

FAMILY TRAVEL

FIND FESTIVE FUN FOR ALL IN STRESS-FREE JAMAICA

Friendly people, postcard-perfect beaches a fabulous mix, **Mhairri Woodhall** writes.

I'm standing amid a torrent of water, my legs shaking like jelly. I'm vibrating with adrenalin, and not in a good way. I'm terrified, and my natural instinct is freeze or flight. Neither will serve me well. Brooklyn, my nutty, brave and trusting seven-year-old, is grinning wildly ahead of me, all-the-while grumbling about the vice-like-grip I've got on her hand. My husband Curt is directly behind me, cheering to help bolster my confidence. Just past him are 10 other intrepid adventurers who complete our human chain. Everyone else appears jubilant and so I force a smile and carry on.

Blind panic, it turns out, is a great distraction. Somehow, in a haze of terror, I've managed to conquer the 183-metre Dunn's River Falls. Well 75 per cent of it, but that's good enough for me. There's just one last challenge before I can escape to dry land — a baptism of sorts I suppose. And so, after placing my heels at the edge of the rock, and grasping Curt and Brooklyn's hands, I close my eyes and plunge backwards into the natural spring pool. Victory at last, now it's time to party.

The first half of our four-hour Dunn's River Catamaran Cruise tour was a safety-first, alcohol-free affair. Every element was carefully executed — from the in-depth briefing upon boarding to the mandatory bright yellow float belts we had to wear for snorkelling. All members of the Island Routes crew are also certified lifeguards — even the DJ — and inexperienced swimmers, or anyone needing extra help in the water were paired up with a guide. The level of professionalism and safety precautions implemented are exceptional, and the best I've seen. Our return trip was just as impressive — while we were scaling Jamaica's most spectacular natural attraction, our crew readied the bar and prepared a feast. With music blaring and the rum punch flowing, we — and I mean everyone on board — danced our way back to the pier.

Jamaicans intuitively create a festive atmosphere. I noticed this throughout our seven-day stay at Beaches Ocho Rios, and it's truly what makes Jamaica so special. Yes, the beaches are ridiculously postcard perfect, and the turquoise water is warm, clear and calm. But this can be said about most, if not all, Caribbean islands. Hot weather and tropical scenery are why we chose Jamaica, but it's the people who made our trip. Beaches Ocho Rios is an all-inclusive resort that aims to provide families with easy, stress-free vacations. It's also one of the few hotels that offers kids clubs for all ages and includes special activities like unlimited golf and scuba diving at no extra cost. Beaches also maintains a strict no-tipping policy, which could be perceived to have an adverse effect on service. Not the case. We found the staff to be friendly, attentive and more importantly, fun. Really, really fun.

One of the best parts of my stay was watching the resort photographers and entertainment team while they watched the live shows. It didn't matter if it was Big Bird, Elmo and Oscar the Grouch singing on stage or a dance competition between guests — their enthusiasm was infectious. And just imagine how many times they've had to listen to Elmo's Song. Yet, I witnessed laughing, singing and dancing on the sidelines. It was fantastic.

I also appreciated how safe we felt. As self-proclaimed helicopter parents, my husband and I are pretty cautious about letting our daughter out of sight. However, the Beaches property felt small and contained, and there were staff and lifeguards everywhere. As such, Brooklyn enjoyed more freedom than she's used to, and was thrilled with the novelty of being

allowed to visit the self-serve ice cream machine on her own. Her favourite places to play were the waterslides at Pirate's Island Waterpark and the white sand beach. Unfortunately, she found the Navigators (5-7 years) kids club a bit young and wasn't quite old enough for the Adventurers (8-10 years) club, which I know she would have loved. We found a compromise solution with the arts and crafts program run by Aunty Pat, who turned out to be my creative daughter's kindred spirit.

With so much on offer at the resort, it was difficult to find an excuse to explore off-property. Our Dunn's River Falls trip was a bucket-list adventure that I'm glad we checked off.

Volunteering is another vacation activity we want to expose our daughter to, and the Sandals Foundation offers a very easy introduction for families. The non-profit agency was started by Sandals Resorts, Beaches' parent company, as a way of giving back and supporting the communities that its hotels operate in. It's through this program that we booked a Reading Road Trip tour to visit a local school. This was one of the top excursions we've ever done, and an important experience for Brooklyn.

It was a revelation to her that not all children have a playground — or even a grass field — at their school. We read with four-year-old pre-kindergarten

IF YOU GO

The Montego Bay airport offers a special customs line for families travelling with young children, which helps expedite the process. It takes just under two hours to drive from the airport to Ocho Rios. Be sure to stock up on water and snacks in the Sandals lounge before boarding the shuttle. While tips aren't accepted on-property, tour guides and drivers do accept and appreciate gratuities. If you're planning on visiting a local school, the kids love to receive new books, colouring materials and stickers.

students who were excited to receive the books we brought them and to share all of their beautiful drawings with us. If you have the opportunity, I highly recommend venturing beyond the resort and spending time in the community. It was a highly impactful and positive experience, which is in line with everything else we encountered in Jamaica.

Visit www.arrivalstravel.com to follow Mhairri's family travel adventures.



A protected beach in front of Beaches Ocho Rios offers white sand and warm, clear waters. **CURT WOODHALL**



The writer's seven-year-old daughter Brooklyn meets local children during a Reading Road Trip tour at a school in Ochos Rios. **CURT WOODHALL**

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