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BLUEFIELDS BAY JAMAICA — AN UNRESORT-LIKE RESORT

November 18, 2011



Bluefields Bay at Sunset

DAY ONE OF FOUR—Our staff is waiting at the door of our villa when we arrive —Rose Spence the cook, Sharon Plummer the housekeeper and Marvin Forrest our major domo, who does everything from whip up frozen drink concoctions to take us on a hike past tiny mountain villages.

Welcome to Bluefields Bay Villas—the most unresort-like resort I've ever visited — in Jamaica, about an hour and 15 minutes drive from Montego Bay in the small community of Bluefields Bay.

My three closest friends from grade school and I are ensconced in Hermitage—a four- bedroom three- bath villa with its own pool overlooking the sea. As I write this, two of my friends are in the pool and one is reading. Our private beach is down some stone steps.

There are six villas in all—ranging from one bedroom designed for honeymooners to six bedrooms. Ours is called Hermitage. No, this place isn't a bargain—the weekly rate at Hermitage is \$6495 plus another \$125 a person per day (\$90 for kids) that includes all of our food, open bar, use of sea kayaks, snorkeling, tennis, a nanny and even laundry. But divided among four couples or two families, you'll probably find you aren't paying more than at a big all-inclusive resort, yet you're having a spectacularly different experience at a place lovingly nurtured by the same family for some 30 years. Owner Debbie Moncure says she and her husband were at the forefront of all-inclusive villa rentals—in part out of necessity because there weren't a lot of restaurants or groceries the area. There still aren't. "The idea is to respond to what people want on their holidays and make that happen. This isn't what you would get in a cookie cutter place."

That's an understatement.

I'm sitting in the open Living room with three vaulted doors open to the patio and the sea. I slept in a canopied bed with windows with breathtaking views. When we arrived last night, the table was set for dinner complete with silver candelabra.

Bill Hawkins and Bobby Schaefer are back for their fourth visit with their 22-year-old twins and their significant others—a belated college graduation trip, Hawkins, who is from Maryland explained. "We thought where we could entice the kids to come with us on vacation," he joked.

"The staff is so gracious with kids whether they are two, thirteen or 22," he said. "It's nice meeting all the locals," he adds.

The owners, Debbie and Braxton Moncure who have been joined by their 26-year-old son Houston, have made community involvement a priority—from outfitting the local high school with computers to completely supporting the local preschool.

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We stop at the Belmont Basic School to deliver crayons and markers to the oh-so-adorable preschoolers in their pigtails and blue and white checked uniforms—dresses for the girls, shirts for the boys.

Two percent of the rental revenues goes to support the tiny community of Bluefields Bay (population less than 2,000), Debbie Moncure tells me on the phone. They are also providing jobs to a community where unemployment is at least 40 percent. That includes our giving the staff of our house work.

Last night we feasted on pumpkin soup, lobster in ginger sauce, rice, veggies and excellent key lime pie prepared by Rose and served by Marvin. I'm guessing our housekeeper Sharon helped with the clean up. I loved that we didn't have to find a restaurant or go there on unfamiliar roads. I loved that I didn't have to shop for food and prepare it as I have done so many times in rented vacation homes. I didn't have to do any dishes.

But just as terrific was the setting—the lace-covered table overlooking the pool and the sea, the tropical breeze, the crickets chirping. .

I even loved the bumpy ride from the airport – Bluefields Bay is roughly 40 miles southwest from Montego Bay– through small towns named Redding and Anchovy, Montpeiler, Rambell where we stopped for delicious Jerk Chicken at “Border Jerk.” We pass women at roadside stands selling fruit and school kids in different colored uniforms on their way home, half-finished homes that our driver Percy Baldwin, who has worked for Bluefields for more than two decades, tells us are being built by Jamaicans living abroad who are planning their retirement. We pass pastel colored houses.

Certainly this is a different Jamaica we are seeing than the big-all-inclusive Sandals resorts that are so well known here. “We'd been there, done that,” said Taria Wright, a nurse from Ohio who with her husband shared the van with us from the airport.

Those choosing a place like this are looking for a different experience—from the house with its traditional Jamaican furnishings, rugs on the floor and paintings on the wall. The book cases are filled not only with books but board games. There is WiFi but no TV. .

You can do as much—fishing, kayaking, snorkeling, hiking—as you like or as little—simply nap in the hammock at the beach, read by your own pool or schedule a massage overlooking the sea.

We all go to sleep smiling, glad for old friendships and new experiences.

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ONE RESPONSE TO *BLUEFIELDS BAY JAMAICA — AN UNRESORT-LIKE RESORT*

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