

A licence to chill at this Jamaica resort

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GoldenEye

Oracabessa Bay, St. Mary, Jamaica; goldeneye.com, 20 guest cottages plus main villa, from \$540 (U.S).
No eco-rating.

There's no sign out front. Just a long stone wall, covered with greenery and a fluttering orange flag marking the entranceway. Behind the stonework, a gravel driveway snakes through lush tropical greenery. Each guest is greeted by name, served a welcome GoldenEye cocktail (made with a hefty dose of the resort's own Blackwell's Rum) and shown to his or her cottage. This is a spot that eschews formalities. The vibe, they like to say, is like being in the home of a good friend.

GoldenEye was once the home of author Ian Fleming – he fell in love with Jamaica and in 1946, scooped up the oceanside land that was a local racecourse for donkeys, then built the main house, an exercise in minimalism. GoldenEye was Fleming's inspiration spot – he wrote all 14 of the James Bond novels here – the main villa still contains many of the original furnishings, including his writing desk.

After Fleming's death, the estate changed hands to the current owner, music mogul Chris Blackwell, founder of Island Records and the man credited with discovering Bob Marley and U2. For just over a decade, Blackwell used the GoldenEye property for entertaining friends and family. GoldenEye is one of his five Island Outpost properties and a favourite getaway for celebrities: Johnny Depp, Naomi Campbell, Harrison Ford and Truman Capote have all slept here. Sting wrote *Every Breath You Take* while staying at the resort.

GoldenEye recently completed a two-year renovation and expansion project that magically preserved the Fleming-era history while adding extensively to the original footprint. Significant changes were made with the expansion: a new beachside restaurant, new spa with a roster of sports and fitness activities, and 17 new luxury waterside cottages.

DESIGN

Blackwell's vision for GoldenEye is about finding harmony with nature and appreciating the site's wild beauty. The original five-bedroom Ian Fleming villa is the centre point of the estate, with three more cliffside cottages tucked into the tropical greenery. In December, 17 new cottages were opened on a wide, crescent-shaped beach that is sheltered by a coral reef. The cottages – with open-air dining and wood-clad siding with jalousie shutters, wide verandas and irresistible outdoor showers – stay true to Fleming's goal of melding outdoors and indoors as seamlessly as possible.

AMENITIES

The two outdoor pools are almost superfluous – the resort has its own coral beach protected by a reef and turquoise waters. I opted for a lay-of-the-(underwater)-land in a short glass-bottom boat tour. The water-sports area has all the basics: snorkelling gear, kayaks and jet skis – and it's a very short swim, or paddle to the reef where I discovered corals, urchins, parrotfish and yellow tang. But, like many spots in the Caribbean, the coral reefs have suffered from silt and sediment that chokes the sea life and mutes the normally vibrant corals.

The treatments and fitness programs of the FieldSpa are under the keen design and management of Iona Wynter-Parks, a former Olympian for Jamaica. In addition to the usual spa menu of massages, facials and wraps, Wynter-Parks has created programs that can be individually tweaked (topics might include posture, walking, strength training and stress management).

I relinquished myself to the “Warming Ginger and Pimento Massage,” a one-hour treatment using cold-pressed coconut oil, pimento and ginger from the property's organic farm. Book an appointment near the end of the day. I drifted off mid-massage to the hypnotic sound of the Caribbean tree frogs beginning their joyous chirping at sunset.

ROOMS

In my two-bedroom cottage, the resort's simplicity vibe does not mean sacrificing luxury and quality. Each room has clean design lines, oversized furnishings, a generous use of local woods (including bamboo light shades and privacy fences around the outdoor showers), widescreen LCD televisions, wireless Internet, soaker tubs and beds topped with GoldenEye's own Royal Hut line of batik-splashed cotton linens.

GoldenEye is at its best when the shuttered windows are opened and the indoors and the outdoors mix. Wide front porches face the water and are perfect for just sitting or entertaining. Most units have full kitchens and everything you'd need to shake or stir at happy hour.

SERVICE

Most of the 155 staff members come from surrounding communities and are eager to share their Jamaican culture, whether a recipe for a favourite dish or suggestions for local tours.

Blackwell is often on-site – he maintains a home in one of the original small cottages. He developed Blackwell's Well Black Fine Jamaican Rum, produced on the resort property using an old recipe from the Blackwell family. It's at the base of many of the bar's signature drinks.

FOOD

Executive chef Conroy Arnold is Jamaican-born but trained at the Culinary Institute of America in New York. He brings the theme of balance to both of GoldenEye's restaurants – The Gazebo, cantilevered from the cliff edge, and the casual waterside Bizot Bar. Menu items are based in island tradition, but Arnold encourages guests to try more than jerk and curry dishes. Indecision has its plus side: I am treated to a sampling menu, including fresh ceviche with the slight burn of Scotch bonnet pepper oil, delicious callaloo ravioli served with a thick coconut sauce, and sweet pan-seared parrotfish with sauce infused by more of that fiery hot pepper (it's a Jamaican staple).

VERDICT

There's a cadence here that causes people to slow down and unplug. Owner Chris Blackwell has achieved his vision of creating a resort where guests feel like old friends, and where the surroundings are in tune with nature.

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