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## Negril Point Lighthouse, Jamaica

By Elinor DeWire

photos by Jonathan DeWire

Imagine my delight last summer when my son and future daughter-in-law announced that their nuptials would take place in Jamaica! Who could ask for better kids? The warmth and sunshine of latitude 18°N was greatly anticipated as Jon and I boarded a plane in Seattle on a gray, rainy morning last December, headed for our son's wedding in the tropics. Our connection in Chicago was late due to snow, and the television in the airport showed wintry weather throughout most of the nation, even a cold snap in Florida. But hours later, we emerged from our plane into the balmy, floral-fragranced air of the Caribbean's most popular island – Jamaica.



The groom, Scott, coming through the galley access door after a visit to the catwalk. The author and her daughter, Jessica, can be seen on the outside.

The island is about 146-miles long and 50-miles wide and has a diverse geography of sandy beaches and rugged coral reef shore giving way to interior mountains with sharply walled valleys carved by rushing rivers and streams. It also has a colorful history. Historians believe the name Jamaica is a corruption of the native Arawak word *xaymaca*, meaning “land of wood and water.” These Amerind natives lived quietly until the late 15<sup>th</sup> century, disturbed only by occasional raids by the aggressive Caribs from South America.

Columbus visited Jamaica on two of his voyages and his son attempted, unsuccessfully, to set up a Spanish colony. On one stopover the dauntless explorer duped the indolent islanders into helping him repair one of his ships by threatening to remove the Moon from the sky unless they provided labor and materials. He knew, as they did not, that a lunar eclipse was at hand!

Pirates found the island’s geographic location perfect for their nefarious activities. The buccaneer Calico Jack lived in the area around Punta Negrilla, on the western tip of Jamaica, along with his pirate girlfriends Anne Bonney and Mary Read. The French captured them all in 1720, and Calico Jack was executed by hanging in Port Royal. Whalers used the island as a processing center to butcher and try their catch. A protected bay north of Punta Negrilla was a favorite spot and quickly earned the name Bloody Bay. South of it lay a seven-mile-long stretch of tawny sand – one of the finest beaches in the world – where the whalers could relax, drink rum, and carouse with the natives before heading home to New England with their holds filled with whale oil, the fuel of America’s colonial lighthouses.

French, Spanish, and English colonists fought over ownership of Jamaica and alternated occupation of the island for over three centuries. In the process, they founded the island’s profitable sugar industry, assuring it a stable vertex in the famous Triangle Trade that brought slaves from Africa to work in the cane fields and sent molasses to New England for the production of rum. Slavery was outlawed in Jamaica in 1832, and after years of political and social struggle, the island gained independence from Britain in 1962.

Most of the sugarcane is gone; as is the sordid past of freebooting, slave trading, and unrest. Today’s Jamaica is cheerful, modernized, and largely tourist-oriented. Our family wedding took place in an all-inclusive resort in Negril, the area named Punta Negrilla by the Spanish for the dark coral cliffs at its western point. Reggae music wafts through the air here, vacationers sunbath and swim nude, women in bright clothing walk the streets and beaches with baskets of fruit and vegetables on their heads, artists offer handmade crafts of jewelry and woodcarving, and hawkers sell cigarettes and Ganja, as the Jamaicans call marijuana. Famous Seven Mile Beach is cluttered with resorts, hotels, restaurants, and bars – a much different-looking place than the pristine beach the rough whalers knew, but equally hedonistic.

But here and there are tastes of old Jamaica. The day after the wedding celebration, we headed out to enjoy the west coast scenery and visit a few historic sites. One of our first stops was the century-old Negril Point Lighthouse, one of seven lighthouses still operated by the Jamaican Port Authority and the first lighthouse seen by ships arriving from the west.



Negril Lighthouse



Negril Lighthouse



Old kerosene lamps that were used before electricity



The author in front of the fresnel lens

I was thrilled when the smiling gentleman who greeted our group at the base of the tower introduced himself as the resident lighthouse keeper. Wilson Johnson served at two other Jamaican lighthouses for nine years before becoming the keeper of Negril Point Light where he has been assigned for the past eighteen years. He and his family, including six large dogs, live in one of the keeper's homes at the base of the tower.



Wilson Johnson, resident lighthouse keeper and Elinor DeWire

Johnson arrived at Negril Point Lighthouse only a few months prior to the station's automation in 1984, just long enough to oversee installation of the tower's self-sufficient electric beacon and learn how to operate and maintain it. The station also got a little facelift and upgrade at this time. The Jamaican Port Authority entrusted Johnson to supervise the sprucing up and automation, and a few years later the solarization of the beacon. He remains on the compound today as a caretaker, giving tours and doing the daily upkeep of the grounds and tower. He says that it's important to have someone living on-site to



prevent vandalism and to restore the beacon in the unexpected event it should fail.

Following automation, Johnson prudently asked the Port Authority to allow him to keep the old kerosene lamps and many of the station tools. He also kept the logbooks. These are displayed in the base of the tower, and though there is no money at present to properly maintain them, at least they haven't been lost or misplaced. I took a peek in the musty logbooks but found nothing beyond daily records of weather and duties. Johnson said most Jamaican lighthouses logbooks are like this. Keepers were not encouraged to write anything flowery or personal. He added that he has no talent with words and is glad there is little of it needed in his job.

Johnson gives a brief historical talk to all visitors before taking them up the 103 steps of the iron spiral staircase to the lantern. He asks no fee for this, but Jon and I pressed some money into his hand before we left – \$200 Jamaican, which was worth about \$4 American as of December 2002. He accepted it graciously, and I joked that he might use it buy extra dog food!

One of the more interesting points in Johnson's historical talk concerns the foundation of the lighthouse, which was designed by Trinity House to withstand earthquakes. The 66-foot concrete tower sits on a 45,000-gallon manmade reservoir of water that cushions it and allows the tower to sway gently when tremors wrack the point. Earthquakes have struck Jamaica on numerous occasions, most notably in 1692 when the town of Kingston was seriously rattled, and nearby Port Royal was destroyed by the ensuing tsunami. The island's volcanic origin is to blame.

Johnson told us Negril Point Lighthouse went into service under English rule in 1894, the fourth sentinel to be lighted in Jamaica (the oldest is at Port Morant, 1841). The tower was constructed of concrete made with crushed coral, quarried locally, and coated in a protective layer of cement. The beautiful second-order, barrel-shaped crystal lens was manufactured in Paris by Barbier & Benard in 1888 and shipped to the point where it was hauled 34-feet up the cliff using a derrick. Lit by kerosene lamps, it was later changed to acetylene gas, then electrified, and finally solarized. Its white beacon flashes once every two seconds. A red panel warns of the reef just off the point to the north. A bell on the catwalk of the lantern was used to signal the change of watch for the two keepers in the era before automation.

The keepers' homes, made of coral blocks, were constructed next to the lighthouse. They are substantial, having weathered numerous hurricanes. Two cisterns still stand next to the houses. They were once used to store water that was caught on the roofs of the houses. Modern conveniences of plumbing and electricity came relatively late to the station. Johnson believes the entire complex, including the lighthouse, was electrified about 1960. A water connection to the town supply also was made about this time, and the cisterns were abandoned.

Nearby to the lighthouse are the famous coral cliffs where intrepid tourists jump into the sea. My son, the newlywed groom and bravest among us, took the 40-foot leap into the 30-foot deep, cerulean cove just north of the lighthouse. The rest of the family was content to watch, staying cool with Red Stripe, Jamaica's famous beer. Considering that the mean daytime temperature in Jamaica year-round is 86°, a refreshing dip must have been commonplace for the early lightkeepers. Even today, there is no air conditioning at the light station. Johnson says the house stays cool because of its coral construction and the pleasant ocean breezes that blow over the point.

Sunsets are breathtaking here too. That may sound hackneyed, but it's true. Myriad tints of pink, lavender, and tangerine color the sky late in the day, as the Sun quickly descends. We even glimpsed the Green Flash, a strange and rare optical phenomenon of the Sun as it sets over a calm, clear sea, departing with a flash of green. This occurs because sunlight contains all the colors of the visible spectrum, and green is the last to disappear over the horizon in a quick salute. No doubt, Wilson Johnson and his family have seen many fantastic sunsets from their home on Jamaica's westernmost point, and a few Green Flashes as well.



A phone card sold in Jamaica with the lighthouse on it.



The lantern room