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The Best New Hotel in Jamaica

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Sometimes you just know.

Within moments of entering a hotel lobby, you know whether your stay is going to be just so-so or really spectacular. And the second I stepped into the open-air lobby of The Cliff, a boutique hotel that opened on the West End of Negril, Jamaica, last December, I knew it would be the latter.

Maybe it was because, standing next to a wall of vibrant photographs of Negril locals, underneath a gargantuan hand-hewn bamboo chandelier and in front of an alluring view across a serpentine pool to the shimmering Caribbean, I immediately felt as if I was in Jamaica.



(<http://caribjournal.wpengine.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/cliff-chair.jpg>)

Not some generic island destination that could have been anywhere in the region, but specifically in Jamaica.

The sense of place was instantly palpable, from the scent of mangoes and strains of lovers' rock borne on the breeze to the warm hugs and enthusiastic welcome I received from Mary Phillips, the hotel's owner and managing partner.



(<http://caribjournal.wpengine.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/cliffside.jpg>)

“When people come here I want them to feel nourished and loved,” says the veteran hotelier, who, after decades of experience running Round Hill and Jamaica Inn, has transformed the former Moon Dance Cliffs resort into a chic yet unpretentious five-villa, 22-room boutique.

And during my three-night stay, I did, indeed, feel the love.



(<http://caribjournal.wpengine.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/cliff-hammock.jpg>)

It's really the only emotion you can feel when members of staff (of which there are 80 serving a maximum of 66 guests) are unfailingly warm and exceptionally accommodating. When, unasked, lifeguard Shavon dashed out to my water's edge chaise during a rain storm to bring me an umbrella and towels and to rescue my laptop, how else could I feel?

When the housekeeper, blessed with a luxuriously thick afro that I couldn't help but admire, generously shared her haircare tips and preferred products, there seemed no more appropriate reaction.

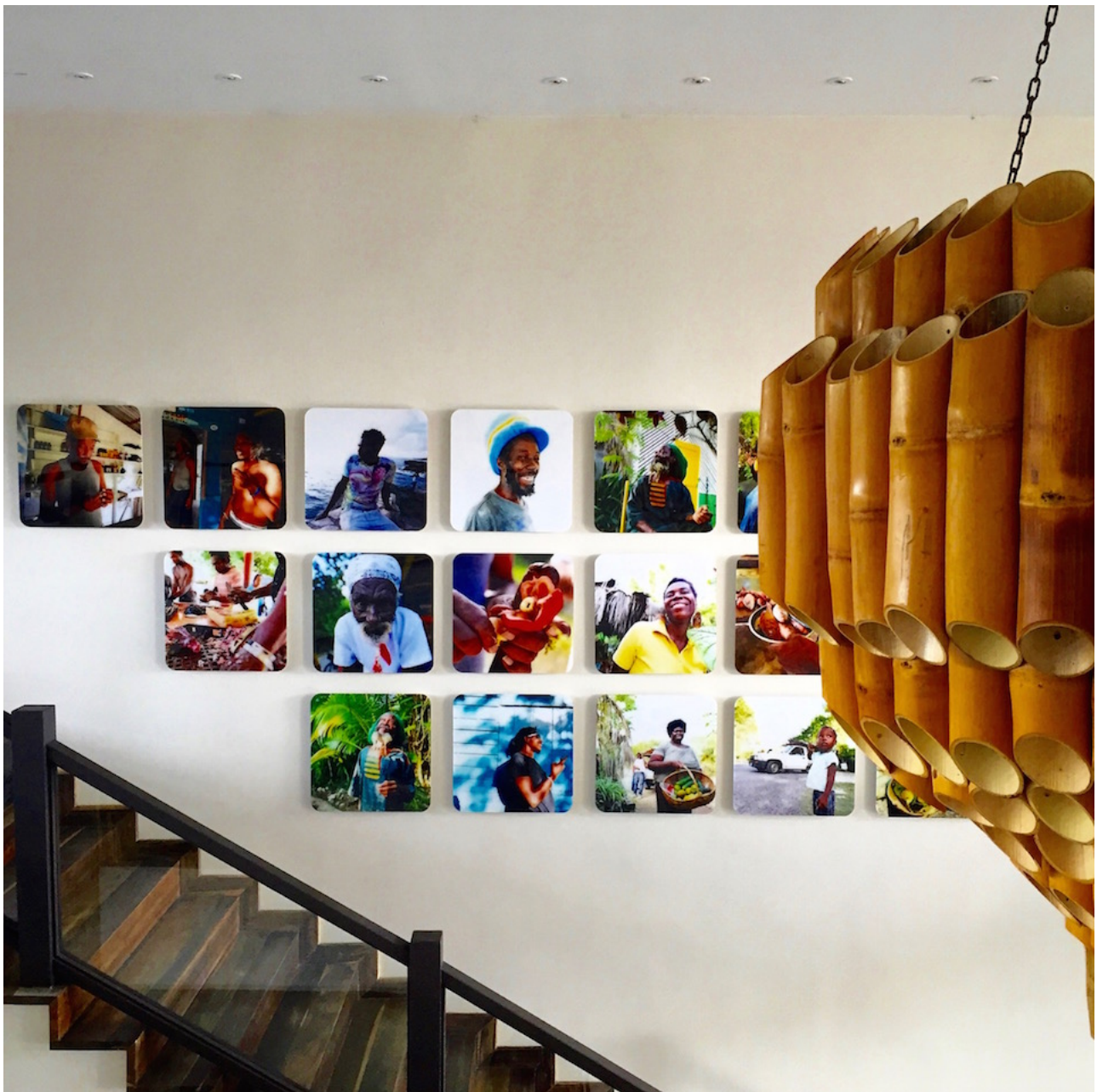
And when, on my first evening, bartender RayJay expertly customized a cocktail for me (heavy on the fruit juice; light on the vodka; Instagram-colorful; and ixnay on the carbonation) and had another waiting for me at sunset every evening thereafter, I really felt it!



(<http://caribjournal.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/mary.jpg>)

Above: Mary Phillips and her dogs

No doubt the staff is following Mary's lead – after all, this is a woman who, when guests expressed an interest in seeing Kingston, arranged for a plane to fly them there and a local filmmaker to give them a private 'Trench Town-to-Uptown' tour of the capital. "I try to eliminate the things that irritate me when I stay at a hotel," she says.



(<http://caribjournal.wpengine.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/cliff-wall.jpg>)

It's a level of consideration and forethought that even extends to the timing of the necessary "evil" of mosquito fogging. When I enquired why it was scheduled for 5:40pm, rather 5:30pm or 6:00pm, she told me she'd checked sunset time and that 5:40 would be the sweet spot between dusk, when the mossies are out, and sunset, which she knew guests would want to witness without the scent of pesticide in the air.



(<http://caribjournal.wpengine.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/cliff5.jpg>)

Staying at The Cliff feels like staying at the home of a friend – albeit a friend with deep pockets, impeccable taste, and insider intel on everything you could possibly want to see and do in the boho burg of Negril and beyond.

Mary and her team encourage guests to get out and explore Negril – it’s roadside chicken stands; waterfront bars and rustic rum shops. And most do.

But soon enough they return to the tranquility of The Cliff, where six parasol-shaded platforms have pride of place on the craggy ironshore, and offer the best seats in the house for Negril’s famous sunsets.



(<http://caribjournal.wpengine.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/clifffood.jpg>)

Where the cuisine at Zest At The Cliff (helmed by Cindy Hutson and Delius Shirley of Miami's Ortanique and Zest Miami) is a creative and cosmopolitan riff on Jamaican favorites (think fish tacos made with rounds of fried breadfruit instead of corn tortillas) and comes with a side of Caribbean views.



(<http://caribjournal.wpengine.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/restaurant.jpg>)

And where that food also fuels dreamy days spent languorously floating in either the circuitous freshwater pool (bordered by palms and boasting its own petite “beach”) or the fish-filled seawater oasis that’s carved out of the cliffs.

Unpretentious yet undeniably exceptional, The Cliff doesn’t scream its superiority over “big box” hotels.

Frankly, it doesn’t need to. The resort seduces with a whisper, rapidly attracting a loyal following by being just what it is: A special place where people can connect with Jamaica and Jamaicans. And reconnect with themselves.

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