

PORTLAND, JAMAICA

Great Times, Great Huts and a Paradise on the Edge

by Monica Frim

Poking out of the jungle, the hut known as African Sunrise is the most prominent feature of Great Huts resort when viewed from the sea.

We arrived on the northeast coast of Jamaica in the evening just as the symphony was about to start. Our seats, or in this case bed, in the thatched bamboo hut known as the Sea Grape, were the best in the house but, really, any spot anywhere on the cliff-top would have been just as good. By the time we unpacked our suitcases, donned our concert pajamas and settled into our private theater dress circle, the orchestra was already tuning up. Like a brush scrape on cymbals, a gentle surf whisked the shoreline. Now and then the piccolo trills of tiny tree frogs vibrated through the air and, like Ravel's "Bolero," eventually built into an exuberant crescendo joined by the pebbly chirp of crickets and other tinny nighttime players. The concert lasted for hours, but I can't say I paid much attention. Eventually the contrapuntal melodies coalesced into sleep-inducing white noise and, like "Bolero" in reverse, dissolved until only the swoosh of the surf was left to greet the sunrise over the sea.

Welcome to Great Huts. Welcome to Paradise on the Edge. Welcome to the parish of Portland and the African soul of Jamaica.

NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL TRAVEL DESTINATIONS

Monica Frim checks out Jamaica's lush, northeast coast, discovered by Hollywood celebrities after Errol Flynn started bringing them to Port Antonio in the parish of Portland in the 1940s. The area is now experiencing a revival more in tune with eco-tourism thanks to an abundance of tropical cliff-tops, hilly rainforests, cool mountain streams and laid-back beaches. Many villas and beaches are associated with the likes of Brooke Shields, Tom Cruise, Sharon Stone, Harrison Ford, Johnny Depp and Kate Moss, quiet places away from the biz and buzz of Hollywood or the densely populated all-inclusive resorts on Jamaica's busier west side.

Photography by John Frim, PhD, and Monica Frim

Travel with us.

Dr. Paul Rhodes, the physician from Washington, D.C. who designed, developed and owns the Great Huts resort (or rather anti-resort), met us at breakfast along with a chorus of cockatoos, lovebirds and parakeets endemic to the pet shops of Jamaica. Lilly, his Virginia-born baby — he hand-fed the snow-white cockatoo from infancy in the United States before bringing her to the wilds of a room-sized aviary in the jungle — stole the show with her unending encore. “Hello, hello, hello...” We soon learned Lilly liked nothing better than a good finger massage, and would lean hard into the prober’s finger, quiet for a spell, head bent coquette-style — until the massaging stopped. Lilly took that as her signal to resume her persistent chatter. “Hello, hello...” minimalist music, bird-style. Across the walkway a larger aviary housed a Scarlet Macaw, an Amazon parrot and many smaller birds.

Dr. Paul, as the locals affectionately call him, explains that the Great Huts slogan, “Paradise on the Edge,” refers not only to the huts’ precarious perch on the cliffs, but also to his non-conformist approach to tourism. You won’t find a swim-up bar, color-coded wristband or other agent of cookie-cutter all-inclusives here. Even the huts and tree houses are all individualized: some with bamboo walls, others with stone or concrete walls; some with concrete floors and others sand;

some single-storied, others with multiple levels, their only connections being the local materials and African designs. Windows are open cutouts in bamboo- or stone-walled huts, bereft of glass but with shutters that can be drawn to guard against the elements. Inside the huts and main lodge, the décor is as individualistic as the crafter’s eye — each chair, table, post or pedestal hand-carved so that, like the huts, no two are exactly alike. Super-sized alfresco bathrooms with modern plumbing but lacking indoor walls offer privacy by virtue of the surrounding trees and bamboo or stone partitions. They’re not for people who are shy with their traveling companions or who freak out at performing their bathroom rituals alongside harmless geckos and millipedes. But adventuresome spirits will love them. I spoke to many guests who were familiar both with Great Huts and other resorts and offered their appraisal of Great Huts as the best deal in Jamaica. The positive reviews online corroborated their opinions.

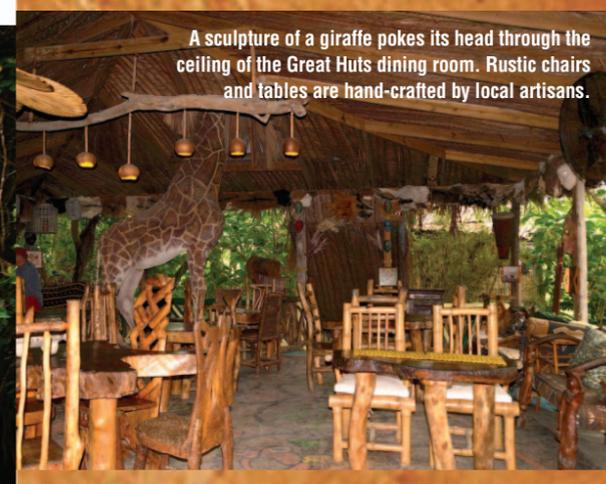
In the dining room, slabs of oddly-shaped tree trunks serve as tables surrounded by an assortment of handmade chairs and benches, some carved out of a single trunk, others hand-hewn limbs whose natural twists and forks provide unique backrests and seat supports. Renowned Jamaican artist Gilbert Nicely handcrafted the wooden furniture, with



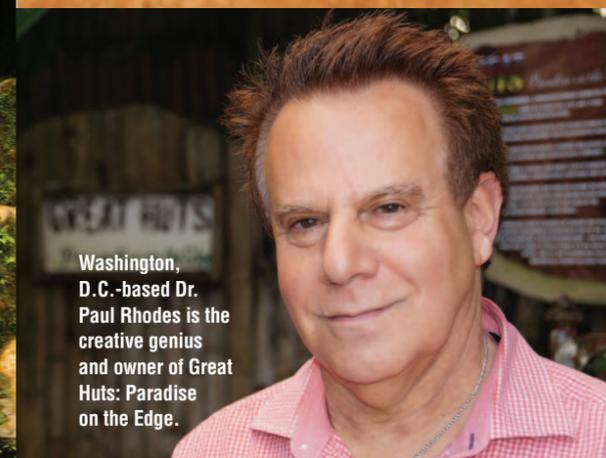
Great Huts features many unusual lounge chairs set into the rocks and jungle. Here two concrete loungers provide contemplative views over Boston Bay.



Pools and caves above and below Reach Falls make this guided jungle trek one of the best in Jamaica. The pool at the bottom of the 30-foot falls was the site of the famous love scene between Tom Cruise and Elisabeth Shue in the movie “Cocktail.”



A sculpture of a giraffe pokes its head through the ceiling of the Great Huts dining room. Rustic chairs and tables are hand-crafted by local artisans.



Washington, D.C.-based Dr. Paul Rhodes is the creative genius and owner of Great Huts: Paradise on the Edge.

the exception of bamboo, which was the handiwork of John Hamilton and his team at the Original Bamboo Factory, now known simply as Bamboo Jamaica, in Spanish Town near Kingston. Masks by Nakazzi Hutchinson, paintings by the late Everaldo Brown, murals by Kingsley Thomas, sculptures by Kenyan-Jamaican Mazola wa Mwashighadi and authentic mud cloths from Africa adorn the walls and pay homage to the Jamaican people’s historical, political, artistic and cultural roots. Whimsical details include lighting fixtures made of calabashes and cutlery carved out of coconut shells.

Dr. Paul conceived the idea of an Afrocentric resort as a showcase of pride in the Jamaican people’s roots and merged his medical and philanthropic interests with his artistic bent when he built Great Huts. Ever since he first set foot on the island as a medical student in 1973, he had an affinity for the people, “I felt greatly moved and felt such a sense of being needed to help these people.”

He returned many times, first as a volunteer with Jamaica’s malnourished children and later with the disenfranchised elderly in the infirmaries. In 2007 he co-founded (along with Nellie Walker, Polly Perry and Father Francis) Portland Rehabilitation Management for the homeless in Port Antonio, where he is the medical director. Long-term volunteers at the shelter live at Great

Huts, while guests at the resort are encouraged to visit the shelter, volunteer or donate what they can.

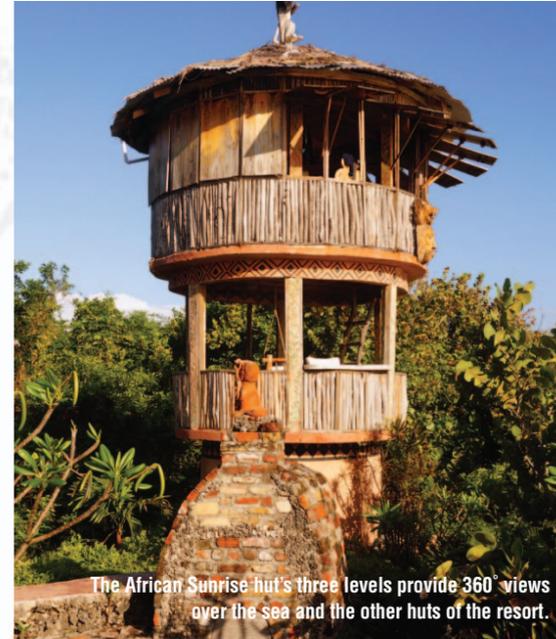
Great Huts' location is Caribbean by nature yet Afrocentric by design. Goldfish and turtle ponds, waterfalls, hammocks and various chairs and lounges hewn out of rock now dot the land, which Dr. Paul bought for his resort in 2000, adding more property later. His order of operations was to establish winding paths that respected the lay of the land first, then build the huts one by one, each in harmony with the existing natural formations.

"We don't cut down trees or move rocks," said Dr. Paul. "We incorporate them into the design of the huts." Indeed. One hut, called the Almond Tree Lodge, features its namesake smack in the middle as part of the supporting structure.

The entire complex consists of four elements: cliffs, beach, jungle and meadow. Dr. Paul took us on a brief tour pointing out some of the unique features. Among the most striking were the Marcus Garvey Memorial Garden with its massive earthenware jugs and sculptures evocative of the struggle for Black nationalism, including a bust of Garvey on top of one of the jugs; the Emancipation sculpture depicting Herod breaking the chains of enslavement in the lobby; and a

stone circle known as a Kongo cosmogram with a "Kalunga" line that represents the separation of the land of the living from the land of the spirits. One could spend days exploring the grounds, as long as you're sober and wearing thick-soled shoes — the fossilized coral surface of the cliffs is sharp and it's a long drop to the wave-lashed rocks below. Other on-site and nearby activities include snorkeling in the sea and the caves that line the cliffs; swimming from Great Huts' tiny, sandy beach; lounging on any of several hammocks strung on both the beach and the cliff-top; or simply gazing over the sea from cliff-top lounges and chairs. Surfers might want to rent a board at the adjacent Boston Beach, which is considered the best beach for surfing in Jamaica.

Another must-do is to tuck into the jerk chicken and pork at one of the Boston Bay jerk stands just a short walk from the front gate. Boston Bay is known as the birthplace of jerk cuisine and it's practically a ritual for everyone — tourists and locals alike. The meat is either dry-rubbed or marinated in jerk spice, a seasoning made principally of allspice and Scotch bonnet peppers (called pimento in Jamaica), plus other flavorings that vary with the chef. The only caveat is that vendors can be aggressive and unsolicited photography



The African Sunrise hut's three levels provide 360° views over the sea and the other huts of the resort.



Dr. Paul Rhodes (right) is also the co-founder and Medical Director of the PRM Homeless Shelter in Port Antonio. Artist Kingsley Thomas painted the mural on the wall.

is generally not welcome. Don't even think of reaching for your camera unless you've asked first.

You will also want to venture deeper into the lush hills and mountains that, owing to an abundance of rainfall, make the eastern part of the island the greenest and best-suited for Jamaica's nascent foray into eco-tourism. Hiking trails along precipitous slopes riddled with caves and waterfalls wind through a rainforest of greens dotted with pools and rivers. The waters glisten like precious jewels, their aquamarine hues changing with whatever ratio of sun and clouds happens to hit them the moment you're looking. Sometimes they're green as malachite, other times sapphire blue. This is particularly true of Reach Falls (I was told they're even better than the more frequented Dunn with its cascading pools of clear mountain water), normally a half-hour's drive from Great Huts, but more if you stop, as we did, to admire Errol Flynn Country and the rather laid-back Long Bay. If you don't have a vehicle, Great Huts can arrange for both a driver and guide.

As for Errol Flynn, you can find him everywhere in Portland. Not the man, of course — he died more than 50 years ago — but the legend, of which there are plenty. Flynn is generally credited for bringing the Hollywood jet set to Jamaica. After he literally washed ashore in 1947 in his yacht "Zaca," he fell in love with the island and spent many a drunken and drug-induced frolic — partying, womanizing, drinking and gambling — in the Port Antonio district. But it all caught up to him when Flynn died in 1959, at the age of 50, while in Vancouver, Canada, with 17-year-old Beverly Aadland, whom he had seduced when she was 15 and, according to rumor, promised to marry. But he never divorced his third wife, actress Patrice Wymore, now in her late 80s, and officially his widow. Patrice still lives in an unassuming

white house on a hilltop on their 2,000-acre cattle ranch and coconut plantation east of Boston Bay.

Our driver, Honey, suddenly stopped the car. "I am going to show you something," he said, jumped out and came back with a leafy branch. "Squeeze that and smell." It was allspice — named for its similarity to a mix of cinnamon, nutmeg and cloves. Ground up, its seeds are used in jerk seasoning and beef patties, but the leaves can be used in cooking and tea. People have tried cultivating it from seed on other islands and failed. It turns out the seeds need to pass through bird droppings first — the thought being that they require either an acidic or warm gut to germinate.

Honey stopped several times en route to the falls, pointing out the countryside's bounty: ackee, breadfruit, the national blue mahoe tree and the unusual, pimply white, pear-sized noni. "If you have a headache, you take the leaf from the noni and tie it around your head," he said. "The fruit, you let rot and ferment, then smash it into juice. It tastes bad but it's good for poor circulation and bellyaches."

At Reach Falls, our Rasta guide, Leonard, led us upriver to the 30-foot back-massaging falls, and onward through a jungle dense with elephant ears, dieffenbachia, ferns and mossy vines, over slippery rocks, and into pools and watery caves cooled by the mountain run-off. I wore the recommended water shoes, but Leonard, his feet toughened by years of treading over rugged jungle terrain, did the entire climb barefoot!

The next day we followed Errol Flynn's footsteps westward, not to vice and profligacy, but to possibly his most virtuous legacy, a punted raft trip — Jamaica's answer to Venice's gondolas — from Berrydale down the Rio Grande to St. Margaret's Bay. Errol parlayed the practice of poling bam-



Riding the surf is a favorite activity in Boston Bay at the base of Great Huts.



Entrance to Great Huts:
Paradise on the Edge



Once a private residence, Trident Castle in San Antonio can now be rented for weddings and corporate functions. Famous guests have included Robin Williams, Brooke Shields, Daryll Hannah, Denzel Washington, Eddie Murphy, Glenn Close, Johnny Depp, Kate Moss and many more celebrities and aristocrats.

boo rafts laden with bananas to the coast for shipment into a tourist industry when he invited friends and lovers (drat, he had to infuse even this eco-friendly endeavor with a smack of scandal) on moonlit rides down the river. Our guide, Granville, tirelessly poled his self-built craft along the 7.5-mile route through a jungled hinterland laden with locust trees and banana groves. “All the captains build their own boats,” he said. Along the riverside, village women soaped clothes in colorful buckets before rinsing them out in the river, boys dived for crayfish with snorkels and spears while enterprising locals sold miniature rafts, drinks and snacks to rafting visitors. When we entered a narrow pass between two rocks supposedly dubbed Lovers Lane by Errol Flynn, Granville told us to make a wish.

Our driver, Jingles, picked us up and whizzed us back to Great Huts along the coastal road — Errol’s road. We had been in Portland only four days, yet a sense of familiarity overtook us as we passed the sights of Portland’s color-studded capital, Port Antonio: “Di Olde Marina;” then the new Errol Flynn Marina; Navy Island with its Flynn legends — that he either won or lost the wooded island in a poker game, depending on who’s telling the story; the orange and white striped Folly Point Lighthouse; the turquoise and white homeless shelter, co-founded and beloved by Dr. Paul; the white wedding cake known as Trident Castle; San San Beach with its offshore snorkeling haven at Pellew Isle, mistakenly referred to in much of the literature as Monkey Island (Monkey Island is actually another name for Wood Island off Folly Point); the Blue Lagoon, made famous by the Brooke Shields movie; and Winnifred Beach, the last remaining public beach between Boston Bay and Port Antonio. We had enjoyed the

stories and sights, the lore and the legends from the road and from the sea. The day after we had arrived at Great Huts, Dr. Paul had invited us for a boat ride from The Old Marina back to Great Huts with Captain Marley. The trip confirmed to me that the best views of this tropical jewel known as Portland are from the sea.

But for the best entertainment, you can’t beat the electrifying Saturday night Jamaican cultural show with performers from Manchioneal dressed in red, white and green. Through song and dance set against the pulsating rhythms of African drums, they play out their history — from their happy and free days in Africa, through their tragic “Middle Passage” across the Atlantic, to their forced enslavement and acceptance of the European ways before circling back (or is it forward?) to the reclaiming of their drums and happy ways. The night we attended, Dr. Paul proved himself a man of many talents as he sang three opening numbers before introducing the guests at Great Huts to each other. I tell you, that man can sing!

Great Huts serves as a great base for forays into the surrounding rainforest and the limy-sand beaches that spread like creamed honey at the base of cliffs and jungles. But the resort atop the cliffs at Boston Bay is not just a place to rest one’s piña colada-hydrated head or to soak up some coastal rays; it’s a cultural plunge. ■

Diplomatic Connections wishes to thank Dr. Paul Rhodes and the staff of Great Huts for their kind hospitality. For more information on Great Huts, go to www.greathuts.com or contact infogreathuts@gmail.com.



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