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Why Literature's Biggest Names Are Going to Jamaica

Written by Kadi Hughes · June 09, 2016



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The Calabash International Literary Festival has become a central cultural event in the Caribbean.

Every two years, Treasure Beach, a sleepy fishing village on the south west coast of Jamaica, is transformed into a vibrant celebration of international literature as thousands of visitors travel from all over the region, country, and world to attend the [Calabash International Literary Festival](#). Now in its 13th staging Calabash has been attended—and praised—by everyone from Wole Soyinka to Salman Rushdie, and become a cultural pilgrimage for writers and audiences alike.

Against a backdrop of the Caribbean, hundreds gather under an open-air tent to listen and cheer as writers read from their work, with most sessions involving a series of three different authors. There is no hierarchy and no “top-billing”—instead, authors perform readings in alphabetical order, which helps create the relaxed and open atmosphere.

This year's festival's theme was *'fruu-isb-aan'* (fruition), and featured three days of free outdoor readings, discussions, and performances. The line-up was a mix of international authors, like Man Booker-winner Eleanor Catton from New Zealand and British travel writer Geoff Dyer, award-winning writers Chigozie Obioma and Teju Cole from Nigeria, and local favorites poet Kei Miller and Man Booker-winner Marlon James, whose novel *A Brief History of Seven Killings* won the 2015 Man Booker Prize for Fiction. Listening to British writer Decca Aikenhead's account of her husband's tragic drowning at Treasure Beach two years prior, the audience gasped—and cried. Amidst Jamaican poet Kei Miller's stirring reading, the audience cheered and jumped to their feet in support.

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“It's a ritual,” says Kingston resident Karen Neita of the festival, held at [Jake's Hotel](#), every two years. “The conversations with the people you meet here are unlike anything else. The weekend leaves you with such a great feeling that lasts long after you leave.” Nevada Powe, a teacher from Kingston who has attended the festival four times, agrees. “It's the mix of people—all ages, classes—that makes it special. Plus, at every Calabash, I'm introduced to writers I never knew about.”

Since its inception, Calabash has always been about community. Founded in 2001 by three Jamaicans—poet Kwame Dawes, novelist Colin Channer, and producer Justine Henzell—the festival's guiding values, according to the founders, continue to be: “earthy, inspirational, daring and diverse.”

“We wanted to create a festival where the authors could mingle and interact with the audience, where regular people could discuss literature and ideas with these writers and each other,” Henzell tells *Condé Nast Traveler*. Dawes, who serves as the master of ceremonies and time-keeper, agrees. “It was important that everything was free from the first festival,” he says. “As we said that first year, ‘The only admission is love,’ and that is still true today.”

Despite the success of the three-day festival, Dawes notes it's also about what they do the *other* 362 days of the year. “Calabash wasn't conceived because we wanted a festival,” he says. “We looked at what was happening with writers in Jamaica. We thought, ‘What can we do to give these writers a chance?’ We wanted to start workshops, but we didn't have the authority. So we had the idea, let's start a festival that would give us the legitimacy to create workshops and a platform for local writers.” The festival has the added benefit of exposing



legitimacy to create workshops and a platform for local writers. "The festival has the added benefit of exposing Jamaican writers to acclaimed international writers. "By bringing these award-winning international writers to Calabash, we raised the standard and showed Jamaican writers the level they needed to be at."



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WHAT TO DO WHEN THE FESTIVAL ENDS

Kingston native Justine Henzell is the co-founder and producer of the Calabash International Literary Festival, as well as an independent film producer and documentarian. Henzell also created the Creatrix Collective, which produces short films exclusively directed by Jamaican women. We asked her where she spends her time around Treasure Beach.

Where do you recommend friends stay when they visit Treasure Beach? What do you love about it?

[Jake's Hotel](#). But if that is booked up during the festival, a wonderful alternative is to stay in one of the villas or cottages in Treasure Beach. There are a variety of sizes and styles to choose from, from the luxurious [Seaweed](#) six-bedroom villas to the delightful, pocket-sized Stonehouse Cottage.

What's your favorite restaurant for a low-key dinner with friends?

[Little Ochi](#). Seafood in an alligator pond!

You favorite restaurant for a special occasion?

It's actually not a restaurant, but a monthly farm-to-table dinner under a full moon set in an actual farmer's field where the produce is grown. It's hard to beat.

Best coffee?

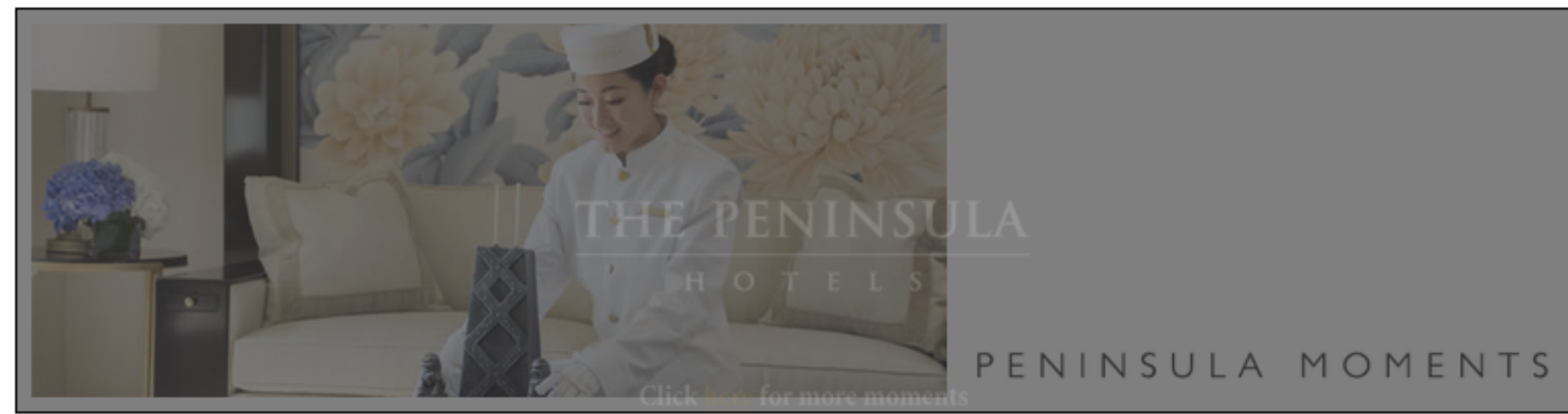
Blue Mountain. Grown high in the hills, this is the most sought-after Jamaican coffee.

Best cocktail?

Rum Punch at [Dougie's Bar](#). The secret recipe has been passed down for three generations in the Henzell family.

Best street for shopping, or favorite local shop?

[Callaloo Boutique](#) for unique and cool (in both senses of the word) fashion.



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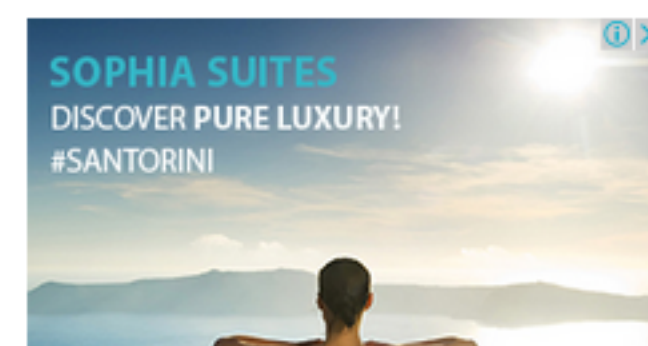
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KADI HUGHES

Former Beijinger Kadi Hughes is a writer, strategist, and coffee-addict based in Brooklyn.

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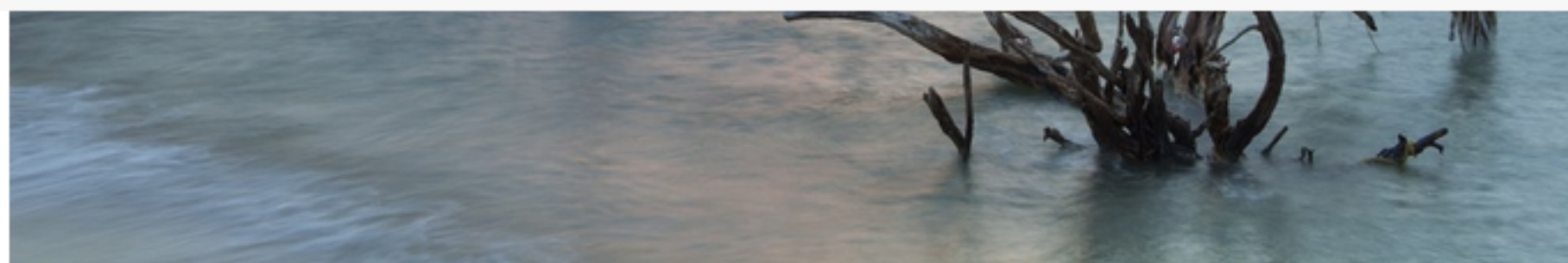


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