

SPRING TRAVEL ISSUE

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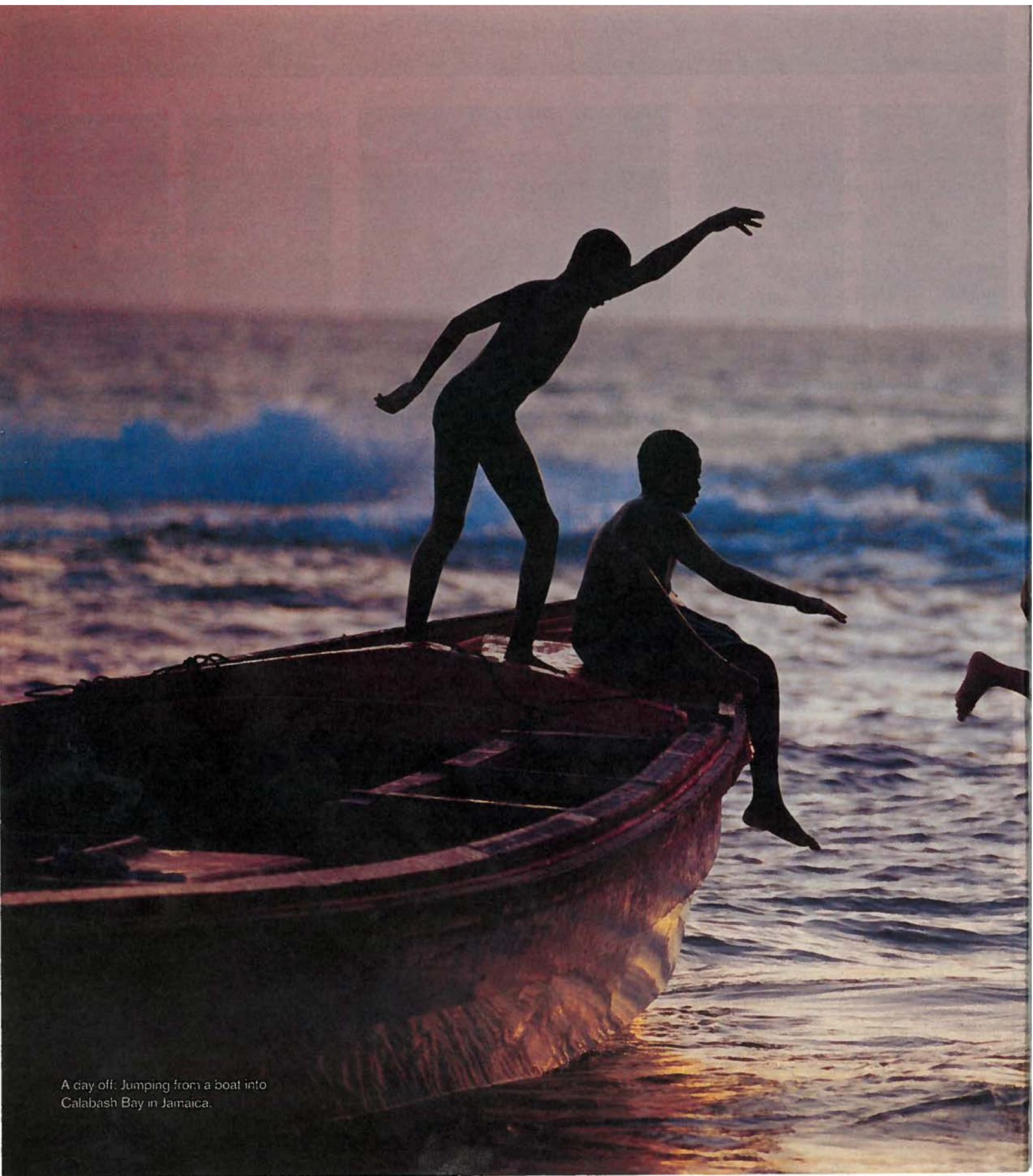
Enlightening Journeys

Exploring the Back Roads of Jamaica

Retreating to Orwell's Scotland Estate

Peter Voll's Vision: Tourism and Peace





A day off: Jumping from a boat into Calabash Bay in Jamaica.

BY GATHRYN JAKOBSON RAMIN

Road Trip, Jamaica

Looping the island with local drivers

For five years, since the first time they saw "Cool Runnings," my sons, 12 and 15, had been angling for a trip to Jamaica. I'd been to the island several times, and we'd have gone in a minute if it wasn't so far from California, requiring at least one plane change and a long layover. Then, Air Jamaica announced nonstop service from Los Angeles to Montego Bay, four days a week. On its heels, Delta followed. For West Coast dwellers, the Caribbean was finally within reasonable reach.

But we were not going to Jamaica to lock ourselves behind the gates of a resort. We'd travel back roads, and if I had anything to say about it, we'd never encounter a watery pina colada or a swimming pool on steroids. Mostly, we'd be eating roadside — in little cafes, with plastic forks, where Jamaicans knew to stop.

"You're not going to make us learn anything, are you?" my younger son asked when I told them that this was going to be a little different than our trip the previous winter, to Cabo. "We're not going to museums," the older one announced. No museums, I told them. We'd visit fishing villages and tiny mountain hamlets, and, in the process, we'd absorb something of Jamaica's history and anthropology, coming to understand why the Spanish and the British fought brutally over an island that is 146 miles long, and, depending where you find yourself, between 22 and 51 miles wide. We'd grasp why the Spanish, incensed at the prospect of losing all they had built to the British, freed their African slaves, who ran for the hills and continued to live in isolation, as Maroons, for hundreds of years, preserving aspects of African culture — cuisine, dialect, music, religion — that otherwise would have been lost.

I planned a Jamaican road trip, starting in Montego Bay and looping eastward, around the perimeter of the island, with inland excursions. Normally, I'd rent a car on such a trip, but I'd heard that in

Jamaica, self-driving meant taking your life in your hands — on the wrong side of the road. Through Jamaican Union of Travellers Association, I arranged for professional drivers who drive minivans (of varying ages and repair, as it turned out). It wasn't the cheapest way to do it (a four-wheel-drive rental of a Suzuki Grand Vitara is \$540 for a week, while a van and driver costs around \$200 a day, depending on destination), but it was safer.

After Neville, our first driver, collected us at the airport, he took us straight to Scotchies, a famous jerk stand across the street from the Montego Bay Holiday Inn. In a dusty, crowded little parking lot, Neville introduced us to the men behind a makeshift bar, sweating while they loaded pimento wood into a pit in the ground, stoking the fire and shifting the glowing embers. Chicken, pork and fish, doused in allspice, scallion, tomato, garlic, ginger, thyme, cinnamon, nutmeg and fiery Scotch bonnet peppers sizzled before us. Soon, we were back in the car, foil packets of chicken and fish resting on our laps, cold cans of a Jamaican soda called Ting at the ready. I waited for the verdict, and it came quickly. Twelve-year-old Oliver announced that, hands down, it was the best chicken he'd ever eaten.

On the road, Neville quickly dropped his careful English, and gave us a welcome immersion in the dialect that Jamaicans call patois. The thing is "da ting," which of course is also the name of the soda. On three mobiles at once, Neville acknowledges that he is a "phone tek-tek," which is someone who cannot stay off the "ting," and that phrase also enters our vocabulary. Then there are some tips. "Ya mon," when it comes out of the mouths of non-Jamaicans, is perceived as demeaning. Not all dreadlocked individuals are Rastas, Neville explains, and not all Rastas have dreads. "Rastafari," not "Rastafarian" is the correct term for these people, who follow a spiritual path that has African aspects, but is deeply rooted in the Old Testament. Many of



their practices (ganja smoking aside) echo Jewish beliefs. "Irie," he tells us, is a great thing to say — it's used to denote acceptance and positive feelings.

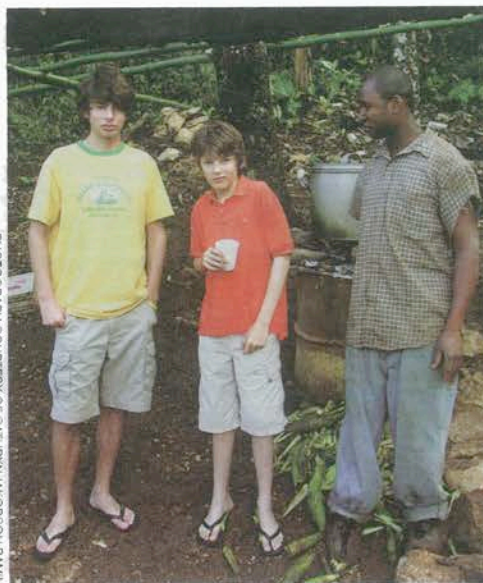
In the next two hours, as we travel over a highway that's sometimes smooth and modern, sometimes nothing but red, rutted dirt, I'm glad we have Neville. By the time we reach Ocho Rios and bid him a cheerful "Irie," we're feeling thoroughly briefed.

The town of Ocho Rios, known to all as Ochi, is mostly a cruise ship port these days, the deep and once-beautiful harbor filled with apartment-building-size vessels that drop anchor, one right after the other. You'd never know this at the Hibiscus Lodge Hotel, however. Set in a lovely garden, overlooking the sea, it's a bargain at \$137.50 per night. You can easily walk into town to get a meal or poke around at souvenir stands — there's a whole market devoted to quickly separating cruise-ship passengers from their dollars.

We're not interested in shopping, because we're headed out. For a small country, Jamaica possesses great geographic and botanical diversity — five mountain ranges, 120 rivers, 200 species of birds and just as many wild orchids. There are mangrove swamps, rain forests (78 inches of rain annually), crocodiles and manatees. It's a shame that the vast majority of tourists never leave the beach. Chukka Caribbean Adventures, the tour company that collects us from the hotel, is trying to change that.

We're signed up for the Original Canopy Tour, where we'll see the rain forest via zip lines stretched from platforms mounted in the tree canopy. My sons have selected it from a long list of choices, probably because it is the one that is guaranteed to scare the bejesus out of their mother. After a long van trip up into the mountains, where the pavement periodically disappeared, we arrived at Platform One, where deft, experienced fitters in khaki suits rigged our harnesses for action. The zip lines use a double-line redundancy system, we were told — if there's even the slightest problem, a guide will be out to rescue us in a second. As we walk out on to the platform, in the middle of dense jungle, I grimace. The boys jump willingly, soaring into space, whooping and hollering like Tarzan. I need a nudge, but as soon as I'm off, I get it: The sun is filtering through the trees, and this is marvelous, as close to being a monkey or an eagle as I'll ever get. Clip — jump — we did it 10 times, flying for what seemed like minutes at a time, and when it was over, we were sorry.

Duly impressed, we sign up for another Chukka tour — an inner-tube trip down the White River. I'm thinking about a placid float, but the man who takes the order gives my boys a wink. The next morning, after a long van ride up an even narrower, steeper country road, we hurl ourselves into inner tubes with plywood bottoms, and set off down a perfectly clear blue mountain stream. Not an icy Sierra stream, to be sure — the water is warm, and a



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF CATHRYN JAKOBSON PAMIN

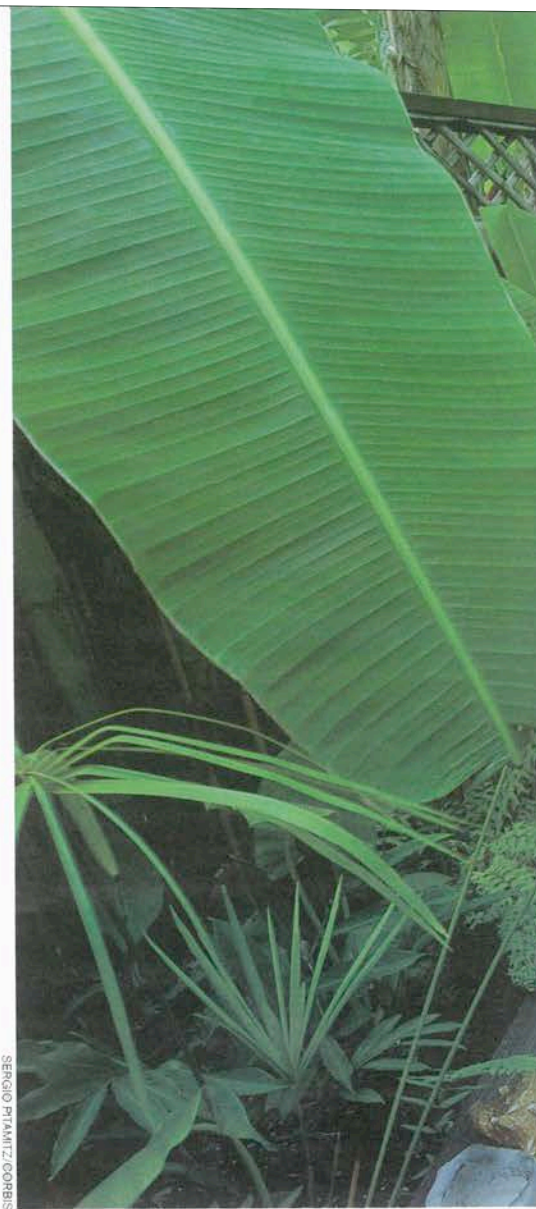
A cup of corn soup: just what's needed at the end of a winding mountain road.

jungle canopy, thick with fruit trees and orchids, arches overhead. Halfway down river, our guides sent us ashore, to a shack where enormous platters of jerk chicken appeared out of nowhere.

The next day we moved on. Our new driver, Devroy, polished and buffed to a high shine, referred to me as "baby," much to my sons' amusement. Later, he informed me that I looked "trash and ready," which translated as "trendy," which the boys found even funnier. In the next breath, he invited us to come to his "yard" — his home — to meet the family, including his wife and teenage son. "We'll have a 'likkle' fresh coconut jelly, which 'cleans da heart,'" he said, but boys need to be careful, he warned, because it can also "put lead in da pencil."

We halted just on the outskirts of the tiny town of Orcabessa, to enjoy the sybaritic pleasures of Goldeneye, owned by Chris Blackwell, founder of Island Records and the proprietor of Island Outposts, a hotel company. Blackwell, who launched Bob Marley's career, may well have introduced the concept of high-end boutique hotels to Jamaica — there are three in total. Goldeneye was Ian Fleming's home. Over the last 15 years, Goldeneye has sprouted a cluster of cottages, bedecked in batiks, laden with pillows and upholstered mattresses, dressed in exuberant and often local art. These artful huts are not spread across the larger property, resort-style, but set within feet of each other, contributing to the feeling of being part of a larger household. This arrangement is not for people who are protective of their privacy. Even Bill and Hillary, when they arrived for a short working holiday, had to be willing to mix.

You pay lavishly for the privilege — \$950 a night



SERGIO PIMENTA/COMBIS

for two, including three meals and all beverages, but this is luxury the way I like it, with all the ostentation sucked out of it. From the moment we arrive, we're treated like treasured houseguests of very well-to-do friends. Everyone, from the boatman to the barman, introduces himself, but not in a way that suggests that he's there as an employee. It's more along the lines of "I have a vested interest in this establishment and a great deal of pride in what we've done here, and I want you to have the best possible time." My sons walk across the terrace, where a few people are finishing breakfast, and nearly fall down the steep stone stairs, they're so busy elbowing each other. They have identified two movie stars I'd never have recognized. Shortly, just about everyone, including the stars in question, one of whom Esquire named the Sexiest Woman Alive, are engaged in a rambunctious match of water football, where getting smashed face first into the clear



The outdoor bathtub amid lush vegetation at the Goldeneye resort, formerly the home of Ian Fleming.

turquoise sea is a refreshing pleasure. Lunch is family style, on a glossy white wood terrace overlooking the lagoon. We stuff ourselves with baked fish, rice and plantains. For dessert, duckanoo — a recipe brought from Africa, made with cornmeal, coconut, spices and brown sugar, tied up in a banana leaf that's slowly cooked in boiling water.

Most of the talk while we were at Goldeneye, was about what would happen to this little treasure over the next decade. After years of thinking and planning, Blackwell is beginning construction of 40 new accommodations, ranging from four-bedroom villas to one-bedroom "huts." Most will be sold promptly to Goldeneye's faithful year-after-year clientele. No one doubted Blackwell's golden touch — the new buildings would be great. But would Goldeneye feel, ever again, like the perfect private estate?

We'd splashed and shared cocktails with the jet set, but the next morning, we were back on the road, on our way to Port Antonio, a quiet town on a long, curvy beach, evoking the Caribbean vibe I remember from the 1960s, when I first visited the island. Most of today's tourists are European — in fact, the farther you travel from Mo'Bay, the more likely you are to encounter travelers from Britain or the Continent. Walk down the street in Port Antonio, and you'll find unpretentious cafes dishing up rice n' peas (which are actually red kidney beans), with a side of spicy fish. You'll find beautiful Jamaican women indulging in enthusiastic labba labba — gossiping, a favorite way to pass the time.

There are many satisfying small hotels in Port Antonio, but for traveling families, it's impossible to beat Goblin Hill Villas. It's situated on 11 well-

manicured acres, and you can reserve a one- or two-bedroom villa, with a kitchen and a deck overlooking a beautiful cove. The key to Goblin Hill's many pleasures is the housekeeper assigned to you on check-in. She'll be happy to take you shopping to the local markets, and then come back and prepare Jamaican specialties, including escovitch fish, cooked and pickled in a sauce of vinegar and spices, believed to be a contribution of the first Spanish Jews who lived on the island, 500 years ago. The outdoor bar at Goblin Hill must be one of the world's finest. It loops around a huge 200-year-old ficus tree, and on some afternoons, the hotel management hosts sherry parties that encourage guests to get to know each other.

The hotel provides passes to the beach at Frenchman's Cove. After you've had enough sun, you can



NIK WHEELER/EPICORBS

A raftman pilots his craft past houses in Port Antonio.

head out to low-key Somerset Falls. Give yourself a few hours, as well, to swim in the Blue Lagoon.

From this little beach town, many travelers head for the massive range of the Blue Mountains, which sprawls across the eastern portion of the island for 28 miles, rising so steeply that it is possible to drive from the coastal planes to an elevation of more than 7,000 feet in a couple of hours. The mountains are gorgeous, flower-laden and misty. You'll take the Port Antonio-Bowden road, which follows the Rio Grande. The road up, described as the Road to Hell, is so awful that when you arrive at your destination, you're in no hurry to leave. There are two hostleries to consider — the elegant Strawberry Hill in Irish Town, another one of Blackwell's Island Outpost group, or at 4,000 feet near the village of Section, the Starlight Chalet and Health Spa, a homey, less expensive entry with 17 small, clean rooms, surrounded by a mature rain forest.

At the Starlight Chalet, Miss Amy is your hostess, and she takes her job seriously. She'll cook you whatever you want, as long as it's chicken or fish. Breakfasts are country big: ackee, a plant that's poisonous until it's ripe, but looks and tastes like scrambled eggs, and salt fish, with steamed calaloo and fried dumplings called spinners. You'll eat that

breakfast with exotic birds — the black-billed streamer tail, Jamaica elaenia and the Jamaica lizard cuckoo among them.

There is great hiking in the Blue Mountains, which are blessed with botanical wealth — 800 species of endemic plants, the world's second-largest butterfly, 200 species of resident and migrant birds, and 500 species of flowering plants. There are three national parks — Hollywell, Blue Mountain and John Crow — and plenty of trails, but they can be muddy and slippery. If you're serious, bring hiking shoes. If strenuous uphill climbs are not your thing, stick with Hollywell, which is less steep, or visit one of the coffee plantations. Jamaica Blue Mountain coffee, 90 percent of which is exported to Japan, ranks among the best coffees in the world. In these hills, it sells for \$7 a pound.

According to my sons, any sort of uphill climb is nothing but punishment, while zooming downward at top speed on two wheels holds great allure. Blue Mountain Bicycle Tours offers what is best described as a coasting experience — you climb off their bus at 2,800 feet, strap on a helmet, mount a bike that may be as old as you are — and for the next 10 miles, you spend far more time squeezing the brakes than pushing the pedals.

I was eager to get to our next destination — another Island Outpost property called Jake's. Our driver, Devroy, entertained us the whole way by having near simultaneous conversations on two cell phones with his wife and the woman he called his "baby mother," with whom he shared a nearly grown daughter. While managing the phones, unable to tolerate the prospect of remaining behind a car going 2 mph slower, he passed other vehicles in true Jamaican fashion: Pull up within a half-inch of the bumper of the car ahead of you, and then go.

Halfway through the trip, just when all of us (except Devroy) had admitted to feeling horribly carsick, we stopped for a cup of corn soup, the classic mountain road food. The purveyor requires a fire, a cauldron, corn, water and some foam cups, a sign that says "Corn Soup," and he's in business. The soup is what you're after, but the well-boiled corn, which you eat without benefit of butter or salt, typewriter-style, is thrown in for free. You slug down the soup, and you're on your way, feeling much better.

Around twilight, an hour before we reached the parish of St. Elizabeth, and the town of Treasure Beach, we dropped quickly out of the mountains.

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Jamaica

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The towering greenery disappeared, and we found ourselves among cactus and acacia, scrubby brush that barely reached our waists. The people looked just as different: Scottish sailors were shipwrecked off Treasure Beach in the 19th century, which explains why many residents have blue or green eyes and reddish skin and hair.

As soon as we pulled up on the dusty road that fronts Jake's, Devroy climbed out of the van and stepped into the shadows, where he said a short prayer, thanking God for delivering us safely. Despite its less-than-elegant position — strung alongside a ragged cliff overlooking the sea, from which a reef pokes dangerously, Jake's has great cachet among knowledgeable Caribbean travelers. If Goldeneye feels like a weekend at a swank estate, Jake's is more like an egalitarian house party. You can stay at Jake's for \$100, or \$300. The two restaurants — one on the hotel property, the other on the next beach over — are priced so that locals can visit, and they do.

Jason Henzell, who manages Jake's for Island Outposts, grew up spending his vacation time on the property, which belonged to his mother and father. He joined us at lunch one afternoon, and explained that his mother, Sally, first built a small cottage that she intended for make into a seaside cafe. "But people kept coming, looking for rooms," he said, "so she decided to turn it into accommodations." That was a success, and she needed more rooms, so Jake's grew slowly, to its current size — 36 rooms, many in cliff-side villas. In conjunction with the Peace Corps, Henzell helped Treasure Beach develop Breds, a community organization that uses a percentage of the money that comes from tourism to improve conditions at local schools. Some of that help is hands-on: After Hurricane Ivan struck, sending huge, salty waves into farmers' fields and homes, Henzell invited physicians who had previously been guests to come and train 30 local people in emergency first response. Thanks to his efforts, things are looking up for Treasure Beach and the entire parish of St. Elizabeth's.

We're joined at lunch by Quest, a Rastafari in dreadlocks, who is enjoying a veggie sandwich. He shows us what he's been working on all morning — a graceful sculpture, perhaps of Jah, the Rastafari name for God. "I-and-I," he says proudly, using the distinctive Rasta modification of the pronoun, which is meant to acknowledge the presence of God — the divine — in every individual. The little sculpture is rough-hewn, but Quest's spirit shines through. My younger son, an artist himself, is impressed that he could carve it in a morning. "Let's ask him if we can buy it, Mom," he whispers into my ear. And that's how Quest's sculpture makes its

way into my suitcase.

Treasure Beach remains a very low-key place, unlikely to attract a big hotel chain, or even much in the way of services. But there are neighborhood restaurants where you can get a good meal for a few bucks, and a great bakery, the Trans Love, where you can have your morning coffee with a fresh baguette, raisin roll — or if you're really on vacation, a big piece of gooey chocolate cake.

Jake's has no beach to speak of, just a rocky, coral-encrusted reef that requires water shoes and strong swimming skills. There's always someone floating in the free-form saltwater pool, with mosaic tile laid into its rough concrete bottom. Just next door, there's a fisherman's beach — the term implies long boats yanked up on to dark sand, amid flotsam and jetsam, with nets strewn about. That's where we found our boatman, Dennis, who took us on a half-day journey on sparkling waters, to a deserted beach with pale, baby-powder thick sand, so peaceful and perfect that I started to think about buying real estate. On the return trip, we dropped anchor at the Pelican Bar, built from sticks and straw in the middle of open water, bringing to mind a dwelling of the Three Little Pigs. If you ordered ahead, which we hadn't, you could get a big fish dinner there, served on paper plates. There were no tables, but day-trippers lined the walls, squatting on stools and ice chests. Frankly, they looked uncomfortable. My sons, ravenous as usual, split a meal that had gone uncollected. Even with the fish bones, usually a deal-breaker, they said it was good.

The best part of being at Jake's might be the table-hopping, which goes on at breakfast, lunch and dinner. It's quite normal for conversations to start between tables, and soon you're all huddled around one four-top, sharing desserts, drinks from Duggie's Bar and tales of the road. That's how we met the drivers — four or five twosomes and threesomes who had rented cars at the airport, and taken off. A threesome from North Carolina assured me that they'd been doing this trip annually for years and that anyone could get the hang of life behind the steering wheel. "Um, maybe not my mom," my older son chimed in helpfully. I thought not only of how much we'd learned from Neville and Devroy but also of what we'd missed — the opportunity to sample even more road food and the chance to take the photographs that eluded me as we sped by, always on someone else's schedule.

I kept hearing about Bluefields Bay, a 6/4-mile-long beach, with a backdrop of lush mountains, a little further west. Bluefields — originally called Oristano — is probably the oldest Spanish settlement on the island, dating back to 1519.

The last stretch of road, some of my tablehopping buddies said, was so potholed it made perfectly sober people drive as if they were drunk. But



it was a great place to get a feel for the old Jamaica. We should hurry there: Already, there was a large, beach-hogging Sandals Whitehouse resort in the area, and more of the same on the way.

Between Jake's and the vicinity of Bluefields, there was plenty to do. One could stop at YS Falls, 120 feet of eight-tiered waterfalls, with rope swings and pools for swimming. You could travel down Bamboo Avenue, a 23-mile-long natural tunnel of bamboo, planted in the early 1900s. You could take a 12-mile boat trip down the 44-mile Black River, through the Great Morass, a mangrove swamp where crocodiles roam and the occasional manatee ventures. Whatever we did, we had to be sure to stop for lunch at Little Ochi, in Alligator Pond, where there were six preparations of shrimp and five of lobster, all served with cornmeal-based festivals, hush puppies' delicious first cousins. It was important to leave room for a snack of baked river crabs, at Sister Lou's River Stop, beside Salt Spring



GANN WICKHAM/ EYE UNIBOUTOUS/OORBIS

A rainbow arcs over the Blue Mountains, a 28-mile-long range reaching 7,000 feet.

Bridge, and then of course, there were the not-to-be-missed peppered shrimp at Billy's Grassroot in Middle Quarters, best recovered from with a stick of sugarcane.

Such opportunities were irresistible, so after a couple of days at Jake's, we set off in the general direction of Bluefields. Besides the Sandals Whitehouse resort, which is all-inclusive, there aren't many places to stay in the area. But Ann Lyons, who for years has run the highly regarded Culloden Cafe, right on the beach near Whitehouse, let us know that she'd made improvements: Above the restaurant, she'd built two lovely guest bedrooms, with a living room in between. For about \$75 a night, a family of six could be very comfortable — with the beach out front and some of the best food in Jamaica — a little more sophisticated than the roadside fare, but still fresh and very good — just

downstairs. Another option was the Villas on Bluefields Bay, a high-end compound of luxurious cottages, generally rented by the week, but occasionally available for a few nights at a time.

It was nearly time to go home, so we continued up the coast toward Negril. We couldn't see Jamaica without pausing, at least briefly, in this land of anything goes, where the Hedonism couples' resorts first flourished, setting a precedent for the rest of the Caribbean. Not far from the lighthouse — before you reach town — we stopped at a place called 3 Dives, next to the Xtabi Hotel. 3 Dives looks like a serious case of nothing much — just another roadside shack, equipped with round wooden picnic tables and benches — but appearances are deceptive. This place has incredible grilled lobster, so popular that at 3 Dives, you see something you won't see anywhere else — a big grill packed absolutely full of

sizzling lobster halves, while the crowd salivates. For about \$20, proprietors Lydie and Paula will hand you a platter of dripping, buttery, garlicked crustaceans. To rinse off, you can dive off the cliffs or take a ladder down into the water. You'll want to go home with a bottle of Granny's sauce.

The final day and night of our journey would be spent in another unique environment — at the Rhodes Resort, a far cry from the ticky-tacky hustle of Negril. After the last bar and restaurant peter out, you continue up the road for 5 miles, then take a turn that demands faith; you're heading a full mile back into a working plantation of 550 lush acres on a mile-long private beach. Rhodes Hall (yes, that Rhodes — Rhodes of Rhodesia, and the much-coveted Rhodes scholarship) has been in continuous operation since the 1700s, dealing in sugarcane, ba-

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Source: ESRI

Jamaica

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nanas, coconuts and mangoes. Original shipping tallies are on view, from as early as 1767. For the past few years, Rickman Warren and David DeMichael have been decorating and upgrading, while making sure that they keep the essence of plantation life alive. A family can have adjoining rooms, linked by a dining room, a full kitchen and twin verandas overlooking the sea, for about \$230 a night.

There are 70 horses at the Rhodes Resort, for no good reason other than DeMichael's passion for them. If you're good enough, you won't be required to maintain a sedate pace. Depending on your riding ability, they are available for gallops down that long beach, as well as trips into the jungle. An hour and a half of riding is \$60.

On the way back to the airport on Sunday morning, we rehashed the trip. The roads were quiet — most of Jamaica was in church, or asleep. We had some time to kill, and I suggested one more stop. We weren't so far from Rose Hall Great House, about 10 miles east of Montego Bay. I knew this would be a tough sell, but I tried. It was built in the 1770s, I said, and once it was home to Annie Palmer, a murderess. My sons summarily voted me down. They'd just rested their heads in plantation beds, and eaten their breakfast on a veranda of a similar vintage. And besides, they definitely didn't want to go anywhere where they'd have to learn something. ♦

Cathryn Jakobson Ramin's new book, "Carved in Sand: When Attention Fails and Memory Fades in Midlife," will be published by HarperCollins on April 1.