "Can you believe there's a house in Jamaica without doors?" On purpose? No. But neither had I been in Bluefields before. Perhaps the security and good will are a product of that concerted effort to "make sure the community benefits from develop-

ment," said Debbie Moncure, owner of the five villas. Her husband serves with the community association, and the couple funds early education at the local school. The Moncures have gone so far as to institute a 2-percent voluntary community fee on all their rentals, which, Debbie noted, every guest save one has been happy to pay.

JAKE'S, A BOUTIQUE RESORT east of Whitehouse on Treasure Beach, has attained almost legendary stature among connoisseurs of low-key tropical destinations.

Created by Jason Henzell, son of Jamaican novelist and filmmaker Perry Henzell (director of the 1972 classic *The Harder They Come*), Jake's cast-away-chic ambience attracts a clientele that includes the likes of Jude Law and Kate Moss, but always keeps things casual and cool. The eclectic touch of Jason's mom, theatrical designer Sally Henzell, is seen everywhere. Mosaics of seashells and china shards blend with





*simple pleasure of spending their entire holiday in their bathing suits.*

bursts of tropical flowers, while colored bottles embedded in the walls splash flavored light into the Moorish mini-cottages. Rooftop daybeds overlooking the sea complete the dreamy scene. The focus of “activity” at Jake’s is the acacia-shaded pool, where bartender Dougie dispenses stories and drinks.

The faces of many Treasure Beach folk echo Scottish and, according to some, pirate ancestry. That fits nicely with the area’s name, except there’s no record of anyone finding any doubloons here, nor is there any beach called “Treasure,” for that matter. Instead, there’s a series of beaches including Calabash and Frenchman’s. Another, Jack Sprat’s, is about 100 paces from Jake’s. Sheltered and calm, it’s a favorite of local families and tourists alike, and it’s the site of Jack Sprat Restaurant, known for great reggae, stout-flavored ice cream —



From top left: Villa San Michele, outside; and in; thoroughbreds at Y.S. Falls; San Michele’s classic colonial interior. Above: Treasure Beach.

really — and surprisingly good pizza.

Though it may not be the most beautiful spot in all of Jamaica, a guy could get used to hanging out in Treasure Beach. In fact, it’s common for visitors to return again and again, and many bring something to the party: One couple gives free art lessons; a visiting doctor brings in supplies for the local hospital; and everyone seems to sponsor the Treasure Beach Foundation, which

supports projects like the volunteer emergency-response unit. For some, even yearly vacations are not enough.

“We fell in love with Treasure Beach,” explained Austrian Axel Wichterich, “and when we saw the news over the Internet at Jake’s on the morning of September 11, 2001, Perry Henzell took our hands and said, ‘Now it’s time to move here.’” Axel and his wife Andrea did just that, and opened their own inn, Marblue.

A 20-minute boat ride from Treasure Beach brought me to the Pelican, one of the wonders of the modern drinking world. Inspired by a dream, the bar certainly qualifies as surreal. Precariously perched on stilts three-quarters of a mile out at sea, it was constructed out of scrap and driftwood by Delroy Forbes, known to one and all as Floyd.

“Here she comes,” said Floyd as a stingray approached like a puppy to





*Jake's castaway-chic ambience attracts a clientele that includes the likes of*

scarf up discarded pieces of a fish destined for frying over the Pelican's small brazier. Fresh fish, an old cooler filled with sodas and beer, and one improbably isolated location — perfect. After the conspicuously exposed bar was obliterated by Hurricane Ivan in 2004, Floyd rebuilt it with planks salvaged from other structures the storm destroyed. "It's much better now," he admitted. The new, larger Pelican even has room for a hammock.

ABOUT HALFWAY BETWEEN Treasure Beach and Bluefields, Black River has that attractively faded vibe of old, British-colonial outposts. As the depot for barge traffic from upriver sugar estates, it once enjoyed considerable prosperity, flush with motorcars, telephones and electricity before Kingston (even before New York, if you believe local boosters). You can still have a drink in the foyer bar of the Waterloo Guest House, the first hotel in Jamaica to employ electric lighting.

Gazing through its open doors out over the pale blue Caribbean imparts the feeling of being somewhere distant in place and time.

The Black River itself teams with wildlife: tarpon, snook, egrets and ... crocodiles. "When I was young we used to shoot crocodiles, not conserve them," said J. Charles Swaby. A Mandeville resident whose forebears arrived with the army dispatched by Cromwell to conquer Jamaica in 1655, Swaby originated Black River Safaris, boat trips into the island's largest morass, or wetland. Although we did not sight Philip, a 13-foot behemoth, during our voyage, our boat cruised as close to plenty of crocs as any sane person would want to. One guide fed them by hand, calling each by name. Citing the giant reptiles' friendliness, he repeatedly invited me for a swim, a diversion that I, and more pointedly he, declined to indulge in. Four miles upstream, with everyone still sporting full complements of fingers, we landed

at Salt Spring for cold beer and stuffed crab at Sister Lou's River Stop.

MORE THAN A FEW OF THE South Coast's better-known attractions lie inland along Highway A2 as it heads east, climbing toward Mandeville, the "cool capital" of the south. The narrow, two-lane road followed the Black River upstream to Middle Quarters, where vendors offered small plastic bags of intensely peppered shrimp. Trapped locally, the spiced "swimps," akin to crayfish, are munched shell and all.

Less than a mile farther on was the cutoff for Y.S. Falls, at the head of a green valley grazed by thoroughbred horses and beautiful Jamaica Red cattle. This is the family farm of Simon Browne, whom I found watching his children play Marco Polo in a clear, spring-fed pool. In 1887, his English ancestors purchased a bankrupt Jamaican plantation sight-unseen "on the condition that it had a river." And



what a river it is, with an eight-tiered waterfall tumbling 200 feet down a jungled ravine. It lacks the mobs that descend upon the island's better-known falls, so you can freely fling yourself from the world's best rope swing into one of the cascade's natural pools without fear of landing on someone.

Road Rule No. 1 when traveling across Jamaica is "when you see someone selling food, pull over and check it out." So back at the cutoff, I stopped at another roadside culinary institution: Howie's Quick Stop, although nobody calls it by that name. "Is this Seventeen Pots?" I asked. "No, it's gone up!" came the answer. A quick count revealed 25 simmering caul-

Overproof Rum are produced by this still each year," announced our Appleton Estate tour guide. "Ninety percent of that is consumed right here in Jamaica, which has a population of two and a half million. You do the math."

Jamaica's high-octane folk cure for everything from the common cold to malevolent spirits isn't the only product of Jamaica's largest distillery — the tour began with a perfect rum punch made from a secret recipe, and ended with liberally dispensed samples of 22 kinds of rum and liqueur.

ESTABLISHED BY COLONIALS AT 2,000 feet to escape the lowland heat, Mandeville is now a favorite roost of

from the hillside above the country club. There, sitting on the magnificent double-tiered portico of Bloomfield, her Georgian manor, Pamela Grant remembered Manchester's old clubhouse well. When she was a child, hers was the first Jamaican family permitted to use its swimming pool. Now, she and her husband own the manor and former coffee plantation that overlook the club and the surrounding town.

"Actually," said Grant, "Bloomfield predates Mandeville." Although the manor doesn't offer overnight accommodations, it is open for elegant dining. "Of course," said Grant, "everyone wants to sit on the verandah." I could see why. Sipping a cold

*Jude Law and Kate Moss, but always keeps things casual and cool.*



drons filled with conch soup, mannish water, peanut porridge and other specialties. After sampling as many pots as possible, I drove under the famed two-mile canopy known as Bamboo Avenue, where the *Bambusa vulgaris* reaches a height of 100 feet despite some damage from Ivan.

My last stop before hitting Mandeville proper was the area's only real mass tourism attraction. "Six million bottles of Wray & Nephew White

expats and successful Jamaicans. I pulled into Manchester Golf Club, the Western Hemisphere's oldest golf course, laid out in 1865. The famous old clubhouse has long since been demolished, but fortunately, veteran staffers like Osborne Foster, bartender for 40-plus years, man the new one.

I found another view of local history

Above from left: Theatrical style pervades Jake's, from arty little niches to handsome rooms; a Treasure Beach twister. Opposite: Acacias shade Jake's seaside pool.

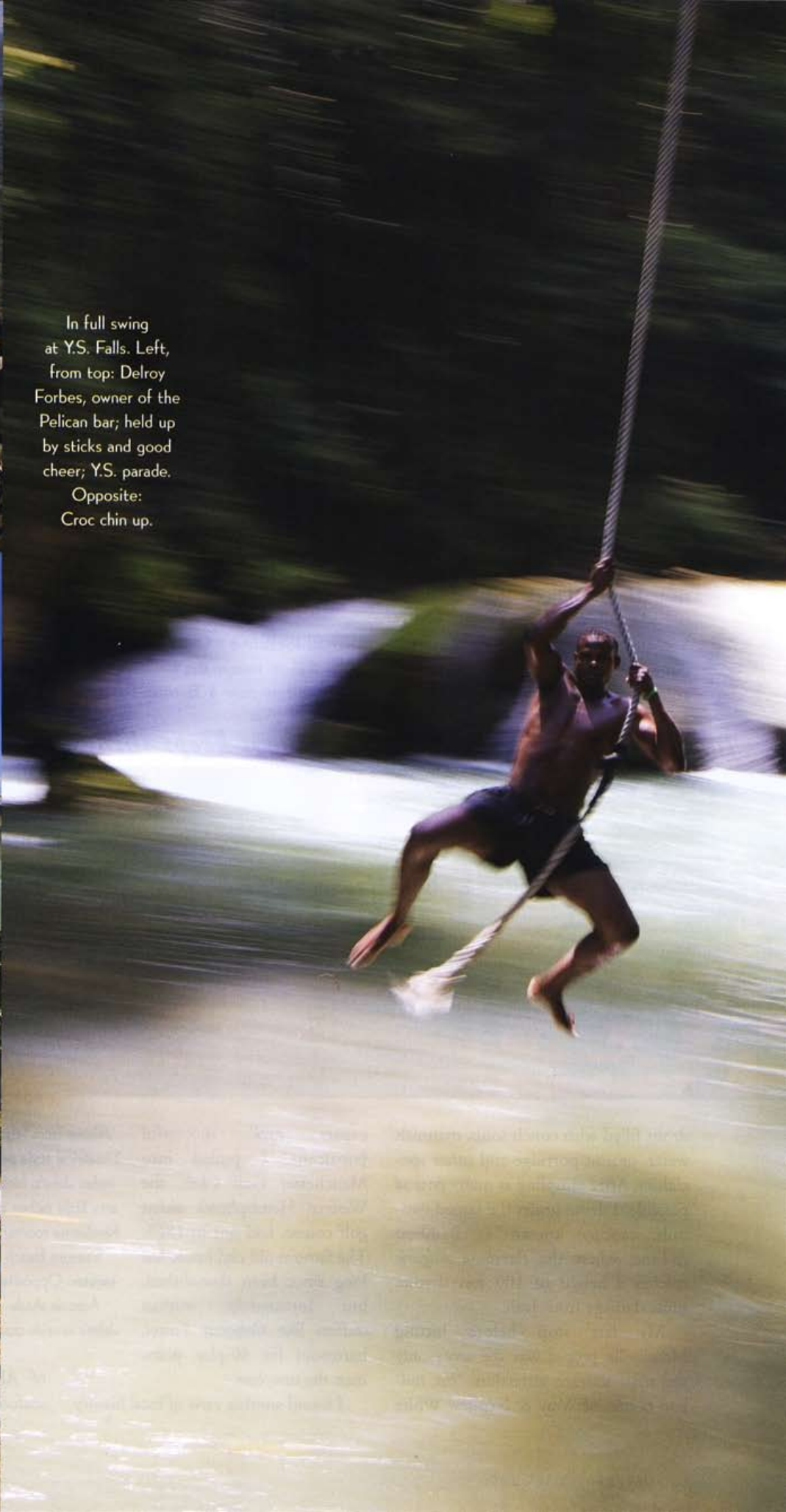
draught Red Stripe, I wished they'd set up a cot so I could wake up to the commanding view of Mandeville spread out before me.

FROM MANDEVILLE you can almost coast the 20 miles back down to where the road ends in the sands of Alligator Pond Beach. A funky seafood operation there called Little





In full swing  
at Y.S. Falls. Left,  
from top: Delroy  
Forbes, owner of the  
Pelican bar; held up  
by sticks and good  
cheer; Y.S. parade.  
Opposite:  
Croc chin up.







Ochie displays none of the hustle of its north coast namesake, Ocho Rios. Things must rock, however, when they host one of their Pon' Di Beach parties featuring anyone from paleo-reggae dinosaur Byron Lee to current dancehall bad boys such as Beenie Man. Proprietor Evrol Christian, whom everyone calls Blackie, grew what was a seaside cook shed into the quintessential south coast scene. Tables are in thatch-roofed fishing dories sitting on stilts in the sand, and cooking is done over wood-fired stoves. Customers not only choose their fish, but request cooks by name to prepare it for them. From the way chef Kanhi jerked my snapper — spicy crusted skin but moist flesh inside — I'd say ask for him.

As the afternoon proceeded, people kept arriving, but few left, blurring the line between two favorite island pastimes, dining and liming.



"A lady took her picture here today," said Blackie's wife Loodie, "so she could put it on her desk back in London and remember she was here." I didn't need a photo: The intense sunlight reflecting off the endless beach and sea had already fixed Little Ochie firmly in my mind.

I took another sip of Red Stripe. Eventually, it would be time for me to go. But eventually would be soon enough — the slow-going south coast was not a place to rush away from.

## inside JAMAICA

**CT&L Says:** The south coast is far afield from Jamaica's tourist hustle zone, so expect to make cash transactions in Jamaican dollars (US\$1 = JMD\$65.5; JMD\$1 = US\$.015). For the best rate, exchange money at the *cambio* window of a major supermarket like Super Plus Food Store while passing through Montego Bay. There are ATM's in Black River, but only cards issued by banks participating in the Cirrus network will work.

**What to Bring Back**  
Rum, of course. **Appleton**

offers a range of high-quality hooch, topped off by their armagnac-fine 250th-anniversary label, blended with rums aged up to 50 years and available only at the estate (US\$180). Also, their distinctively Jamaican **Wray & Nephew Berry Hill** pimento liqueur will add an intriguing dimension to your rum punch (US\$8.30).

**When to Go**  
Lying in the rain shadow of the island's central mountains, the south coast receives the least precipitation in all of Jamaica. Showers are

likeliest in May and from September to November, with hurricanes possible from May to October. Each May, **Jake's** hosts the **Calabash Literary Festival** with readings and concerts.

**CT&L Index**  
■ Small bag of "pepper shrimp," Middle Quarters: J\$200  
■ Willel's fried fish, Borders: J\$200  
■ Cup of mannish water at 17 Pots: J\$50  
■ Lobster dinner, Little Ochie: J\$760

*Continued on page 114*