

# Banana Shout Post Ivan - October '04

*By Vinny Bogan*

## Where to begin?

As the sun sets over the Negril cliffs, I lay in the hammock on my veranda overlooking the sea. On the table sits my journal, a cold Red Stripe and a freshly rolled "Sunset Spliff." A gentle sea breeze washes over me, blowing in from the southeast, the same direction from which hurricane Ivan's winds and waves crashed upon this point just three weeks ago.

The Caribbean Ocean completely fills my vision like a giant IMAX Theater, framed by the Lighthouse in the south, and in the north by the freshly painted post holding up the roof of my two-story mansion by the sea. I try to capture the scene with my camera, but I only succeed in knocking over my beer, thus scaring the bejesus out of my tiny lizard friend with whom I've been sharing this spot the past few days. It's probably not the same lizard each day, but until I see two of them at the same time, he's lizard dude, we've bonded.

I'm thrilled to finally be here, it seems the entire universe conspired to keep me away from Negril this trip. During the booking phase, hurricane Charley was making his way through the Caribbean. I guess I was being pretty selfish as I followed the storm, worrying more about my ten days of R&R than about the people actually in the storm's path. Luckily for me and the people of Jamaica, ok, luckily for the people of Jamaica and me, Charley did his damage elsewhere. The folks in Haiti weren't so lucky. It seems they rarely are.

My buddy Nick is coming along on this trip, he and I go back a bit. We worked as restaurant managers together, then we were co-dependant housemates, and now finally, homeys. I owe my Negril initiation to Nick. His stories of a 1992 Negril trip were inspiring enough to get me to check it out in 1994, and the rest, as they say, is history. Over the intervening years we would each return to Negril several times, but never together.

We first discussed an October '04 trip while I was planning my April '04 trip. I was trying to get Nick to come along in April when he mentioned being in Negril for his October birthday. I was like, "Cool! I'll go back in October!" Can one get too much of Negril?

Nick and I went back and forth on where to stay, and even if we would even go at all. Finally we decided to go and to go to Banana Shout, though from the beginning, destiny seemed to be leading us there.

I'd heard of the book "Banana Shout" written by Mark Conklin the owner of the resort "Banana Shout," so I went to Amazon.com and ordered me a copy. I'm always on the lookout for writing on Negril, there isn't much available and usually hard to find. A few days later I received an email from Irene Conklin, Mark's wife, thanking me for the order. This personal touch went a long way with me.

The more I read the more I was hooked on Banana Shout. I mean there's a book about the place, how can you not want to go to a place someone wrote a book about? Well yeah, the guy who wrote it owns the place, but still, it's like a landmark. The book was a great read!

Really, the only reason we thought of other places at all, was there were two of us going in on the place, and Banana Shout's prices were so reasonable we shopped around for something more expensive! Unfortunately the more expensive places came with annoying things like phones and TVs, things that have no place on a Negril vacation. In the end we decided to book "Seaside One" a spacious two-story house on the cliffs and boy did we make a great choice!

In true “Luck of the Irish” fashion, when I plan a trip to the Caribbean at the tail end of hurricane season, its one of the most active hurricane seasons in twenty years. Charley, Danielle, Frances, Jeanne and of course Ivan, Ivan the Terrible!

I watched in horror as Ivan took his toll on the Caribbean passing just south of the Jamaican coast. The news blackout was maddening. I scoured every story I could get my eyes on like it was the Zapruder film. Looking for anything that would let me know how Negril really fared. The Negril board was down, as were most Jamaican websites, and the US newsies didn’t share my level of concern.

While not a direct hit, winds and waves caused fantastic devastation from Morant Bay to Negril Point. The Negril cliffs did their job shielding the beach from the worst of the storm, but even so, the damage was severe throughout Negril. Gigantic waves from the southeast crashed over the high coral cliffs and washed inland well past West End Road, tearing apart all man and nature had placed there.

I waited two days after Ivan hit before I emailed Irene at Banana Shout. I knew I was being a pain, but my PNS (Pre-Negril Syndrome) was peaking, I was hearing anecdotal horror stories, and of course I didn’t purchase travel insurance.

Irene responded promptly to inform me they lost the two cottages closest to the cliff, most of the foliage, and a large portion of the seawall, but our Seaside One was still standing! She said Mark was Negril bound the following week to check out the damage first hand, and she would be in touch. It seemed Banana Shout would live on, but weather or not she could handle guests in only twenty five “sleeps” was the question on which our vacation teetered.

Now that was a long week. I wanted to email Irene the second Mark’s plane landed, but I held out for forty-eight excruciating hours, and again, a response within hours! Anyone who has tried to email Jamaica knows that the “soon come” concept extends to the cyber world also. Irene informed us that “Seaside One” was in good shape, and was getting a facelift. The rest of the place was being rebuilt and rejuvenated. Irene offered to refund if we wanted to postpone since there would be so much construction, but we knew the worst week in Negril is way better than any week in the real world. I told her as long as they could lash a hammock between a few trees with a tarp over it, and a cooler of Red Stripe under it, we’d be there!

## **Negril Bound - October 8, 2004**

US Airways is a sad way to get to Jamaica. I kick myself every time for not spending a few bucks more to fly Air Jamaica.

I buy my tickets online as cheap as I can find them, usually months in advance, so I expect to be strapped to the wing, or stuck between two sumo wrestlers. This time I got the aisle seat, a clear shot to the emergency door, only one or two people to trample, not bad. You see, between the time I bought my tickets and departure day, US Airways declared bankruptcy and I figure they’ve been cutting corners somewhere. Paranoid? Just a little.

Philly is a hub for US Airways, which means for me it’s non-stop to Montego Bay, but for many it’s a connecting flight. Caitlyn was one of these people, a pretty thirty-something woman who connected all the way from Phoenix on the third leg of her trip. I had to compliment her; she was quite perky for someone who just spent the night on planes and in airports.

We discussed all things Jamaican, this was her first trip to the Caribbean paradise, and in true Cliff-Clavonian fashion I played the roll of salty expatriate, spouting off advice and answering her every query in much more detail than necessary. I didn’t care, I was headed to Negril, I

was happy to be talking to a pretty woman and she seemed intrigued with my vevry knowledge.

In the real world I'm usually self conscious around women I don't know, but something comes over me when I'm in the "Jamaican Way." I let loose! I drop the burdens and baggage I carry in my normal life. Hmm, I'm thinking there's a lesson here. Maybe that smooth, charming fellow I let loose on vacation should come back to Philly with me and see what happens.

Caitlyn definitely made an impression on me too, she was going to Negril for her Dad's birthday and was staying at an all-inclusive about as far from Banana Shout as one could be and still be in Negril. So I decided to enjoy our plane time and not to get my hopes up for one of those "From Here to Eternity" moments, though I did show her my vulnerable side by tearing up when Peter Parker and MJ finally had their romantic moment on the tiny airline movie screen.

Walking off the plane I came face to face with the ever forward march of progress, well, in Jamaica it's more like the cool rhythmic gait of progress. Anyway, the renovation I witnessed the previous April had been completed. The stair trucks were gone and a shiny new jet way greeted us! We walked in cosmopolitan luxury through the jet way and into the newly air-conditioned arrival area. I hated it!

Am I becoming an old head? A highlight of previous trips was that hot blast of salty, fragrant Montego Bay air hitting you like the proverbial ton of bricks. The dazzling Caribbean sun blinding you as you stepped from the plane to the stair truck and clumsily made your way down to the asphalt for the hundred yard walk to the terminal.

For the past few years I heard my friends in Negril tell stories of the "Old Road to Negril," I always feel left out, I'd only been on the old road once and it was a truly magical experience, but still, it was only once. I was jealous for their memories and would sit and listen to yarns for hours as Red Stripes and ganja mixed with smiles and sunsets to create the cocktail that makes this place so special. Well now I can pine for the stair truck! Sure it's less romantic than a two hour road trip through jungle towns and potholes, but I'll always miss it.

I hung out with Caitlyn through the immigration line. I invited her to breakfast at Selina's Sunday morning, and we said our goodbyes as she went to get her baggage, I carried on.

Dodging Red Caps I made it to the JUTA bus counter and paid \$20US for the bus ride to Negril. I promised myself not to blow money on stupid things this trip, like an \$80US private taxi ride to Negril. I told the JUTA folks I'd wait outside for the bus, a decision I immediately regretted. It was HOT, and there was no way back inside without going through the airport security gauntlet.

I found myself in a small fenced in lot where the fancy hotel jitneys lined up to take their overpaying fares to all-inclusive wonderfulness. Other than the lady in the small refreshment stand, I was the only one out there. I was terribly dehydrated, it was ninety degrees in the shade, but there was no shade! So I broke with my tradition and ordered a Ting instead of a Red Stripe for my first taste of Jamaican refreshment.

That's my moment! I don't know why. Not the landing, not the passport stamping, but that first taste! Oh yeah! I was in Jamaica! Maybe being gravitationally challenged for much of my adult life gives sway to my taste buds when it comes to the sensual understanding of reality. Maybe it's just that when I finally slow down after the immigration, customs, Negril transport blur, the first thing I do is get a drink and relax, giving me time to look around and see that I'm really here! Whatever the reason, it's a great moment, the beginning of my slide into Jamaica time.

The JUTA bus was filled mostly with Hedo people, which surprised me because on my 1994 Hedo trip, the resort sent a ramshackle old bus to pick us up.

I sat in the front, which is my custom, and right behind me were the two most excited twenty something guys I have ever come across. They were Hedonism bound and I luxuriated in their enthusiasm. It was truly contagious, and as if to pour gasoline on their fire, I told them of the wildness and wanton sexuality waiting for them, for I had “been there” and “I knew!” They had read that this week was a lifestyles week and expected a “totally wicked-awesome time.” The younger guy, the red head, was literally drooling.

I didn't have the heart to tell them that the large majority of swingers looked more like their parents than supermodels on a sex binge, but what I did tell them was they were in for a great week, because as different as Hedonism was from my preconceived notions, it was among the most bizarre, wild and fun times I've ever had.

All the talk on the bus was of Hurricane Ivan. From my vantage point the northeastern shore looked untouched, but like many things in Jamaica it's all a matter of degree and perception. Some people see only poverty, saying they are so upset and they feel so badly for the people, but these same people would never go into a Jamaican person's house, share a meal and get to know them, get to understand what Jamaican life really is. They just compare it with their suburban 60 by 120 and feel superior.

Soon we rounded the bend at Lucea and headed down the west coast towards Negril. There was some damage, mostly just piles of trees and brush that I wouldn't have noticed if the driver hadn't pointed them out.

Entering Negril, the piles of debris became more obvious. Our first stop was Hedonism and it looked great. The entrance was brightly colored and all the plants were manicured to perfection. This brought a sigh of relief, I was expecting devastation, I was guardedly optimistic.

Leaving my Hedo friends behind, we were off to Mariner's to drop off a couple from Toronto. Through the heart of the beach resorts from White Sands, past Selina's, to Kuyaba, the obvious but limited damage was encouraging. The overall impression is that the entire town needed a paint job. The usually bright signs and facades were dull and weather beaten.

Finally alone in the bus we hit the roundabout and headed up West End Road.

## **Banana Shout**

It was like night and day as we rode up West End Road and into the cliffs. The storm damage was terrible! Everywhere I looked were bare trees, washed out yards, and half standing buildings. The farther up the cliff line the worse it got! My heart was in my throat as we rounded the bend bringing us to Banana Shout.

The first thing I saw hopping out of the bus were the ruins of Rick's Café, looked like Rick's Baghdad, not Rick's Negril. Lost in the moment, I heard my name called and turned to see a tall Jamaican man unlatching the bright orange gate to Banana Shout.

“Welcome, Welcome!! I am Alex!” he said as we shook hands.

For weeks now I'd been preparing myself for this moment. I knew there would be damage and construction, but my head was spinning. As I entered the gate and tipped my driver, the realization that I would be spending the week on a busy construction site made my spirits sink.

The shirtless grey haired man approaching me picked up on my disillusionment. He warmly greeted me and thanked me for not canceling my reservation.

“Hi, I’m Mark,” he stated holding out his hand.

As I shook his hand, it was like I was meeting a rock star or a head of state. Again I wasn’t prepared for this, I felt like a groupie, or a dork, or a dorky-groupie.

We walked through the small parking lot that was now a depository of building supplies, around the house to Seaside One. Ahead of me the yard opened up. I was stopped dead in my tracks. The view was amazing. Her name was Anne Marie. She was the housekeeper, actually my housekeeper, since I was the only guest. Her smile could have lit up the entire town. The power of speech eluded me as we were introduced, so I just smiled and shook her soft, gentle hand.

The rest view was great too! My front door was fifteen yards from the edge of the cliff and the entire Caribbean Ocean was mine to enjoy. Things were looking up!

Mark opened the door to my mansion by the sea and showed me in. The smell of fresh paint mixed with that of ocean salt as he showed me the spacious house. The kitchen, bathroom, refrigerator, lights, water heater, beds and balconies with hammocks, the place was huge, and it was all mine! Walking out to the downstairs balcony, Mark pointed out the closest restaurants, the local food store, and even where I could watch football on Sunday if I was so inclined, though of course I’d planned my vacation on an Eagles bye week.

My spirits were buoyed by this awesome cabin, and by Marks ebullient character. Alone, I walked around bouncing on beds, opening drawers and looking in cabinets. I decided to explore the second floor before unpacking. And, since it was really hot, I stripped out of my travel clothes and down to boxers before ascending the newly painted stairway. As I turned to look into the room, all I could see through the screened room front was ocean. Like an excited child I raced across the wooden floor past the two queen-sized beds to the door. Opening it I was blown away by the view, the ocean was everywhere, the midday sunlight danced on the rippling waters throwing up an impossible assortment of colors.

I was master of all I surveyed, and I was nearly moved to tears when one of the workers yelled, “Hey SpongeBob!” It was only then that I realized a few things. First, I was out on the balcony, in my underwear, in broad daylight, and second, I was wearing bright yellow SpongeBob SquarePants boxers.

I retreated back inside while the guys all had a good laugh (I convinced myself they were laughing with me). I padded downstairs and cracked open a Red Stripe bought on the way from the airport and started unpacking. I guess the redness in my face made me thirsty. My buddy Nick wouldn’t be arriving till Monday so I got dibs on the upstairs closet, and the bed under the fan. I began to make myself at home.

Sitting at the big table downstairs, I broke out some herbal refreshment purchased up in Green Island (apropos name), took out my trusty pack of Rizlas, and headed on to happy land, my second taste and my second slide into Jamaica time.

By this time it was about three in the afternoon and the air wasn’t moving, so I opened all the window slats, kicked all the fans into high gear and hit the shower to wash off the travel dust.

I didn’t bother with the water heater, I’d always enjoyed cool water showers in Negril, and this one did not disappoint. I described this shower as “glorious” in my journal. I couldn’t tell if it was the Red Stripe, the ganja, or the water, probably a combination of the three, but I felt it

was my soul that was being washed. The chatter in my mind ceased and I was transported to another place. The clatter of the construction outside took on a rhythmic musical texture, and I felt the spirit of this place wash over me. Toweling off, I was drawn to sit quietly up on my balcony and enjoy this feeling for as long as it would last.

Luckily I had the presence of mind to pull on a pair of shorts. I don't think I could have convinced myself they guys were laughing *with* me if I walked out to the balcony naked.

I reclined into the brightly colored hammock and noticed a small green lizard looking me over from the support post. I introduced myself and began to survey my surroundings. The "Shout" had really been slammed, the two cottages in front of my place to the right and left had been almost completely leveled, and there was a gaping thirty foot hole in the seawall. The formerly jungle-like garden was naked, the wind took the leaves and the waves took the smaller plants. Throughout the property small saplings were planted in newly restored terraced beds, and several crews of Jamaican men were working extremely hard to bring the place back to life.

Mark shouted apologies for the noise, but I was so deep in my own experience that I almost didn't hear him.

"Not at all, the place is great!" I replied lazily from my perch.

"It's a lot quieter at night," Mark said, maybe thinking I was just being nice.

"No really, this is great!" Lack of eloquence aside, I meant it, this place was really cool. There was something here, a kind of energy, an enthusiasm, and little did I know, I was just scratching the surface.

About an hour before sunset the workers packed up and headed home. I'd unwound enough to do a little exploring, so I ventured forth from my house and made my way over to the cliff. I was trying to reconcile what I was seeing with my memories of the place I studied for months on the website. It was sad that the beautiful eden was gone, but simultaneously it was somehow exciting, the opportunity to create another, better place, a clean canvas on which to paint a new beautiful picture.

I climbed down the maze of stairs to the water's edge. Over the years Mark had built this labyrinth of stairs, walkways and platforms along the cliff face. From this angle I could see how much of the seawall had been taken out, not only was a thirty foot length missing but the gash went fifteen or twenty feet deep. For a moment I had the feeling that it would be fun to go out the next morning and help with the wall building. I sat with my feet in the water till that feeling went away. Hey, wall building is back breaking work, and I'm on vacation.

Walking back to my cabin, I ran into Mark, he was watering the plant beds and we spoke of Ivan and his fury. Banana Shout is located in a tiny cove about three hundred feet wide, to the north is Catcha Falling Star and to the south is Rick's Café. Both points were all but washed away, looking like ancient ruins against the setting sun.

The seawall from Banana Shout used to wrap around the cliff to Catcha Falling Star right out to her point where there was an octagon shaped concrete bungalow. The sunsets from there must have been amazing, but it's gone, completely washed away.

Ricks looked like a bomb hit it. One of the most commercially successful places in town was no match for ol' Ma Nature. Ivan ripped down the bright awnings and the wooden decks. He smashed through a big chunk of the main structure, and piled debris against the large cinderblock walls along the road. Rick's deepened my understanding of the tragedy that befell

this town. I'd been to Rick's so many times that I had a clear "before" picture in my head, and the after picture just blew my mind.

Mark described how the ocean rose up, how the waves came in, and even worse, how they went back out. For the first time I got a glimpse of how terrifying it must have been, this quiet, peaceful, yet vast ocean, turning to an indescribably huge monster attacking relentlessly like the Jason, Freddie and Michael Meyers combined.

From my second floor balcony I watched the sunset. It was magnificent, as the first one usually is, though I'd slept through it on my last trip. I tried to capture the moment in my journal, but the majesty of the scene before me had me slack-jawed and silent. The view from Banana Shout is among the best views of the Negril sunset available, I'm sure there are a few as good, but none better.

As I sat there I knew this trip was to be very different from the others. Something profound had happened here, it was more than just a storm, more than a seasonal happening that the cheerful Jamaican people took in stride. I knew that being here at this time would afford and opportunity to get to know the people around here in a more personal way, to gain a deeper understanding of this little neighborhood. I really began to look forward to Nick's arrival. I knew he would "get it" and partner with me on this quest.

I walked the two hundred yards over to LTU Pub right past the closed Rick's. On the way I met a few locals, the first guy I met couldn't believe I was on vacation.

"Who's takin' guests?" He asked

"Banana Shout," I replied, "I got here this afternoon."

"If ya need anyting, ya know, I'm Marcus this is my town!"

"Sounds good Marcus! I have a buddy coming Monday and we'll be looking for you!"

That's how so many of my conversations went that weekend, and as time went on I realized I was just about the only guest on that entire section of West End Road, say from Primrose Lane to the Lighthouse. Everything was closed since the storm.

Across from "The Shout" there is a small family run beer stand with flirty young (too young) daughters. I picked up a six-pack of Red Stripe and a few bottles of Ting, and walked back to Seaside One.

I crashed early that night, I don't do watches or clocks on vacations but it couldn't have been much past nine.

## **Saturday and Sunday**

I was up before dawn, stumbling disorientated around my new digs. I've come to love Negril at sun-up, the way it slowly wakes, rolls around for a while and then gets up for work. This morning I went out to the second floor balcony, sat at the small table and began to write in my journal. Somewhere in the garden I heard a gentle motion and looked over to see Mark getting the hose for what I would come to know as his watering ritual. Everyday, in the morning and in the evening Mark would be watering his new plants, coaxing them to take root in their new home.

The sun seemed to be in no hurry this morning, it was the new moon, the sky was blacker than usual and the ocean was a deep black void. Then almost imperceptibly over the next half hour

the sky turns every possible shade from deep purple to a hazy blue. Way out on the horizon the clouds are the first to react as the sun peeks over the hills behind me.

My morning meditation is usually performed on my stinky blue country style couch with some soft esoteric music playing and often a little incense burning. I sit quietly and sink into the music, raise my awareness, and with eyes closed and senses sharp I drift off to find the center of things. Some times are more satisfying than others, but the discipline has helped to quiet the voices in my head.

In Negril you never have to close your eyes to meditate, the such-ness of the place is so complete, so close to the center that you realize you're already there.

As the light strengthens the fishermen begin to work the reef, they work much closer to the cliffs than they do the beach. Most of the boats are small one man skiffs though a little farther out, larger craft with three to four men seem to be using traps.

Mark noticed me and came over to my porch and waited till I came back to earth and we said our good mornings. He invited me over for coffee and I enthusiastically said yes. Mark was living in Seaside Four which is on the second floor of the office or main structure. Seaside Four also survived Ivan and seemed no worse for wear.

Talking with Mark was cool. His book "Banana Shout" had taught me a lot about the old days of Negril, but raised many questions and avenues for discussion. The poor guy was at the mercy of my relentless inquiries. Mark had amazing stories about every famous and infamous visitor to these parts not to mention all the characters who came to live and work in paradise.

Mark told me he was thinking about killing a goat in the next few days to thank the stone masons for all their hard work, and to ask the gods to bless this new venture. In Jamaican, Caribbean and African culture the killing of the goat is a very meaningful gesture. Mark had killed a goat on the property across the street that he owned and it's still standing, no goat was killed on this side and it got hit. Now Mark never said there was any cause and effect here, but it was better to be safe than sorry, as the wise old Rastaman once said.

We talked in some depth about the killing of the goat, how the Rolling Stones named an album Goat's Head Soup after spending some time in Negril and participating in a goat killing event. I learned all about Mannish Water, AKA Goat's Head Soup which is actually made from the goat's head and his "mannish" parts. It purports to enhance your mannish prowess and make you "strong like bull." They take the rest of the goat and make "Curried Goat", now that's real Jamaican cuisine. I was excited about this meal and hoped Mark would go through with it. I'm always looking for real Jamaican experiences and this would be as real as it gets!

Saturday was housekeeping and communication day. I walked over to the little market a few blocks away and picked up all the essentials, Red Stripe, Ting, coffee, water, sugar, bread, eggs, bacon, milk, and some fruits and veggies. I felt good having a full refrigerator, again I was trying to be cost conscious on this trip and the prices at this little bodega were very low. Also Seaside One was so much more like a house than a hotel room that you lived there for the week, and not just slept there.

While walking back from the store I met a driver named Clive, he had the cleanest and most polished minivan I have ever seen. He talked me into being my driver for the day. I needed to go into town to send a few emails and to post a message on the board to communicate my impressions after a day in town to the Negril faithful concerned with the whitewashing of facts by the tourism folks.



Clive drove me crazy as we cruised into town. He hit me with every sales pitch one could possibly stuff into a ten minute drive, there was no way I would be driving anywhere else with this guy!

I went into an internet café on West End Road, the one with the hoochie-mama sign out front. I had an "Italian Ice", called a "Water Ice" in Philly, and I emailed my buddy Nick and my daughter Kristine.

I also posted on the Negril.com message board about how cool Banana Shout was. I think the lead was "Banana Shout Lives!!!" and the body was a thumbnail damage assessment on Negril and her environs.

After computer time I began walking into town, I planned a stroll along the beach then maybe a beer at Kuyaba, but after about half a mile I was sweating like a fat man in a sauna, because that's pretty much what I was. No sooner did I begin to rethink my plans then my new best friend Clive was pulling up next to me with the air conditioning on full blast.

"I LOVE YOU MAN!!!" I emoted as the door opened and the cold air hit me.

"Vinny, you need to watch yourself out here!!" Clive teased as we pulled away. "What kinds of fun you looking for this week? Clive is your friend, I take care of everything."

I guess Clive grows on you because as of that moment he was our driver for the week, and he did seem to be able to get everything we needed all week, though we didn't take him up on the young girls offered on every ride.

It was just after noon when I got back to "The Shout." I planned on spending the afternoon in the second story hammock, and that's what I did except for running downstairs for ice cold beers from our ice cold fridge from time to time.

Part of me felt bad just watching the workmen working so hard, of course I rationalized by thinking that this much work was probably a real windfall for these guys as full employment is rare in Jamaica. There were three crews working. One was building Seaside Two attaching the corrugated zinc roof and building something inside. Another was framing forms for the poured concrete walls and posts on Seaside Three. Then there were the stone masons, several guys shaping irregular limestone blocks and fitting them into place in the seawall like mosaic artists, and their two helpers mixing cement. Now that was hard work, these two were the lowest on the totem pole and I guess after some pre-determined time mixing cement with your eyes open and your mouth shut you graduate to stone mason.

A few days later I walked past a small yard about a hundred yards past LTU Pub where an old truck was dumping half dozen huge limestone boulders six to eight feet around into the yard. As I walked by I was floored to see the real low men on the totem pole that would be thrilled to be mixing cement all day. These guys had the job of breaking these huge boulders into small irregular blocks about ten to twelve inches around, loading them into barely functioning wheel barrows and bringing them to the various construction sites along the cliffs. There was no shade and I immediately stopped feeling sorry for myself having to walking uphill in the ninety degree heat, but in true Jamaican fashion when I made contact with one of these guys he flashed me a big bright smile and waved. I love this place!

Let me tell you, watching two guys mix cement by hand for hours on end is the most relaxing thing you can imagine, I'm not sure if it's the rhythmic scraping and shoveling sound, or if I was amazed watching the ingredients change form, or maybe I was just really baked. First they pile an assortment of sand and gravel in the center of what will become the patio, then they form

it into a ring just like when you make pasta, and add water into the center. The sand and water is mixed from the outside in, till it forms a smooth mortar.

I tried to figure out what kind of cement they were making, and what it would be used for before they brought it to its final destination. Wall mortar was thick and dry, medium concrete was poured into forms to make posts, and finally thin slurry was used like stucco to cover the cottage's cinderblock walls.

Later I climbed down the cliffs to the waterline to watch the sunset. I brought a few Red Stripes and a sandwich with me and had a little picnic. This is a great little place to hide from the world. The coolness of the water is like air conditioning. If the sun gets too intense there is plenty of shade in the shallow coral caves. It was a bit cloudy that night and the setting sun kicked up oranges, yellows, silver and gold from the water. Depending on the time of day you can see every color in the spectrum reflecting from the ocean, it's no wonder Caribbean art is so colorful and vibrant.

Being right on the waterline, I could see miles and miles in each direction and since the ocean is completely flat in all directions you get the feeling of looking through a wide angle lens and get a feel for the curvature of the earth.

Looking north towards the beach I could see a large craft coming my way. This wasn't a fishing boat and as it got closer I could see it was a large double hulled boat moving quickly. Closer still, I could hear music, and finally could see it was full of dancing partying people. It was a strange feeling because the cliffs were so deserted, but the all-inclusives were obviously well stocked.

It was hard to make out what boat it was since it was silhouetted by the sun, but it was coming straight for me, so it wasn't too long before I saw the name "Wild Thing" painted on the hull and a bunch of people frolicking on the deck. Damn, I needed to get into town. This boat was full of hotties! I waved and they all waved and back, I guess they were still making their nightly trips to Rick's Café maybe to ooh and aah at the destruction, but there'll be no cliff diving tonight. There must be a channel between the reef and the cliffs because the boat came only twenty yards from where I sat.

I laid down on my beach towel just inches above sea level and watched as the sun kissed the top of the ocean. Sailors of old say you can hear a hiss as the blazing sun hits the cool water.

I woke sometime later, it was dark and for a minute I didn't know where the hell I was. I laughed at myself, "Boy am I glad I didn't roll over."

One place you don't want to be just after sunset is near the water without bug repellent. I got bitten all over, and even with a cool shower and some of that bug bite stuff, I had a long restless night. I was tempted to go buy a bottle of over proof rum to knock myself out, but as the morning stirred I felt great.

I used a coffee percolator for the first time ever, running restaurants for years I knew the process, but back in days of percolators I was under the coffee drinking age. I cooked an egg, put jam on some sweetbread and went up to my balcony to enjoy my second Negril sunrise.

Out on the horizon there was a huge cargo ship I assumed was headed to the Montego Bay Freeport. I tried to use the zoom on my digital camera to read the ship's name but there was too much haze. I had more than a hundred and eighty degree view of the ocean that it took half the morning for the ship to cross my view.

It was Sunday in Negril which meant Selina's for the RealNegril.com webcast. This time I made sure I'd sent everyone a link to the site and was ready to mug for the camera. I walked out to West End Road figuring it wouldn't be long before a taxi came by, but as soon as I cleared the gate, I heard an engine start behind me and the unmistakable sound of Clive's voice.

"Vinny needs a ride? Where's Vinny going?" he said as he was right next to me.

"Hey Clive! How much to Selina's?" I didn't remember telling him about Selina's, I was beginning to think he was psychic.

"I'll give you a good price!" He countered, not answering my question.

I got in and told him I liked his van and how he always seems to know when I need a ride, but when I ask about price I expect an answer, I even told him I didn't care what he charged as long as it's fair. I really had no problem paying a premium for his good service and comfortable reliable transport.

One great thing about Clive is that he drives slow, really slow. I love to explore and I'm too lazy to walk all the way into town so this is a happy medium. I told him I'd be hanging out at the beach most of the day and I'd be starting back around three. I also told him Nick was coming tomorrow and we'd need a ride in the evening. I'd already made plans with Banana Shout's driver to pick up Nick, though I would have gladly paid twenty or thirty dollars US more for the comfort and charm of Clive's Island Tours.

Selina's wasn't too busy. October is one of the slowest times of the year in Negril and being only a few weeks post Ivan compounded the effect, but it was still nice to see Rob, Selina and her family, I met Coinmon and a woman named Laura I'd emailed off the board as I relentlessly posted my "sleeps" countdown.

I've been to Selina's many times and always have a great meal, but unfortunately since the hurricane there was no ackee thus no Jamaican breakfast, so I ordered Big Roy's famous Banana Pancakes. Woohh Hooo!! A definite 4 out of 5 angels on my "Heaven on a Plate" scale. The coffee is always great so I tried to buy some of Selina's famous beans, but she wasn't doing a roasting till later that week, this was great because I'd still be in town next Sunday and would be in for the webcast. This ten day vacation thing rocks!

It was overcast that morning so I took the opportunity to walk Beach Road all the way up to Firely, and out to the beach. The view from the water's edge was awesome, I hadn't seen the view from this end of the beach in a few years, and I was proud that I'd walked this far up and still had my breath. I'm not a beach person per se. I don't like to lay out slathered with oil. I'm also not a big swimmer, though I float pretty good, but I love to walk along the beach in the cool of the day, and since it was cloudy, the whole day was the cool of the day, so I seized the opportunity.

Walking up the road about three miles or so took an hour and a half, walking down the beach took about four. I do a lot of stopping. I love stopping at the little bars along the beach, talking to the bartenders and waitresses, and watching people walk by. Conversation comes easily for me, but it was easier still since the lack of tourists and Ivan were top of mind for everyone.

It was about four thirty when I popped out on Beach Road cutting though Travellers, I planned to stop in at the Yoga Center to say hi when Clive pulled up in his icy cold van. You gotta love this guy!

Back at "The Shout" Mark declared tomorrow was goat day! I was so excited that I was going to witness this pagan ritual, I steered all subsequent conversations goatward. Finally I realized I

might miss the whole thing because I was going to the airport to get Nick at eleven AM, which was right about goat time.

This brings me back to where I began this tale. Laying in my hammock with my lizard friend looking on, having enjoyed my quiet first three days, but looking forward to the more kinetic week ahead.

## The Day of the Goat

As far as pagan rituals go, goat sacrifice is definitely my favorite, mainly because the price of admission is so reasonable. No cult to join, no strange or unfashionable attire, no tongue-twisting incantations, nada! And the lack of these superfluties take nothing away from the experience, it was awesome, even the goat seemed to understand and be okay in his role.

I was up early, well before the sun. I made coffee and rolled several spliffs for the ride back from the airport with Nick, and at least one to spark my morning routine. I was enjoying myself on the lower balcony this morning listening to the “gleep gleep” of the Jamaican Tree Frogs, much more ganjafied than usual, when in clockwork fashion Mark appeared to begin his pre-dawn plant watering. The past few days we kind of acknowledged each other’s presence but didn’t actually speak till well after sunrise, today was different. There was a goat-y exhilaration in the air, and neither of us tried to hide our excitement for the new day.

Since hearing of goat blessing in the previous few days, I began to notice how many businesses in town had either a goat’s skull on the wall or on a shelf behind the bar, or had a tanned goat skin nonchalantly hung somewhere in their place. I told Mark about my findings with some amazement, and he looked at me in a “Whaddaya think I was bullshitting you?” kind of way. I guess some things take longer to sink in than others. This goat thing was new to me.

The wake and bake had done me in and I found myself sleeping on the downstairs cot after my morning shower. I was startled awake by a strange and annoying sound. It sounded metallic, like one of the guys brought some sort of broken down piece of construction equipment and the motor had a bent flywheel and it was scraping on concrete or the housing of whatever it was, jees it was irritating! Every time the noise would come, the guys, who seemed to be in the lot right behind my cabin laughed and or made comments. It was like one of them was trying to start the infernal machine but was having no luck and the Monday morning quarterbacks were giving him advice.

This seemed to go on and on, thus thoroughly shaking the cobwebs from my head. Suddenly the noise moved to the side of my house, like right outside the back door, and its character changed as now I was hearing it in my completely awoken state. I opened the door and my entire world seemed to crash in around me, it was a goat!! That sound was THE GOAT!!

All this goat talk, goat writing in my journal, casual goat conversations on the street and even goat cold-turkey as I fought the impulse to order curried goat which screamed to me from every menu I looked at! Never once, not for a second did it ever occur to me that I’d actually be meeting the damned goat!!

I didn’t know how to act! He was a stocky, healthy, cute little fellow. Was I supposed to pet him? My mother’s voice boomed in my head, “VINCENT! Don’t play with your food!” I was lost!

I’m a supermarket guy! I’d been to slaughterhouses, I’d even helped butcher a deer once, but these were controlled environments, I never met my dinner in such an “in your face” kind of way. It’s not like seeing a cow in a field and knowing in an abstract way that we eat cows, there he was. He was looking right at me!

God, I felt like such a chick!

All this happened in mere seconds. Mark broke thru my fog by calling over with a smile, "Hey don't name him!!" Everyone laughed.

"Damn!" I thought to my self, "I just called him Goat Dude, I hope I didn't jinx anything!!"

After a while things calmed down and the goat was tied to a tree in the yard to relax a little before being killed and eaten. I have to give it to the little guy, he was a feisty bugger. He just stood there proudly as if to say, "Naa-ah-ah!! Yeah Buddy, Eat Me!!"

The guys got to work while Mark sent one of them to the store to purchase the accoutrements for the special meal of Curried Goat and Mannish Water. Zero hour for Goat Dude was to be eleven AM, there was plenty of time.

I scurried up to my balcony to try to capture this experience in my journal, but looking back I guess I was a bit whelmed over and wasn't making much sense, no profound insight came through.

Gary, our driver, arrived at about ten AM and was ready to head out to the airport right away, but when he found out about the goat he chilled out and waited for the big moment. At about ten thirty the guys took a break and a few began washing up and standing near the goat. Mark called me to make sure I didn't miss anything, and with little fanfare it began.

Now this was not my moment. I didn't think it was appropriate to inject myself into the actual scene, so I stood back and took pictures of the once in a lifetime event.

Two of the stone masons took the goat and strung him up in the small tree by his hind legs. Mark took the knife, more like a straight razor actually, and posed with the guys and the goat like he was going to actually kill the goat. After a few photos everyone stood back and let the two stone masons, now butchers, do the deed.

It was much less gruesome than I expected, though I was ready for the Texas Chainsaw Massacre. One guy held the legs from kicking around. The other took the razor in one hand, and a large sponge like one used to wash a car in the other, and he simply slit the throat. There was very little blood. A third guy placed a bucket under the goat and after a few kicks the goat dude hung silently. The knife guy then cut off the entire head and held it up in the air to the cheers of all attending.

I was fascinated how well these guys knew how to skin and gut the animal as it hung from the tree. Americans would starve in the wild. I remember hearing my dad tell stories of killing chickens and plucking them for his mother, I guess people raised on farms still know about these things, but to us city folk it's as distant and foreign as a Fritz Lang film.

Soon the head was in a pail with the other mannish parts. Feet, heart, penis, scrotum, testicles, liver, spleen and a few other choice innards waiting for the water to get boiling, while the rest of the goat was being butchered for the Curried Goat.

By this time Gary and I were running late for the airport run, so we took off. Gary drove fast like a regular Negril taxi driver. We didn't talk much during the ride, I was in my own goat induced high and Gary was minding the potholes, another gift from hurricane Ivan.

After a bit of an ordeal, we found Nick and packed his bags into the tiny Japanese subcompact. Damn I missed Clive! But at least Gary drove fast, and we made it back to Negril in record time. So we wouldn't need to stop, I'd prepared all proper refreshments needed for the hour

plus ride. It was my plan to help Nick slow to Jamaica time as quickly as possible, but to hurry someone into slowing down doesn't work too well, though there was a certain level of day one decompression.

In the state I was in, I'm sure the main subject on the return airport trip was the goat, and luckily Nick knows me well enough to filter my over-animated prattling to grasp the concept and the significance of the situation we were walking into.

Nick had just finished reading Mark's book on the plane and was in the ideal frame of mind to jump right into a Jamaican cultural experience as we entered the Banana Shout gates.

"Hi! I just finished your book!" Nick beamed as he shook hands with Mark.

"Thank You and welcome! You picked a great day to show up!" said Mark, motioning to the cooking area.

The next few hours were a mixture of unpacking, goat discussions, Red Stripe, Ting and ganja, lots of ganja! Nick was as thrilled with the place as I had been. It was still a construction site, but today work was stopping early, and about four in the afternoon everyone gathered near the boiling cauldron of Goats Head Soup. I know "boiling cauldron" is a bit over the top, but this was truly an over the top situation.

One of the guys ladled the soup in into styrofoam cups and began passing them around. It's hard to describe the taste of Goat's Head Soup. It was a bit like gamey chicken soup, though a bit heavier. Very spicy and flavorful thanks to the chef of the day, but as I got to the bottom of my cup there were things in there I couldn't identify.

"Don't worry, we ate the testicles earlier!" Mark assured me as he caught me looking suspiciously in my cup.

"Ok, in that case..." Nick countered, and began devouring the unidentified chunks of, Jah knows what.

I wish I could say I did the same, but I whimped out and only ate the vegetable looking things, though I'm sure I got some foot, penis or goat guts anyway.

There is something magical about Goat's Head Soup, no sooner did we drink it did we really become part of the celebration. Maybe the guys seeing us bravely consuming brought us into their confidence, or maybe the act of eating the soup, it actually becoming part of us, gave us that visceral understanding of the reality we were facing. Either way, I had a feeling of complete presence, of momentary enlightenment, every fiber of my being was aware and a part of all that was happening around me.

The Negril sun backlit the celebration as the Curried Goat was served over a generous portions of rice. The white rice against the bright green dish was mesmerizing, it was beautiful. When Mark handed me my plate, I felt like I was in a church, the same hollow silence seemed to engulf you, although people were talking all around. A solemnity to eating something killed before your eyes for a very specific purpose far beyond that of simple nourishment. The essence of the first taste exploded into my mouth, and a feeling began to come over me, an excitement of spiritual energy and a connection with everyone there. I wanted to think I was just really stoned, and just feeling an irie vibe, then I looked around to knowing smiles and nods of understanding, and I knew. Praise Jah!

Along with everything else the meal was delicious! There were no seconds, the cook eyed his portions perfectly and was scraping the corners of the pot as the last pilgrim was fed. There

were about a dozen of us sitting around in some sort of group trance when Mark pulled out a small bottle of over-proof rum, I wish I remembered the exact details of the rum blessing, I just rode the wave and reacted to Mark's directions.

Mark passed me the bottle and I took a drink and passed it back, he then passed it to Nick who also took a sip, which kind of shook me from my daze. Nick hadn't touched alcohol in ten years, and the fact that he made this exception made me realize he was as swept up in the moment as I was. Mark offered us beers with our meals, and when he found out Nick didn't drink, he instantly knew and appreciated Nick's participation in the event, they became fast friends.

As the sun began to set, Nick and I began to plot out the week's activities. Nick's birthday was Thursday 10/14 so I said we should visit Tedd's Shroom Boom that day, Nick countered, "Let's go now!" And we did.

We walked out to the street and hopped in a cab and we were off for sunset at Tedd's.

### **Banana Shout Post Goat**

I don't remember telling him to hurry, but our driver was a lead foot. The signs whooshed by, as the setting sun threw a bright copper light on their faces. I know I was still in a goat induced stupor, but it was beautiful.

Every time I ride thru Negril I try to place my location on the map in my head, as if tracking myself on an imaginary GPS. I feel the need to play this Jamaican geography game because of all the maps in the bibliography of Negril, there isn't one drawn to scale!

I'm a map guy! Ever since I was a kid it was my job to read the map, to be the co-pilot. On my family's now legendary vacations, my Dad would give me the map and it would be my job to keep us on track. Really, for me, the vacation started when the package of Exxon maps arrived with an orange highlighted route to our main destinations. I would spend hours scouring those maps and reading about every "Point of Interest" and daydreaming about our trip. Of course all this made me feel very important, hell I was 8, and without my deft map reading skills, Jah knows where the hell we would have ended up. I scheduled rest stops, I calculated miles till our tank needed filling, and I drove my sisters nuts with trivial map trivia. Looking back I realize that I'd been had! We were going to Florida for god's sake, there's only one damned road! Though back then it did change names a few times along the way. Even so, I'm still a map guy.

Soon my mental map told me we'd made it to Tedd's Shroom Boom. Walking into the yard we were greeted professionally by Garland's son (I wish I knew his name). The young man was growing up, though I spared him the "you're getting so big" line, but I remembered fondly the day he and my former girlfriend played with his dog in the yard behind the cottage.

Garland, on the other hand, never changes. He greeted us with smiles and handshakes. We took seats on the porch till as he boiled water and brewed his world famous tea. The three of us made goat and mushroom infused small talk as the sun set and a warm darkness came over the yard.

You're never ready for mushroom tea. At least I'm not, I've had it a dozen times and every time I'm shocked, appalled and horrified by the overwhelmingly bad taste. I don't want Garland to think me ungrateful or critical. I'm sure he makes it as delicious as anything that grows in shit can be! Ooh, I get a full body shiver just thinking about it!

It may be the time of year, it may have been Ivan, but the shroomage was milder than my last

few visits, and I was very cool with that. After the goat-citement all day, I wasn't up for anything more than a mild mind expansion.

Back at "The Shout" we mostly chilled for the night. The tea, mixed with Nick's spliffs, served to keep the talk mellow and the vibes irie.

We spent a lot of time with Mark that night, by this time I'd been hanging out with him for four days, and today there was a change. After the unimaginable stress of watching your life's work get washed away on the Weather Channel, then the horror of coming "home" to Negril and seeing your worst fears brought to life. This is the part I think is so cool, because instead of crying over spilt Red Stripe, Mark took action, inspired action really. He got the renewal going immediately.

We arrived only three weeks later and well more than half the heavy lifting was done. For Mark Goat-Day was a milestone, the re-dedication of his "salty piece of land" and the simultaneous defiance and acquiescence to the gods. "I'm staying!! But yeah, I get your point!"

The locals seemed also to be philosophical about all the devastation and loss. I love this about the Jamaican people, maybe it's because they live so much closer to nature than we do in the states, and they understand the give and take on a very deep level. Living in concrete America nature is something we manage, something that occasionally gets in our way. We have snow tires and raincoats, sun block and galoshes. The Jamaicans don't see the enmity between them and nature, they're in nature, they are nature. We think of nature of something you see on Animal Planet, a good reason for weekend camping trips to the Poconos, and of course the RV has a microwave and cable TV. There are so many things about the life they lead that gives me pause. This is the overriding everything for me. They get it. We've lost it.

Is that why so many of us come back to Negril year after year? We tell our friends we need to escape from reality for a week, when really we are escaping *to* reality.

Don't get me wrong Jamaicans are in no means a society of monks living in an enlightened state, humming in orange robes. It's not like that, hell for that matter I'll bet a Tibetan monastery isn't like that either. I guess it's easier to look at a picture, read an article and make distinctions the last for a lifetime than to get out and see the world!

The next morning I woke before dawn, tiptoeing thru the kitchen area to make coffee, I heard voices on the yard. It was Mark and Nick discussing Negril things as Mark did his morning water ritual.

After a phattie the size of a baby's arm, Nick and I wandered onto the street and set out to meet our neighbors. Over and over, people we met seemed surprised that we didn't bail for the week.

We met Sampson, a local tough who told us he runs this area, and if we need anything we should go see him. At first he sounded pretty convincing till we met another guy a hundred yards closer to town who told us the same thing.

A bit farther down the road we met a guy names Robert. Robert was a carver, and he was rebuilding his roadside stand. As we approached he looked up and noticed us approaching, "Hey Mon! Where dat pretty young girl a yours!"

Great line, I thought, first it denoted familiarization, and second it propped up the machismo with the "pretty young girl" thing. Good job Robert!

Robert was a tall handsome Jamaican man with a few pickneys milling about. Want made him



most impressive was that he really did recognize Nick, and was actually referring to a former Negril trip companion.

Nick and Robert greeted each other like long lost friends, and then Robert turned the familiarity into the smoothest of sales pitches.

Then in what I assumed was an ingenious way of totally disarming a prospective higgler Nick said, "Hey, last time I was in Negril I got this really unique mushroom carving, I've never seen another like it. It's sitting on my TV and I need one for the other side."

Robert looked puzzled, but also looked beaten, for he had no unique mushroom carving. Not to be foiled he countered, "I keep an eye out for one, all a da beach sellers buy from me. You come see me inna few days."

Wow, I thought my, "I'm trying to conserve cash, and I'm doing all my buying on X" (I fill in whatever is to be my last day in town) was a smooth move, but to add to the authenticity of Nick's little ploy was he was actually telling the truth! He really did need a unique mushroom carving! Now that's devious on a whole other level.

Soon we were at "Sips & Bites." I'd heard of the place, but somehow it's not a featured breakfast place in the normal Negril lexicon, which was fine by us, no crowd, great food and fast service.

We sat down and a sweet matronly woman dressed in professional waitress garb approached us and offered coffee and menus. We asked if they had Jamaican Breakfast and she said, "Of course we do, you're in Jamaica." Most places weren't serving the National Dish of Ackee and Saltfish with calaloo and johnny cakes because Ivan blew the ackee off the trees.

"Would you like to start with some porridge, I just finished making it." She beamed proudly.

"Absolutely! Sounds great!" I replied, but was really thinking, "Porridge?" Sounds nasty, in a Charles Dickens kind of way, but what else could I say? I had to say yes, it was like your favorite aunt offering you a delicious plate of her famous Kidney Stew, you have to eat it!

In about a minute she returned with juices and two soup cups of porridge. We looked at each other intrepidly. She stood there to watch us take our first taste, and being good sports we dug in. By the time the spoon neared my mouth, the sweet pleasant cinnamon, vanilla and honey aroma filled my nostrils and made my mouth water. As the stuff hit my tongue the flavor explosion was intense, it was like oatmeal on steroids! It was the kind of good that made you wanted to lift the bowl and slurp it down, but you hold back because you want to make the pleasure last as long as possible because it's something you don't get everyday, kind of like sex with a beautiful woman, well, for me anyway.

Walking back to our cottage we met a Rasta family with a pumpkin soup stand, we stopped to talk and promised to be back this afternoon for a few bowls. I didn't even know they had pumpkins in Jamaica.

Back at Banana Shout there was a bit of commotion over a new tenant who was taking up permanent residence there. Andy was an interesting fellow with an interesting personality, though it took a while for him to come out of his shell, but once he did he seemed to fit right in. Andy was a turtle.

The main part of the turtle pond was complete and the new resident seemed quite content in his new digs. Tomorrow Alex and Mark would build a waterfall to give his new home some needed ambiance.

After late morning naps and watching several rounds of cement mixing we headed to the little grocery store for supplies. We bought Ting, Red Stripe and a sack full of Jackass Crackers. On the way back we met the Rasta Pumpkin folks again and we each took a bowl back home for lunch.

We pretty much chilled till dinner time, since the heat of the day was a bit oppressive. For dinner we walked over to LTU Pub, which was pretty close by. I had some kind of chicken thing and though I love the LTU, I wasn't impressed. It was sunset time on a Tuesday and we were the only ones there. I guess with Rick's closed no one was venturing into the cliffs.

That night we relaxed, but as the night wore on I began to feel uncomfortable at first, then queasy, then downright ill! Before I knew it I was praying to the porcelain god, hugging Johnny, you get the picture. It wasn't pretty, though I did enjoy being reacquainted with all the wonderful meals I had that day!

I was done. I couldn't even hold down water or worse yet, Red Stripe! The night was fitful and the next morning didn't hold much promise. Since I was empty, I felt fine. I was just a bit light headed, but as soon as we left Sips & Bites, I had to leave some Sips & Bites on the roadside. So it went all day on Wednesday, no bueno!

Thursday morning I had an idea. No more Ting! Maybe the acid was doing bad things. I switched to water and Red Stripe, and by lunchtime I was feeling much better! So much so, in fact, that we chipped in with Mark for a spicy Brown Stew dinner prepared by Anne Marie the housekeeper.

While she was cooking we realized we needed more cash, so we headed down the road. By this time it was late afternoon and I felt so good to be feeling better and looking forward to my first full meal in two days. We didn't get more than a hundred yards down the road when Clive pulled up, again as if by magic.

"He really is Psychic," Nick said as we haggled for a ride into town.

I'm a Scotia Bank regular, but Clive took us to the National Commercial Bank in the other grocery store in town. I'd only ever gone to the HiLo, but this place seemed a bit nicer.

I tell ya, Anne Marie missed her calling, she should be a chef! The meal was beyond description, it had that nameless quality that only home cooking has. She offered to cook for us again if we wanted her to.

Everyone at Banana Shout adjourned to their separate vantage points to watch the sunset. I was on the first floor porch, Nick was up in the second story hammock, and Mark was on his balcony while Alex and Anne Marie sat at a table near Andy's pond. Physically separated but joined by the great meal and a beautiful sunset, soft music floated in from a car parked across the road. I wondered if everyone felt as I did.

## **A Friday in October**

The second story bedroom in Seaside One at Banana Shout is amazing for sleeping, Nick and I got to calling it "The Bamboo Lung." Screened windows all around with wooden slats similar to those crank operated glass slat windows your grandmother had on her porch. This type of window is very common in Negril at least in the non-air conditioned part of town. Up here the slats were fixed three-quarters open, perfect for privacy and air flow while keeping the sunlight at bay. Add to this a very efficient ceiling fan, and even in the heat of the October afternoon, this room is a cool retreat.

It was Friday morning, early morning, I don't know what time. I lay in my bed staring at the ceiling fan cutting the humid pre-dawn air. I was wide awake and feeling great! Two and a half days of being sick were definitely in the rear view, and I felt all that Negril energy popping, calling me to begin my day. I couldn't lay still any longer.

I stood in "The Bamboo Lung" looking out to the ocean, I was so happy to be back to normal that I decided not to waste a minute of my last three days in paradise. I quietly walked out onto the veranda. I looked at the hammock and then out to sea. I had a strong feeling that I needed to be out there, so I tiptoed across the room and down the stairs. As I moved the feeling grew, some force was drawing me to the sleepy coral cliffs, I walked past the coffee maker, grabbed a half smoked spliff from the ash tray and before I knew it I was standing with my toes just inches from the cliff's edge.

There was no moon this morning, the sky was crystal clear and a zillion stars peeked thru the firmament to greet me. The pitch black ocean was non-existent visually, yet I could feel its life force everywhere at once. Its gentle breeze flowed around and through me, energizing me as I stood at the precipice, lost in time and space, eyes open, fully aware, mind quiet.

I have no idea how long that moment lasted, just that like all such moments, not long enough, but probably just long enough. I walked down closer to the waters edge, either my eyes or my mind had focused to the situation, because I could see every detail of the limestone steps and below me and the coral cliff beside me. I sat on a tiny out cropping in the cliff with my feet resting in the water. I began to time my deep breaths with the rhythmic splashes of the tiny waves at my feet and again was lost in the quiet search for the center of all things.

Part of me could see a fisherman about a hundred yards off shore, quietly checking his traps. Mark was stirring, I could hear the hose way off in the distance. The street was coming alive then finally the cock began to crow, morning was here for the rest of Negril, but for a few precious moments I had it all to myself. As I walked back to fire up the coffee pot I realized the half-smoked spliff was still in my pocket.

A cool shower and half a cup of coffee later Nick came trundling down the stairs immediately knowing I was back to normal.

"Weclome Back," he said as he fumbled for a coffee mug.

"Thanks Man, I feel great!" And I did.

"What time is it, I'm starving!"

"Not sure exactly, but the sun is just coming up which means it's five or five thirty-ish"

"Which means three hours-ish till Sips & Bites, didn't you buy eggs?"

"Yeah and bread too, make some breakfast!" I said, all of the sudden feeling hungry.

"Two Mushroom Omelets, coming right up!!" Nick seemed wide awake as he flashed an evil grin and a baggie of mushrooms!

Sometime around mid morning, with our bellies and our heads full, and giggling like drunken girl scouts, we set out to find out where West End Road turned into Lighthouse road.

It was nice walking weather, not as oppressively hot as it had been all week and soon we were at the Negril Lighthouse. It's funny, from Banana Shout it seems like it's around the next bend,

but it's probably a good half a mile. Looking up at the impressive structure, I realized I had never visited it before nor did I know much about it. Generally I'm a wealth of worthless knowledge, but the Negril Lighthouse file was all but empty. I approached excitedly, hoping to fill this knowledge void, but alas it was closed due to Ivan damage. A big pile of stones blocked the entrance while a few mean looking and well armed guards gave us the hairy eyeball.

Part of me wanted to keep going and check-out "The Westender Inn" and on to Negril's south shore, but the out of shape part of me won out so we headed back towards "The Shout."

As we headed up the barely paved road, we began to hear music blaring from somewhere. The music added rhythm to our trudges the closer we got it became obvious that it was coming from a Jamaican guy rocking out with some kind of Karaoke machine. As we got closer I began to figure out the lyric.

"Hey boys come-a-over-ere  
Da Paarty is whatcha gettin' neer  
Don't cha just a be a-walk-a by  
Da music would make ya wanna fly"  
and on and on.

"Hey Fellas whatcha name" the man shouted with the aid of his loudspeakers.

"Nick" replied Nick.

Then booming across the yard, "Nick Nick Nick Nicky Nick  
Rexy's place will do da trick  
Anyting yar lookin far, I and I show you da door"  
and on and on again.

Well with an invitation like that we had to make an adjustment to our plans and check this guy out.

We walked across the yard to a pavilion of sorts with the name Sexy Rexy's painted in faded letters across the front. The place was pretty sparse, a few picnic tables and a makeshift bar in the back. A youngish man offered us Red Stripes and Ting, we got one of each.

From the time we turned from the street into the yard known as Sexy Rexy's the older man who enticed us in with his rasta flavored rapping, had been singing a song with unintelligible words, but with all the gusto he could muster. We sat at a bench and relaxed out of the heat and enjoyed the entertainment such as it was. Soon the song was done and he enthusiastically came over and introduced himself.

"I am Sexy Rexy" he proudly stated with a big smile, and as we introduced ourselves I remembered hearing of this guy though I didn't know any details.

I'm not sure how to describe Sexy Rexy, saying he was a character would be a gross understatement. Part ex-street higgler, part Rastaman, with just a bit of pirate thrown in. We found ourselves spellbound within the world of his stories. He spoke in length about Ivan, by figuratively walking us down Lighthouse Road, colorfully describing the damage and the current state of every property from Jackie's on the Reef to The Yacht Club.

When he found out we were at Banana Shout, he told us of he and Mark's decades long friendship in story form, of course, telling tales of Negril's past from the Jamaican vantage point. We could have stayed all day, but the pangs of hunger and the need for a ganja refill said it was time to go.

Sexy Remy went back to his music and set out to lure in a preppy looking couple coming up the road. As we passed them they asked what was over at Remy's and I replied, "Jamaica." An adventurous smile grew on the cute older woman's face and dragged hubby towards Remy.

As we walked away I heard Sexy Remy say over the loud speaker, "Hey sista whatcha name"

After a spliff or three and an afternoon nap, the sun grew heavy in the sky. I remembered it was Friday night, so I hopped in the shower, shaved, poofed my hair and put on my loudest Hawaiian shirt. We're going to 3 Dives!!

3 Dives is about the best restaurant in the world, great food, great people, cold beer, and a sunset that defies description. No one was diving tonight, the webcast was rolling and we took our time hanging out with strangers who became friends.

## The Final Days

Saturday morning's calm was punctured by Mark calling to a fisherman a few hundred yards off the cliff.

"Poglai?" He shouted, hose in hand.

"Ya Mon" Replied the fisherman.

Mark called Alex over and had him cut a deal with the fisherman for about 3 pounds of Poglai (It may have been Toglai).

Mark told us this tasty reef fish is only available in the fall and is a local delicacy! Your average Poglai/Toglai is about nine inches long and quite meaty. Ann Marie cooked them while we were out gallivanting and they were sitting in our refrigerator when we returned.

As with most fish in Negril they were cooked whole and looked like they were pan fried with some kind of spices. I don't know how they tasted hot, but cold they were a real treat! As soon as we were done we sought out Mark and Ann Marie to thank them.

Hanging out this week at Banana Shout with Mark, Ann Marie and the rest of the crew added innumerable insights to Jamaica, Jamaican life, and the expatriate experience.

If I ever write a book of my travels it will be called "An American Expatriate in Negril - A Week at a Time." That's the flavor of my experiences in Negril, an expatriate for a week. I try to drop into the Jamaican lifestyle as fast as possible and roll with it for the entire trip. I so envy friends who go native for extended periods, the freedom must be amazing! Usually the worst time in Jamaica is the few moments you let yourself dwell on the impending trip back to the so called real world. To put that off for a month or more, wow. Now, that's a trip I'm definitely going to take! Someday.

On Sunday the boys went to town. We were going to get some breakfast, do our souvenir shopping and see where the day would take us.

Clive picked us up around 10AM and we headed to Selina's for breakfast and the Sunday Brunch Webcast. It was Nick's first time to the Selina's for a webcast, but he realized he'd been to Selina's before.

The joint was jumpin'! Cowboy and Dave were doing their thing while we stuffed ourselves with Big Roy's Banana Pancakes. I ordered a few pounds of coffee and we hung around for about an hour meeting and greeting fellow boardies.

We made our way down the strip towards the Craft Market, meeting many disappointed higglers who found us full of ganja and heading out of town tomorrow. It was early afternoon by the time we got to the Craft Market and there were thunderclouds threatening.

The Craft Market had not bounced back from Ivan yet, more than half the shops were closed and almost all of the apparel had been soaked by the hurricane and had a sickly yellow tinge to them. Most of the carvings were the imported and painted crap first timers buy.

Several times the sellers frustrations of not selling, met our annoyance of being sold at! It was as stressful a time as I've ever had in Negril, and the now driving rain didn't help much!

We knew exactly what we wanted, I resigned myself to getting my nieces and nephews t-shirts at the airport, but I was looking for a unique carving for my daughter and Nick was losing faith that his week long search for a unique mushroom carving was in vain.

Finally we met a guy who said he was the "Maker." Unfortunately, though he was the maker, which was good, his stuff was not to our liking, which was bad. I bought a coral necklace from him anyway, for effort.

But this gave us the idea of asking for the "Maker!" Jah bless them, Jamaicans can twist, back pedal and obfuscate with the best of them, but they can't lie very well when asked a direct question.

Finally we found one "Maker" who had just what I wanted for Kristine, my spirits soared! One down!

There was a guy that had been following us, pleading for us to come and look at his stuff, "Are you the "Maker?" we asked.

His reply hooked us. He said that if we didn't like what we saw he would make us anything we wanted. That got Nick's attention. We went into his small shop which was more workshop than storefront. We looked around and his stuff was cool, but all too big and no Magic Mushrooms carvings.

He asked Nick to describe in detail what he wanted. So, with his hands he sculpted the air into his ideal shape. "The Maker" pulled out a raw piece of mahogany about six inches square and twelve inches long. Nick took the piece of lumber and held it as "The Maker" explained exactly how he would free the mushroom carving trapped in the wooden block. Nick was sold!

Then the haggling began. Nick had planned on spending \$30 to \$40US for the carving, but "The Maker" started at \$80. After several feigned walk outs the price was \$40 now and \$10 more on delivery. "The Maker" asked where we were staying and said he would drop it off at Banana Shout at 7PM.

Walking up to the corner in the now light drizzle of rain to wait for Clive, I told Nick, "You know you just lost forty bucks."

Nick was philosophical, "Well at least I'll have a story of how I "didn't" get my mushroom carving!"

Standing at the corner waiting for Clive, every cab driver in Negril tried to get us to ride with him. At first it was funny, then annoying, and they just kept coming. I wish we would have counted. There were at least twenty five, if not thirty, no kidding!

Soon Clive appeared and we were back at "The Shout" in minutes.

After some herbal relaxation and showers we each took a late afternoon nap. I woke up and it was dark, Shit! I missed my last sunset!

"Last night dinner, you call it!" I shouted to Nick from downstairs where I was still half sleeping.

"3 Dives, Shit Butt!!" He eloquently replied.

As we were enjoying our pre 3 Dives hunger enhancing spliff, Alex came to our door saying some guy had been outside for an over an hour saying that he had something for us. Puzzled we walked out to the street behind Alex, and to both Nick and my astonishment "The Maker" was standing there holding a bag, beaming with pride.

He pulled his Fungi Masterpiece out of the bag and it was exactly what Nick had been describing to Negril's crafty crowd all week! Nick gave him \$20US, ten more than they'd agreed on and triumphantly marched it back to our house. He hid it in his stuff and off to 3 Dives we went!

This was my third 3 Dives dinner in ten days and it was delicious as always, it was dark and as crowded as we'd seen it all week. I guess some of the all inclusive folks were feeling daring!

We stayed up late that night smoking, reminiscing and writing in our respective journals. It was actually light when I got up.

A family of ants had found their way into my bag of sugar and I did my best to not add any to my morning coffee, but I'm sure I got a little extra protein.

I sat out on the porch of Seaside one with my coffee and stared off to the horizon, lost in my thoughts. Just then one of the cement mixing guys came up to the porch with a new looking gym bag.

He told me earlier in the week, he was a jewelry maker and planned to move to Negril and make his fortune. I told him to come by before we left and I'd be his first customer. He'd actually spent a few breaks this past week telling us of his plans, so I was happy he came back.

He opened his bag and there were a huge assortment of beautiful necklaces and bracelets. I needed a few birthday gifts so I picked three necklaces and asked how much. He was so excited to sell me something his haggling skills weren't very sharp.

He told me each necklace was \$10US, but when I offered him \$10 for all three, he not only took it, but gave me another one! Then he thanked me, hugged me goodbye and gave me a woven friendship bracelet that I tied to my ankle (its still there).

Nick and I walked down to Sips and Bites for our fifth or sixth breakfast of the week. The place is awesome, as the week went on the portions grew, the bill shrank, and the tips more than doubled.

As we walked back to “The Shout” we knew it was time to say goodbye to our friends. We shook hands with Mark and Alex. Then we each hugged and got pictures with Ann Marie. All too soon Gary was there and we packed out bags into his car.

A sadness came over me that I’d never known when leaving Negril. This trip was more than just a week of partying. I’d met some really great people, and I had some truly unique experiences.

I promised myself that I would share these experiences, take the writings from my private journals and put them out there to see what happens.

Moving forward, I’d live a little free-er, take more chances, open my heart and share my art.

As Banana Shout disappeared around a corner, I knew that I’d finally found a place in Negril I will definitely come back to.