



# SEX ON THE BEACH

**What is it about island guys that makes grown women go gaga?**

He comes to me on the beach when I am content to just stare at the Caribbean Sea and dig my toe into the sand. But as he leans down, I see his skin shining in the sun like a polished chestnut. Then he tells me he's been watching me, been thinking about me hard. "You is de prettiest girl in de worl' I ever seen. Yeah, to have an' to hol'. From the first time I bless my eyes on you, I felt a tingling all over me body." I dig my toe deeper into the sand and try not to laugh because, I mean, *really*.

I see him on the beach the next day, and the next. Bare-chested and barefoot, he ▶

*\*Some names have been changed.*

by jeannine amber



looks strong and healthy. He's nothing like the city boy I promised myself I would get over. Every day he brings me a bouquet of sweet words. Soon I stop laughing and just listen. He loves me. He says I make him feel joy "pon me heart." Then one afternoon he slides over and gently rests his hand on the back of my neck. I don't tell him to move it, I just smile and watch the sun go down. My Jamaican guy makes me feel warm all over.

For years, since way before Stella got her groove back, women have been traveling to tropical islands for some R&R only to find themselves swept up in a crazy fling they swear they'd never let happen in their "real lives." Even Mrs. Brown, my friend's mother, tells me she got it on with a beautiful Jamaican man in 1974. Back then, Mrs. Brown says, "Everyone knew Jamaica was the place for women to have affairs. I had propositions all over the place and flattery, flattery, flattery."

With its high volume of tourism (more than half a million women visited the island last year), Jamaica may well be the most popular spot for an affair to remember. But you could name nearly any heavenly island and some woman somewhere is probably giggling about it right now.

Over the last 20 years, tourism to the Caribbean has tripled to more than 15 million visitors annually. And by all accounts, the number of women traveling alone has skyrocketed. "More women are financially independent now, and they feel like they deserve to treat themselves," says Phyllis Stoller, founder of the Miami-based Women's Travel Club.

### THE 'WOMAN SPECIALISTS'

I've been going to Jamaica for years; I have family there. Almost every time I'm at the beach I get approached by some smooth-talking beach bum telling me how pretty or sexy or cute I am. Call me crazy, but I always thought it was just happening to me. Clearly I was wrong. But if this is a national phenomenon, what is it about these guys that makes otherwise sane women—such as me—go gaga?

I find yet another clue on a strip of beach in Ocho Rios where you can snorkel, jet ski or go parasailing. The watersports guys, who all have American superstar nicknames like John Wayne, Chuck Norris, Tarzan and Kirk Douglas, walk up and down the beach rustling up business and flirting with tourists. It's these guys who tell me that Jamaica is simply a nation of "woman specialists."

"Jamaican men treat women the way they are supposed to be treated. We have more deep emotional feelings," explains Big Mack, one of the glass-bottom-boat operators.

"You always try to show dem de good tings," says Rocky, who repairs jet skis. "You take dem to de different sight scen'ry. Let dem have good times so dey respek you, dey likes you. Eventually it turns into a bigga bashment [party]. I got woman galore. Dat's automatically sure. As dey see me, dey start to scream out fe me."

Oh, these men have lyrics. Delivered in anything from lilting British-inflected accents to rough and rugged patois, they are so over the top, so relentless, that you listen, if for no other reason than complete incredulity: *Hey slimness, hey sweetness, hey sugaplum... Me like you. Me love you. Babee, you look suh nice an' sweet, so young an' sexy. You favah an angel, like you escape from heaven. You is de woman of my dream. Me like yuh style, yuh profile. Wouldn't yuh like to try me good lovin'?*

Rocky is a supreme woman specialist—and the word is he's got the love letters to prove it. I chase him down for a whole week, begging him to let me see them. Finally he hands them over. He's got a plastic shopping bag filled with neatly folded letters from women in Great Britain and the United States, all postmarked from last winter. One letter says, "You always make me feel so special. I need your love because it helps me see how beautiful the world can be." Another says, "I don't want a cheap wedding. I want you to be proud of me when I become your wife." A third says, "Please don't send your letters to my house, it would be awkward. I hope you understand." Rocky understands. "They love me like hot choc'lit," he says.

But it's more than the chocolate-loverman vibe that captures the hearts of foreign women. It's that on vacation, everything is perfect: You aren't the woman who lost the promotion, who can't keep a man, who should have been on that diet yesterday. You are exactly what the gorgeous man on the beach says you are—a shin- [CONTINUED ON PAGE 104]



**'Every day he brings me a bouquet of sweet words.'**



ing beauty, a princess, a stargirl. And that feels delicious.

Ask anyone who's been there and they'll tell you unequivocally: Caribbean men have a broader appreciation of the female form. If you have a few wrinkles, some extra pounds and breasts that have seen perkier days, there is still someone who will call you beautiful. "The men in Jamaica will tell you exactly what you need to hear no matter what you look like," says Andrea, my British cousin, as we stroll along the beach one afternoon. "If you're 300 pounds it's 'Wha'ppen', beautiful?" It doesn't matter where your self-esteem is, it will rise ten feet by the time you leave."

In short, there's someone to love you just for you: "Many of us are just so hungry for the kind of attention they shower us with," says Julia A. Boyd, author of *Embracing the Fire: Sisters Talk About Sex and Relationships* (Dutton, 1997). "In the United States, we place a lot of emphasis on how people look. 'Good' hair, light eyes, European features and thinness are so played up that if you don't have those qualities you feel as if you're not okay in some basic way."

"It seems like the men here were born to please women," laughs Karle, a 40-year-old computer programmer. "When you are with them, they make you feel like the sun rises and sets on you." Karle is one happy sister. She has her own island honey. He's only 22 but he makes her feel like a stargirl. The two met at a dance last October and spent three days together, and when Karle got back home she promptly racked up a \$2,900 phone bill. But that big grin on her face when she looks at her man, points out his dimples and rolls her eyes to the heavens with a cascade of wild giggles tells me that, for her, it's all worth it. "My baby's just very, very considerate," she purrs.

But it's not just the attentiveness of Caribbean men that melts our hearts. Women tell me it's the way their man is "connected to nature" and "nurturing but still manly" that really sends them over the top. I just smile and nod because my man can catch a fly in midair, cook me dinner, sail a boat and sit on the edge of the bed sewing up the torn strap of my sundress. How cool is that?

But Carol, an American who works as a Tarot-card reader at a fancy hotel in Jamaica, is over her love jones. Twenty years ago, she did what many tourist women are still doing—she vacationed on the island, met a man, fell in love, returned home and went bananas. "You write them, you send them stuff, you obsess, you go crazy," she says. She ended up going back to Jamaica, marrying her boyfriend, taking him to the States and adopting his two children—then getting divorced and moving back to Jamaica without him. "I think it's really impossible for these relationships to last. We have one set of expectations and Jamaicans have another." Her main complaint with her ex is that "his whole plan, which he did not make perfectly clear to me, was to get out of Jamaica."

## MONEY, HONEY

While foreign women may love the attention and adoration a Caribbean man doles out, his main objective may, in fact, be leaving the island or finding someone to send him

money "from foreign." For other men, hooking up with a smitten tourist means being able to pay his children's school fees or getting a decent night's sleep in a comfortable bed. It's not love but economics that keeps many of these men hanging on. In a developing country such as Jamaica, all Americans seem rich. A full-time hotel worker might only make about \$70 U.S. a week, roughly the cost of a pair of shoes. So isn't it only fair that if a guy is going to take you out, show you a good time and be your companion for the week, you should pay? Not only for your entertainment but maybe for a portable CD player as well? For many women, it's difficult to say no once a man starts asking for money. For

some men the ultimate payoff is not just money but also making it to the States or England or Canada, where the economic opportunities seem boundless.

"My sense is that a lot of these guys are illiterate or poorly educated or haven't finished high school, [so] this is one of their only options," explains April Gorry, who's working on her Ph.D. in anthropology at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Her dissertation subject: "romance tourism."

**DO THE HUSTLE**  
Negril was once a quiet fishing village on Jamaica's west coast, but with its seven miles of continuous beach and scores of recently built luxury hotels, Negril has blossomed into a mecca for young, single travelers. When it comes to beach hustling, Negril has got to be the world's capital. I met Arlington there, where he works at one of the hotels. When I told him about my research, he offered to take me to the popular Rick's Café to watch the hustling. Arlington broke it down for me. He pointed to a not-bad-looking guy cuddling a very plump White woman with glasses. "He don't deal with the pretty girls; what he dates is the older fat girls. The ones that have some cash," Arlington explains. "For instance, she meets him on the beach and she knows he don't have the money. But [CONTINUED ON PAGE 162]



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he'll hold hands with her and act like they're married. He'll tell her things she likes to hear, like 'Baby, I really like you, we're going to get engaged.' Once they make love, he's in control." That's when the money starts to flow. "Money to go shopping, a couple of tires for the car, shoes, whatever." Arlington says lots of hustlers don't bother with African-American women because we're too much work. "They're cheap. They go to a restaurant and ask for separate tabs," he says with disgust. Other women, explains Arlington, "got no man and they heard Black men are good lovers. It's worth it to them to spend what they have."

All around Negril are young Jamaican men holding, whispering to and grinding against older women, obese women and lots and lots of White women. At the disco one night I see a middle-aged woman hike up her dress and rub her pantied bottom against the groin of some Jamaican muscle man. "It's as if they come here and lose all their inhibitions," says Anne, who has worked in the Negril tourist industry for the past four years. "Can you picture these women taking home a poor Rasta man in their country? No."

On the first day Arlington plays tour guide, I'm thinking, *Gee, what a helpful guy*. By the second afternoon, though, he starts telling me about this "real sweet" American girl who came to visit. One night she got a cash advance on her credit card and handed him \$400 to pay for them to go out, he says. "When we got back to her hotel she didn't even ask me for the change," he says, grinning. Now Arlington wants me to get a cash advance on my credit card. I tell him I don't have that kind of money. He tells me about his Japanese girlfriend who gave him a car stereo with a little remote he has attached with Velcro to the dashboard. I tell him I still don't have any money. This goes on for a while until I'm in tears, insisting that in America men don't ask me for money; they take *me* out. And Arlington says, "Well, you're not in America." And that's the end of my guided tour.

In Negril, relationships are often business. And what's worse, I get the feeling that many people think tourist women—even those who get wooed into spending thousands of dollars on

some hustling hunk—are getting exactly what they deserve. Just ask some of the Jamaican women. "[Female tourists] just leave themselves open to be taken advantage of," insists Norma, who has worked in the travel industry for 12 years. Her attitude is hardly surprising. For thousands of women who live near the beach, good-time women foreigners can be nothing but trouble. "A lot of Jamaican men already are settled with a wife and children. And then the opportunity [to become involved with a tourist] comes up and the children suffer," says Norma. "The tourist provides him with whatever luxury he needs, and the Jamaican woman ends up losing her husband. [These relationships] cause her a lot of pain, stress, strain, you name it. If a Jamaican woman is not treating a tourist right, it's most likely because of that."

### Who's Bad?

"The women are just looking for the big bamboo," says Pinky, a pretty young woman from Ocho Rios. "They are as bad as the men."

Are they as bad as the men? And are the men really that bad? The mythology is that the men are heartless, whoring hustlers and the women are sluts or fools or both. But if you ask me, most of these relationships are completely symbiotic—he gives her something that makes her happy, she gives him something that makes him happy. The fact that one of those things is money and the other is affection speaks volumes about Jamaica's economic deficits and America's social one. Whether it tells us anything about the inherent "wrongness" of these relationships is another matter entirely. There are plenty of Black women who can tick off on their fingers the ways in which they are overlooked and underappreciated at work, at home and in bed. Is it really any surprise that when presented with unbridled adoration these women lap it up?

"This isn't a morality issue," Julia Boyd argues. "It's about feeling good enough about yourself to be able to have some fun and have a fleeting relationship. Men have these all the time. For guys it's always about sowing their wild oats. For women it's always about 'This has to lead somewhere.' We feel that in order to have a casual relationship, in order for it to be okay, we have to love this person on some level."

Some women are sent reeling into months of heartbreak and debt. But isn't disaster inevitable when a woman rushes full steam ahead into a relationship with someone she barely knows?

"People come down here and they lose all their caution. They just dash it to one side," sighs Cassie, who is still with the Jamaican man she moved from Wisconsin to marry 17 years ago. Cassie says she marvels at how little women consider the particulars before they get involved with guys from the beach. "If this person is spending all day on the beach, if he drops everything in his life to spend a week with you, you have to ask yourself, *How is he doing that?* You've got to look at that guy as you would at an American sitting next to you in a bar." Cassie says the women who get hit the hardest are the ones who think they've found paradise. "Paradise doesn't exist," she says. "It's a lot of hard work."

Fortunately, most stargirls seem to have the good sense to practice safe sex in their pursuit of paradise. According to Lovette Byfield, communications specialist with Jamaica's Ministry of Health's HIV/STD control program, "Female tourists tend to insist on condoms. It's so much the norm that sometimes the men get suspicious if the woman doesn't insist on a condom." Lovette says the majority of Jamaica's 2,184 reported AIDS cases and more than 40,000 reports of STDs are in metropolitan, not tourist, areas. "Our cases are local cases," she explains, "often brought in by migrant farmworkers or Jamaicans who were traveling or living abroad."

So, though most tourists won't return home with a pesky STD, there are plenty of sad stories to go around: the maxed-out credit card, the unanswered letters, the crushing realization that you're not the only one. But for some women, holding on to an illusion of paradise—no matter the cost—is preferable to emotionally disengaging from a holiday romance.

When you have a fling, you bring home with you a rough sketch of a fantasy (did I mention that my Jamaican guy wants to spend the rest of his days with me, wants to give me a baby?), which you inevitably start to fill in with vivid colors (our baby would be beautiful!). I know the temptation is to hang on to that feeling by hanging on to the man. I know the trick is not

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to give in. I know I should hold my memories close to my heart and get on with my life. But what do I *really* know? Behind my computer, buried under a stack of bills and unfinished work, is an airline ticket back to Jamaica. ♦

*Jeannine Amber is a writer living in Brooklyn, who thinks it may be time to consider a relationship closer to home.*