














# CLUB JAMAICA

The glamour endures at Tryall, coconut plantation turned exclusive retreat, where members commune with colonial ghosts and Monday never comes. **BY DANA VACHON**

Scenes from the Tryall Club, where villa owners and their guests have been gathering for more than 50 years

There is a picture on the wall of the pro shop at the golf course of the Tryall Club, here on Montego Bay in Hanover, Jamaica. It's a black-and-white photograph of a young Frank Pringle on some distant afternoon, finishing up 18 holes at this very course. His hair is dark, skin tanned, and he looks like the fifth member of the Rat Pack as he stands beside his friends Bill Paley and Bing Crosby. Pringle points to the picture, taken in the sixties when his cousin John Pringle had just joined a group of American investors to rebirth a failing coconut plantation as a vision of private homes and championship golf. There is no hotel here of the sort found at nearby Round Hill, but Tryall is no

*TOGRAPHS BY* **PHILIPP VON HESSEN**

practitioner of brute exclusivity; the world has far lower limbo sticks. The club's plot owners are its members, and there are more than a hundred of them, with many renting out their villas throughout the year.

Outside, the day is bright and made precious by the knowledge that for the rest of the world it may be Monday morning, but here in Tryall it is eternally 2:15 on the Saturday afternoon of a three-day weekend that everyone is quietly stretching to four.

The first hole shines before us like a Photoshop trick, uniform greens given dimension by palms that make sizzling sounds in the ocean breeze. The hills of Tryall are set back above us. A mist gathers atop them each morning and in the afternoon becomes the most gentle, nap-inducing rain. Overlooking the hills are the villas, with gently sloping cedar-shake roofs and picture windows facing out to a sea once home to pirates. The Tryall aesthetic is an architectural echo of that earlier period, the homes all taking significant cues from Tryall's Great House, the onetime home of the Browne family, wealthy coconut and cattle merchants whose decline and dénouements might have come from the last pages of a García Márquez novel; Charlie Browne was living in a modest concrete house just behind the beach when construction on Tryall began....

And what started as a $600,000 lark is now a full sphere of economic activity, a tiny pleasure republic all stirring with gardeners gardening, nannies nannying, laundresses laundering—lords-a-leaping! Tryall villas now go on the market for millions and rent for anywhere from $3,000 to $40,000 a week. And the place continues to grow, with 14 new plots cleared from the jungle and put up for sale in the last year alone. It is a lucky man who, in his later years, gets to see his dream pan out so fully. It is a luckier fellow still who gets to play golf on it.

John Hodges (in blue), husband of *Vanity Fair* editor Punch Hutton (in red), with Sea Salt villa owner George Hodges (in white) and his wife, Marty, on the pool patio of the Following Seas villa

## AT TRYALL IT'S ETERNALLY 2:15 ON THE SATURDAY AFTERNOON OF A LONG WEEKEND.

The Tropic of Cancer being more or less right above our heads, we pause to apply sunblock.

"It's a bit too late for me, I'm afraid," Frank Pringle says, regarding his forearm with a resignation passed off as humor. Looking at his skin, you'd think that it must have come into this world so pink and delicate—a Scottish baby born in colonial Jamaica! Fair Albion's seed! Seven decades later it is all crinkly browns, autumn leaves pressed into wax paper.

The first of Jamaica's Pringles, John, came from Scotland in the early 1870s as a young impoverished physician, soon marrying a daughter of the prosperous Levy family, Jews who had fled persecution in Portugal. He would rise to become the largest landowner in Jamaica and receive a knighthood. In 1953 a descendant of that John Pringle, also John Pringle, founded one of Jamaica's most renowned resorts, Round Hill, which he sold in 1962, before leaving for Switzerland. It was from the shores of their forebear's great success at Round Hill that Frank Pringle, his cousin, a later John Pringle, and Oklahoma oilman Ted Law looked up the coast at the coconut plantation of the declining Browne family and dreamed up the Tryall Club.

We tee up our balls and hit out onto the first hole of the Tryall course. Could we have known then that I would play one of the very worst games that Tryall's Ralph Plummer–designed course had ever seen? Or that our caddie suffered from staggering, undiagnosed nearsightedness? That even balls hit within relative proximity of the fairway could be lost on his watch? It hardly would have mattered. Golf is just an excuse for walking and talking anyway. In the next four hours Frank Pringle will tell me how he once sold Bing Crosby four plots of land in a single morning, lunched with Adlai Stevenson in London on the day he died, and served in the Jamaican government in the seventies, when the CIA came to town. He'll tell me how Winston Churchill, Princess Margaret, Noël Coward, and....

I have long had a personal bias toward these postcolonial Caribbean developers and trace it to a summer afternoon in 2001 when, in an air-conditioned theater at the Film Forum on New York's Houston Street, I watched *The Man Who Bought Mustique,* a documentary about Colin Tennant, Lord Glenconner, who made his great fortune into a small one by transforming said island into a ghastly sociology experiment—or a version of

paradise, depending on one's view: Mick Jagger bought a home there and visited with Bianca. David Bowie had one, too. Princess Margaret was gifted her own peninsula, not far from Patrick Litchfield's house. Bryan Ferry, Carolina Herrera, and Queen Elizabeth came along as well, and the place was a huge success until Tennant's money ran out.

A deposed jet-set king, Tennant moved to a gingerbread house on nearby St. Lucia, where the film found him making preparations to head back to Mustique for lunch with his old friend Princess Margaret. But 30 years had passed. The island's new owners had turned it into an efficient corporation. Many seemed to be from Connecticut. Tennant had imported an Indian tent with Kama Sutra paintings on its walls for the purpose of hosting lunch, but that afternoon even the Kama Sutra couldn't do the trick: The

James Goren and Liz Hodges heading to the Following Seas villa

looks like wet chocolate and opens onto an infinity pool set high above Montego Bay. At the heart of the house is a blown-glass fountain, French blue, dimpled, gurgling softly into a reflecting pool.

The growing season in Jamaica is year-round, and the Hodges home, just completed, is so fully landscaped with mature flowers and plants that it looks to have been here for decades. When I arrive, a group of workers appears to be racing against no apparent deadline to add a bathroom to one of the suites. In the mornings there are great rustlings of foliage beyond the window of my suite, followed by the cracking falls of trees as a team works with saws and machetes to realize the Hodgeses' vision of a view to the sea. On arrival I am met by a fully assembled staff.

"Cool towel?" asks one woman, who then produces one on what I recall as a silver tray.

## AMERICANS COME TO TRYALL TO BATHE IN THE PHOSPHORESCENT GLOW OF A BYGONE ERA.

ailing princess—she had lost a lung, suffered strokes, scalded her feet in a bathtub—proclaimed the day too hot for kissing hello. Her décolletage was smeared with pasty sunblock. The two quickly ran out of conversation.

Upon arriving, I had thought of Tennant and the intoxicating, at times destructive drive to fabricate paradise. Driving from the airport in Montego Bay, past the famed Round Hill club, we approached the Tryall Club, which rises from a thin strip of cabana-dotted beach in a green hill of palms so perfect they might be fiberglass, here on loan from some Japanese indoor beach that's all crammed with bright plastics and slick flesh. Presiding over the emerging view was the Brownes' plantation house, now without its clan, an aesthetic Empress Dowager. We drove into the club and up its smoothly graded roads to Sea Salt, the newly built villa of one of the Tryall Club's newest homeowners.

George and Marty Hodges began visiting Tryall years ago, staying in homes owned by George's family. They built Sea Salt in 2006, following George's retirement as president of the Wolf Organization, a Pennsylvania construction-materials concern. Their five-bedroom villa was designed by Nancy Maffessanti, a local architect whose father also designed homes at Tryall and whose Italian grandfather came to Jamaica as a prisoner during World War II and enjoyed it so much that he stayed. Sea Salt is configured as a gorgeous geometric proof, a series of discrete suites arranged at points and connected by arched colonnades floored in travertine tile. The main living room is finished in a rich local mahogany that

"Cold drink?" offers O'Neill Graham, the butler and preternaturally capable head of house for the Hodgeses, presenting me with a pineapple-and-rum cocktail.

O'Neill soon takes my picture with a digital camera, telling me that he will take it again when I leave and we will all be amazed at how much happier and more relaxed I will look.

Each of the staff wears bright blue polo shirts and Bermuda shorts. The uniforms were chosen over the standard dark pants, white shirt, and bow tie, a colonial holdover that the Hodgeses viewed as a touch absurd for 90-degree heat in the year 2008. In fact, the couple regard their staff with a casual affection that is decidedly un-British, a style that has strangely enough resulted in Mr. George Hodges's receiving an informal title around the house.

"Sir George is a great man," O'Neill will tell me privately, in a voice suggesting that

Tryall, 1962, *from left:* CBS founder Bill Paley, Frank Pringle, Bing Crosby, golf pro Hubert Green, World Golf Hall of Famer Julius Boros

I have surely gleaned this myself. Hodges is eminently likable; he looks like a kinder, gentler Terry Bradshaw. I am unsurprised when another member of the staff intimates that the Hodgeses have enjoyed great popularity with the people of Hanover Parish following a gift, through the Tryall Fund, of computers to local schools.

"The only real problem we've ever had was with our first cook," Marty Hodges tells me the next night over an expertly prepared dinner of local fish with coconut sauce. "He only knew how to make one dish, although he could carve anything out of a melon."

"It is true," O'Neill affirms, noting that the man was recently featured on local television, winning a championship with one such carving. "He really is someone who should be working on a cruise ship."

How many melons would it take to make a life-size sculpture of Kathy Lee Gifford? I wonder as this exchange takes place. And would the owners of Lever House be interested in such a thing?

At the moment Marty presides over the formal reception in a blue caftan, her face tanned as if it were August. She tells me to please take off my blazer and get settled in my suite, and that we'll be eating dinner in a few hours beneath a gazebo out by the water.

A hummingbird arrives as if on cue, and with its delicate wings suspends itself in the air just above the purple petals of a thunbergia.

I took my daughter to Georgetown, and when we saw Ivanka Trump was there, we turned around and went right back to New York!" An Italian man emphasizes the importance of keeping Trump's children away from one's own as we stand on the dock that shoots off the beach of the Tryall Club into Montego Bay.

Waiters serve cocktails the colors of kids' toys as the sun yields to the moon. Looking down the coast, one can see the lights of Round Hill, where Noël Coward and Bill Paley were among the original shareholders, where John and Jackie Kennedy honeymooned, where many played in those days just after World War II, when America was without enemies and Acapulco rivaled St.-Tropez.

That club still has its share of well-lit names—Steve Schwarzman has a home there, as does Ralph Lauren and Bob Pittman. Lauren's house is white and visible in the moonlight from its perch on a promontory of rock.

The bar at Round Hill strives to affect Hollywood in the thirties—its walls are lined with black-and-white photographs of the more romantic passers-through, and they seem to look down from their places there with approval as waiters in white shirts set out high tea each afternoon. But the differences between the two resorts are quite minimal—they are most like fraternal twins, and East Egg–West Egg analogies have no place down here.

Almost. Later that night we will return to the Hodgeses' to find staff members assembled outside, looking up at a big villa atop the hill where shines a very faint blue light.

"Lennox Lewis lives up there," one will claim; then, as if relating an irresistible secret: "We can always tell when he's home because they leave that blue light on."

As for now....

The dinner table has a centerpiece of flower petals and candles and swells with talk about the usual things: the upcoming presidential elections, dates of departure from a season just ending, Tryall Club governance. It's the sort of pastel noise that often washes over such tables but with a few exceptions. The crickets fill the night with the sound of a thousand winning slot machines. One of the Hodgeses' friends is a lovely woman from Mississippi, and when she laughs it sounds like a National guitar. And there is Frank Pringle, in a shirt of the sort I have only ever seen before in that documentary on Mustique, a short-sleever with bold vertical stripes of blue and red and shiny gold. It's a shirt from a different era, one for dancing with someone like...

## THE CLUB FOUNDER'S VOICE EVOKES THE NARRATION OF LONG VOLLEYS AT WIMBLEDON.

"...Princess Margaret, beautiful girl, most beautiful eyes ever. Mauve. Mauve!" Pringle is saying, almost as a point of history.

"Princess Margaret? Did she come here?" I interrupt him midsentence.

"Well, she had just broken up with Peter Townsend," he informs me, referencing the famous love that the princess was denied when her family ruled Townsend unsuitable.

"Was she with Snowdon then?" I ask.

"No, she was between them." Pringle now gets a boyish spark in his eye, then a manly pride. "She was with me."

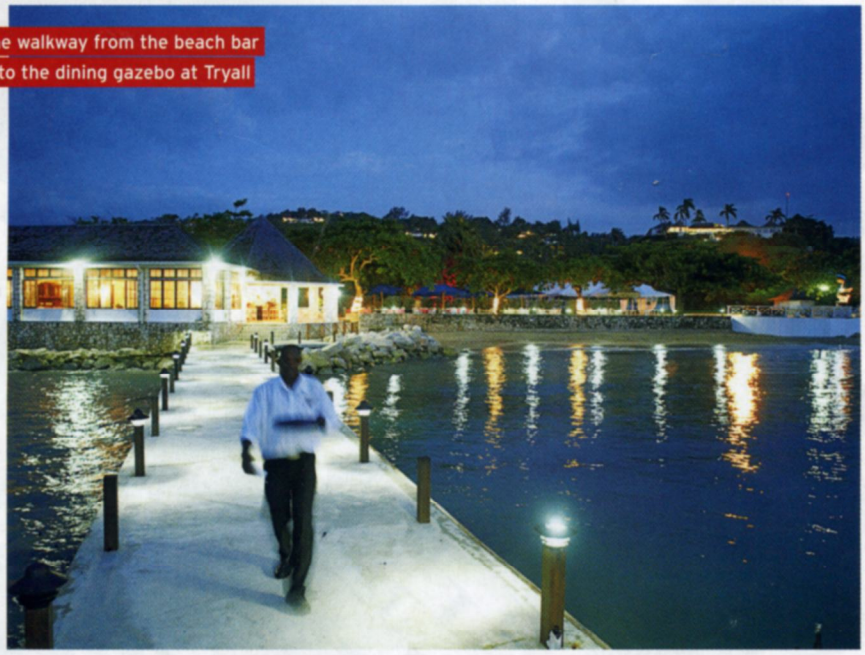
"You were lovers?"

He pauses. A waiter comes by to refill wineglasses. The table is amber with candlelight. "It was passion, really."

Pringle recounts the old days in a voice that evokes the narration of long volleys at Wimbledon and documentaries about

migrating wildebeests. Tryall is filled with the homes of Americans, many of whom come, it seems, to play at an idealized version of haute colonialism, to swim in the phosphorescent glow of a bygone era.

They have in Pringle the genuine article, a man born here when a king still reigned over this island, who knows the color of Princess Margaret's eyes. He is still here, dining beneath the sky in a gazebo, wearing a dancing shirt with streaks of gold.



The walkway from the beach bar to the dining gazebo at Tryall

The next night Pringle comes over to the Hodgeses' villa for cocktails. He wears a blue polo shirt with the Jamaican national crest embroidered in gold and red, still playing his old role of tourism minister. He remarks on the mahogany inlays in the Hodgeses' living room and looks out at familiar Montego Bay.

## WAITERS HERE SERVE COCKTAILS THAT ARE THE COLORS OF KIDS' TOYS.

We drink rum. The crickets begin to assert themselves. Pringle tells me stories about his experiences with Winston Churchill during his visits to Jamaica, and though I am forbidden to retell the stories in their entirety—Pringle is saving them for his memoir, *Two Sides of the Same Coin*—he agrees to let me reveal the highlights:

"Buggerers can't be choosers!" Churchill declares about one Conservative party member at the end of the first story. "One might verily, yea verily, tell the world to go to hell!" the Great Man booms to an intimate group in the other.

The Hodgeses are getting ready for dinner at the home of another Tryall resident, Albert Dwoskin, a Washington, D.C.–based real estate developer. I am to go with them. Before we leave, though, Pringle recalls another story, about a barbecue on a beach decades before.

Noël Coward was there and had recently gifted a donkey foal to his friend Kitty Lehman, wife of banking heir Bobby Lehman.

"What happened to the foal I gave you?" Mr. Coward asked Ms. Lehman as they ate. "Is it doing okay?"

"It's doing very well," said Ms. Lehman. "In fact, it's now pregnant."

"Oh my goodness, really? And what do you call it?"

"I called it Celestine," she said, and the name was seen by most as a good choice.

"I've written something to Celestine," Mr. Coward announced moments later, and when the table had grown quiet he recited:

*Celestine, Celestine,*
*What a naughty girl you've been!*
*Even though you were deflowered,*
*Love and kisses, Noël Coward.*

At dinner that night we are served local fish in a formal dining room with 30-foot ceilings and vaguely silver walls. My dining partners, both civil engineers, have been flown in by our host to begin work on a new residential development he is building just down the way. The conversation is lively: We talk about John Edwards's (at that point undashed) desire to be attorney general and Queen Noor's loveliness. We talk about people from the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia living in Washington, and about a man whose wife tried for many years to poison him.

The next morning Frank Pringle comes by Sea Salt as I prepare to leave for the airport. He has his grandson with him, a young man whose clear infusions of native Jamaican blood have given him dark skin and hair well suited to the tropics. Pringle's grandson brings with him his girlfriend, who looks like one of Gauguin's river bathers. The Hodgeses are not home, but Pringle gives an informed tour, pausing to point out the quality of the mahogany, the effect of the infinity pool, the upholstery of the couches. He then points at the view of Montego Bay, which you could never grow numb to.

A bit later I'm sitting at the Hodgeses' dining room table with my bags packed, flipping through a copy of *Slim Aarons: A Place in the Sun*. The pictures have those very intense colors of the seventies. Photography has advanced since then and probably become more accurate, but what happened to those colors? The pure whites, in the bikinis of the women in St.-Tropez. Such deep reds, in the ski suits of those little German princes. And the corn silk of their mother's hair…

O'Neill now appears with a can of Jamaican ginger beer for me to take back to New York. I thank him but say I doubt it will make it through security. He then produces his digital camera and I realize it's time for my parting photograph. We may have taken it by the dining room table. Or maybe in front of the fountain. I don't quite remember. My mind was still very much with the colors of the book. I do know that it was very, very bright out. I recall it being just incredibly bright…. ■