

Travel:

JAMAICA'S "COUPLES" RESORT HITS A HOMERUN

by Don Woodland



The beachfront at Couples/Ocho Rios, with Tower Isle just offshore

If you are thinking of heading for warmer weather, you should definitely consider one of "Couples" three all-inclusive resorts in Jamaica.

Couples Negril is a 216-room resort located on 18 acres of tropical gardens, with Caribbean views and Negril's famous seven-mile beach.

Couples Swept Away—also in Negril—is set on 10 acres of tropical landscape overlooking 1500 feet of white sand beach. The resort won last year's Conde Nast Traveler's Readers' Choice Award for Top All-inclusive Resort in the Caribbean. It's also ranked #9 in the Top 20 Caribbean Resorts.

Couples Ocho Rios, which is the feature of this story, opened as Tower Isle Resort in 1948—the world's first all-inclusive for couples. Its creator—Abe Issa—was considered the father of Jamaican tourism. The resort became "Couples" twenty-seven years ago.

In the 50's, the resort became a Hollywood hangout. Today that history is something patrons find charming. The resort is currently run by Abe's sons and daughters.

Couples/Ocho Rios is 5 miles west of Ocho Rios, and 2 hours from the airport at Montego Bay. It offers 188 rooms, each with a patio or balcony. 70% of the rooms have ocean views. What's truly remarkable about Couples/Ocho Rios is the mix of staffing, food, facilities and clientele:

The Clientele—It's often an overlooked consideration, but it really stands out that patrons at Couples/Ocho Rios really like people, and enjoy taking the time to converse. You've never been to a place that had friendlier clientele. They're all adult ages, and hail from the U.S. (about 80%) and England (particularly in the spring) almost entirely.

It's remarkable to be at an all-inclusive where folks have a great time, but don't overdo it. Because the resort runs \$475-795 per night per couple (based

on the five types of rooms you book and the time of year), you don't get the "bus station crowd" or the "college crowd." There's never a racket in the corridors outside the rooms, and you don't hear any dramas next door through the room walls. At the buffet, no one seems to be piling food on their plate, and no one gets stupid drunk.

Facilities—Couples/Ocho Rios is clean, the rooms are spacious, and even though the resort is almost always at 100% occupancy, it never appears crowded. There are no food lines, nor folks cued up to order drinks at the bar.

There are three very nice sit-down restaurants at Couples/Ocho Rios: the **Bay-side Restaurant**—which features Italian food served with tablecloths and candle light; the **Calabash Restaurant**—which features island cuisine; and **LeGourmet**—an award-winning French restaurant, where most dine in semi-formal attire. There is also the **Verandah Buffet Restaurant**, which serves three buffet meals a day; and a grill at beach level, which is open 24 hours. There is also outside bars by the pool and on Tower Island (more on this later), and a piano bar off the resort's lobby.

A \$1.6 million refurbishing to Cou-



The Piano Bar at Couples/Ocho Rios

ples/Ocho Rios was completed last year. 70% of the rooms have been recently refurbished. 65 additional rooms will be refurbished in the next six months.

Food—Those who have been disappointed with the food at other all-inclusives will delight at the quality of the food at Couples. It's some of the best food you'll ever have—prepared with pride with presentation that is superb.

Service—Everyone raves about the staff at Couples. Most of these waiters, waitresses and other staff have been at Couples for years—some have been there 30-40 years. During one's stay, it's very common to see new arrivals exchanging hugs with staff members they've come to know over the years. Ocho Rios Operations Director Leonard Henry says that more than anything, he looks for positive attitude towards people in the people they hire. The staff are expertly trained and also given room to be resourceful. As a result,

when you ask a staffer for help, you don't have to ask twice. Not only does the staff clearly enjoy doing a good job, you can tell they really like what they do.

All-Inclusiveness—It's really remarkable all that's inclusive in your price per stay—starting with the no-tipping policy. Here's the list of other included items:

- Breakfast, lunch, dinner and snacks daily, plus a la carte dining, Continental breakfast in bed, 24-hour food service, Unlimited domestic and international cocktails, beer and soft drinks.

- Nightly entertainment includes live music, shows, a lively disco and selection of bars.

- Tennis—Five courts (three lighted for night play) are available with complimentary professional lessons.

- Golf—greens fees and transfers are included. Caddies are mandatory at an additional cost.

- Fitness Center—the air-conditioned, beach front gym is fully equipped with a 10-station Cybex facility, free weights, Life Cycles, Stairmasters and an aerobics deck. A variety of exercise classes, including step aerobics and yoga are available with instruction.

- Squash Courts - two air-conditioned courts.

- Windsurfing, HobieCat sailing, sunfish sailing, water skiing, kayaking, snorkeling are all available with professional instruction.

- Scuba diving with resort certification course and equipment included.

- Indoor game room - provides backgammon, card games, dominoes and billiards.

- Bicycling.

- Freshwater pool, three Jacuzzis overlooking the Caribbean Sea and two private Jacuzzis located in the tropical gardens.

- Computer internet access.

- Airport transfers, taxes and gratuities.

- Tower Isle, where guests who prefer au natural sunbathing, can enjoy a swim up pool bar, hammocks, lounge chairs and snack bar.

Also included off-premises:

- Shopping trips to downtown Ocho Rios.

- Catamaran Rum Punch Cruises to Shaw Park Beach, plantation tours on horseback.

- Tours of Dunns River Falls.

- Glass bottom reef boat trips.

- Golfing at Upton's Golf Course.



Resort guest Robert Wilson and waitress Pauleen Mais

According to Gary Stephens, Jamaica Operations Director for Couples, aside from food, there are about \$1800 in inclusions weekly that are included in the All-Inclusive package. Once you check in, it's rare that you'll need your wallet.

There's also a spa and salon on the premises offering treatments such as Swedish, trigger point, deep tissue, sports, aromatherapy and deluxe massages, fa-



70% of the rooms at Couples/Ocho Rios look out over the Caribbean.



Musical greeters at the International Airport in Montego Bay

cial, reflexology, body wrap, body scrub, body polish, waxing and more. Spa treatments are by appointment only and available at an extra cost.

Weddings-- Weddings are a big deal at Couples, in as much as the resort does them free for guests wishing to get married on the property. Included in your wedding is a ½ hour His & Hers massage, a 2-tier wedding cake, a bottle of sparkling wine, the bridal bouquet and boutonniere, the ministers fee and a personal wedding coordinator. (A government processing, license and certificate fee of \$200 however, is mandatory.)

Repeat Customers—Talk to people standing at Couples/Ocho Rios and you're blown away with the number that keep coming back year after year. The resort boasts a 40% return customer rate.

Robert Wilson, age 64, is an Englishman currently living in France, who said he'd been back to Couples/Ocho Rios 14 times since 1988. He explained his loyalty saying, "The staff is very well trained. I'm impressed with how gentle the Jamaicans are."

Both in their 50's, Marcia and Dave Belcher from Columbus, Ohio said they'd been to the resort four times in the past 4 years. "We like the friendly atmosphere," Marcia explained. "It's small enough to be quaint. We also like it because we can only travel during spring break and the college kids don't come here. There's the feeling of seclusion; the resort isn't crammed in

quality of the staff."

Linda and Gayle Everidge are ranchers from Lemmond, S. Dakota in their mid-50's who like all-inclusives. Linda says of the resort, "We went to Beaches before and like this better." Gayle, her husband, added, "The staff is really patient, especially if you're just learning to sail or snorkel."

If you're going:

- Couples/Ocho Rios is accessible by major airlines landing at the international airport at Montego Bay. It is a 90-120 minute drive to the resort. This drive time will be significantly reduced when the new highway connecting Ocho Rios and Montego Bay is completed (which should be in about a year and a half). Ground transportation from the Montego Bay airport to the resort is provided by the resort. You also have the option to fly on a small commercial aircraft from the Montego Bay airport to Ocho Rios air strip, and the hotel will provide transportation from the airstrip to the resort.

- If you book your connecting return flight through Miami, make sure to allow at least a two-hour layover. Getting bags off the plane, cleared through Customs, and back to the check in can take an eternity at Miami Airport.

- Peak season for the resort is Dec. 27 to Aug. 15th.

- Electric outlets in the resort are standard 110 volts, so you won't need adaptors.



Musicians play for thousands of passers-by daily at the entrance to Dunn's River Falls with other resorts along the beach."

Englanders David and Marianne Allen have been to the resort twice in the last eight years. David explains, "We like the great food, the friendliness, the activities like diving, sailing and waterskiing that are available, and the off-premises trips to shop, and to visit Dunn's River Falls." Dave and Penny Mallett, their traveling companions added, "You can also tell that the ownership is local and hands-on by the

- You only need a passport. No visas. No vaccinations.

- Calling home directly without operator assistance is no problem and can be done from your room with very easy instructions provided.

- Cell phones work if you have a quad phone (one that works on all four international frequencies). Standard U.S. cell phones generally do not work in Jamaica, but check with your cell phone company



Watching young Dunn's River Falls climbers is a favorite pastime for visitors like Jim and Carolyn Martin of Tuscaloosa, Alabama.

to be sure.

- Don't worry about the water, the ice cubes, or eating the salads for fear of gastrointestinal illness. It doesn't happen. So just have fun.

- The resort is gated, and theft is not an issue. All rooms have their own room safes.

- You should pack shorts, swimsuits, t-shirts and resort wear. However, if you plan on eating in Le Gourmet, men will

need slacks, collared shirt and closed toe shoes and ladies are asked to wear dress slacks, skirt or dress.

-If you plan on going horseback riding, bring a pair of long pants.

For more information, check out www.couples.com. Don't miss the "special offers" page for great packages. There's also air/room specials when booked together over the Internet.

Thanks for traveling!



Enjoying the Jamaica sun are resort guests Linda and Gayle Everidge



Early morning at the magnificent pool area at Couples/Ocho Rios