

Jamaica

by Camille Pepe Sperrazza

"Commodore" Camille is a Jamaica specialist.

VIP Lounge at Montego Bay and Kingston Airports

Have you ever looked on in awe at the travelers who have access to VIP lounges at the airport? They have usually purchased expensive business or first class tickets. Now, unrelated to the price of your air ticket, you can have access to a VIP lounge that offers complimentary alcoholic and nonalcoholic beverages, cappuccino, sandwiches, snacks, cake, cookies, free WiFi, reading material, and more. You can even take a shower here. It's all clean, bright, and beautiful. Another huge advantage is that when you have a ticket to this lounge, you bypass long security lines, and are personally escorted through security by a representative. Believe me, once you experience this, you will never want to travel any other way. Take advantage of spa services while you wait for your flight, for an additional fee. Catch up on business. Don't have your laptop with you? There's a business center, with computers at your disposal. When your flight is ready to board, they'll let you know. It's the best \$30 you'll ever spend. Contact me to buy in advance, because it's \$35 when purchased at the airport.

The resorts:

Half Moon Jamaica.

Located in the Rosehall area, about 10 minutes from Montego Bay Airport, it's rated 5-star, 4-diamond. Prince Harry and his entourage stayed in a 6-bedroom villa here which holds 12 people. But when you stay here, you don't have to be born into royalty to be treated like royalty. You would get your own butler and chef, but meals and drinks are an additional charge. You can select from a list, in advance, and groceries will

be at the villa upon your arrival. The villa is a beauty, with its own pool, living room, 6 large bedrooms, and a small kitchen for the chef. There are balconies galore, and lots of space for lounging poolside. Right behind the pool, you can enjoy the beach, your own quiet little oasis. Many of the rooms are designed so that everyone has access to a strip of secluded beach - a

Jamaica sunset at Half Moon



big advantage of staying at this resort.

At Half Moon, it's all about luxury and pampering. I was privileged to be provided with a spa suite - 3 huge rooms and a bathroom that rivals the size of my first apartment. The bedroom has glass doors that open on to a back patio that leads to your own private strip of beach. It's possible to throw open the drapes, while still lounging in your pj's, and gaze at the sand and surf because no one is really going to be strolling along your private retreat. The bathroom has a jacuzzi, surrounded by candle holders (candles and matches are provided). The double sink vanity is tremendous, and amenities galore are provided - "too huge to take home" pump bottles of shaving cream, body wash, lotions, shampoo, and conditioners, and baskets filled with cotton puffs and swabs. It's all bright and beautiful, magnified make-up mirror provided.

The separate shower stall is all modern, with a seat, and water jets that spray from every angle. If you don't want to get that wet, there's a rainfall option.

A beautiful living room has a couch, cushy chairs, and table and chairs. The suite has two televisions (one in the bedroom and one in the living room), with lots of cable channels, including HBO. Complimentary WiFi is available throughout the resort. The spa suite also has its own spa room, with his-and-her treatment tables, so you never have to leave - the pampering services come to you.

The stunning sunsets over the water, seen every evening from the outdoor restaurant and main bar air have to be experienced. They are breath-taking. There are many room categories at Half Moon. One I like is the cottage, in particular, for their locations. These are along the main beach, which is the most beautiful part, and the area where one can swim. (The more private stretch of beach described above is more for admiring than swimming). These rooms are also lovely. Some have 4 rooms to a cottage, so if you don't want a villa, and are traveling with others, this is a great option.

Half Moon is spread over 400 acres, and includes a golf course, dolphin experience center, horse stables, its own hospital, and shops. I participated in a dolphin encounter. This resort may be purchased room only, breakfast only, all-inclusive, or all-inclusive without drinks. Be aware that the restaurants on the premises are on the pricey side, so all-inclusive is a good option. Night life at the resort is quiet, with a band playing dance music in the evening. A Friday Night Beach Party featured lively music and crab racing. The resort is about serenity and down time, but if you are looking for some excitement, Margaritaville and other nightlife is about a 10-minute taxi ride away.

Sunset at the Palms - Negril area; about an hour from the Montego Bay airport; 4-star resort.

Walk through the doors of this lovely and surprising affordable resort, and you will no longer be waiting to exhale. The zen-like surroundings provide instant tranquility. The "Treetop Rooms," as they are called, are zen-like works of art - warm beige, browns, and natural earth

tones. Everything about this resort is inviting and quaint, including the piano bar in the lobby. It's all-inclusive, yet well-priced, because one has to cross the street to get to the beach. This is but a small price to pay. The resort has a crossing guard, and the beach is just steps away. It's difficult to find a more beautiful and peaceful resort, with such stunning accommodations, at such reasonable costs. Negril is arguably the best beach in Jamaica - 7 miles long, and staying here is an affordable, yet luxurious way of doing so.

Beaches Negril/Sandals Negril.

Sandals is the couples only resort. Beaches is the same product - but it's for families, singles, and friends. They are both all-inclusive, with staff that goes out of its way to make your stay an exceptional one. Many water sports are included, and they'll even take you out on a glass-bottom boat ride, twice a day, where you can feed the fish. The liquor is relatively high-end, and there's lots of choices. Dining offers numerous options. At Beaches, there was an Italian, Japanese, seafood restaurant on the beach, Tex-Mex, grill area, pizzeria, plus a huge daily buffet. One night I dined with 17 people at the Japanese hibachi restaurant - people I had just met who had invited me to join them - and those chefs were real entertainers. They put on a great show - lots of singing, and shrimp-flipping. The diners got to flip shrimp, too. Lots of fun, and plenty of laughs. This was the only restaurant where reservations were required. We got a taste of everything on the menu - seafood, meat, fried rice, veggies, soup, and salad, just like at the hibachi joints at home.

In the evening, the place to be is the main bar area, where there are shows, and where friendly bartenders show off some dazzling tricks. It's got a city-like, upscale vibe.

Pools are scattered throughout the Beaches resort, and there's fun and games on the beach throughout the day. For the kiddies, there are Sesame Street character breakfasts, and these characters roam the resort, and are also featured in daily shows.

Sandals and Beaches have lots of room categories. I am a certified Sandals/Beaches expert, and as such, I am required to attend annual training workshops. There is a huge difference among Sandals' properties, and I have seen many of them.

RIU All-inclusive Resorts

I sent lots of happy people to the Riu Montego Bay. It's located 10 minutes from the airport, and you can always count on Riu to provide a good experience at a reasonable price.

There are also two all-inclusive Riu properties in Negril - Club Riu Negril and Riu PalaceTropical Bay. They are located right next to each other, on that 7-mile beach. If possible, stay at the Riu Palace which is more upscale. The resorts are beautiful, and they are designed so that just about all rooms have good locations, making it easy for you to walk around. There are several specialty restaurants, for which reservations are required. I have stayed at Riu properties, and always find the food to be excellent. If you like to have drinks in your room, Riu is still one of the few resorts that provides huge bottles of liquor to you. They

are usually mounted in a case on the wall, and you simply push to pour. Club Riu is a bigger resort, and much more spread out. You can't go wrong at a Riu which is why I choose to be Preferred Partners with them.

Couples Resorts - Couples Negril and Couples Swept Away

Couples Resorts has four properties. The two above are located in the Negril area. Staying at these "couples only" resorts comes with lots of inclusions. For example, they will take you on a trip to Margaritaville - no charge. They will take you to the shopping area - no charge. They will send you on a Catamaran cruise - no charge. These are tours that will cost you money when you stay at any other resort. They like to say, "Yes, It's really all included" - water sports, glass bottom boat rides, windsurfing instruction, water skiing instruction, tennis instruction, golf, WiFi, all drinks, all meals, and more. The food is good quality, and both resorts have small "casinos." Couples has just a few slots, while Swept Away had a handful of slots plus a small table game. Swept Away is the more upscale of the two properties. It has a fresher look, and a juice bar where the bartender serves fresh, energizing fruit drinks. Both have exercise facilities. The Beachfront Suites feature large, wraparound balconies, but they do not contain televisions. The Verandah Suites do. Some rooms have hammocks on the balconies, a nice touch. There are several bars and swim-up bars throughout, and nice cushy beach chairs. At Couples Negril, there is a private nude beach, separated from the main resort by a wall.

Put on Your Sandals

Put on your "Sandals"

Spotlight: Sandals all-inclusive couples' resort, Whitehouse, Jamaica

We were greeted with a cold drink, refreshing towel, and the sound of exotic birds.

We weren't in Brooklyn anymore. I looked around and discovered the noise came from a peacock, in full bloom, showing off its bright blue feathers, decorated with the most intriguing turquoise emblems that Mother Nature had provided. Just beautiful.

Later, we learned that there's an entire family of peacocks living at Sandals Whitehouse. They roam the premises, as if they own the place. You are their guests, and they are delighted to pose for your photos. Really, take your time getting the shot. Like the rest of Jamaica, they embrace the laid-back, unhurried lifestyle.

The Sandals resort located in Whitehouse, Jamaica, is on the Southern coast, about an hour and half drive from the Montego Bay airport, and arguably, the nicest Sandals property in Jamaica. Yes, there is a huge difference among Sandals' properties.

This one incorporates the title "European Village," as it's divided into three sections: The

Italian side, the Dutch side, and the French side. The Italian side is closer to the main area of the resort; the Dutch side is center; and the French side is located furthest away. Yet, each section has its own pool and access to the beach. The premises are lovely, decorated with fountains and beautiful gardens. It's easy to walk along paved paths, and the majority of the walking is done along flat surfaces. Not every Sandals is designed this way.

Food: Sandals Whitehouse has a variety of restaurants, including an Italian one that serves brick oven pizza and pasta; a seafood restaurant; one noted for Caribbean cuisine; an Asian restaurant; and a buffet, with a variety of food. Again, not every Sandals' property provides these kinds of choices. You can opt to eat indoors, in air-conditioning, or outdoors. The exception is the seafood restaurant which has outdoor dining only. I found the food to be very good.

Sandals Whitehouse also has a "Cafe de Paris". Here, you can get the most tantalizing, freshly-baked cakes, scones, and cookies as well as cappuccino, espresso, and specialty coffees, both hot and cold. It's a very popular spot. Interestingly, I noticed just as many people walking around with coffee drinks as were walking around with alcoholic drinks. In the afternoon, fresh crepes are prepared here. You choose the fillings and the toppings. I enjoyed a chocolate crepe, topped with a mound of fresh whipped cream.

If you don't want to stray too far from the beach or pool during the day, jerk chicken and pork are barbecued on the beach, near the main pool. Very convenient.

Accommodations: Rooms are spacious, and nicely decorated, with balconies that overlook pools and the beach. While all drinks are included at this all-inclusive property (exception: there is a charge for more expensive wine), it is only the more expensive rooms that are stocked with bottles of vodka, rum, wine, champagne, beer, and more. Book a lesser room, and you'll have to make your own way to a bar to drink. The better rooms also have a whirlpool bathtub, and double sinks. Book the highest category, and you can have your own butler.

Service: Sandals takes great pride in its customer service. Just about everyone will greet you warmly, chat with you, and go out of their way to do everything possible to make your stay a pleasant one. It's a very friendly and warm environment. But you are on "island time." Translation: Events aren't always punctual, and people may not move as quickly as you may be used to. That's why they call this a "vacation." Relax.

Entertainment: If you're looking for blockbuster nightlife, go to Vegas or New York. You're not going to find it at any all-inclusive. That said, there is a cabaret. We saw a show that featured singers and a guy balancing a variety of chairs on his head. There is reggae music. Another night there was a group of three women who did a good job singing popular tunes. If you opt to dine outdoors, soft, live music is played while you dine, which is very nice. A martini bar opens around 10 p.m., and you can sing along with a piano player. If you go with a group of people, and many people do, as they are there to attend weddings, you'll no doubt make your own lively entertainment.

Tours & Spa Treatments: When we make your reservations, we can also book spa treatments and tours in advance of your stay, so all will be in order when you arrive. We went on a tour of Negril that included shopping stops, a visit to Sandals Negril, Margaritaville, and a trip to Rick's Cafe, noted for its gorgeous sunsets. Unfortunately, it was a cloudy day, so there was no sunset. Rick's Cafe has food, drinks, and trained divers who jump from cliffs into the ocean. Amazingly, tourists are welcome to take the plunge, and many of them do. Perhaps only in the Caribbean can you combine an environment that includes drinking and diving. Be prepared to be asked to make a financial contribution to the divers.

What else do I need to know? There are American outlets in the rooms, so you don't need to bring adapters. Passports are required for entry into Jamaica. You can reserve your next Sandals vacation, while you are there, at a discounted rate. Sandals encourages guests to use travel agents, so your travel agent will receive full credit when you take advantage of this offer. Sandals properties are named after the areas in which they are located. Whitehouse is an area in Jamaica, as is Negril, as is Ocho Rios.

How will I get to Sandals from the airport? When you book Sandals, transfers are included. In fact, when you arrive at Montego Bay airport, there is a Sandals' hospitality booth. Here, you can get a refreshing drink, use the bathroom, and drop off your luggage. In no time at all, you'll be whisked away to a van, your vacation ready to begin.

What if I'm not a "couple"? While Sandals caters to couples, it's not all that unusual to find some guests on the premises, without significant others, as they may be invited wedding guests. I was there with my mom, and we were very comfortable. If you are a wedding guest and plan to share a room, bear in mind that all rooms contain king size beds, but they are so huge and spacious, it's not usually an issue.

Children are not permitted, but if you want an all-inclusive family vacation, Sandals has a division called Beaches. Contact us for an all-inclusive property that best suits you best.

This "review" is based on my experience, July 2010. Sandals has the right to make changes at any time.

For more information or to book a trip, [contact](#) "Commodore" Camille today.

This article was accurate when it was written, but everything in life changes. Enjoy the journey!