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For a bit of laid-back hedonism, Jamaica is where it's at: the island ups the ante as its golden age of glamour is reborn

by Delilah Komo

THE GRASS IS DEFINITELY greener in Port Antonio. This side of Jamaica is like a prelapsarian Eden, with magnificent waterfalls, tropical forests and mist-covered hills, and is famed for its starry history. In the 1940s the jet set, from Errol Flynn to Bette Davis, escaped uptight America and washed up happily on its shores. Flynn turned up in pure swashbuckling style when his yacht docked in Kingston during a storm. He decided to stay on the island, declaring that Port Antonio was more beautiful than any woman he had known.

Completely seduced, he bought a huge swath of land east of the coastal town and would sail on the Rio Grande with Graham Greene, Sophia Loren, Truman Capote and Evelyn Waugh (who famously steered a bamboo raft in blue silk pyjamas and a Panama hat tied with a pink ribbon). Yet another resident of note was Baron Heinrich von Thyssen-Bornemisza, who purchased the tiny, nearby Monkey Island as a Valentine’s Day present for his fiancée, the sultry supermodel Nina Dyer. She moved there with her pet panthers, only to divorce the Baron two years later and marry Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan.

So Port Antonio is steeped in sun-soaked golden age glamour, but it’s not pickled in aspic: the spotlight is once again on this part of the island (Portland, in particular), with a wave of fashionable new openings. Aside from its verdant, jungly landscape, another kind of greenery is now drawing the crowds. ‘Herb is the healing of the nation,’ declared Jamaica’s national treasure, Bob Marley, in praise of marijuana.

This year, let’s be blunt, his words have never rung truer. With CBD oil (a non-psychoactive chemical produced by the cannabis plant) being lauded as a wonder ingredient and held up as the biggest wellbeing trend, it is no surprise that the plant is thriving in Marley’s homeland.

It’s thanks in no small part to the billionaire banker Balram Vaswani, who has launched the first legal strain of weed on the island. His fabulously lithey medical marijuana company, Kaya, is being dubbed the Louis Vuitton of the herb world.

Vaswani’s holistic herb shop is designed for pure relaxation and gentle, hedonistic pleasures. Here, a mixture of high-end CBD products and a THC line (THC is the principal psychoactive constituent of cannabis) are on offer. There’s also an onsite marijuana doctor to prescribe the right strain of weed to treat a range of ailments (from emotional to physical), a pizza restaurant to satisfy the munchies, cabinets of prettily packaged holistic CBD beauty products, tinctures of oils and even pre-rolled joints.

The options for people looking to indulge in ‘Green Therapy’ are abundant, while for connoisseurs looking for a more immersive experience, barefoot luxury

Undulate your inner nude goddess on Jamaica's picture-perfect beaches
experience, the world’s first CBD spa and a Kaya marijuana dispensary, too, are scheduled to open next year in Port Antonio.

The spa will be in the glorious Geejam hotel, a place that is as sylvan as it is spiritual. Candle-lined across the steep hillside of the quietly elegant San San neighbourhood, Geejam draws the likes of Beyoncé and Jay-Z, Drake, Rihanna, Florence Welch and Harry Styles. They come seeking peace and privacy, to record in the hotel’s decadent studio or to unwind in the spectacular, newly built infinity pool that’s positioned overlooking the rainforest. And there’s more to come: this winter, there will be 12 loft-style rooms (the Rhumba Studios), a waterside restaurant, Bentley’s Yard, a re-imagined Bushbar for CBD Martinis, plus a new beachside spa.

The atmosphere is electric, thanks to hotelier Jon Baker, a music-industry maverick and cultural lynchpin who can open up the island for you. Baker is able to, for example, prepare a lavish, five-course butter-seared dinner by the Reach Falls on a white, arace full-moon night, under towering bamboo arches past fern-shrouded groves to a secluded spot that Flynn named Lovers’ Lane; or a hammam-style experience in sacred hot springs in the hills with the Rasas – a restorative treatment that leaves you feeling reborn.

Baker will also organise private tours to the Blue Mountains’ coffee plantation owned by Rohan Marley (Bob Marley’s son), then on to Emil Flynn’s sprawling estate, now managed by his grandson, Luke Flynn – a Ralph Lauren model and screenwriter who’s planning to open a farm café next year.

A highlight of a stay here is a trip to see the huge marine conservation effort of Francenza von Habelburg. As part of her Alligator Head Foundation, she has not only introduced an impressive fish sanctuary and cleaned up the surrounding coral reefs with her Marine Lab, but has also created an artist-in-residency, which has seen Biennale artist Claudia Comte create underwater sculptures that Baker’s guests can now snorkel up to see. Or just revel in the hi-lo spirit of the place, like Beyoncé and Jay-Z, who loved nothing more than kicking back in the hidden lagoons, eating spicy lobster and swimming in water the colour of jade. They even chartered a chopper to the area’s very own ‘River Café’, headed by local chef Belinda. At this barefoot, bohemian riverside shack, she cooks food on a wood-fired grill for passing rafters. Signature dishes include curried crayfish, the size of lobsters, chicken fricassee and roasted breadfruit dumplings. Johnny Depp was so blown away by the whole ‘rafting and Rio Grande’ experience that he held the Pirates of the Caribbean wrap party here.

With so much to explore in the Portland area, guests often find it near impossible to leave the blissful environs of Geejam. No wonder: there’s also the glorious, low-dung 1960s Panorama Villa that both Audrey Hepburn and Mick Jagger were known to rent. And then there is Cococana, a six-bedroom villa high on the hills of San San. Filled with limited-edition vinyls and contemporary art, the villa is every music mogul’s Jamaican-idyll dream come true, complete with an infinity pool and various hangout spaces, crisp white bedrooms the size of a Manhattan loft, and balconies that jut out over the estate. Daniel Craig decamped here while shooting the upcoming Bond film, No Time To Die, nearby.
and short stories at GoldenEye, famously declaring ‘Would these books have been born if I had not been living in the gorgeous vacuum of a Jamaican holiday? I doubt it.’ Coward and Fleming may be long gone, but the louche, fun-loving spirit lives on, especially at Coward’s enchanting home, Firefly, on land which once belonged to pirate Sir Henry Morgan and remains marinated in 1940s glamour. A highlight of any stay at GoldenEye is sunset drinks at the playwright’s former home-turned-museum, where Coward’s piano still stands, his 78s remain on a turntable, his Hawaiian shirts, silk PJs and dressing gown hang in the wardrobe.

Since the 1980s, it has been run by Island Outpost, the beachfront owned by Chris Blackwell, the legendary producer who launched Island Records, made Bob Marley a star and also was a location scout on Dr No. Blackwell is pure Jamaican aristocracy: his heiress mother, Blanche – the rumoured inspiration for Pussy Galore – belonged to one of the island’s oldest families and he grew up on their estate near Golden-Eye. Blackwell’s own private retreat, Panzreplant, is in Cockpit Country, further inland, where GoldenEye guests can now stay in a two-bedroom cottage.

Jamaica continues to captivate guests with its hedonistic delights. Rupert Everett comes here regularly to unplag and write, while Halley Baldwin, Sofia Richie and Kendall Jenner can be seen here beachcombing and frolicking on the sands, like modern-day Honey-chile Ryders. And those daren’t evil treppansers, the Earl and Countess of Wemyss, relations of Fleming’s wife, Ann Charteris, still holiday at their house in San San.

A laid-back luxury permeates the air and keeps people coming back, mostly content. It is the perfect place to rebuff, with landscapes so exalting the spirit soars – especially after some of Kay’s finest greenery (the place is nicknamed ‘Golden High’, after all). In the words of Bob Marley, Jamaica truly ‘satisfies your soul’.

But for a truly immersive Bond-style experience, head further along the coast to the original GoldenEye resort. This is Ian Fleming’s beachside home in the tiny town of Oracabessa. With its cute Buttom Beach and neighbouring James Bond Beach, it is irremissable for 007 fans. Fleming, from 1946 to his death in 1964, spent two months every year here, swimming and carousing with his neighbour Noel Coward. In his quieter moments, Fleming wrote 12 of the Bond novels