

## Every Ting Irie, Mon! A Honeymoon in Jamaica

***Monday, Sept. 12, 2005***

It was two days after our wedding and time for us to embark on our much-anticipated honeymoon to the Caribbean; like being married, I had never been there before. We had been planning to cruise through the isles, but a better idea was soon proposed. As a wedding gift — one I can't begin to express the value of — my mother purchased us a week at the Sandals Grande Ocho Rios Beach & Villa Resort. I know it's a mouthful, but I definitely did say a Sandals resort. This was not the kind of vacation, much less honeymoon, I had ever considered for myself. For those who have known me (or Guy) for more than five minutes, you know that we're reasonably adventurous travelers, and Sandals just seemed so contrived, so typical-honeymoonesque ... I admit it, I thought it was a downright cheesy notion.

On the other hand, we *were* going to Jamaica.

We disembarked from our Delta flight in Montego Bay and were immediately swept into a reception lounge flowing with free sodas and Red Stripe. [Note of interest: Red Stripe is apparently the national beer and you can find it wherever you go, pretty much to the disqualification of everything else.] We then got on the bus that would take us the harrowing two hours to Ocho Rios.

The term "harrowing" is *apropos* for many reasons. The first is the fact that there are no actual highways in the area, except for the big one that's currently being built and subverting the existing patterns. Second is the fact that all Jamaicans agree that Jamaican drivers are crazy, and that the driving should be left to the locals only. Third is that they drive on the English side of the road, so it's a bit disconcerting for just about everyone who visits. Except the English, of course. And there were certainly a few of those about.

I was warned about this journey ahead of time, and since our large motorcoach was effectively fitted with dark red curtains, I opted to spend my time talking with my new husband and not looking out the windows too much. Except to check out the occasional one-room or observe a specific landmark if the driver pointed it out. [Vocabulary lesson: a one-room is basically a small shack (maybe 4 x 6 at most) without plumbing or power that a person or a family lives in.]

The driver proved an able narrator of the island. We learned much about Jamaica's culture and customs before we ever even arrived at our destination, which is fortunate because our resort turned out to be a fabulous cocoon in comparison to the poverty that pervaded our view as we traveled. This was the first time I had ever been to a country where there were spots of purely primitive existence. And the majority of the local lifestyle was little more than a step-up to basic existence, all of which made me very appreciative of life at home in the United States.

Granted, there were sporadic twinges of extravagance mixed into the landscape, but even if you had money, there was nothing really to buy locally. Everything had to be imported for the most part, and in many cases, even once your luxurious mansion was completed, there was still a chance that you'd never have a roadway — or maybe even electricity — as part of its amenities.

Upon arrival at the resort, there was a woman standing outside the bus holding a placard with our name on it. Guy was instructed to attend to claiming our bags while I was led into yet another reception area, this time with the word "Concierge" over the door. It was then that I was introduced to Trudy Ann Thomas, who would be our butler for the week. Kecia also came into the lounge, carrying a glass of champagne for me, and introduced herself as our second butler. They explained that they would be alternating day and night shifts with one another, so that one of them would always be available to us to assist us during our stay.

The butler service turned out to be a wonderful part of the gift mom had given us. It was an add-on benefit that was included with the level of honeymoon villa she had booked. Trained by The Guild of Professional English Butlers, Kecia and Trudy Ann were both charming and professional. I kept threatening to pack Trudy up in my suitcase and take her home, but I think her husband would have missed her.

Although in their early twenties, Trudy Ann and Kecia were both married. Many people in Jamaica are devoutly Christian and they marry early. As for the rest of the population, their lifestyle could be compared to American culture in that they often marry a bit later, sometimes with a child or two already in the family. There's also some disparity in the population of women versus men, at least according to the men. Whether or not that's true, I haven't really verified, but I know there were a few local women I spoke with who were overly anxious about the possibility of finding a husband; a sad coincidence next to a place that was packed to the rafters with honeymooners.



Trudy escorted us up to our villa and gave us the tour. We had an entire first floor with our own pool right outside the lovely French doors that adorned both the living area and the bedroom. There were two air conditioning units and she also walked us through our fully stocked kitchen and fridge. Our favorite beverages (including a large bottle of Jack Daniel's) sat neatly on the shelves, and each morning Trudy or Kecia would replace the plates of tasty assorted cheeses, freshly sliced fruit and crackers. Trudy Ann was also kind enough to go into town and get me a full case of bottled water — the brand was called WATA — since that was the thing I went through most quickly. I quickly discovered that although the top-shelf alcohol flows freely on the grounds, bottled water is a bit tougher to find!

That night, we managed to leave our suite and go to the Beach Party. We had to take a bus to the beach side of the resort, and it wasn't a very impressive landscape to two people from Florida. The resort itself was absolutely gorgeous, but the amount of sand was relatively sparse in our opinion. The water was that beautiful cerulean blue though, and it made the small size of the beach almost irrelevant.

We only stayed about an hour, still tired from the trip and all (emphasis implied on "and all," wink wink, nudge nudge), but we enjoyed plenty of tiki light, limbo contests and music. Oh yes, and the food ... there were piles of it. My favorite was the rice and peas, a theme that would carry through the rest of our stay.

As you may or may not be aware, part of the Sandals experience is all the food and drink you can handle. It really is like a cruise ship, but on land — and with butlers! Jamaica is also in the Central Time Zone, so there's not a lot of jet lag or time adjustments to deal with. It's just a quick little jaunt to a tropical paradise, and the Sandals brand augments that experience by making everything casual, sensuous and easy.

## ***Tuesday, September 13, 2005***

We slept in the next morning and strolled down to breakfast at our leisure — an all-you-can-ingest feast, of course. After that, I walked over to the salon and had a fingernail fixed. An unfortunate incident while I was packing led to its painful demise.

Guy and I then spent the rest of the afternoon lounging next to the pool. Guy sampled the long list of exotic drinks while I indulged in nachos and French fries under a luxurious red canopy; it looked like something out of a movie. There was even a sunken swim-up pool bar that was the epitome of decadent living. The day was exquisite and so was the company: my new husband and the latest John Irving novel, "Until I Find You." I couldn't have dreamed a more perfect day.

Here's Guy at our breakfast table, watching a band and trying to determine which side of the pool we should go and crash. You can kinda see the red canopies in the background, as well as the bar.



That evening we opted to dine in the casual Italian restaurant. The food was decent, but it wasn't our favorite place. The garlic and onion soup was the most memorable part of the meal, in my opinion. Trudy had made the reservations for us.

When we returned to the room later that night we were surprised to find a bed covered in heart-shaped towels and plants. Carnelia, our evening housekeeper, had done it. Also like something out of a movie. We used the towels to take a late dip in our pool; guess we hadn't had our fill of relaxation. The temperature of the water and the air was divine. The quiet breeze was reassuring. We decided we could stay in Jamaica for a long time. And as for Sandals, I was sold!

### ***Wednesday, September 14, 2005***

Today we did Dunn's River Falls. By "did" I mean we climbed a perilous 1,000 feet fearing for our lives at every moment. Yes everyone does it, yes it's terrifying. I'm just glad it's over. We even bought the video to commemorate the terror. It's kinda fun to watch; the Eurotrash in the pink Speedo makes for some memorable moments.

On the way out, we were accosted by "street" vendors who had small flea-market-type booths at the park. Quite a few people got ripped off, but all I bought was an "I survived Dunn's River Fall's" tank top. It sealed my fate as a tourist.

That evening, Guy and I took the romantic sunset catamaran cruise. Kathleen and staff had been working all day, and we were their last trip. They took us to the Island Shopping Village which is owned by a famous American record producer. We also listened to some crazy reggae novelty tunes and they attempted to get me to sing along. Um, no way!

Pop culture note: Irie FM is the major radio station on the island. In fact, it takes up every decimal point on the 107 channel frequency. 107.1, 107.2, 107.3, you get the idea.

When we disembarked at the Island Shopping Village (a duty free district with a movie theater and Jimmy Buffet's Margaritaville restaurant) Guy sealed his own fate as a tourist when he was accosted by a swarm of "sales" people while he was still wading through the water to get to land. But he purchased a lovely heart necklace for me from the apparent king of the vendors here, who then assisted in shoing the rest away.

Too late we learned to say, "Me no wanty, mon." And if you ever go to Jamaica, you'd better remember that phrase! Americans are too kind in their excuses to get away. With Jamaicans, you have to just say no ...

Anyway, while at the village we got our first honeymoon couple photographs made by Kirundie, one of the Sandals staff photographers. He took

us inside the movie theater and showed us around the shopping area. He was helpful as could be, and when we visited the photo shop at the resort to view his work, we were happy with the shots he had taken of us; we even bought a couple of them. They currently adorn our coffee table.

### ***Thursday, September 15, 2005***

Today was a remarkable day for one significant reason: I went snorkeling. For those of you who know me, you know that the ocean is NEVER on my list of things to do. I like lying next to it, I enjoy the smell of it, but I can't stand the feel of the saltwater nor the potential for something to take a bite out of me. And so it goes that my first-ever snorkeling experience was commemorated by this photograph:



My mask hides the terror, but it's there. There was some reassurance in the fact that I could see all around me in the beautiful blue water. And it was definitely cool to see the reef with all the tropical fish; yet another like-a-movie honeymoon moment. Plus, Guy stayed next to me the entire time I was in the water (a whole nine minutes, probably) and was very proud after the fact.

That evening, we ate at Arizona, a Tex-Mex cantina with tables right in the sand on the ocean. That was kinda neat and the food was actually fairly impressive. We impressed some of the other diners when Kecia walked us over and seated us, placing our napkins in our laps and everything. Overall, we didn't use the butlers as much as some people surely did (Guy and I are pretty self sufficient) but they came in so handy on so many key occasions that I'm not sure what we would have done without them.

Prior to this point — except for the snorkeling — we had spent the entire day reading by the pool. I was still totally entranced by the John Irving novel, and when I wasn't kissing Guy it was receiving all of my attention.

The other cool thing about hanging out by the pool, this was our pool at our villa, not the big swim-up bar pool, was watching the wildlife that hung out up in the hills where we were staying. I had adopted a pet mongoose by tempting him with scrambled eggs and swordfish balls. (By that I mean balls like hushpuppies, not actual swordfish balls.) Anyway, there were also a number of feral cats, who were not shy to just walk right into our villa at their leisure. Hence, we had to keep our doors closed if we were outside by the pool.

A study in environmental balance: The mongoose was imported to Jamaica some decades ago to get rid of the rats. However, the predatory beast ended up getting rid of the rats and the snakes and meanwhile its own population continued to grow. They tend to have a nasty temperament, but I think I prefer it to the possibility of deadly tropical snakes!

This was the only day that it rained while we were there. Of course, it was at 3 a.m. when it happened, but it was LOUD.

### ***Friday, September 16, 2005***

This was the day we got to see a lot of the country. That's because we did an eight-hour bike tour in the Blue Mountains. Yep, this is where that damned expensive coffee comes from (approx. \$30 per pound). But the people who pick the coffee certainly don't live in the lap of luxury.

The Blue Mountains are an amalgamation of natural beauty, subsistence living and death traps. The latter is mostly a matter of infrastructure, or lack thereof. The roads and bridges are terrifying, here's a quick snapshot of what I mean. Yes, this road is intended to go both ways.



The homes that do exist here are mostly one-rooms, but there are also many homes in progress. Homes in progress are a staple in Jamaica. That's because often a person or family will start out with a one-room, and then add on as they're able. There are a number of circumstances that contributed to this slow going. The first is the availability of materials. Even if you have a lot of money, materials are just not necessarily obtainable.

The other major contributor is the outrageous interest rates. Like most families, Jamaicans have to borrow money in order to fund their home construction efforts, but the banks in Jamaica are likely to tack a thirtysomething percent interest rate on any and all borrowed cash. It's ridiculous. And so, people have to save a long time just to afford their next room.

Up in the Blue Mountains, there are a couple of truly lovely homes, but the only way to reach them — either as an inhabitant or as a builder — is to walk up or down or through a valley or whatever. The people who reside in the mountains can cross an entire valley in a matter of minutes, without even batting an eye. I know because we sat there and watched a man do it. Fascinating.

The men there carry machetes because their function is to cut away the weeds that can suffocate the coffee plants. The women basically just walk up and down and pick the beans as they become ripe. There are no machines, there are no automated processes. It's all done by hand. And the women carry

their loads on their heads ... as do many people in Jamaica. This method captured my attention, especially since I've had a double spinal fusion. Kinda found it cringeworthy, actually.

Another cringeworthy item turned out to be the local cigarettes. On our way up the mountain to meet our bikes we stopped in a small market and decided to try them. They are called "Craven A" and they feature a spooky black cat on the box. They only cost a \$1.50 a pack. For those who don't smoke, this makes Dorals look extravagant. They were pretty harsh, but I managed to smoke about three of them during the trip, even though I generally don't smoke at all.

We also bought a Highgate candy bar; this is the locally produced chocolate. Again, to try to create a sense of it in your mind, it made those cheap little Palmer's holiday varieties seem like Cadbury. The brand name was probably the most marketable thing about the stuff.

We had driven about 1.5 hours across the island's coastline to reach the mountains, with our drive Woney providing the best color commentary ever, in my opinion. Then, as we drove up into the mountains (see the photo above) we spent about 30–40 minutes more going uphill. Then we suddenly stopped in the middle of nowhere and were told to get off the bus. We did, and upon disembarking we saw a neat line of about 24 bikes parked on the side of the road. Meant for us? Of course. A bathroom-equipped launching pad for the tour? Of course *not*. Remember what I said about plumbing and electricity ... it doesn't matter what you can afford.

Anyway, we got on our bikes and added some cute helmets and knee/elbow pads to our attire. Why we did this, I'll never know. What we really needed were pothole protectors and loud horns to discourage oncoming traffic. But whatever. Here's Guy expressing his delight with the scenery; it was stunning.



As we hopped on our cruisers and headed down the mountain, a moment of hilarity quickly ensued when we were told to stop and get off our bikes. That's because the first bridge we had to cross — the one we had just driven a large BUS over — wasn't fit for us to now ride our bikes across. Driving a big heavy bus full of tourists was okay, riding a lightweight bicycle was not. I can't explain it ...

As we cruised down the mountain our guide, Colin, introduced us to herbal plants that are used for medicine and healing, explained the Rastafarian religious practices, and showed us things such as empty police houses and outdoor kitchens. It was a true up-close Jamaica experience. Then he took us to really excellent waterfall.

It should be noted that anywhere in the United States this fall might occur would be overrun with people trying to swim in it. Its loveliness could only be matched by the strength of the current that emanated from the fall's outward push. Everyone was challenged to swim up to the fall, and very few made it. Guy

was actually the only one who was able to swim directly under the fall itself. Most everyone else had to maneuver around the side as a way of avoiding some of the current's power. It was so private though, and invigorating. Our visit there would have made the entire trip worthwhile, if there hadn't been so many other wonderful experiences.

Here's a still photo, which doesn't really do the place justice. Hence, once again we bought a video. And the video includes much of Woney's bus commentary as well as some exceedingly silly dialogue and singing by our videographer Ron.



After our dip in the fall, we left our bikes behind and got back on the bus to return to the resort. We stopped off at the rest area again; however, where this time they fed us a home cooked lunch. It was of a significantly higher quality than the Highgate chocolate and Craven A's we had indulged in when we stopped there on the way out. I had my first johnnycake, which was out of this world, along with a hefty helping of homestyle chicken and rice and peas. Guy thinks it's the best meal we had all week, and I think he could be right. I had eaten some form of rice and peas just about every day too; I was darn near an expert!

Back at the resort, we were sad to be packing because we were leaving the next day. That night, we did venture out to the pool party where I had both rice and peas, and also rice and peas soup. A double treat! I had really become a junkie! I also had six gorgeous desserts, all with very little sugar in them. Guess that explains the ickyness of the Highgate; we Americans should take a cue from this type of sugar intake. Nahhhhh ...

***Saturday, September 17, 2005***

We rose early and Trudy Ann was there to pick us up to get us to the airport. A much less extravagant trip back; no champagne or free-flowing Red Stripe at the airport, but it was still a nice day.

Again, I must reiterate that the thing to remember about Jamaica is that it's not about the poverty; it's about the fact that you can't get what you need even if you have money. It's just not there. The things we take for granted and the level of income that we consider "poor" is just not even close.

I was reminded of this one last time when the ticket agent at the airport was trying to locate her pen, and she couldn't. But she just wouldn't stop looking. I offered her one of mine — and it was a nice one too — and she was so happy. As we were walking away she actually sang a song about it. Bizarre.

We still had a bit of Jamaican money left, but not much. We ended up spending a little bit at the duty free shops, then got a bite to eat at Jimmy Buffet's Margaritaville (yes, they were ubiquitous) while we waited for our flight. Apparently, other people decided to do more than just eat, as two of the people who were supposed to be on our flight never showed, and we were stuck at the gate for an hour while they unloaded all the bags and pulled theirs off. Bastards!

In the end, every ting was irie, mon. In Jamaica, when you say "irie," it means things cannot be any better. Our flight got in at a decent hour and we entered our home as a newly married and undeniably relaxed couple, ready to begin our lives together and thinking that one day, perhaps for a milestone anniversary or something, we'd like to go back to Jamaica.