

BLUE HEAVEN

Unique collection of family-owned villas offer a taste of Jamaica's unspoiled south

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Winnipeg Sun

MEARNSVILLE, Jamaica — The temperature is 30 degrees Celsius, but it's not like any 30 degrees I've ever experienced.

Thanks to the near-100% humidity and the effects of an hour-long hike up the side of a mountain, the needle on my temperature gauge is squarely in the red. And judging by the sweat collecting on the brows of my fellow hikers, I'm not the only one who could use a cold Red Stripe or two.

Sadly, the nearest bartender is several hundred feet below us, back on the shores of Bluefields Bay on the lush southwest coast of Jamaica. But no worries — we've got our local guide Feldon, who shimmies 10 metres up a palm tree and tosses down four coconuts to quench our thirst.

Refreshing

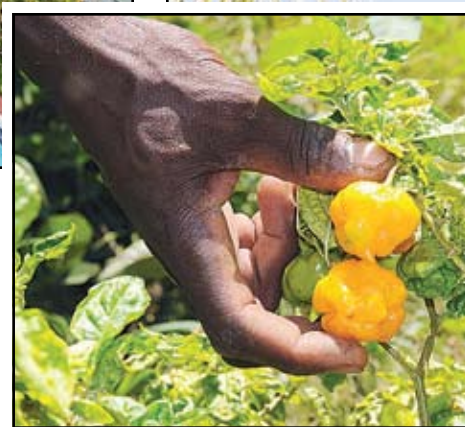
Once he's back on the ground, a couple of hacks with Feldon's knife reveals the clear water locked inside the unripe fruit. It's sweet, refreshing and even replaces some of the electrolytes we've lost on our mid-morning journey. The only thing it's missing is a shot of rum and a cocktail umbrella.

The rum starts to flow about an hour later, once we're back at the Hermitage, one of six properties operated by Bluefields Bay Seaside Villas. As I cool off in our private pool overlooking the bay, our butler Marvin brings me a papaya daiquiri, prepared with fruit that was picked this morning and Appleton Estate rum that was distilled less than hour's drive from here.



ALL PHOTOS BY STEPHEN RIPLEY/WINNIPEG SUN

Like each of the six Bluefields Bay villas, the Hermitage (above) has its own private pool, butler, cook and housekeeper. All of the meals are prepared with organic, local ingredients, such as these scotch bonnet peppers (right).



With service like this, it's no wonder Bluefields Bay attracts such an exclusive clientele. As I sip my drink, Marvin names a few of the celebrities who have stayed at the Hermitage, including singer Lionel Richie, actress Jodie Foster and NFL hall-of-famer Dan Marino.

The villas are operated by the Moncures, an American family whose ties to Jamaica go back more than three decades. Braxton Moncure acquired the first villa, the expansive Mullion Cove, back in 1981 and has gradually added more properties, now stretching from one end of the bay to the other. The main attraction was — and still is — the unspoiled nature of the area, which stands in stark contrast to the scores of all-inclusive resorts that line the

island's bustling north coast.

My days at the Hermitage begin early, with some pre-breakfast snorkeling amid the rocks and coral just a few metres away from our sea-side gazebo. It doesn't look like much from shoreline, but once my head is submerged, I glide through schools of angelfish and yellowtail, broken up by the occasional balloon fish, ready to puff itself up at the first sign of trouble, and the goth-looking squirrelish, with its distinctive black eyes. I spot a green moray eel poking its head out of a hole in the rocks, not far from lobsters and crabs scuttling along the sand.

One of the most eye-catching residents of the reef is

also the most reviled. While beautiful to look at, with its white-and-black stripes, elaborate pectoral fins and venomous spikes fanned out like a peacock's feathers, the red lionfish has become a menace to the marine ecosystem. A non-native aquarium fish from the Pacific that was somehow released into the Atlantic, the lionfish have flourished in recent years, gobbling up as many as 30 native fish and crustaceans per hour and breeding uncontrollably.

In an effort to help eradicate this scourge, local chefs are starting to add lionfish to their menus. And after sampling a couple of the dishes prepared

by my personal chef Rose, I can report it's quite tasty.

Did I mention each Bluefields villa comes with a private chef? Along with a butler — or headman, as they call him — I have a housekeeper to clean up and do laundry and a chef to prepare breakfast, lunch, dinner and snacks in-between. And the meals are amazing. In addition to the lionfish, my menu for the week includes lobster, conch, jerk chicken and some of the most delicious soups I've ever tasted.

All of this food is locally produced, as I learn when I

pay a visit to Brian and Upton, two farmers who belong to the local organic food co-operative. It's quite a hike up a steep, rocky path to Upton's plot, but our efforts are rewarded when we arrive at a veritable hillside Eden. While his young daughter does her homework in the shade of the small barn he's building, Upton proudly shows off lettuce, bok choy, callaloo, plantain trees, scotch bonnet peppers, corn, tomatoes, okra and a host of other crops that will eventually find their way onto the plates of Bluefields diners.

With such a bounty laid out before us every day, we need to get out for some exercise. Less than an hour southeast of Bluefields is the perfect spot — YS Falls, an outdoor playground that features a zipline circuit, swimming, tubing and generally cavorting amid a seven-tiered waterfall that ranks among the highest in Jamaica.

A short drive south of YS

Falls is the town of Black River. Formerly a sugar, logging and slaving port, Black River is now the jumping off point for tours of the river, which gets its name from the layers of dark, decaying vegetation that can be seen below its crystal waters. A more appropriate name might be Crocodile River, since its mangrove-lined banks are home to more than 500 of the reptilian predators, one of the long list of facts our boat guide robotically rattles off during an hour-long excursion up the river.

Crocodile wrestling

What our captain lacks in public-speaking ability, he more than makes up for in daring. Whenever he spots a big crocodile — in the 14-to-16-foot range — he lures it over to the boat by throwing raw chicken in the water, then grabs a foreleg while it struggles and thrashes its mighty tail to get away. He still has both of his arms, so it doesn't



look like the crocs have exacted their revenge yet.

We stay a little closer to home on our next excursion, touring some of the schools in the Bluefields area. The students are all off for spring break this week, but the teachers are happy to show us around, pointing out some of the recent improvements spearheaded by the Bluefields Bay Community Fund, which is supported by a portion of

the villas' rental fees. Whether they're helping to build new flushing toilets at the Mearnsville All-Age School, donating and installing a computer lab at the Belmont Academy or subsidizing the rent for the nearby preschool, the Moncures appear to be living up to their goal of sustainable development in the communities surrounding their villas.

I don't fully appreciate Bluefields' charms until the day I'm

scheduled to leave. Waiting for my flight at the airport in Montego Bay, I find myself equally fascinated and revolted by all the tacky, touristy businesses crammed into the departures area — several T-shirt shops, a Bob Marley-themed store, a restaurant dedicated to the Jamaican bobsled team, a Harley-Davidson outlet and not one but two Jimmy Buffett's Margaritavilles.

Gratefully, I realize this is

the only exposure I've had to the mass-market tourist vibe that has ruined much of the Caribbean for me. While most of my fellow passengers talk about the buffets and crowded beaches of the sprawling all-inclusive resorts on the north coast, I smile and consider myself fortunate to have seen a completely different side of Jamaica.

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Bluefields guide Feldon (left) tosses down a coconut for a thirsty hiker. Jerk master James (above) shows off his special jerk chicken.



Visitors gingerly make their way across one of the seven tiers of YS Falls (left). A 14-foot croc in the waters of Black River (above). Both attractions are within an hour of Bluefields Bay.

IF YOU GO TO ...

BLUEFIELDS BAY, JAMAICA

■ The nearest international airport is in Montego Bay, about an hour north of Bluefields. WestJet and Air Canada offer direct flights from Toronto and Montreal. Direct charters from other Canadian cities can also be found in-season.

■ The villas at Bluefields Bay range in size from two to six bedrooms, from the secluded Milestone Cottage, which is perfect for honeymooners, to the more expansive San Michele, which can sleep as many as 12.

■ Each villa has air conditioning, wi-fi and 24-hour security and is staffed by a headman, housekeeper and chef. The all-inclusive package includes three meals, appetizers at sunset, an open bar, the use of kayaks, snorkeling gear and tennis courts, plus airport transfers from Montego Bay.

■ Weekly rates begin at \$2,275 for the smallest villa, plus \$125 per person, per day for the all-inclusive package.

■ For more info about rates and amenities, visit www.bluefieldsvillas.com.



OTHER SIDE OF JAMAICA

See more photos and learn more about Bluefields Bay and Jamaica's southwest coast.

winnipegsun.com/bluefields