

One Love, Two Sweet Spots

From vibrant resorts to intimate private villas, sunny Jamaica offers the ultimate in pampered luxury

By Mike Alexander

As our WestJet flight descended below the clouds, four hours after leaving Toronto's Pearson International Airport and an admittedly long nine hours from Vancouver, we got our first glimpse of our island destination, Jamaica. Lush mountains, a rugged coastline streaked with beaches of golden sand, emerald-green forests, waterfalls and the impossibly blue waters of the Caribbean rejuvenated our senses after the lengthy flight.

Our trip included two Jamaican destinations that offer a contrast in styles and service: the high-end resorts of Negril's Seven Mile Beach and, later in the week, the ultimate in personalized service at Bluefields Bay Villas, a privately owned sanctuary of six luxurious waterfront villas located in the quiet fishing and farming village of Bluefields.

From the airport in Montego Bay, our transfer mini-bus took us on an exhilarating hour-long ride hugging the coastline. No stranger to danger, our driver used his horn liberally to warn pedestrians and other vehicles of our approach as we navigated the narrow road, a constant stream of oncoming traffic keeping us entertained. Election day in Jamaica was fast approaching and a parade of opposition-party supporters decked out in party colours were packed into, and hanging off, every imaginable form of transportation on their way to a local rally.

Bluefields Bay Villas' stunning San Michele villa sits on the edge of the Caribbean Sea about an hour from Negril on Jamaica's southwest coast.

IMAGE COURTESY BLUEFIELDS BAY VILLAS

Our first stop was Negril, on the western edge of the island. The area is famous for its black cliffs, Rick's Cafe and Seven Mile Beach, while the city is known for its laid-back, anything-goes vibe. Once a quiet corner of Jamaica, Negril has been transformed by a plethora of large resorts; Sandals, Riu, Breezes and Hedonism, among others, all sit side by side on the luxurious stretch of Seven Mile Beach.

The lobby of the **Breezes Grand** is an expansive open-air rotunda where a gentle breeze wafts through keeping guests cool and comfortable. Resort staff greeted us with smiles and cocktails as we waited to check in. The formalities quickly over, within minutes we'd shed our travel clothes for bathing suits and had our first experience of Seven Mile Beach. Voted No. 4 on the list of the world's best beaches by TripAdvisor, it didn't disappoint.

Whether you're planning a honeymoon or complete destination wedding, Jamaica's all-inclusive luxury resorts have much to offer. At Breezes, the rooms are spacious, clean and comfortable. The food is excellent, plentiful and with five different on-site restaurants, we were treated to a different menu every night. And, of course, the drinks and entertainment were lively and constant. The local reggae influence is everywhere and it feels as if every Jamaican has been given the gift of music and dance.

The island nation also boasts one of the richest and most varied landscapes in the Caribbean, with waterfalls, springs, rivers and streams all flowing from the mountains down to the sea, so if you prefer not to be resort bound, you can choose activities like river rafting, waterfall climbing and horseback riding. Of course, if you'd rather just rock the day away in a hammock under a palm, this is the place to live that dream.

Weddings at Jamaican resorts are a staple of the weekly routine. Each resort has its own wedding concierge and offers package themes ranging from simple to sublime, with oceanside gazebos, sandy beaches and manicured lawns allowing for a variety of ceremony styles. Complimentary wedding packages require a minimum number of room nights booked and you can add on, depending on your needs.

Sandals has long offered a variety of wedding packages including its now-famous Martha Stewart-branded weddings. With a minimum stay of six nights, you can enjoy their basic Beautiful Beginnings package at no extra cost, or you can choose from a variety of themes. Themed packages include all you would expect from Sandals and Martha Stewart, ranging from "Flutter of White," featuring white styling and a butterfly release, starting at US\$1,600, all the way up to their "Island Paradise" theme at US\$3,200. Most packages include the basics, such as ceremony officiants, flowers, cake and reception meal, but expect to pay extra for a photographer or videographer.

After six days of fun and relaxation, we were ready for the next leg of our adventure. The day before we left, I negotiated a private taxi ride to **Bluefields Bay Villas** from the group of taxis permanently stationed outside our resort and, a little too early the next morning, we set off.

Although we had pored over photos before leaving Vancouver, nothing prepared us for the unique experience of Bluefields Bay Villas. After the hustle and bustle of Negril, a short distance south, Bluefields offered a welcome retreat into Jamaica's colonial past.

Top: A corner of Seven Mile Beach in Negril, voted No. 4 on TripAdvisor's list of best beaches in the world.

Middle: A quiet walkway at the luxurious Sandals Negril.

Bottom: A Jamaican fishing boat does double duty as a swimming platform.





Top: All the villas at Bluefields Bay Villas are furnished with colonial antiques, including traditional four-poster beds.

Middle: Personal service at Bluefields Bay includes your own dedicated headman, personal chef, housekeeper, security staff and driver.

Bottom: Sunset bathes the San Michele villa in a warm golden glow.




Imagine your own private villa overlooking the Caribbean Sea

Privately owned and operated by the Virginia-based Moncure family, the villas are a jewel not to be missed. Four of the private villas have been lovingly restored from original estate homes, while two are newly designed and absolutely unique in their approach to the local landscape. Perched on the edge of the Caribbean and brimming with local colonial antiques scoured from across the island, each villa evokes a different feel and look.

Enormous four-poster beds, complete silver service at every meal, private pools and every wall covered in original local art: from antique to contemporary complete the experience and offer a feast for the eyes. We felt genuinely immersed in a time long ago.

But the heart of the Bluefields experience is the personal service. Our villa, Mullion Cove, the original property purchased by the Moncures, was staffed with six personnel continually at our service, including our own chef and personal headman or butler. Each meal was a personalized gourmet experience. Our laundry was done daily appearing clean and folded in neat stacks on our bed by mid-afternoon; our own security person and daytime driver left nothing to chance. Our headman, Aldeen, was the highlight of our visit — constantly vigilant, Aldeen looked after our every whim from the time we woke in the morning until late in the evening. Discreet but always attentive, the service was outstanding, including a silver tray of cocktails or appetizers waiting for us at just the right moment.

If you're dreaming of a wedding with a uniquely Caribbean at-home feel, Bluefields Bay offers a truly once-in-a-lifetime experience for you and your guests. Imagine your own private villa overlooking the Caribbean Sea, a lawn festooned with tea lights, a gazebo perched on the water, a reggae band to dance the night away and you may come close to the actual experience. Best suited for wedding parties from six to 40, the villas can be rented individually or in groups, depending on the size of your party. The staff can arrange almost everything required for a local wedding, including officials, florals, cake, music and photographer. And our own experience tells us the service and the food will be outstanding. 



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IF YOU GO:

- Westjet offers flights out of Vancouver to Jamaica via Toronto. See their site for current offers at westjet.ca
- For general information on Jamaica, check out visitjamaica.com
- For information on Negril, visit negril.com; negritoday.com or tripadvisor.com
- Breezes/Superclubs offers all-inclusive rates during the off-peak season starting at US\$407 per night, with peak-season rates starting at US\$540. Visit breezes.com/resorts/breezes-grand-negril
- Sandals Resorts' all-inclusive nightly rates during the off-peak season start at US\$425 with current promotional discounts applied. Peak-season rates start at US\$520. Visit sandals.com
- Bluefields Bay Villas offers all-inclusive rates for the villas starting at US\$450 per night in the off-peak season (April 14 to December 14). Peak-season rates start at US\$725. Visit bluefieldsvillas.com