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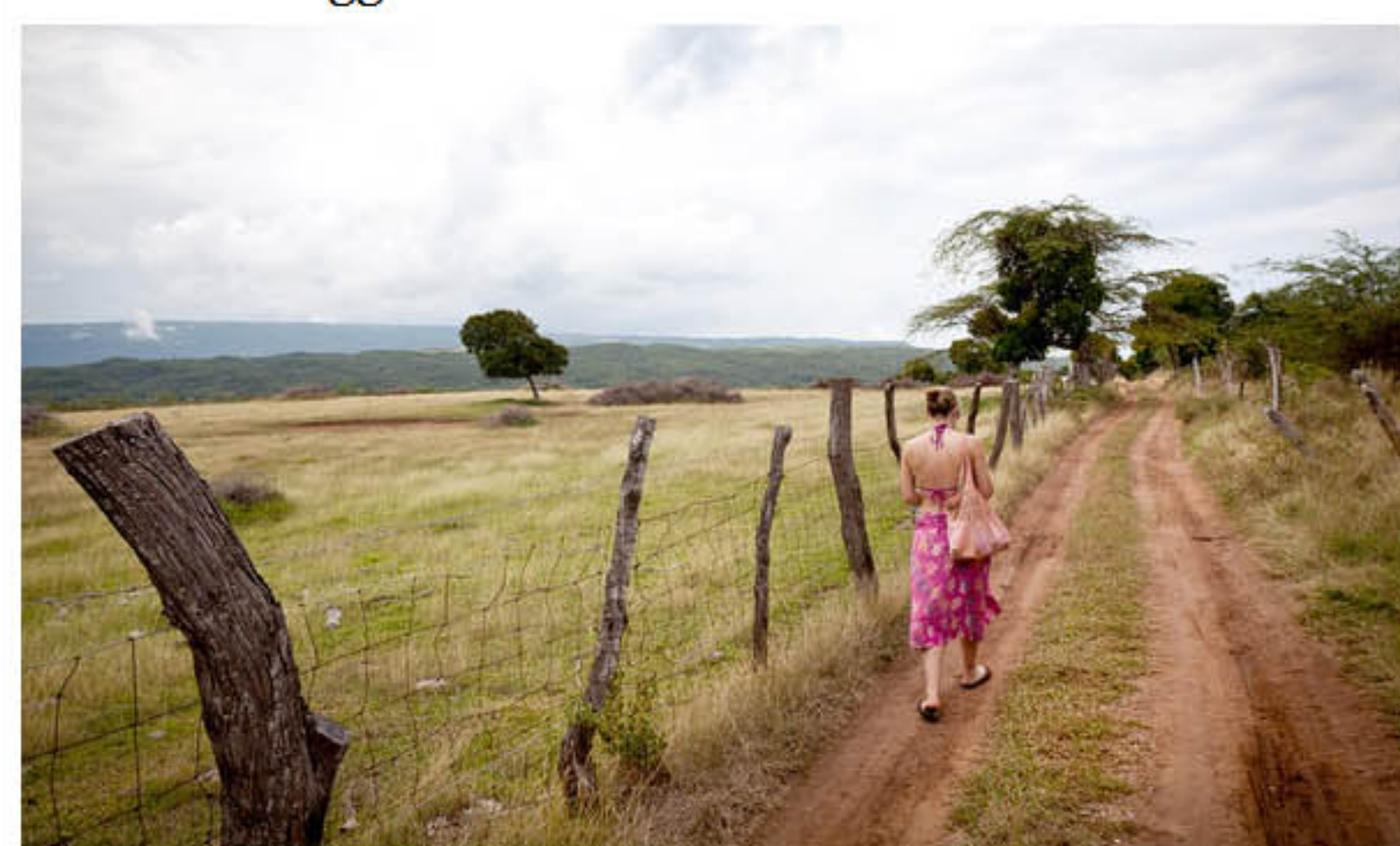
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HEADS UP
Rum and Reggae? Not Here



Remy Scalza

Treasure Beach, on the southern coast of Jamaica, attracts visitors with its quiet, rural character.

By REMY SCALZA
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OUTSIDE Treasure Beach, on Jamaica's rural southern coast, a half-dozen oxen are blocking the one potholed road into town. When the taxi driver honks, they turn, stare and stand their ground.

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long drawn travelers who come as much for its inaccessibility as for the black-streaked sand and azure water. The contrast from the rum-and-Rasta Jamaica of package tours is pronounced: no sprawling all-inclusives, no Margaritavilles; just a string of waterfront guesthouses set among local homes and a patchwork of rolling farmland.

Backwater status may be fleeting. "We'll always be a fishing and farming community first," said Jason Henzell, who runs the family-owned **Jakes** (Calabash Bay; 876-965-3000; jakeshotel.com), a collective of beachside boho-chic lodgings (\$115 to \$325 a night for a double room; two-bedroom cottages from \$295) that first put Treasure Beach on the tourism map in 1994. "But we need to prepare ourselves for changes." Last year, Jakes inaugurated a private aerodrome to accommodate its increasingly jet-setting guests. Charter flights from Kingston now take just 35 minutes.

Nearby, down a quiet residential lane, a squat, metal-roofed farm shack houses the new **Callaloo Butik** (Frenchman District Road; 876-390-3949; callaloo-jam.com). Inside, flowing original dresses vie for space with hand-painted ceramics and petite embroidered handbags. "I'm a little concerned, of course, that Treasure Beach will become like Negril," said the owner, Sophie Eyssautier, a Frenchwoman who worked for Dior and other Parisian fashion houses before moving here three years ago. "But I think we still have a few years."

For now, anxieties seem premature, especially along Great Bay, a beach outside town cluttered with open-hulled boats and fishing nets drying in the sun. On the porch of **Little Negril Seafood Pub** (Great Bay; no phone), a shack set on pilings above the sand, fishermen slap down dominoes while sipping rum. They trace their fair skin and striking blue eyes to a 200-year-old shipwreck, whose legacy has come to define this insular community. "We've all got a little Scottish blood from the castaways," said the owner, Ever Golding.

Seas around Treasure Beach aren't quite the gaudy turquoise of nearby Negril, but they are rich in wildlife. Last year, the Nature Conservancy signed on as a partner to manage the 625-acre Galleon Fish Sanctuary, home to manatees, turtles, reefs and mangroves. Boat tours by local fishermen turned marine wardens often end with cold Red Stripes at the **Pelican Bar** (Parottee Bay; no phone), an offshore tiki hut on stilts that fills up for sunsets.

After dark, Treasure Beach is no longer backcountry quiet. On the grass-and-sand patio of newly built **Frenchman's Reef** (Frenchman's Bay; 876-965-3049; frenchmansreeftreasurebeach.com), a mix of locals and travelers sit at wood tables crowded with plates of jerk chicken (500 Jamaican dollars for a quarter, about \$6 at 85 Jamaican dollars to the U.S. dollar) and grilled lobster (1,000 dollars). Back a few streets, sound systems from thatched-roofed bars pump dancehall music (no Bob Marley here) into the humid night.

The pounding bass carries partway down the street but fades well before the gate to **Minerva House** (Fort Charles; 876-965-3374; minervahouse.com). Several miles from town, with its own beach, butler and infinity pool, this luxury villa (\$750 a night) augers a new Treasure Beach, rustic no longer. A former Jamaican prime minister, Edward Seaga, recently rented it for a night. "A little bit of heaven on this place we call earth," he wrote in the guest book before leaving. No word on whether he flew back to Kingston.

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