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WEB EXCLUSIVE: In Negril, The Cliff Hotel Exudes Jamaican Flavor

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NEGRIL, JAMAICA—Amid the rocky cliffs of Negril's West End resides the Cliff Hotel, a luxury 33-room boutique hotel seeking to carve out its own story in this idyllic beach destination. Much like the singsong voices of the people here, there is a rhythm to this place that makes it special and different.

The five-acre property was originally built in 2008, then sold and eventually renovated under the management of The Vagabond Group to reflect the relaxed, peaceful style of the island or "irie" vibes, as the locals might say. There are 33 suites and villas, including one-, four- and five-bedroom villas with views of the Caribbean Sea. The new owners tapped design duo Kathryn May and Tamara Paige with Artsmiths Interiors out of Montego Bay, Jamaica, to upgrade several areas and deliver "a cool, chic aesthetic."



The Cliff Hotel

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"The owners realized that the facility, the actual location and geography was great and it's on five acres, so there were some good things about the bones of the property. However, it was dated," said May. "It was spacious where other hotels are tightly bunched together. It's not easy to get privacy and a sense of luxury at hotels here. They saw it had potential."

During the rebranding process, the name for the reimagined hotel came very early on as it was the most fitting and obvious choice. "In Negril, there are seven miles of white sand and a whole section of hotels and restaurants on the cliff. In Negril, you're either going to the beach or to the cliff," said May.

Working with the good bones and building on the existing framework, Kathryn and Tamara began to sharpen its looks and inject a decidedly Jamaican sensibility to the spaces. "It's an imposing structure and it's quite large and sits beautifully on the island, but we had to find a way to make it more chic and feel more Jamaican, while creating an atmosphere based on the foundation we were given," said Paige.

The hotel was sorely lacking in communal spaces for guests and the design team set out to rectify these issues or flaws in the original design. With the sea and rugged landscape as a main draw, they created spots to lounge and get drinks from the bar. At night, it is a place to relax under the stars. "It became a beautiful gathering spot. The [original] kitchen was also 500 yards away, so we built a kitchen adjacent and that needed to happen," said May.

Other necessary design elements included incorporating more shady areas to enable guests to take a break from the sun's rays and a rejiggered landscape focused on the addition of shade trees.

Elsewhere, guestrooms feature a neutral palette and large pieces of interesting artwork. The bed is draped in a sheer, gauzy fabric to create a sense of privacy and yet allow light to come through. A soft-blue-painted doorway between the room and its veranda—every room has one here—is a stroke of whimsy as it ushers guests to a matching light-blue sky. "It's a play on the dark-stained ebony wood and colors of the sea. It's a common thread that runs throughout the property," said Paige.

There are natural elements mixed in with clean looks for the rest of the place, according to May. "The rooms were very big to begin with and that's not too common in this world. The fact that everything is spare and simple and mixed with the natural and raw gives it a softness and we've done that in tighter spaces."

The overall look achieved at the hotel is clean, contemporary with natural pieces added to the mix. Indigenous items included sticks grown on the South Coast that are typically used for shade, here they line the ceiling and serve as a trellis by the hotel's bar.

"There is a large, custom-bamboo chandelier and blue mahoe wood, native to Jamaica, that creates the surround for the reception desk and staircase in the lobby. We chose very strong Jamaican elemental pieces and mixed it with a chic, white quartz that's indestructible mixed in with the natural," May said.

Creating a sense of place was of vital importance to the designers. Paige noted that their heritage plays a significant role as well.

"Because we are both Jamaican, this is home and where we have worked and designed work over the last several years. Other hotels try to do things not inherent to the place and it's important that you are right where you are. This is where it is and it feels that way," said Paige.

—Corris Little