



*Dive into Jamaica's newest
all-inclusive resort for a refreshing*

jump start

BY DENISE GEE
PHOTOGRAPHY BY
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Negril's birds come alive under the stars. So do we. Each night, the trees pulsate in multithroated harmony while distant sounds of reggae music waft below. And each night we drink it all in, sinking into the lushness of Couples.

The 18-acre beachside resort—the newest all-inclusive to join the hip Jamaican town—is an intoxicating mix of Moroccan, French, and Caribbean décor and attitude. With upscale ambience enjoyed by a mostly young, European crowd, the \$36 million resort is the epitome of elegance in Jamaica's "capital of casual."

The open-air lobby's 1920s wicker furniture, William Morris-meets-Montego Bay design scheme, and amber lighting hint at soothing Arts and Crafts inspirations. In contrast, bold and modern guest rooms nod to such tony hotels as New York's W and Paramount. In turn, Couples' premier restaurant, Otaheite, speaks of the south of France, with plush velvet banquettes-for-two, intricately beaded lampshades, superb service and food. The fusion works beautifully: The place is a veritable catalog of Caribbean cool.

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Happiness is a warm hammock and being toe-to-toe in Couples' enticing pool. The resort's open-air lobby, lower left, is also a cool spot to relax.

resort's deep blues, greens, and yellows transform into invigoratingly bright hues, while beyond, the turquoise water and bisque-colored beach—considered the best on the island—invite doing everything or nothing at all; wearing anything or, in the au naturel areas, nothing at all. In all cases, there is much to see—and do.

Water sports offered on the unfortunately named Bloody Bay include scuba diving, snorkeling, waterskiing, sailing, windsurfing, canoeing, and water tricycling. And as is the case landside—with volleyball, tennis, yoga, aerobics, and golf (at the Negril Hills Country Club)—resort packages include all fees for such active endeavors.

Appealing to a more laid-back crowd is the resort's freshwater pool overlooking the beach and sea. A thatched cabana, one of Couples' four bars, allows for

drinks both in and out of the pool, while island music piped throughout keeps spirits high.

So does Couples' inviting food, available 24 hours. Multicultural menus rule, with the likes of Cornish hen paella and sweet-and-Irish potato foccacia reigning at the dinner-only Otaheite, while the more casual Cassava Terrace buffet offers a rotating mix of Jamaican classics (callaloo, ackee, jerk pork) with healthful salads and pastas.

Another satisfying aspect of downtime is a visit to Couples' two shops. Showcasing handmade crafts that are a far cry from shell wind chimes and cheap T-shirts, its gift shop features one-of-a-kind vases, scented coconut candles, hand-painted ceramics and tin frames, Jamaican seasonings, Blue Mountain coffee, and distinctive clothing. Couples' other shopping spot is a European-style

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boutique with fashionable shoes, linens, and jewelry.

But the best part of downtime, of course, takes place in the low-rise resort's 234 rooms, all with balconies or patios overlooking tropical gardens or the smooth sea. Each room is outfitted with a king-size bed, CD player, telephone, hair dryer, and satellite TV. Eighteen suites include Jacuzzi tubs. Another distinctive touch includes a closet



Couples' colorful rooms, top, might just tempt you to spend some of your vacation indoors, but be sure to venture out for a lobster feast on the beach or an island serenade at sunset.



“door” of hanging cedar beads. (The woody scent lingering in some of our clothes continues to remind us of our stay.)

Spa services pamper as well. Though not included in most accommodation packages, deep massages paired with aromatherapy make pleasant intermezzos. We vow never again to go without an occasional rejuvenating massage once we get home.

But a vow we didn't take

IT TAKES TWO

Couples, an all-inclusive resort for couples only, is 55 miles from the Montego Bay airport. The airport is served by American, Air Canada, Air Jamaica (a Delta partner), Northwest, TWA, and U.S. Air. Though Couples' packages include round-trip, air-conditioned bus transfers (taking about two hours each way), if time is of the essence, opt for Air Jamaica's express service. For \$55 each way, you can fly directly from Montego Bay to Negril's small airport, conveniently located across from the resort.

Three-night (minimum stay) accommodations for two—including room, meals, drinks, activities, and all tips—range from \$1,735 to \$2,065 during the current high season (January 1–April 14), later ranging from \$1,485 to \$1,780 (April 15–July 2 and September 3–December 24) and \$1,420 to \$1,715 during the low season (July 3–September 3). For more details call 800/268-7537 or access www.couples.com.

AND TWO MORE ...

Other recommended all-inclusives catering to couples include: GRAND LIDO: Next door to Couples, you'll find an even more international crowd in a quiet, pristine beach setting. Call 800/467-8737 or look up www.superclubs.com.

SANDALS: A comfortable resort akin to a Carnival cruise on land. The one-bedroom loft suites are quiet and private. Call 800/726-3257 or log on to www.sandals.com.

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**OFF THE
BEATEN PATH**

Though there's a lot to do at Couples, visitors would be remiss not to experience Negril's local color and culture. Don't rent a car or motorbike; they're expensive, unreliable, and often dangerous on sub-standard roads. Taxis are plentiful, inexpensive, and run by friendly drivers.

On the beach, head east on foot to a shipwrecked fishing boat and a nearby section of picnic tables. There, fishermen cook garlicky spiny lobster for \$10 each. On the road into downtown Negril, jerk-chicken stands drum up spicy and succulent chicken and pork for as little as \$5 for two heapings (ask your taxi driver for a recommendation).

On the other side of downtown, Xtabi—a rocky cliffside resort with private villas—offers a deliciously different visual and culinary treat, with broiled lobsters and rock-divers deserving applause. Even farther afield, Rick's Cafe is a great place to watch the sun set while pro and even amateur divers make a splash from 50-foot cliffs.

(this time) is also a popular "extra"—a wedding package. If so inclined, a couple can get married or remarried at the resort. (The option is free for guests staying at least six nights; a month's advance planning is necessary.) Included with the garden gazebo's non-denominational ceremony are live music, a two-tier cake, wedding certificates, a bouquet and boutonniere, sparkling wine, and half-hour massages.

Needless to say, there's plenty of bliss to go around. ☘