



Nestled in Jamaica

At the Bluefields Bay Villas, the rhythm is luxuriously slow. By **TINA GOMES BRAND**

PHOTOGRAPHY BY PATRICIA LYONS

As the plane prepares to touch down at Montego Bay on a cloudless day, the island is etched brilliantly against the bright blue. Waiting by the white van, with gentle smile and neatly pressed checkered shirt, is Nevillae. "Hey man, how you been? Welcome back home to Bluefields." Clambering in, we are ready to begin a holiday to end all holidays in the sun.

The minivan makes its way south from Montego Bay, through tiny parishes toward the villas of Bluefields Bay on the southwest coast of the island, in the parish of Westmoreland, on the Caribbean Sea. The 90-minute drive is a sight-seeing tour itself, wending through acres of orange groves, sugar cane fields and tiny hamlets, then past

the Anchovy Constabulary, on the front steps of which one might see a policeman, in his perfectly creased uniform, pondering another cloudless day.

Coming to Bluefields Bay feels like coming home, even on your first visit. The fact that the villas are so private contributes to this state of mind. Many of the staff members who run these beautiful properties have been here from the start, making for the down-home air that comes with the ease of knowing your job well and taking pleasure in doing it. Each house comes with its own butler, housekeeper, gardener/pool man and a babysitter if you have small people in tow.

Warm, friendly smiles and easy handshakes greet you. There's Carmen,

general manager, who came to Bluefields 17 years ago and stayed. She runs a tight ship, though you would never know it gazing into her large, dusky eyes. Earl, head honcho butler, has been here 22 years. He's what Carmen calls the "all-time all-rounder." "He can cook the best breakfast, find the freshest catch of the day, and once, when a guest had a yearning for sugar cane, he produced it in a silver bowl in the middle of the afternoon," she says. There's James the gardener, who has a cult following because, on Wednesdays, James trades his garden rake for cooking implements and becomes Jerk Chicken James. His famous chicken is served at the Tree House, the communal clubhouse pavilion with stunning views of the coast.



Facing page, from left, Carmen spreads fresh linens for the dining table; homemade key lime pie. Here, San Michele in the afternoon.

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At Bluefields Bay, there is something to suit everyone in the five properties, which sit nestled in the pretty coastline. Their names evoke whimsy and charm—Cottonwood and Milestone cottages, Mullion Cove, San Michele and the Hermitage all offer 180-degree views of the sea. The houses are surrounded by exotic, vigorous, paradisiacal gardens, and all have their own pools in case guests should tire of swimming in the warm waters of the Caribbean Sea. Here, visitors can be as reclusive or as engaged with the local community as they choose.

Debbie and Braxton Moncure are the owners of Bluefields Bay Villas, with impeccable Virginia credentials, including among their relatives Nancy Lancaster, who founded Colefax and Fowler. How did Braxton Moncure, whose ties to Virginia wind back to his great-grandmother, Catherine Cary Ambler, who lived in Jamestown in 1812, come to be in Jamaica? With family spread from the Northern Neck and Gloucester County to the more urban reaches of Northern Virginia, the world-traveling Moncure felt an immediate connection with Jamaica on his first visit in the '70s and began a search for his own piece of heaven. Frequent and focused trips finally unearthed the jewel that was Mullion Cove.

Today, the Moncures are an institution on the island, with deep roots here while still maintaining their home in Virginia. Debbie and Braxton married at Mullion Cove, and their children Rachel and Huston were born on the island. Over time, they acquired and developed the coastline on either side of the original Mullion Cove property, mindful of the heritage of the island and its fragile ecosystem. Debbie Moncure is an architect, so the houses that she built over time bear the keen and magical mark of someone trained in the design of beautiful homes. Incorporated into the new houses are as many local building materials as she could source.

The houses are all breathtakingly serene. Cool tile and parquet floors lead from one generous space to another while, in the background,

antique lace flutters through louvered windows. The villas are furnished with local antiques, from the richly carved armoires and immense four-poster canopied beds, laden with feather pillows and embroidered linens, to comfy sofas and arm chairs. In neat piles, you will find the latest *New Yorker* and *Tatler* magazines, classic holiday novels and historical accounts of the islands. All around are vistas through arches of pink bougainvillea, bright orange orchid sprays and clusters of nodding hibiscus to the glittering blue sea beyond. Among flowering bushes and cascading creepers are flashes of busy hummingbirds and colorful butterflies. In the background, the discreet hum of an efficient household goes about its business of satisfying every whim of the guests.

Lobster with ginger sauce, fragrant curry, soups, quiches and magnificent, old-fashioned tea cakes—the menu is varied and delicious, thanks to the training the villa cooks receive from French chef Jean Claude Lelan. Chef Lelan has been traveling here annually for the last 10 years from his restaurant, Le Refuge, in Old Town, Alexandria. He has a warm tenderness for this place and its people. The eagerness of the Jamaican cooks to learn new recipes gives him a satisfaction quite apart from that of running a successful city bistro. "How lucky am I?" laughs Lelan. "I swim in the morning, search the local markets in the afternoon for ingredients, and then spend my afternoons in the villa kitchens."

After lunch, laid out in your private loggia, served up on a table resplendent with scattered flowers, pretty embroidered linen and a funky mixture of china that can range from vintage Spode and Wedgwood to Lennox, it is time for a stroll of a few yards through the garden down to the ocean. Pause to inhale the scented air and you might spy, hidden under a hibiscus bush, an ice chest stocked with Red Stripe beers, Ting (a fantastic Jamaican lemonade) and other sodas and bottled water. Far out on a rock, so as not to invade your private space, you will notice Dorrington or Andy, watchful senti-

nels who are the villa's coast guards. Nothing like peace of mind.

As the sun begins to slip into the sea, pulling ropes of color with it, a day of kayaking, sunbathing, swimming and reading by the ocean draws to a close. The vibe is picking up at the villa. Butler Earl, who has been in casual mode during the day in Bermuda shorts and Hawaiian shirt, is now in formal black and whites for dinner service. Fireflies wink in the bushes leading up to the house, and in the distance geckos can be heard calling to one another. Your favorite symphony is playing on the house stereo. The table is set for dinner, candle-lit lamps glow and appetizing



The nearby beach and right, students at Bluefields Bay School.

to an orchid park or to the Kew Park coffee plantation—just send word to Carmen, who arranges all these quickly and efficiently. Who can resist a visit to a plantation called Paradise, where you can mount up and go giddyap through grassy glades and stands of old trees out to the sea, where the horses perk up as they splash through the shallows. An especially fun and satisfying visit is one we make each time, to the preschool called the Bluefields Basic School. Supported by the socially conscious Moncures, the neat-as-a-pin and gaily painted place is the pride of the parish. Here, teachers prepare their students for primary school, and the



aromas curl on a gentle breeze.

After placing drink orders with Earl, you might freshen up in your private boudoir before dinner. You will find the bed turned down and a neat pile of your laundry, washed and pressed. The pretty white nets over the bed have been lowered and the blades of an overhead fan slice the evening air. If needed, flick on the air conditioning to take the edge off a warm day.

You could get used to this.

At Bluefields Bay, you can do as much or as little as you want. A well-maintained tennis court with night lights is just across the road. Boat rides and fishing trips, croquet, long hikes to a majestic waterfall, a visit

complex is a hive of earnest activity each day.

At Bluefields, the slow rhythm is entrancing, and a deeply satisfying massage in the garden under a canopy of flowering morning glory fits in nicely. Long-time housekeepers Thermane and Sharon are adept at hair braiding, and one could spend an idyllic afternoon on the terrace sipping rum punch while your hair is woven into beautiful creations. Two American beauticians living nearby are available to visit you poolside if you care to make an appointment.

The Moncure family can be proud of this venture. Bluefields Bay has brought stability to the area by providing jobs and playing an active role among the local population. Guests leave not only feeling refreshed, but also truly connected to the Bluefields Bay community.

After most holidays, I am eager to return home. Bluefields Bay is one place where a sadness wells in my heart as I wave goodbye. I guess some of the regret is also from knowing that the mundane reality of cooking meals, wrestling with the laundry and driving carpool is about to begin again.

Jamaica

Villas at Bluefields Bay
Phone: (202) 232-4010
BluefieldsVillas.com
Vacations@BluefieldsVillas.com
A week's stay for two adults ranges from \$3500-\$8400, depending on the villa. Higher during holiday seasons.





Top left, a guest enjoys an afternoon nap near the beach; a mango sorbet for dessert; Debbie Moncure relaxes near the water at dusk. Middle left, a bedroom with a view; the table is set for breakfast; a guest relaxes on the patio near the pool at the

Hermitage. Bottom left, James, chef and gardener makes jerk chicken smoked over allspice leaves every Wednesday for the guests; mahogany arches in the loggia of the Hermitage, designed by Deborah Moncure; some of the gracious staff.

