

high life

DECEMBER 2003

DON'T WAIT TO ESCAPE

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TV
and audio
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FASHION

Let's hear it for tweed

KENYA

The boy in the bush

LIFESTYLES

Could you live abroad?

DIDO

writes us a postcard



*Caribbean
cool*

Which is the right spot for you?

Mark Jones finds peace and quiet in Jamaica

A BLACK DATSUN SCREECHES INTO A BEND ON THE SOUTHWEST COAST road. The tape deck is on fuller than full blast. You can almost see the sound waves in the hot afternoon air as the bass pounds against the blacked-out windows.

The windscreen is almost bulging with the effort of keeping in the din. There's writing along the top: it says "DIVINE PEACE".

You're never very far from the divine in Jamaica. Whatever people say about the island, it's one of the most godly places you'll ever visit. On my stopover night in Kingston, I went to a party at Jamaica's number one model agency, Pulse, to celebrate the return of the country's latest and brightest modelling star, Nadine Willis. It was a pretty worldly event, with video crews, local TV, beautiful people undiscovered and uncovered. But the agency's CEO, Kingsley, made a speech that sounded more like a sermon than a sales pitch.

As for peace, that's harder to find. This is the home of the street corner sound system, the wailing police siren, the beachside DJ, the revved-up engine and the souped-up speakers. I've always thought the cities of Spain took the award for decibel-enhanced tourism. A night in Kingston and an early evening in Montego Bay soon put me right. Spain is as quiet as a Moor's sigh in comparison.

Later that evening, however, when I got to my villa in Bluefields Bay, I found it: Jamaican peace, and divine it is, too. There's an outpost of touristic frenzy in Negril, at Jamaica's western extremity. Savanna-La-Mar is a busy market town. Otherwise, the southwest coast is undeveloped and pretty well unruffled.

Creeping into the villa at 10pm, the quiet was shocking. You could almost hear the candles flickering on a dining table. The mahogany table was set like a scene from *Wide Sargasso Sea*, but the room was open to the night breezes. The moonlight made that kind of milky pathway across the Caribbean so beloved of cruise ship brochures. A hundred feet below, the tide met the beach in relaxed spliff-like exhalations. I looked at the CD player in the corner and thought – maybe not.

Most single travellers in Jamaica are not looking for moons, whispering seas and tranquillity. They're after action. The beach parties at Mo Bay, Negril and Ocho Rios offer all the action you'd want in a normal lifetime.

So places like Bluefields, a chain of spectacular villas built by American architect Debbie Moncure, are usually taken by couples in all their forms: just married, just remarried, just ourselves, just ourselves and the kids, just escaping the kids. Jamaica is not a discreet place as a rule – it's about as discreet as a hurricane, in fact – but Bluefields is. You can socialise with the other guests and peek at their terraces and pools. But if you're, say, a famous Hollywood actress whose name we're not

meant to know staying with someone whose identity we can't reveal, then you can be as secluded as you like. And if you're single, you can, like me, gaze out from the balustrade of your villa and try to look as if you're thinking great thoughts.

Great thoughts are fine, but you have to find plenty of time to read your trashy book, sip your cocktail, listen to the sea, and just indulge in the luxury of recovering. You walk along the beach and there's no

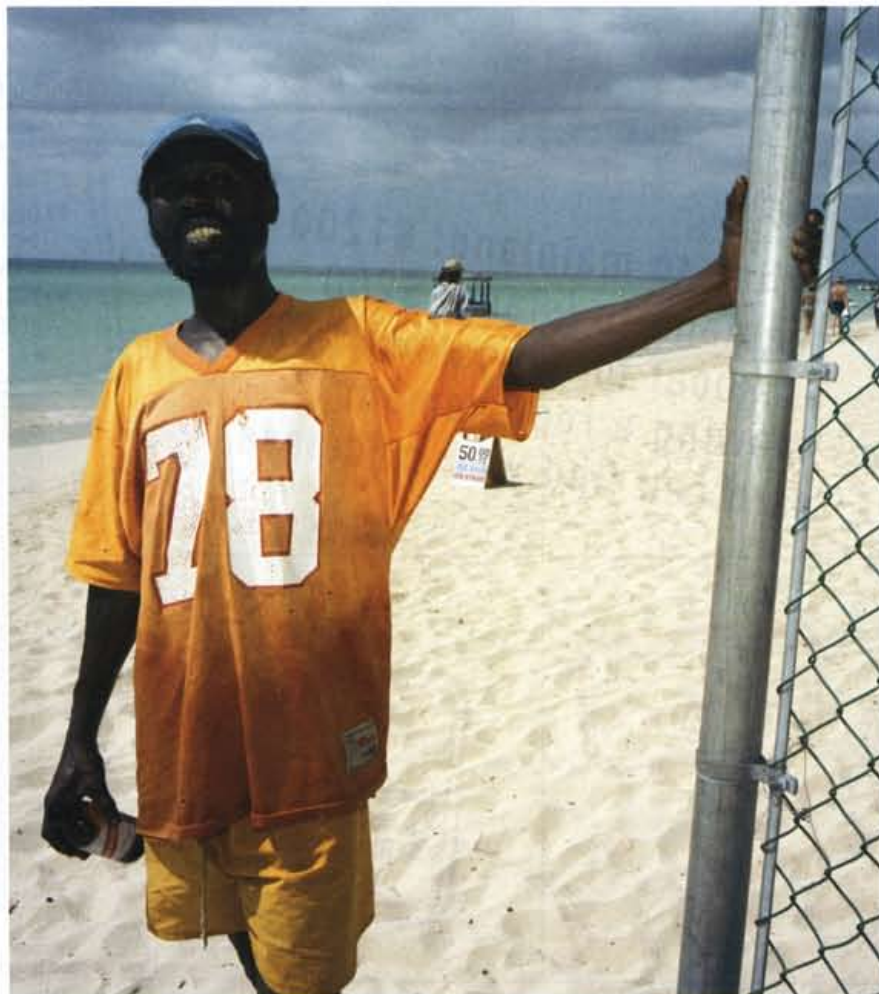
hassle. You go to a bar and there's no stress. If the guy you pass on the beach tries to sell you a massage or something more in the medicinal line, it's more in the way of a greeting than a serious sales pitch.

But you can get to feel a bit isolated and selfish perched up in your ocean eyrie. So if you're down Westmoreland way, give Woldie a call and go and meet some people at the Bluefield People's Community Association. Woldie Kristos used to be called Lieghton (sic) McPherson. But he didn't feel like a McPherson, so he became a Woldie. You can change your identity whenever you like in Jamaica. Woldie felt like being an Ethiopian with a touch of classical Greek.

Woldie used to be illiterate, until an Englishman

BEST FOR... BUSES ST VINCENT

Jump on a bus in St Vincent and let the good times roll. Discos on wheels, deep-bass reggae and calypso pound out of the windows. Drivers vie with each other by painting their vehicles brightly and outlandishly. Squeeze 'em in and pile 'em high is the philosophy – what better way to become acquainted with local culture. www.svgtourism.com



PETER DENCH

started doing some work in the parish. Now Woldie writes (and talks – a lot), oversees community projects and runs a small travel company called Reliable Adventures. For all the sweetness of this gentle coast, the social problems are acute. But the rich visitors and foreign residents have helped build schoolhouses and pre-schools, and supplied computer equipment and books.

Not everyone wants to set up companies and be a local spokesman, of course. Not Jah Cato, who has a stall by the side of the road where he carves wooden figures and promotes inner freedom. And not Oral, the jewellery maker. Oral's workshop is a six-foot by six-foot shack perched on the high grassy slopes above Belmont. His baby girl runs around with the chickens and Oral patiently makes simple designs out of bamboo and cow horn, amethyst, bone and coconut – perfect in themselves. You walk down the hill back to Belmont and whether you're single or not, a family man or otherwise, you think Oral has it just about right. ■

Mark Jones stayed at The Hermitage, part of the Bluefields Bay villas (tel: +1 202 232 4010. www.bluefieldsvillas.com). Woldie Kristos runs Reliable Adventures (tel: +1 876 955 8834)



Opposite page: a welcome for tourists at Negril. Left: carver Jah Cato and his roadside business. Below: the calm of Bluefields Bay



PETER DENCHING, MARK JONES

Entries/Entrées

Departures/Sorties

Entries/Entrées

Departures/Sorties

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