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Port Antonio, on Jamaica's sleepy northern coast, keeps it real

By ROBERTA BERNSTEIN

DRIVING from the Kingston airport to Port Antonio, on the island's northeast coast, it was obvious we were steering clear of the "other" Jamaica — that of loud resorts, overdeveloped beachfronts and hulking cruise ships. Paradise — a coastal landscape of honeycomb rocks and craggy inlets, white-sand beaches and aquamarine sea — awaited.

We asked our driver which celebrities he'd taken to the Trident Hotel, the new luxury boutique property to which we were headed. He laughed and said, "I've taken Beyoncé's luggage. She took the helicopter."

It's not surprising that Beyoncé chose the fiber-private Trident, situated in Portland parish, home to the ravishing Blue Mountains. Other stars have made the trip to Portland — Scarlett Johansson and Gwen Stefani, among them — but they're hardly the first. In the 1950s, Hollywood royalty (and just plain royalty) — including Princess Anne, Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton — yachted to the Caribbean hamlet.

In the 1980s, however, thanks in part to devastating hurricanes and the decline of a once-thriving banana trade, the area began to lose its luster. Even the Trident Hotel, a formerly swinging destination, fell into disrepair.

Enter the Geejam Collection, led by music veteran and indie hotelier Jon Baker, partner and co-owner Steve Beaver and (more recently) businessman and Port Antonio native Michael Lee-Chin. Recognizing that the area's abundant charms were there for the asking, they began to renovate and build the next generation of luxury Caribbean retreats.

The collection currently consists of the Trident and Geejam hotels — which share a bespoke philosophy — and the eight-bedroom Trident Castle, a fantastical confection used mostly

for private events.

The Trident's aesthetic is ultra-sophisticated and modern, with just 13 sea-hugging villas awash in white walls, beige tile floors and mid-century furnishings that feel both 1960s jet-set and very current. Luxurious flourishes include private patios, infinity pools and 24-hour room service.

At cocktail hour, guests sip concoctions at the hip Time Bar, where an eclectic selection of tunes plays on the sound system. The attached Explorer's Lounge, with its comfy couches, vintage pool table and mid-century artwork, is a great place to sprawl out. Food is uniformly delicious, aided by the Trident's organic farm. Casual dining is at the indoor-outdoor Veranda with coastline views; dinners are mostly at Mike's Supper Club, which often features a gifted jazz band. Topping off the hotel's amenities are a private beach, a small, top-notch spa and a fitness room open to the water.

Trident's cool sophistication stands in contrast to the earthier Geejam. Set some 10 minutes away in verdant foothills thick with majestic fruit and nut trees, the resort is an Eden-like hideaway replete with steep, winding paths and unexpected vistas.

Geejam began in 2005 as a recording studio lovingly built by Baker, a former Island Records executive; then the resort was built around it in 2008. It has become a favorite work spot/getaway for musicians like Alicia Keys, Snoop Dogg and Grace Jones. Its seven deluxe units feature high-end modern furnishings and amenities. Meals are served



PORTIE-LANDIA: Beachy Port Antonio (top); an art-minded junior villa suite at the sleek and sophisticated Trident Hotel (above).

at the Bushbar, an exceptionally well-tricked-out "treehouse" restaurant with an ambient sound system.

Port Antonio itself, rundown but on the upswing, has a recently built marina, festive street dance parties and a modern crafts market. A boat ride reveals a coast of secret coves and caves, peeks at private homes, lone spear fisherman out in the waves, the clear, deep waters of the infamous Blue Lagoon and pristine white sand beaches. For sunbathing and swimming, a favored spot is the gorgeous slice of beach at Frenchman's Cove.

The area is also known for its waterfalls. A gorgeous coastline drive will veer off and ascend into the rainforest past thick stands of fruit trees and red-orange forest flowers, until a turn-off drops you off at Reach Falls. Here, visitors experience a magical realm replete with tranquil pools, hanging vines, exotic flowers and thundering water.

Later, back at the Trident, cocktails call at the Time Bar. Go dressed up, or stick to shorts. High-end resorts rarely feel so extravagant yet unassuming. Then again, Portie has long been an expert at seduction.

TIP: Trident, from \$563; Geejam, from \$495; geejamcollection.com