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The price of a holiday fling

They're women looking for love and romance, fun in the sun. And if they happen to hand over money to the men they meet on the beach, well, that's just their way of helping out... isn't it? Julie Bindel investigates the darker side of sex tourism in Jamaica

Two flights are due into Montego Bay airport, one from Toronto, the other from London. Clinton waits on the beach for the new arrivals, hoping that one of them will bring him good fortune. "I look for the milk bottles," he tells me, explaining how ultra-white skin is a giveaway, "the ones who've just arrived. Milk bottles that need filling..."

Negril, with its seven-mile stretch of beautiful, white sand and turquoise sea, and its glorious blue skies, attracts the majority of Jamaica's 1.3 million tourists every year, primarily from the US, Canada and Europe. It is known as a "swinging" resort, where anything goes. Home to Hedonism II, where nude marriages and orgies in the spa bath are a common occurrence, it has been described as a place where visitors can "let it all hang out".

Many white, western women come to Negril to do precisely that. Clinton is one of hundreds of young men working the beach and, like most of the "beach boys", he is desperately poor. His primary income comes from accompanying lone female travellers who want sex with Jamaican men. He lives with his family in a shanty town above Negril, in a tin-roofed shack with no electricity or running water. In contrast, the hotels and apartments that line the beach are luxurious. Resort hotels cost US\$200 (£120) a night; hotel workers make \$80 (£48) a week. While some beach boys may be content to have their entertainment and meals paid for, the ultimate goal is marriage to an American or European and a ticket out of poverty. Clinton's dreadlocks, wide smile and good physique make him attractive to white female tourists.

Clinton has a "regular girlfriend", a 45-year-old Canadian professional, who comes to see him four times a year. "She's a good friend and she looks after me. Sends me money when I can't pay my rent." Clinton says he works "in the tourist industry" and won't admit he is a beach boy. "If I take a tourist out, and she wants to help me out as a friend, give me money and let me stay with her in the hotel, what's wrong with that? Of course I have sex with them, but that's because I'm not gay - I like women." Clinton's current "girlfriend" is a 50-year-old grandmother from the US, whom he met yesterday on the beach.

Negril, like some resorts in the Dominican Republic and Cuba, is renowned as a place where white, middle-aged women come in search of what they call the "big bamboo". UK researchers Jacqueline Sanchez Taylor and Julia O'Connell Davidson found that the usual analysis of sex tourism does not allow for the possibility of women as buyers of sexual services, because "prostitute-users are, by definition, male, and this assumption is shared by many researchers and theorists". The two researchers interviewed 240 women holidaying in Negril and two similar resorts in the Dominican Republic. Almost a third of the interviewees had engaged in sexual relationships with local men in the course of their holiday. Though 60% admitted to certain "economic elements" to their liaisons, they did not perceive their sexual encounters as prostitute-client transactions, nor did they view their sexual partners as prostitutes.

Those who admit to coming to Negril for sex believe they are helping the men, and the local economy, by giving them money and gifts. However, much of the local community is scathing about beach boys and thinks the women are misguided and naive. "These men earn \$100 (£60) each time they have sex with the women," said Richard, manager of the Nirvana beach apartments in Negril. "For oral sex, which is taboo for Jamaican men, they can earn more like \$150 (£90)." However, both the women and the beach boys say that many will act as a guide to the island and throw in sexual services, often for as little as a hot meal and a place to sleep.

HIV and Aids figures reflect the fact that condom use by the beach boys is sporadic. In the main tourist areas, the number of those infected is higher than elsewhere on the island. Last year, an estimated 20,000 adults and children out of a population of 2.6 million were living with Aids or HIV - a figure that had more than doubled in two years. The growth of the sex tourism industry has contributed to this rise. Research into the practices of tourists at European holiday destinations reveals that women are less likely to use contraception or protection against STDs on holiday than at home. Many on the island confirm this. Stanley Gottlieb, an American who owns the Nirvana apartments, is shocked at what he has seen in his 20 years on the island. "The women do things here that they would never do at home. They have unsafe sex with risky men, walk along the beach drunk, get into cars on their own."

In the Irie bar, Anna (not her real name), a 40-year-old businesswoman from East Anglia, sways to the loud reggae coming from the huge sound system, her hand resting on the knee of BB, a Jamaican from nearby Green Island. The list of cocktails on sale includes Big Bamboo, Dirty Banana and Jamaican Steel. She would describe herself as an "accidental sex tourist". "I was reading all about the sex stuff in Lonely Planet on the way here, and thought, 'Oh my God, I didn't realise it was like that!' I suppose it made me curious." She had already developed an interest in African and Caribbean culture through hanging out with her Nigerian boyfriend back home. "But I didn't only come here because I wanted

to shag the pants off some Jamaican guy." Anna met BB on the beach, just hours after she arrived on the island, and had sex with him that day. "I knew he was angling to do it without a condom, but I don't know him well enough for that."

She says it is the attention, more than the sex, that she enjoys. "I wondered what it would be like to be with a Jamaican man. The notion I have of them is that they love English women. I thought I'd be popular and accepted, but I had no idea that you really could have the pick of the bunch. They're around you like bees around a honey pot."

Like the other women I spoke to, Anna eroticises black men and is taken with the myths about their sexual prowess. "You've heard the phrase 'Once black, never back'? Well, I can understand it."

Anna admits that she is expected to pay for "most things" and that when they first met, BB asked her directly for money. "But he hasn't asked me for anything today." It is 1pm on the second day. BB showers her with compliments and tells her that she is the most beautiful woman he has seen all year. "At first I didn't believe him. I mean, look at me, I'm hardly an oil painting, and I'm overweight. But they love big women - to them it's a sign of wealth."

In Jamaica, around 17% of the population live below the poverty line. Many children from poor, rural communities are not enrolled in school; of those who are, 4,000 drop out every year. Tourism and agriculture are the main sources of income. For fit young men with no job opportunities, hustling on the beach, selling cigarettes, fruit, ganja or sex, is the only way to feed themselves and their dependants. "You can buy anything on Negril," says Alphonso, an elderly Rasta who sells jewellery on the beach. "A man for your woman, a woman for your man, a woman for your woman."

The Jamaican government has made half-hearted attempts to curb the behaviour of the beach boys. During the winter seasons in the late 1990s, harassment of tourists in nearby Ocho Rios and Montego Bay received such intense publicity that the government proposed to double the fines for harassers and to establish a night court to process offenders swiftly. Nothing much has happened since, though civilian security teams patrol Negril beach day and night.

One man on whom they keep an eye is Robin. He decks his speedboat on the water's edge and waves to a group of older German women. They giggle and wave back. One of them tells me that Robin is a "full-time gigolo" and that she "dated" him the previous evening. Robin is 25, skinny and shaven-headed. He has pockmarked skin and wears glasses. Although he is not the best-looking man on the beach, tourists seem to love him. "My reputation gets around the island," he says. "Jamaican men can keep going at sex for over an hour. Back home, they say, their husbands can't even go for 10 minutes. Some guys just say, 'You've got to pay me to fuck you', but I make a friend of them." Women

routinely approach him for sex, he says: "Some girls say, 'You're really black, I like your skin, you're nice and tall.' Especially the bigger girls - they're always nice to me, you know. They see me swimming and say, 'Hey, you got a bigger dick than my man back home.'"

Robin's regular girlfriends take him shopping and give him money to spend. He usually has two or three on the go at any one time. "Understand: if I work for you, I want you to pay me. I like to be independent, I don't want no one using me. I'm not a gigolo, I'm a player. I love girls."

His favourite tourists are black Americans, because they have "fewer hang-ups than others", although he likes being seen with white women ("I can get a black woman any time"). Like the other "baldheads", he is critical of "rent-a-dreads". "They grow their hair for the tourists, because they all want to fuck Bob Marley. No way are they real Rastas. They stink, but the women like that. They just pick up the tourists for money, but I like to give them a good time."

Debbie, a 43-year-old tour operator from Canada, has been coming to Jamaica twice a year since she was 20, and is a veteran sex tourist. Brash, loud, overweight and striking, she is keen to recount her success with Jamaican men. The guys have always approached her, she says. "They are very upfront. They come up to you and say, 'I like you and want you', and then you pick and choose which one you like and which one you want. It's so simple. I think, OK, I like that one because he's got locks, or I like him because his teeth are white, or he's got muscles."

Debbie comes to Jamaica primarily for sex with local men, and is very specific about the type of guy she likes. "My current one is gorgeous! Not one ounce of fat on his body and locks down to his knees!" She is not looking for love and is scornful of those who are. "You know what, if you can control these guys, you can have a great time. Some of the women go all gaga on them, but I don't want anything permanent - just to enjoy myself."

Debbie loves the sex, but admits that some of her friends are disillusioned. "A lot of men here smoke ganja, and because life is so hard they drink a lot, and the combination can make a man not perform that well. So they've been extremely disappointed, because they're after the marathon fuck, two weeks of banging, and are thinking, 'What's going on? I've got this huge Rasta with locks down his back and I ain't got nothing.' I've actually had to go and find another one for my friend because she said, 'This one's no good!'"

The relationship between beach boy and female tourist is seen by many as "romance and fun". Not one of the men I spoke to would admit to money being a prime motivation for their liaisons, although some of the women did. For them, that still did not mean they were sex tourists; they were simply "helping out". Many of the men are so poor that they will have sex with a woman for food.

Debbie told me, "They will come up to me and say, 'I want to eat today', which means, 'I will do anything for a hot meal.' That means oral sex, fucking, even a massage, if I buy them some rice and peas." The knowledge that many of her sexual partners are desperately poor does not seem to spoil her enjoyment.

In the distance, groups of fresh-faced, attractive young American women walk along the beach in revealing swimwear, and are ignored by the beach boys. "They don't have much money to spend, so they are less fun than the older women," explains O'Neill, a barman at Cool Vibes. When the "spring breakers" arrive in town - well-off American university students on a week's vacation - they are welcomed by the bar owners and hoteliers, but the men complain that their business is affected.

I bump into Anna and BB at the Roots Bamboo beach party one evening. BB is glued to her side. "He doesn't like me to talk to other guys," Anna says. "They [Jamaicans] are like Africans. Very possessive. Mind you, I wouldn't trust 90% of the Jamaicans, but I trust this one." Later that week, I see BB a couple of miles down the beach, his arm around a French Canadian woman.

Robin took me out on his glass-bottomed boat and, like all the other beach boys I interviewed, tried to persuade me that I needed an escort during my time on the island. Each time I asked them to describe their ideal woman, they would describe me, hoping that I would be flattered by the compliments and change my mind.

"It's their job to be nice," says Patty, who works at the Risky Business beach bar. "They run a weird sort of protection racket, moving in initially when the women are having hassle and then hanging around constantly as the woman's minder. I see 60-year-olds hanging on the arm of some young Rasta. As soon as her money runs out, he's off with the next one. I wish they'd learn, but they never do."

While many women come to Jamaica purely for sex, others get snared by local men who exploit their vulnerability. Self-delusion is rife among these women, who often believe the men they have hooked up with are in love with them. Carrie is 35 and "not considered attractive back home". She gave up her job as a lifeguard in Toronto to tour the Caribbean. Her long-term partner had recently died and she had since been "used and abused" by men at home. Carrie met Winston on arrival in Negril - "I was being ripped off in a bar and he stepped in and helped me out." After two weeks of "hot romance", she moved on to another island, but found that she was missing him so much, she came back.

During the 30 minutes I spoke to her in the club where Winston was DJ, no fewer than five of his friends came up to check on her. "He wants to make sure I'm OK and not hassled by any other men." Cynics might say he was protecting his meal ticket. Although Carrie admitted paying for everything, and lending Winston money, she denies that his motive is financial. "I knew the reputation for that. Of

course, I buy him drinks and stuff - I want to do that. He looks after me in other ways. He borrowed a few bucks because his gig was cancelled. But I expect it back." She told me that she loved him, and that the sex was "great. They [Jamaicans] are so attentive, and have great bodies. I could never pull guys this fit and handsome in Toronto."

Carrie was even considering moving to Jamaica to be with Winston long-term. Winston says he likes it when the women come back. "I have two American girlfriends who come to see me about twice a year. They always bring me nice presents and look after me while they are here. I need a wife, though, someone who can get me off the island."

But it is when the women come to Jamaica to start a new life with the beach boys that things can change for the worse - many find themselves in extremely abusive relationships with the very men who treated them "like queens" when they were on the island as tourists. Andrea Johnson, a corporal with the Negril police, says, "The relationship ends up sour and we have to intervene. I've seen some nasty domestic violence towards the white women who move in with their boyfriends. The men sometimes steal from the women, or beat them when they run out of money."

Anna wants to talk more about BB. She approaches me on the beach, as if she needs to be reassured that he is not after her money. "Is there much theft on the last day?" she asks. Robin had already talked about the men who rip off the women. "The dreads, they can't do their jobs properly if they need to steal from the women. If she likes you, she gives you what you ask for. If you diss them, they won't come back and ask for you next time they're in Jamaica."

"They are always nice to me, whatever I do," says Chloe, a 50-year-old sports instructor from Yorkshire. "It's their job to be nice to women." Chloe has been coming to Negril for five years, since she discovered that her husband was having an affair with a friend from her aerobics class. "I thought, great, I've devoted 25 years of my life to this arsehole, and put up with his habits, boring sex and bringing up his children. Now it's my turn to have fun." Like so many others, her inspiration to come to Negril was the 1998 film *How Stella Got Her Groove Back*, in which Stella, a divorced black woman in her 40s, takes time off work to travel to Jamaica, where she meets and falls in love with Winston, a local man who is half her age.

Chloe has "boyfriends" every time she comes to Negril. Her current one is Clarence, a 23-year-old Rasta who sleeps on the beach and operates a jet ski when he can get the work. The rest of the time he hustles white women like Chloe.

"The first day I met him, he asked me if I wanted to go to a reggae party that night," says Chloe. "Actually, we didn't make the party." She laughs. "I said to

him, 'I can listen to Bob Marley at home, but I can't get this there' and grabbed his crotch! I can't believe I did that! He asked if it was OK to stay in the hotel with me, and could he order from room service? I said, 'Sure.' I didn't realise it would be as cheap a night. When I first came to Negril, I was told they ask for \$100 dollars for sex. I would never pay that, but I was willing to barter him down."

Chloe, like a number of other women here, is not very impressed with the sex. "I almost had to force him to go down on me. I suppose it's because strict Rastas don't eat meat, so why should they eat that! After I got wise to the ways of Jamaicans, who are very much wham, bam, thank you, ma'am, I made sure I taught them all how to do it properly."

Michele, a local woman who works at one of the beachside bars, wonders what the tourists see in Jamaican men. "They know what it is, I suppose, but I don't see the attraction. Our men are lazy and good for nothing. They are not good lovers - all they do is get us pregnant and leave us to cope with the baby while they're off doing their own thing."

Andrea Johnson is similarly puzzled. "They say there's none like the Jamaican men. I don't know why. They must know the reason, but it's a secret to Jamaican women."

The late Klaus de Albuquerque, in his research into Caribbean society and tourism, suggested that "perhaps Euro-American women are prepared to accept their nights with the big bamboo as just another holiday activity, pleasurable, if not completely satisfying, like tourists everywhere."

Certainly, many of the white women have a notion that they are transgressing racial boundaries by having sex with black men, although most of those I spoke to did not do so at home. "White girls like walking with a black man, going to a party. They think it looks cool to mix up the colours," says Robin. "They say to me, 'I hear black men are big down there.' Most have never been with a black man before but, once they do, they're hooked."

Lucy, 45, from California, fell in love with her first Jamaican man when she was 19. He has since married a German woman and moved off the island, but the experience changed her taste in men. "Since then I have always gone for dark-skinned men. They are so much sexier than white. And, you know what, it's true: black men have bigger penises." Lucy, however, is looking for romance, not just sex, on Negril. "It is the one time of the year that I feel I can have my pick of the bunch. Back home, because I'm fat and not exactly beautiful, I tend to settle for men who aren't that special-looking. Here, they are gorgeous, and I can have any one I want, just about. I wanted to come here and feel all the feelings I had back then."

The research carried out by Sanchez Taylor and O'Connell Davidson suggests that the reason many female tourists are able to delude themselves into believing they are not prostitute users lies in their racialised power over the men: "Racist ideas about black men being hypersexual and unable to control their sexuality enable them to explain to themselves why such young and desirable men would be eager for sex with older and/or overweight women, without having to think that their partners are interested in them only for economic reasons. The men in Jamaica and the Dominican Republic are not selling sex, but doing what comes naturally to them. Only women who had entered into a series of brief sexual encounters began to acknowledge that it's all about money."

Lennie, an older Rastafarian who sells trips on glass-bottomed boats, has a sideline of fixing up female tourists with beach boys. "The women are told to come to me when they book into their hotel, so I can fix their 'company' for them. Sometimes they ask for a tour guide - someone who knows the island well and will take them to parties. Other times, they are more direct. They tell me what he should look like, smell like, even fuck like!" One hotel that caters mainly for German women offers a young male "guide" for the week in with the price of the room.

Women such as Debbie and Chloe, the "veterans", are very clear that they are looking not for romance but for sex, and they are happy to pay for the privilege. Others, such as Carrie and Anna, fall in love and naively believe that their love is reciprocated. They are often victims of bad relationships, low self-esteem and loneliness back home. The beach boys exploit this, often treating them badly and ripping them off.

But whatever the intentions of the women who arrive in Negril, it seems to me that most are exercising their racial and economic power over the beach boys. Ignorance and lack of concern about the abject poverty and lack of choice that characterises these men's lives leads the women to romanticise their actions. They are exercising powers that they cannot use at home - their race and their relative affluence. Third hand, I heard a story of a teenage boy being locked in a hotel room and sexually assaulted by several American women. Whether or not the tale is true, I believe the behaviour of some of the women is exploitative.

There are some obvious differences between female and male sex tourism. Although the beach boys are objectified and often sexually humiliated by the female tourists, they tend not to fear or experience violence and sexual aggression, such as being beaten and raped, in the way that female prostitutes routinely do. Nor are they vulnerable to criminalisation, unlike female prostitutes whose activities are illegal.

What I found in Negril was complicated. I would return to my apartment depressed after a day spent observing grey-haired women desperately seeking the love and approval of handsome young men, feeling worthless without a

relationship, and beach boys so desperate for a hot meal that they agreed to be treated, and treated themselves, as a commodity. One man who tried to pick me up for the week told me that, as long as I wrote a letter supporting his visa application to visit the UK, he would take me out and even pay for my drinks. "But let me give you the money first," he said, "because I ain't going to be seen by my friends buying a white woman's drinks." This warped sense of masculine and racial pride, coupled with a desperation to better themselves, leaves the Jamaican beach boys with very little opportunity to shake off the legacies of slavery.