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Jamaica: Knocked for six by a Caribbean curiosity



Hidden away on Treasure Beach is Jakes, a hotel with a history like no other. Honeymooner? Cricket fan? This is the place to come, says Amol Rajan

The story we shall relate today is about love: its origins, nature, and conquest. What follows is an account not just of an enchanted patch of the Caribbean, but my first forages in married life. This is a story about my honeymoon.

In 1991 Sally Densham Henzell, a diminutive, sunny and endlessly creative matriarch with English heritage, bought a small property close to the water on Jamaica's Treasure Beach. Back then, this village community in the south-west tip of the island was home to just over a thousand souls. Though her purchase was recent, her family's love affair with this rugged region stretched back decades.

It was shortly after the Wall Street crash of 1929 that Sally's English uncle, Lionel, a navigator on the ship of a wealthy American, became so enamoured of Treasure Beach that by telegram he instructed his brother, Basil, to drop everything and head for Jamaica. Basil was soon raising a family in nearby Mandeville, and bought a place called Treasure Cot (short for cottage), in which Sally frequently holidayed, and Alex Haley wrote *Roots*.

In 1965, Sally married Perry Henzell, perhaps the most celebrated of all Caribbean film-makers, whose seminal *The Harder They Come* (1972), starring Jimmy Cliff, Sally worked on as Art Director. They had two children, Jason and Justine. In the subsequent two decades the former has expanded that one new property into Jakes, a wonderful hotel with a cool and cult following; and the latter, among many garlanded projects, runs the fantastic Calabash Literary Festival.

Sally Henzell's conquest is a tale long ago told. What is much less well known is the march of the next generation, by which I mean Jason in particular. Being the entrepreneurial sort, this heroic little Gatsby has now embarked on a new project: to transform Treasure Beach itself, and pioneer nothing less than a new model of tourism for the Caribbean.

It started with a hotel. And that started with a bird. Jakes was named after the family parrot. Its doors swung open to customers in 1995; since then, Jason – who it's hard to believe is a former banker – has added beachfront rooms slowly but surely, so that there are now 17 of them in total, almost all with double beds. Separately, Jason and his general manager, a wonderful émigré from Birmingham called Yvonne Clarke, manage six much bigger cottages in the Treasure Beach area, most of which can sleep at least six. One of them, Seaweed, was recently host to Venus and Serena Williams and a large, tennis-playing entourage.

That gives you a flavour of the appeal to celebrity types. Jason is close to a lot of sports stars, so that it's nothing for Lennox Lewis, his chum, to swing by, and cricket superheroes such as Gordon Greenidge and Jimmy Adams have been known to stay. But this being Jamaica, and specifically Jakes, there is nothing peculiar about the idea of sharing a colada with one of these people, because famous names and families mix with the ease of ackee and saltfish – the island's favourite dish. That's partly because of an island mentality, where everyone knows everyone; and partly because in my experience of Jamaicans – especially men – they often have such a high regard for themselves that celebrity status hardly registers on their emotional radar.

Jakes oozes informality. In honour of Sally's love of Gaudi, there is a childlike and jovial décor, from a main reception which has free Wi-Fi and cold drinking water, to a central, tree-lined porch area facing the sea where meals are served. A few yards away, adjacent to this spot, the unflappable (and elderly) Dougie is a very imaginative barman who puts in long hours and serves a ferocious Planters punch. Like other cocktails, this is good alcoholic value at \$6 (around £4), and is made with lashings of freshly picked fruit.

Most Caribbean staples are done excellently here, like bammy (cassava flatbread), festival (cornbread fritters), callaloo (a variant on spinach) and meats marinated in jerk sauce (the hot signature flavour of these islands: scotch bonnet pepper, spring onion, garlic, ginger and thyme). But you also get some European dishes, such as eggs Benedict and, at breakfast in particular, there are plenty of fruity, healthy options, including a cucumber juice that tastes good for the soul.



Yoga pavilion at Jakes

Talking of which, you could treat this as a health and spiritual healing holiday. There is a good and reasonably priced spa at Jakes, where a firm Swedish massage (\$80 for 50 minutes) is better than we'd expected. Upstairs, a windswept wooden floor hosts daily yoga classes led by a bendy American called – what else? – Rene. And though the rugged landscape isn't easy to traverse, you can get a very cheap speedboat ride, up 12 miles of coast, to the mouth and then the gut of the Black River. This is swarming with crocodiles, but never dangerously so. We were taken by a wonderful bloke called Shabba. On the way back, we stopped by Jamaica's most celebrated watering hole, the Pelican Bar. This ultra-rustic shack, half a mile out to sea and attended by marijuana-munching, dominoes-playing locals, is unforgettable fun even when empty, because you can take a swim in its warm waters between daiquiris.

Rene's classes and Shabba's rides aside, Treasure Beach runs according to Caribbean time, which means that when you ask for something, you ought not to expect a quick response. We stayed in one of the honeymoon suites, a small but more than adequate castle with a roof shielded by walls so that newlyweds can ponder and produce their future in private. Downstairs, pastel-coloured walls framed a double-bed that looked on to a terrace which the waves crash into 24 hours a day. It was listening to these one morning, while watching a sunrise, that I finally let go of my iPhone, said goodbye to Twitter and Roy Greenslade, and thought to myself: I'm on honeymoon, and it's bliss.

Around 6.15am, the sun began its golden ascent over the hills to the east. The mosquitoes stopped their whining, the waves lapped gently, and a pure sky evolved from grey to blue via azure. I had a piña colada, one of around 37 I consumed that week, in the fridge; and this being our honeymoon, it was never too early. Soon after, the songbirds started their chirruping, while my wife lay asleep. I had been looking forward to this moment for a year, and couldn't stop smiling. Not long after, Charlie woke to find me staring into the distant Caribbean Sea, with only Tony Blair's memoirs and a thousand ambitions for company. And not long after that, I was at a cricket match.

Ten minutes' drive or a 20-minute walk away is Treasure Beach Sports Park. I have seen a few beautiful cricket pitches around the world in my time, but this was in a different league, in every sense. Built by Breds, the Treasure Beach Foundation, it sits in a bowl adjacent to a clutch of hills. The pitch is hard and dry and the colour of mud. Yohan Blake, the sprinter, helped raise \$45,000 so that Breds – led by Jason – could begin turning this into the foremost community sports venture in Jamaica by 2015.



Treasure Beach Sports Park

The 19 acres were owned by the grandfather of Darin James, a local driver who reminded me of Chuck Ramkissoon, the giant cricket-playing hustler in Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland*. In 2003, he and Jason cooked up the idea of using the land for community sports; in 2010, they played cricket on it for the first time and have since hosted teams from England including the notorious Lashings side, as well as the House of Lords and Commons team now captained by Matt Hancock MP.

I grew up in south London surrounded by West Indian cricketers, with their extraordinarily boisterous characters, high standards on the pitch, and low ones off it. To be back among that sensibility was more than memorable, not least when "Uncle" Steve Bucknor, perhaps the most famous umpire in cricket after the retirement of Dickie Bird, turned up and accepted a gift copy of my book on spin bowling.

A match which started according to Caribbean time – 45 minutes late – quickly erupted into the most wonderful carnival I've seen in years: rum flowing, searing heat, and massive, 15ft-high speakers pumping out dancehall and reggae. Sally turned up with her two dogs; so too an amateur local cameraman. It was a visual riot, and when the match was on, the music stopped as a local commentator hurled patois at the men in whites.

Later this year, a huge new pavilion, built to International Cricket Council specifications and containing 38ft changing rooms, will be opened here. I might even take a touring team out to mark the occasion.

At the heart of this giant party is Jason himself, an unmissably warm and bouncing presence in whose image and pedigree not just Jakes but all of Treasure Beach is fashioned. His mission, he says, is to "convert a boutique hotel into a community hub". We took a tour of the area, visiting a local school which has benefited from Breds investment. (Sponsorship money from Digicel, owned by Denis O'Brien, is also making a tangible difference.) Jason was greeted everywhere as if wearing an invisible technicolour dreamcoat.

"I just love these people and want them to have more love everyday," he told me in his thick accent. His every exchange with a local ended with "Love, love", and he signs off his emails with "Ilove".

His ambitions are unlikely to be thwarted. Over two decades, Jakes has evolved into the beating heart of Treasure Beach, an affordable, hot, love-infested village community that is fast updating the Henzell heritage. I look on it now with the fond nostalgia its own residents reserve for Babylon, a place where legends live and time slows down. Though Charlie and I will return for an anniversary, we'll never recreate the magic of that first visit. For you, that needn't be a problem.

Travel essentials

Getting there

Amol Rajan travelled to Jamaica with [Virgin Holidays](#) and Hip Hotels (0844 573 2460; vhiphotels.co.uk) which offers seven nights' room only at Jakes for £1,149pp, based on two sharing, including private transfers, v-room airport lounge access at Gatwick and flights to Montego Bay, for travel in May and June.

Staying there

Jakes, Treasure Beach (001 877 526 2428; jakeshotel.com).

More information

Calabash Festival takes place from 30 May to 1 June (calabashfestival.org).

Jamaica Tourism: visitjamaica.com.