

Our very own 'butler phone'

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on the south-western tip of the island proved the ideal spot to recuperate, with its exotic gardens, shady pagodas and miles and miles of white, sandy beaches.

It's a huge resort but is so spread out that we never felt overwhelmed by hordes of people. Our swim-up Crystal Lagoon suite opened directly into the pool and being just yards from the beach was the perfect place to kick off our dancing shoes and relax. The suite had a huge four-poster bed, luxurious marble and mahogany furnishings, in-room whirlpool and two massive plasma TVs.

Even better, we had Basil and Myron available via "butler phone". They were hilarious. I said to Myron: "Look, my dad is Jamaican. You need to make sure you bring us some really good local dishes." He said: "If you want saltfish I'll do my best to get it for you"; bless him, he did.

I'd heard a lot about Negril's sweeping seven-mile beach and it didn't disappoint with its crystal-clear water, laid-back vibe and copious jellied coconuts.

More therapeutic than the scenery was the birdlife, especially the swooping pelicans. I'm a big one for haggling and enjoyed some banter with the beach traders. My mum collects shells, so I bought her a lovely conch, some shorts with a Jamaican flag on the bum, a towel, a mug, some beads and a domino set.

Romance was strictly off limits for Nicola and me but the resort is a couples' paradise, especially at night when the beach becomes an impromptu restaurant under the stars, complete with campfire and butler service. We'd bought flights to Miami to join friends



ROOM SERVICE: Alesha and Nicola with Basil, their butler, at Sandals

there for New Year's Eve but by 10pm I was fast asleep. Feeling virtuous, we rose early the next day and headed for the heavenly Red Lane spa, which offered some tantalising treatments including a seaweed body peel, a water lily wrap and, most intriguingly, a salty margarita scrub.

I enjoyed one of the best massages I've had surrounded by candles, tropical flowers and the sound of the waves breaking gently on the shore. Feeling revived, invigorated and with my

● **GETTING THERE:**

Virgin Holidays (0844 557 3859/www.virginholidays.co.uk) offers seven nights at the Sandals Negril Beach Resort & Spa from £1,679pp (two sharing), all-inclusive. Price includes return flights from Gatwick and transfers. Jamaica Tourist Board: 0207 225 9090/www.visitjamaica.com

Christmas sickness already a distant memory, we headed to nearby Rick's Café at West End Cliffs. It's a little touristy but boasts a fantastic location and is easily the best place on the island to enjoy the sunset. It's also the cliff-diving capital of Jamaica. When I'd visited in 2004 for my uncle's wedding, I took the leap myself even though I was petrified. This time we decided to save our energy for a spot of dancing to a reggae band.

When Jamaicans let their hair down they go for it. We did our best to keep up, working up an appetite that we satisfied at Cosmo's, a gorgeous restaurant right on Negril beach where you can virtually dip your toes in the ocean as you eat. It specialises in authentic dishes including conch soup, bammy (deep-fried cassava flatbread) and curried goat.

On another day, we took an excursion to the beautiful Dunn's River Falls near Ocho Rios, where scenes from the 1988 film *Cocktail* with Tom Cruise were shot. It's an amazing sight: 600ft of staggered waterfalls and lagoons to clamber up and down. Nicola was awestruck.

Another must-do is a guided tour of the capital Kingston, home town of Bob Marley and birthplace of reggae. We cruised around soaking up the sights. The wealth gap was vivid.

My abiding memory of our trip was not just the beauty of the island but the kindness and spirit of the Jamaican people. I've never felt better looked-after in my life. After the year I'd had, this was just what the doctor ordered.

Alesha was talking to
NICK McGRATH



DROP IN, CHILL OUT: Rick's Café guests watch the cliff-diving