

plaza sweet
TRAVEL FALL 2010
Mexico City



Rock star Left: swimming in a grotto at the Caves resort in Negril, Jamaica. Above: Chris Blackwell with Bob Marley and friends.

That was then. Now Jamaica, with its lush Jurassic terrain and hypnotic music, its fountainhead of rum and distinct cuisine, competes for heat with St. Bart's, Mustique and even Anguilla, a scrubby cultural wasteland in Blackwell's view. "Anguilla is just a strip of sand," he says dismissively. "But a lot of people who have money prefer a place that has no natives. No problems. All they want is a great beach." Though Blackwell himself is now a very rich man, he is careful to avoid any implication that he has become *the Mon*. The founder of Island Records, he phenomenized Bob Marley, Cat Stevens, Grace Jones, Steve Winwood, the B-52s and Roxy Music; signed U2 to its first record contract; and then, in 1989, sold his label to PolyGram for something like \$300 million.

Then came a '90s layover in South Beach, when Miami was practically giving away Deco bijoux, and Blackwell, who couldn't resist a bargain, scooped up the Marlin and the Tides. But now he's home, and Jamaica is his next act, only Jamaica is suddenly behaving like some strung-out rock star. A State Department travel warning was briefly issued just as the impresario was getting ready to take me on a tour of his Jamaica, the last stop the gutted-and-overhauled GoldenEye, scheduled to open in mid-November.

THE CAVES SITS HIGH ON A CLIFF IN Negril, past the honeymooner hideaways and the storied emerald golfscapes of Montego Bay. Blackwell, who despises golf, has made a conscious decision to leave the country-clubbers to MoBay, as natives call it, where his cousins, the Pringles, famously opened Round Hill in 1953. Blackwell's Island Outpost almost seems to make a point of

Old Mon and the Sea

When it comes to Jamaica, the hotelier and hit maker Chris Blackwell is the island's big daddy of cool. Phoebe Eaton takes a dip.

Jamaica has been on the defensive lately. JAMAICA... NO PROBLEM T-shirts sold in sticky tourist flytraps seemed like so much wishful thinking in June, when a popular mafioso went on the lam and riots shocked the slums of Kingston. It would be a while before the memory of daily body counts receded into a haze of happy ganja smoke.

Chris Blackwell, the big daddy cool of the Island Outpost group — a consortium of glitzy hotels including the Caves, Jakes, Strawberry Hill, Geejam and Ian Fleming's beach retreat, GoldenEye — remembers the country's postwar better self, when high tide used to bring Hollywood and royals of every flag. "The first person I ever saw water-ski was Errol Flynn," says Blackwell, who grew up in Jamaica. Flynn was dressed for cocktails. He had a cigarette holder in his fist "and a dachshund under his arm. I was 12 or 13, and it was the most glamorous thing I'd ever seen."



Island life From left: a room at Geejam in Port Antonio; a roadside house; Blackwell, still youthful at 73.



tastefully exploiting the other rich and varied neighborhoods of the island.

The Old Harrovia accent notwithstanding, Blackwell grew up in Jamaica, where his mother's clan, the Lindos, is one of the island's first families. At the hotel bar, he shows off Blackwell's Black Gold Special Reserve Fine Jamaican Rum, with its Gothic-scripted treasure-map label. "Settling in Jamaica in 1625," it says of the Lindos, "they were renowned for exporting bananas, coconuts and rum." (Equally: the importing of slaves from Africa.)

"On a choppy day, it's like a washing machine in here," says Blackwell, 73 but markedly fit, swimming his grotto like some grizzled Neptune. Blackwell fishtails through an underwater tunnel to reach a second, larger cave. I follow and emerge bleeding like shark chum. "Fetch the white rum!" he shouts — 150 proof. Locals slap their faces with it like Aqua Velva before downing a shot. Blackwell dabs it on the back-of-leg scratches, and it burns more than the original offense. But it could be worse: On a recent night swim here with Vladimir Doronin, the Russian-oligarch boyfriend of Naomi Campbell, sea urchins stung Blackwell on both hands. The remedy for *that*, he reliably informs me, is urine. The Caves is sand-free, and so in the next few months, Blackwell plans to revamp the resort, its Caribbean cottages giving way to Santorini-bleached rooftops.

After a breakfast of johnnycakes and eggs with callaloo, it's into the jeep for a trek down south. Blackwell used to know the roads like a telephone lineman, but that was ages ago, and

the signs are spotty. Blackwell, a widower of five years, turns out to be an indefatigable roadside shopper, on the hunt for lignum vitae cutting boards, artisanal goat cheese, Bombay mangoes. The jeep slows at a fly-clouded shack where Blackwell consumes fried snapper and a Red Stripe as anonymously as any bus driver.

The houses turn more fastidious as we enter St. Elizabeth Parish, where the villas of Jakes bestride Treasure Beach. The rooms are a fashion stylist's dream: door frames made of driftwood, walls in the outdoor showers built with Perrier-Jouët empties, a birdbath recycled as a sink. The zinc-roofed cottages were designed by Sally Henzell, an unreconstructed hippie who once dated Blackwell before marrying Perry Henzell, the director of "The Harder They Come."

Her son Jason, who quit banking to oversee Jakes, commandeers the skiff Mr. Nice Guy for a voyage to the Pelican Bar, a flimsy offshore rig that has somehow survived his 40th-birthday blowout and a hurricane. Jason points to the property down the shore that Lily Allen was going to buy — then didn't. "That's when her accountant said, 'What do you want to go and buy land in Jamaica for?'" Blackwell jokes. (But, he adds politely, "She's a terrific girl.")

The boat slows before two giant hawksbill turtles *in flagrante delicto*, a rare sight and virtually impossible to capture with Blackwell's Nokia phone. "Okay, we've interrupted enough of this love affair," Blackwell announces, and the skiff skips onward.

BACK IN THE JEEP, WE REACH KINGSTON after Blackwell begs directions from a police

car and is dragooned into taking on a hitchhiker, a friendly mama juggling plastic-wrapped plates of food. She turns out to be a cop, too. "So now that I have a cop in the car, I can break the speed limit?" Blackwell asks. She gives him a breadfruit recipe before hopping out.

We make a left into Trench Town: broken asphalt, corrugated roofs and car tires repurposed as planters. Bob Marley was raised here. "I released his first record," says Blackwell, who misread the name on the tape box as Robert Morley. "Same as the foppish English actor. That record's worth thousands of dollars now. 'Robert Morley' singing 'One Cup of Coffee' on one side and 'Judge Not' on the other. It's like a mistake on a stamp."

When Marley was shot, he recuperated at Strawberry Hill, Blackwell's home high above Kingston in the Blue Mountains, where the coffee comes from. Blackwell's gingerbread house with shutters is duplicated on a smaller scale on the estate's 50 acres for guests who dig cottages with treehouse views and the colonial romance of four-poster beds canopied with mosquito nets. "Bob and I were a match made in heaven," Blackwell says. "He'd met someone who is Jamaican, who understood the language, understood him, what he was. And didn't reject it. I gave him money without any contract to make a record because with these rebel characters, the only way to establish a relationship with them is to show them trust."

In Kingston proper, Marley's house turns out to be a Victorian gingerbread, too. Blackwell lived here first, orchestrating a hand-over, one intuit, to tweak the neighbors,

who appear to have responded by selling out to car dealerships in this formerly upmarket neighborhood. "Rich people don't care at all for the classes that don't have any money, they really don't," says Blackwell, who deems Marley "blessed with a real innate wisdom." Blackwell remembers when Rastas were treated like vermin, underappreciated as fakirs who rove the land and are today so closely identified with the Jamaica brand. They remind him more than a bit of the Jews.

On the coast, in Port Antonio, No Doubt and Drake are expected in coming months at Geejam's *in situ* recording studio. Tom Cruise and his family rented all five villas when he shot "Knight and Day" in town. The Aga Khan is dearly departed from his Port Antonio beach house and private island, but Thyssens still reside at Alligator Head, and the cattle is still branded EF for Errol Flynn at Flynn's estate, Boston, a 15-minute drive from Geejam, where his widow, Patrice, endures.

Blackwell's partner Jon Baker is a punk pirate: diamond hoop earrings, chipped tooth and *oik* accent. His act under management is the Jolly Boys, a bouncy calypso band of elderlies singing Amy Winehouse's "Rehab" down at the Bushbar restaurant. Blackwell confers with

Baker about installing Apple TVs at other Island Outpost hotels: keep the guests pleasantly distracted if it rains. The discussion inevitably runs aground on St. Bart's. "If they want to make Jamaica happening, they'll have to loosen restrictions," says Blackwell, who'd like to see marijuana declassified as a drug here.

"Marijuana is Jamaica's big brand," Baker says.

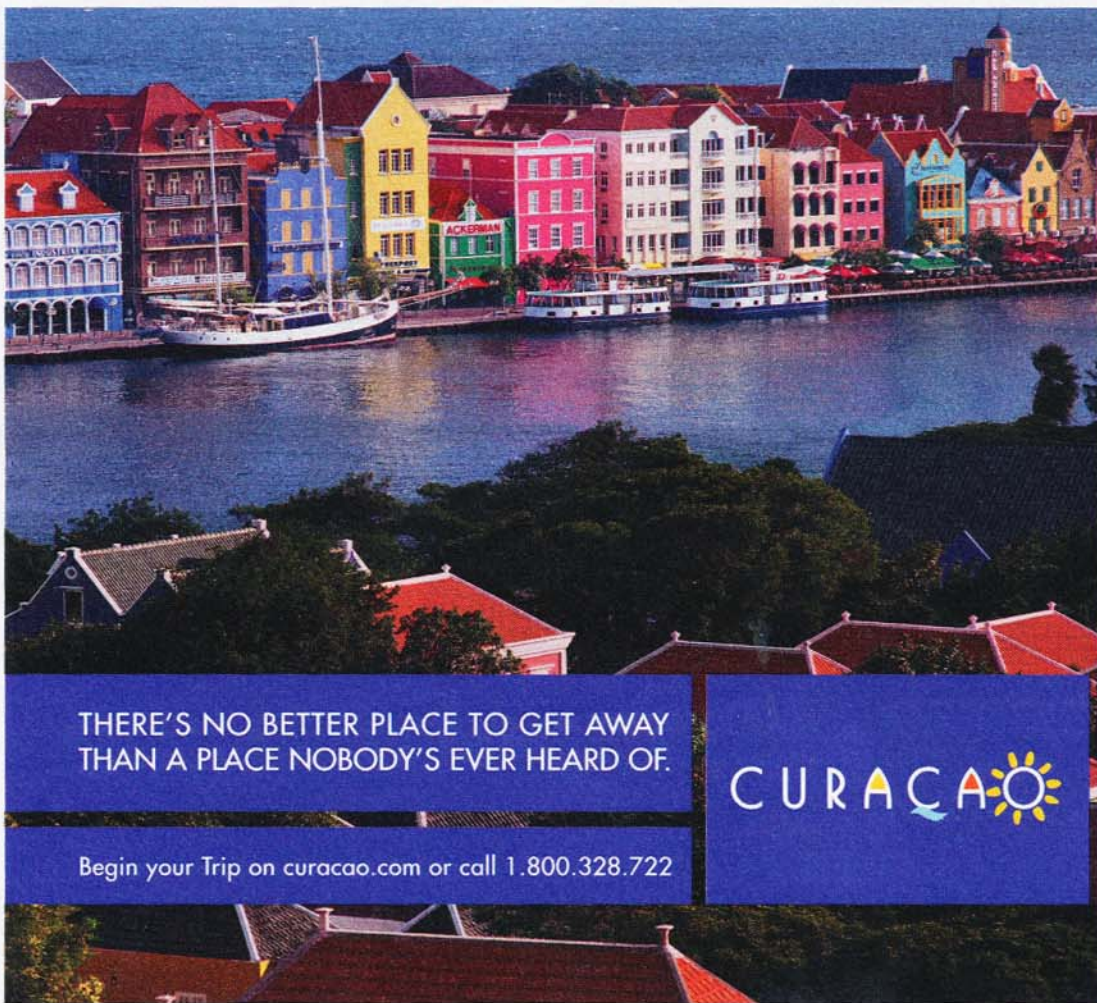
"This place would really take off," Blackwell continues. "But parents hear the word 'drugs' and don't want their kids near that. Marijuana is a plant. It's an herb. It's ridiculous."

BLACKWELL HANDLES THE JET SKI LIKE a Harley as we buzz the beaches and mangrove-shadowed lagoons of his ambitious 52-acre GoldenEye compound. There's talk that the airstrip nearby, which is being upgraded to accommodate international flights, will be renamed the Ian Fleming Airport. Fleming's red bulletwood desk, where he fired off 14 spy novels, shall return. (The original skin-and-bones villa that Blackwell acquired in 1977 has been refreshed and expanded as part of the overhaul.) Fleming's gardener Ramsey Dacosta remains, cutting coconuts for guests. Summer-camp-style docks have been grafted to each

of the private villas. Blackwell jokes that one super-property is "the Russian lot."

Fleming was merely a journalist and former intelligence officer who had only just started fooling about with a novel on his typewriter when he started up at GoldenEye. Blackwell's darkly ravishing mother, Blanche, eventually became Commander Fleming's mistress. She subtlet GoldenEye and redecorated it, much to the irritation of Fleming's wife, Ann, who disparaged Blanche to friends as Ian's "Jamaican wife." It's the only subject Blackwell trips over later in the car, probably because his mother is still alive. He describes her back then as "sort of like a man in a way, ready to try anything and go anywhere." Blanche was a fixture at Firefly, Noël Coward's house just up the hill and open to the public. This is where, at age 14, Blackwell learned how to be at ease with superstars like Charlie Chaplin, Liz Taylor and Audrey Hepburn funning around the swimming pool with the heart-stopping view.

The jeep pulls into the Montego Bay airport. The end of the road. We've been listening to the band 1 Giant Leap in the car. "It's all about finding things that will attract people," Blackwell says. "Like a video does for a record." May Jamaica be a hit for Chris Blackwell. ■



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