

WASHINGTON POST AUG, 10 1997

Sunday, August 10, 1997

**In Jamaica,
Inclusive
Without Walls**

If you're the type to book luxury all-inclusive vacations without a second glance at your checkbook, then just take my word for this and skip down to the phone number now. You will never stay at a Caribbean resort so seriously, memorably indulgent—and yet so congenial with the neighborhood, both socially and ecologically. Please have your gold card ready, and thank you for shopping the Sunday Travel section.

The rest of you come with me (and bring at least two friends), and we'll figure out how—and why—regular people would, and should, also spend some time at the Villas on Bluefields Bay, on Jamaica's still untouristed southwest coast.

The easy part, of course, is why.

Most of us know Jamaica as a land of resorts, ever more of which constitute lands bounded by fences, inside of which entrepreneurs—of a wholly different scale, if not sensibility, than the ones invariably hawking jerk chicken and less legal smoked goods outside the gates—endeavor to meet vacationers' every need for a week or two. Maybe because Jamaica is perceived by many as a wilder place than its Caribbean neighbors (or in spite of this), the all-inclusives flourish here, especially among the north coast resorts of Montego Bay, Ocho Rios and Negril. The Villas on Bluefields Bay, five homes perched among the dense green-on-green above a serene bay in a part of the island where most people still either fish or grow things for a living, certainly fit the all-inclusive category, the rates covering all meals and open bar, full staff and airport transfers. But the similarity ends here.

Unlike the north coast, the southwest coast's attractions are largely natural—narrow, haphazardly paved country roads in the area lead to deserted, narrow beaches, farms and small villages, and such sublime daytime destinations as the 120-foot, multitiered Y.S. Falls, or to safari sails up among the mangroves and crocodiles of the 44-mile Black River. At Bluefields, you are meant to—and, unless you rent a car or hire the resort's van for a day trip, pretty much forced to—relax and take in the fundamental wonders: the sea, the sun—and, in this case, the staff.

Probably because they consider Jamaica their adopted home, Bluefields' owners, Alexandria-based accountant Braxton Moncure and architect Deborah Moncure, have taken some evident care in developing, since the early 1980s, their organically grown string of resort villas. Jamaican antiques, including exquisitely carved mahogany four-poster canopy beds, grace the rooms. All the wood, stone and other materials used in renovation are local (as they were in construction of the Hermitage, the Bluefields villa designed by Deborah Moncure and surely one of the world's most seamless, sigh-inducing integrations of nature and shelter). And all of the staff—from sharp and sunny manager Birdie Walker to almost every cook, waiter and nanny—are from the area

and hired, it seems, because they are not only capable but also worth meeting. There are plans for several large north coast-like complexes in nearby Whitouse and Savannah-la-Mar. If you want to know what a Caribbean island looks like before Sandals, you might want to visit Bluefields soon.

Meals are eclectic and wonderful, routinely served among china, crystal and linen. There are fresh flowers in a Wedgewood vase in your bedroom. There are small boats, floats and a windsurfer available. When you walk down to the long, narrow private beach in the morning, or one of the small swimming pools at sunset, someone has generally gotten there first with towels and cold drinks.

We were able to stay at Bluefields—at the Hermitage and adjacent Cottonwood Cottage—because my wife, Charmaine, gathered a group for a retreat in April, in the semi-off-season; there were 11 in all, bringing the cost down to just over \$1,000 per person for a week in paradise. Three couples, in high season (January - March), could have the Hermitage for \$10,080, including the 12 percent charge for gratuities and taxes (tipping is verboten). And it is possible to get a taste by renting, in the off-season (May-October), a single bedroom at Cottonwood for \$250 a night (minimum five nights, and not including the trip to and from Montego Bay airport).

-Roger Piantadosi