

FROM THE COVER

JAMAICA | All-inclusive resort makes for a worry-free vacation

fruit of Jamaica. The meaty part of the fruit looks a little like brains and tastes a bit like scrambled eggs. If you're curious about trying it, make sure you order it in a restaurant rather than picking one off an evergreen tree. Consuming unripened ackee has resulted in some fatalities.

When we arrived at the Grand Lido Negril, we were tired from all the traveling. Luckily, everything was already taken care of at this all-inclusive resort. While we love trips where we can plan our own itineraries down to a T, it had been a hectic few months and we just needed to get away.

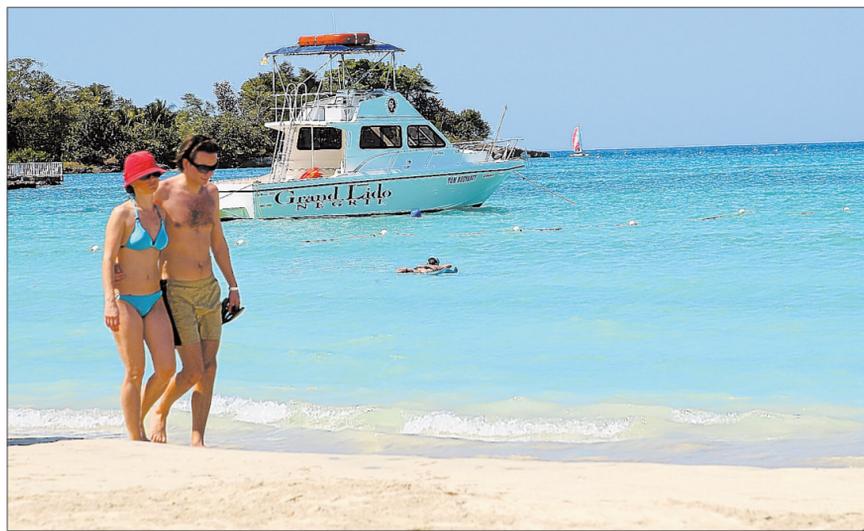
As we learned, sometimes it's nice to have all the thinking done for you. All the meals, drinks, snorkeling and scuba diving were included. And as they stressed at the resort (and in its brochures and Web site), tipping was not allowed. For Americans, this truly is a foreign concept. While it felt odd not tipping the cocktail servers, it was also refreshingly liberating not having to worry about carrying cash with you, especially when you wanted to lie out at the pool or get a drink at the beach.

Joining in the cheesy fun

One of the things we were intent on avoiding were the "Love Boat"-style group activities, which sounded cheesy. Sure enough, every afternoon a cheerful young man led diners in a game of "Jeopardy." While we dug into our meals, we would roll our eyes — thinking we were too cool to participate in such nonsense.

And then something happened. Our fearless game leader wanted to know the name of the first African-American star to win an Academy Award for best actress. One of us has an endless wealth of pop culture knowledge. While one hand was getting ready to pick at some jerk chicken and rice, the other shot in the air in a manic, "Pick me! Pick me!" kind of way. (For those still wondering, the answer was Halle Berry. Duh.)

The next two questions dealt with mathematical equations. Did I mention that the other half in this couple is a scientist? Game on! Though we did not win the bottle of rum that was being offered as a prize, we had a ton of fun. And while it would be un-sportsmanlike to accuse the winners of being cheaters who couldn't add their points correctly if their lives depended on it ... well ... draw your own conclusions.



All meals, drinks and some activities are included in the Grand Lido Negril's price, so there's no need to carry cash when strolling on the beach. | DENTON MORRIS-FOR THE SUN-TIMES

No longer 'a foreign concept'

For dinner one night, we ate at Munasan, a Japanese restaurant at the resort. We know what you're thinking ... sushi in Jamaica? How good could that be, right? Much to our delight, it was better than much of the sushi we were used to in Chicago. Ruel Dionisio, the Detroit-trained sushi chef who worked for sheiks in Dubai before being lured to the Grand Lido Negril, had his fish flown in fresh directly from Miami to ensure that his restaurant received top sushi-grade seafood.

"When I first got here, I had to train the staff on how to prepare sashimi [raw fish] and sushi, because they were used to cooking the heck out of the fish," Dionisio said. "Sushi was truly a foreign concept to them. But they caught on quickly and the guests love having this as an option to eat along with the Jamaican delicacies and other offerings here at the resort."

In the past, some scuba divers had complained about the diving in Jamaica. The reefs around much of the western island were in bad shape because of careless diving, overfishing and dumping garbage into the water.

Today, Jamaica is focused on preserving the reefs both for its tourism draw and to strengthen its fishing industry, and it shows. During our trip, we swam with gorgeous tangs, parrotfish, snapper, angelfish and damselfish. The island was teeming with quality dive shops and some of



The Grand Lido Negril offers sunset massages along the shoreline as well as more traditional massages at its spa.

the friendliest staffs you'll find in the Caribbean.

We traveled to Jamaica before Hurricane Dean devastated parts of the Caribbean and negatively impacted tourism in August. But Jamaica has slowly been on the rebound. Jamaica's Ministry of Tourism reported in early October that there has been a break in the six-month decline on visitors.

"We had a positive in September and showed a 4.8 percent increase over last year," tourism minister Ed Bartlett told *radio jamaica.com*. "We are looking at somewhere in the region of 1.2 million visitors to date and will probably end the year with 1.6 to

1.7 million visitors." In 2006, 2 million tourists visited Jamaica.

Increasing the amenities

Local resorts are doing their part to lure more visitors as well. Acknowledging that some Americans stayed away because of the new passport requirements, SuperClubs resorts (which owns Grand Lido Negril), have extended their Passport Included promotion through Dec. 31, and offer amenities to stay at their resorts. SuperClubs also includes hurricane insurance with every booking.

"We launched the promotion — where we pay for your pass-



IF YOU GO

For more information about Jamaica, go to www.discoverjamaica.com.

Passport: Tourists need a valid passport to enter Jamaica.

Official language: English

Currency exchange: \$1 (U.S.) = \$68 (Jamaican)

Capital: Kingston

Size: 4,247 square miles

Population: 2,652,689

Tourism: You'll get the most bang for your buck traveling to Jamaica within the next few months. During peak tourism season (December through April), you'll not only be paying more for airfare, but also for hotel rooms and many restaurants.

Air travel: We traveled on Air Jamaica (www.airjamaica.com, 800-523-5585). For the four-hour flight from O'Hare to Montego Bay, we upgraded from economy to business class at the ticket counter. Because the section wasn't full, it was about \$175 to

upgrade for each ticket — about three times less than what Air Jamaica was charging the day we booked the tickets weeks prior. Sometimes, procrastinating does pay off! One more airport note: We splurged on some of the famous Blue Mountain coffee at one of the duty free shops, paying about \$30 (U.S.) for a pound a coffee. Unfortunately, when we got home we discovered that the coffee wasn't fresh. So, unless you can find a bag with a visible expiration date, you may want to order it online instead.

Lodging: For more information on Grand Lido Negril resort, go to www.superclubs.com.

Staying connected: If you plan on working during your vacation, bring a laptop along with you and take advantage of the wi-fi areas at the Grand Lido Negril resort. The computers at the business center can be spotty. When we were there, only one out of three was working.

Jae-Ha Kim

ports if you book a SuperClubs vacation — in advance of the passport rules," says executive chairman John Issa. "It's one of our most successful programs. And at our Grand Lido Resorts & Spas, guests who book five nights or more receive a credit at our spa — up to \$350 per room. We're beefing up our value proposition to combat the weakened U.S. dollar, by including some spa treatments, cooking classes, golf and many other amenities as part of our Super-inclusive vacations."

A note for some of our more prurient readers: The resort lies next to the adult-only Hedonism resort. While we had intended on venturing over there to take a peek around — purely for journalistic research, of course — we never made it. Who could bother, what with all the sunning, eating, snorkeling and pampering? You should definitely consider splurging for one of their heavenly sunset massages, which are conducted outside. But bear in mind

that you'll be undressing in little areas outside that aren't completely private. And you also may see a nude sunbather or 12 (they have a discreet section off one end of the beach).

If massages in public doesn't do it for you, opt for one in the privacy of the spa. Or if you'd rather save your money for souvenirs, be sure to make a reservation for the complimentary mani/pedis they offer all guests. The quality isn't up to par with the service you'll get at, say, the Tiffani Kim Institute, but it'll be difficult to keep from smiling as the manicurists chat amongst themselves in Jamaican patois (provincial speech). Listen carefully 'cause they may be pulling a "Seinfeld" and talking about your gnarly nails while you're sitting right there. Just smile, nod your head knowingly and say, "Yah, mon." It's all good.

Jae-Ha Kim and Denton Morris are free-lance writers based in Chicago.

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