

A LETTER FROM JAMAICA

Best Care Lodge
11, Trevennion Road
Kingston 5
Jamaica

September, 1991.

Dear friends,

After a year of A levels and fundraising, I am finally here, Kingston, Jamaica! Thank you so much for all your help and support. Where do I start? There is so much I could tell you.

The home is in central Kingston, the capital of Jamaica. It is run by a government backed board and we are sponsored here by a charitable trust called the International Proxy Parents. They take care of the needs of the children. Best Care Lodge is the home of thirty-three mentally and physically handicapped "children" (seventeen are over the age of eighteen) Their abilities vary immensely and our job is to stimulate the children through art, craft, music and sport. The other staff just take care of their basic needs. We also take the more able kids swimming, to church and on various other outings.

Although the work is tiring it is very rewarding and enjoyable because the children are very loving and hugs usually come six at a time. Our patois is improving fast, so we can understand the children and staff. It is also important for the Jamaicans to realise you are not a tourist so then they do not rip,"tiff", you off. The buses are real sardine tins. They have large signs stating the seating capacity which is then tripled. Everybody cannot help but get intimate with their neighbours and the real problem starts when people want to get off. They also tend to race each other to get to the next stop quicker. I have found my skiing has come in useful to keep my balance when going around corners, and a bellowing "One stop, driver" screeches the bus to a halt to get off.

Kingston is a sprawling city. It is backed by Blue Mountains which are filled with tiny settlements of close, interbred communities. This leads down to the commercial (well, as much as a third world city can be) New Kingston. Then to the tidier, smarter Downtown and the shanty towns in the industrial harbour. My geography lessons on the developing world came rushing back to me.

Three years ago you would not have ventured into Parade, the shopping area of Downtown Kingston. Now, due to the new government policies, it is safe to walk around during the day without getting heckled "Hey, whitey, I give dem child?" The Coronation Market is so different to European markets. The stall holders just sit on the dusty floor with their goods in old sacks and large plastic buckets. These are usually carried on one's head! Everything can be found here. A local delicacy is chicken feet. Bartering is fun as they think any "whitey" must be wealthy. Once anybody knows what and where we are working, their attitude changes and the price drops!

(over)

Our first trip into the mountains was an experience. Six current Project volunteers, one ex-volunteer in a taxi fit for the scrap heap. (Enough of that, I don't want to worry my family). The scenery is breathtaking and I had to pinch myself to believe I was actually in Jamaica. As we meandered up the pot-holed road (in a car with no clutch), we could look down from the lush, green mountains onto the city and the deep, blue Caribbean sea. It is a dream until you open your eyes to all the poverty.

I have not yet seen a stereotype West Indian beach, but there are palm trees outside my bedroom window and the suntan is doing well from all the swimming excursions.

The Jamaican way of life is very, very slow, and I have unlearned the true meaning of the "Soon come" phrase, on a recent visit to Kingston Public Hospital. Anyone who knows me quite well will know I find hospital life interesting and have spent time working in a local hospital and the Radcliffe Infirmary in Oxford. What a difference! Anyone with any complaints about the N.H.S. should come here. We, that is a member of staff, Ursula, and a twelve year old boy with cerebral palsy and a badly infected elbow, and myself, arrived at 7.30 a.m. We eventually saw the first doctor at one o'clock, by which time Ursula had fainted, leaving me with Jermaine weeing all over the floor of a room with thirty other people anxiously waiting. If I had a dollar for everyone who asked me if he was my son!

We finally got home at half past five. I had braved the X-ray department and a hospital ward on my own, plus one handicapped child, a limited understanding of Jamaican English, and white skin. It was a real eye-opener and it fills me with dread to think of all the tourists on the North Coast who leave Jamaica with such a false image.

Most people would do anything to help you, especially when we are with "our children". The Rasta. population is low. Another stereotype that needs breaking down is the drug image. Yes, there is a lot of drug pushing in the rougher areas, but you do not see people on the streets abusing drugs as the image states. Jamaica has the basic problems of developing countries, which is why our help is required.

I have not yet mentioned the weather. The West Indies, hot isn't it? The climate is best described as very predictable. It is very hot, very sticky and you live in a permanent sweat. It is the rainy season but it has not rained since May, so there is a terrible water shortage.

To summarise, we are seeing all sides of life; the Jamaican, international ex-patriots and life as a white volunteer. The work is hard but enjoyable and rewarding, and our days off are excellent. I hope this is interesting and describes something about this fascinating country.

Best wishes,
Amy Richardson.