

The Road To Negril (Circa 2/94)

By Vinny Bogan

I consider myself lucky to have experienced "The Road to Negril" at least once before the new road came through. It was February 1994 and "Highway 2000" was still a sketch on someone's planning board. I know many of the more seasoned Negrilistas will read this and think, 1994? You should have seen it in '68, back then we had to hack our way through the jungle, it was uphill, BOTH WAYS!"

I totally give in. I'm sure I missed so much, though I bet someday my daughter will say, "Oh, how I long for the Negril I knew before the Spaceport!"

It was my first trip to Jamaica. I was about to turn thirty, recently divorced, my first vacation since my honeymoon 10 years earlier. I was traveling alone and was headed to Hedonism II. I got off the plane, through immigration, baggage and customs, and then I was herded onto the Hedo mini-bus. It was all a blur.

Sitting on the bus as people filed in, I was so excited! There I was, in a real foreign country on a beat up old bus with about a dozen other people headed to paradise for 5 days of hedonistic wildness! After a few minutes and a few official looking people poking their heads into the bus, a large imposing black man got on, he looked us over, did a head count and scribbled on some papers. Suddenly a big smile erupted on his face as he introduced himself, "My name is Satchwell, The Driver, Two Hours to Hedonism!" We all cheered! We were on our way to Negril!

As soon as we cleared the airport complex Satchwell started handing back ice cold Red Stripes from a red cooler on the floor between the front seats. The second that cold beer hit the back of my throat my stress level began dropping. Ya Mon!

Driving through Montego Bay was wild. You have the beautiful azure Caribbean Ocean out one window and a bustling third world city scene out the other. Wow, I was really in another country, I could tell by the Burger King and the KFC. The poverty was obvious, the people seemed happy. I had a hard time getting my mind around it all.

About two beers out of Montego Bay (it wasn't Mobay for me yet) we stopped for a pee break. There just happened to be a series of makeshift craft stalls for us to peruse as we got out to pee or to stretch our legs. Aggressive higglers like carnival barkers called from every stall, "We got da real Jamaican carvings here" or "Best prices on in Jamaica, you pay more in town." They sold everything from souvenirs to TV's, even a carburetor for an 84 Honda Civic. Hedonism was all-inclusive but I was skeptical about that and wanted to preserve my cash. So, I just bought a couple cold six-packs since Satchwell's stash was running low.

Back on the bus, the alcohol buzzes started on the plane were getting back to party strength. Ya Mon! There was no air conditioning and the Jamaican sun felt great on my pasty white skin. I was wearing jeans and a t-shirt so the only thing I could do to keep cool was to drink more Red Stripes and keep my window down. Several women on the bus weren't so inhibited. They decided to change into their bikinis right there on the bus! Can I get another Ya Mon!?! Oh, this was going to be a fun week!

We drove through a series of small towns, we saw school children in neat uniforms doing the things children do, people working, walking and waiting for busses. Several times while we slowed in traffic, young men with baggies full of ganja seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere. I'd read of a place called "The Ganja Bridge" it was famous for this type of activity, but I never noticed it happening near any bridges. It was cool seeing how the people here live.

This is a poor country but no one seemed angry or gloomy. Hell, its 89 degrees in February how gloomy could you be?

A great part of the road to Negril was the town of Lucea. Pronounced "Lucy" by her residents, the horseshoe shaped harbor with its panorama of lush green mountains took my breath away. The town itself is but a shell of its storied past. In colonial times it was Montego Bay's big sister. A major port town, its small natural harbor, regional sugar plantations and the Lucea Yam, brought captains from all over the world to trade and supply their ships.

One of my favorite and uniquely Jamaican stories is how the majestic clock tower in the Lucea town square got there. Sometime around 1817, a large clock was ordered by the island of St Lucia. Things got screwed up and this large ornate clock showed up at the port of Lucea. The townspeople were so enamored with this huge clock that they decided not to give it back. A local German merchant built a clock tower for their newfound booty on the condition that he would have sole discretion in the design, thus its resemblance to an old Prussian infantry helmet. St Lucia soon found out their clock was keeping Lucea on schedule and petitioned the British for restitution. Lucea's townspeople eventually anteed up and to this day the old clock keeps perfect time!

After leaving Lucea we stopped near Cousins Cove for another pee/commerce break. This place was a much more laid back than our earlier stop. People lived here it wasn't a market town or a tourist trap. My bus mates went to look at the food and craft offerings, while a girl named Lisa and I walked across the road to this little bar/jerk shack to see if we could get her a glass of water. Lisa was an attractive woman, albeit a very drunk one, who seemed to be a third wheel with an older couple (I didn't ask). We walked into the yard and a pretty teenage girl welcomed us. The vibe was very different here, not just a store, this was a family's home in the country.

We walked into the bar, Lisa found her water and I ordered a beer. In the corner was an old man wearing a bright green, yellow and red knit hat that contained huge amounts of dreadlocked hair. He was the most authentic looking Rastaman imaginable, right out of the Lonely Planet Travel Guide though not as scary in person. I smiled at him and he nodded and said, "I tirsty mi fren. H'bout ya get me ona doze beers?" I smiled, slid him my beer and ordered another. He smiled back and I turned to make small talk with Lisa who was becoming more and more beautiful with every swig of Red Stripe.

Soon the old man began laughing. Ok I thought, old men in the subway do that all the time. I turned to see what he was so funny and I realized it was me! I guess he'd caught me staring hopefully at Lisa's humongous breasts, breasts that seemed to be in a constant struggle for freedom against the bounds of her teeny bikini top. I was of course rooting against the bikini top. Still laughing, the old man rattled off a string of unintelligible patois I could never hope to repeat here, but the gist of it was, "lady, you should buy a t-shirt before Fatboy's eyes bug out!" I laughed; it seemed the right thing to do. Lisa laughed too, somehow knowing her boobs were the subject of conversation. I'm sure they often were.

Without another word the old man pulled out a huge spliff and lit it. I was surprised! Doing that in Philadelphia would have you in handcuffs before your eyes could turn red. Smiling at my apprehension he just toked away and the aromatic, sweet ganja smoke filled the room. After about a minute his friendly work worn hand emerged from the purple cloud. I took the spliff and I hit it slowly, not wanting cough like an amateur. Within seconds a warm feeling filled me that was more than the ganja. Mmmm, I sat back against the bar and closed my eyes. Ya Mon, I like Jamaica!

As the three of us toked on the cigar-sized spliff, the old man broke into a story. I could barely understand a word of it. I doubt if Lisa could either. It had something to do with Rastas, his father, the Maroons and tourists from "The States." His three-toothed grin was warm and

genuine while his grey and black matted dreads danced around his face punctuating every line. Often he'd touch my shoulder or hand, his black eyes twinkled as the dramatic tale ranging from raucous laughter to near whispering seriousness unfolded. I'd hoped to have a true "Island Experience" on this trip, never once did I think it would happen an hour out of Mobay while still on the road to Negril.

Just then Satchwell stuck his head in and said, "Saddle-Up", which sadly meant, "We're leaving."

As I turned to leave the old man stopped me and toasted me with his beer, "Mutual Respect Mon." It was like we were old friends parting. I didn't know how to react, it didn't help that I was stoned out of my gourd. He bumped my fist with his, he looked me in the eye and said, "You and Me, Mutual Respect." I replied "Mutual Respect," the intensity of the moment was palpable, this was important. I got it! Man-to-man, better yet, person-to-person, One Love, Mutual Respect.

Lisa was already stumbling back to the bus as I walked to the yard. The pretty girl was beaming, she knew something, I said goodbye.

Wow, what a moment, I felt great! Yeah I know I was so baked I could barely see, but I knew it was more than that. It took me a long time to realize, but the Jamaican bug had just bitten me and the only treatment is to come back again and again.

I got on the bus and Satch gave me a knowing look, being paranoid I thought it was the smoldering spliff in my hand or maybe he knew the old Rasta man. I sat next to Lisa and asked Satch if I could light up, he smiled and said not till after the next bridge. Several of our fellow passengers had also scored ganja and the bus was cloudy with thick smoke by the time our rear wheels cleared that next bridge.

Lisa and I shared our spliff and as soon as it was done she went back to her kinky threesome thing in the back of the small bus (I still didn't ask).

The bus got really crazy now, the reggae was blasting and the women were dancing topless in the isles. People honked and waved as we drove by. We were a big green, red, yellow, mooning, flashing, smoke belching party bus!! I sat at the front leaned back with a big smile and enjoyed the party. Present in that moment, all else left behind. Ya Mon!

Soon the tiled mosaic sign announced we were at Hedonism II.

As I got off the bus I swore to myself I would come back and hang with the old Rasta man again soon.

I never have.