





FESTIVAL

*Photography by
Connor Macleod and Ian Hylands
Words by Rowan Sorrell*

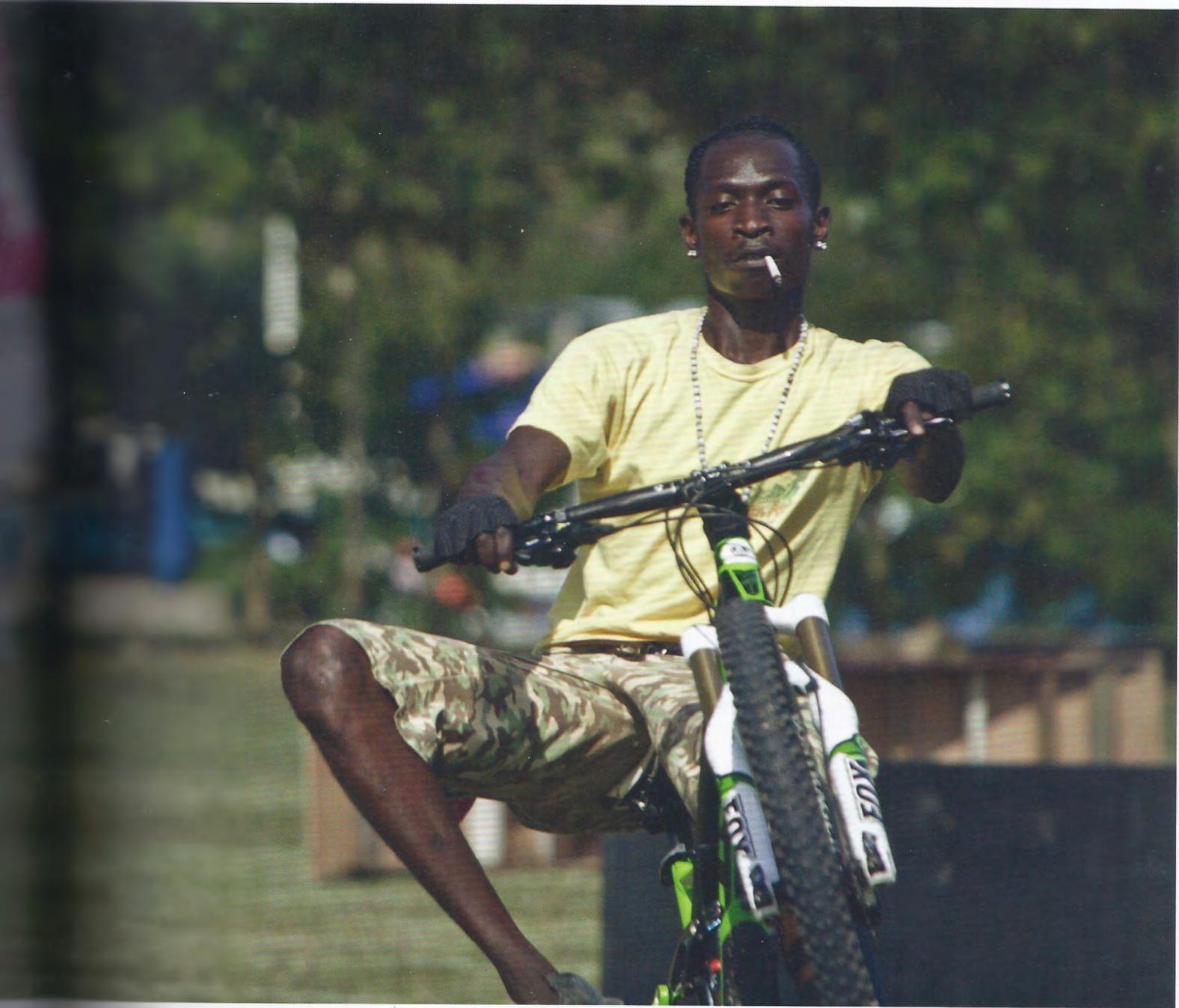
No other small nation sparks so strong an image in the western mind as Jamaica. The flag, the music, the dialect, the religious movements and the national colours are all instantly recognisable and uniquely Jamaican. Most of these things are ingrained in popular western culture and many of Jamaica's national heroes, both past and present, are known and adored worldwide. Certainly for me, without having once set foot on the island, there was a strong feeling that I had a bond with the place. But is this cultural perception a representation of the real Jamaica? And, more important in terms of feeding my mountain bike obsession, what could it offer the travelling biker?

Many of us have striven over the years to find alternative places to explore with our bikes, real alternatives to the guaranteed return on investment of an annual Alps adventure. To get professionally hard nosed about it, as someone who has tried to provide as well as revel in great riding, could the island really offer a decent payback for the long haul flight? What scene, if any, exists? How many and how good are the trails?

Using the wonderful web, the sheer potential of the landscape had become apparent; the topography of this island is such that even the most hardened rider could meet his match among those serious mountains. But would this potential be realised on the ground? There is little readily available information on the paths and trails that exist in this impressive landscape, culminating in the Blue Mountain, which towers over Kingston at 7,402 feet.

No alternative then than to go, which suited me. One of the easiest ways in appeared to be the Fat Tyre Festival, which conveniently runs at the end of the British winter, a time when the soul often need uplifting. I'd been eyeing it up for a few years, but my cynical and tight fisted side never let me take the plunge. I'd been looking for my own way in, some way of exploring the trails in the country off my own bat, but it just wasn't happening. So eventually I parted with my money and booked a place on the 2012 Fat Tyre Festival to enjoy a week's tour of the highlights in a guided group. Sold on the idea of riding what were said to be the best trails on the island – and of shutting my brain off for a week and not having to think for myself – I boarded that plane in February in full holiday mode.







The Festival had been running in some shape or form for many years in Negril, a flatter and more touristy part of the island. Back in those days the event had a heavy hedonistic vein and the trails and the riding experience played second fiddle to the many delights and temptations that the colourful island could offer the westerner. These early beginnings eventually ran their course so one night Andrew Giles and his friends Jonathan Gosse and Wayne Lee hatched a plan to bring the Fat Tyre Festival to the trails they had been riding around Ocho Rios. The very next year they were the hosts and the emphasis was firmly back on the riding. They now run it for one week annually and it is a tour of some of the best trails in the country, riders overnighing in different locations along the way.

Of His Own Accord

They say first impressions last and Jamaica made a few of those on me. Touching down on the island and driving away from the airport you are struck dumb by just how vibrant the colours are; someone

has clearly installed the vivid filter on Jamaica and it instantly uplifts your mood. My imagination ran wild on what might be out there in the countryside and I couldn't wait to get onto the trails and see this country from within.

Then I was hit hard by the warmth and humidity. While the heat is not searing, it is constantly hovering around 30 degrees with high humidity turning any pasty white westerner into a sweaty mess after just a few minutes of pedalling.

Finally, you are loudly and insistently reassured about the island's strong connection with music. It might be at the hands of the lead shoe wearing bus driver blasting out the latest basement and dancehall through a pimped sound system installed under the passenger seats. Or it might be from the sounds of reggae sweeping through the air from distant speakers in towns and villages. This island takes its music seriously. In fact it is such a huge part of the whole culture that I'm sure Jamaicans would take a huge sound system that shakes the foundations over any other luxury.



I have to admit I had pretty low expectations of the quality of the trails we would find. Perhaps this was a subconscious exercise to avoid disappointment, as all I really wanted was an excuse to visit the country. I had come prepared to accept that we would be dabbling with fledgling trails, my outlook distorted by the lack of any visible domestic MTB scene on the island. I was to be pleasantly surprised: I would be enjoying eight days of solid riding, reasonably technical and in beautiful landscapes. We all had a blast.

Easing In

Things started slowly however. On day one we were taking in a few mellow runs around Ocho Rios, guided by festival organiser Andrew Giles. Fun though it was, this wasn't getting my heart pounding. The group was strung out and we were stopping every five minutes for punctures, which wasn't helping the flow. This trail did, however, give me a first taste of the land that the trip would eventually unlock – stunning flora, lush green forests, clearings with palm trees, and one of the most picture perfect rivers I have ever encountered, with crystal clear waters and blue and green gravels making up the bed.

“

Someone has clearly installed the vivid filter on Jamaica and it instantly uplifts your mood

”

And so after just a couple of hours on the bike I knew that even if the trails didn't wow me, the land we were riding through was going to blow my socks off. We moved onto another local trail, a much rockier affair that blew away a few cobwebs (and a few more inner tubes; with 15 snakebites among the group on day one we decided that the Flat Tyre Festival would have been more apt a name). The final section of trail we rode that day emptied our motley crew at a small fishing village set on a lovely quiet beach where we stopped for barbecued chicken, lobster and cold beers. A perfect setting to end the day and this trail made me feel more hopeful of what was to come.







[Previous] Robin's Bay, a land of fishing villages, farmers' fields and fresh coconuts

The optimism would be repaid. The riding was ramped up a notch the next day; faster trails with more flow reaching deeper into the country. Straight off the bus we were into fast rocky singletracks, old traditional paths used to link villages and beaches now given a new lease of life with the rush and scabbling of tacky rubber indicating that the fat tyre had arrived in town. These trails are of the very best kind, traditional routes each with its own history built to serve a very practical purpose yet seemingly crafted with an understanding of two wheels.

We put down a couple of quick runs on these before travelling on to the second trail of the day: Pressure Drop. This one plummets down to finish on a remote black sand beach and is an absolute belter. Weathered over time, its roots and rocks make for a sublime techy treat. The old path has been titivated with features added over the years by Andrew and his trail building helper Natty Grant. Suddenly whoops were sounding through the trees, tyres were locked and sliding and discs were glowing. At the bottom we were all grins, joy enhanced by the beauty of the secluded black sand bay at which the trail ends. While the group swam, ate and sunbathed, I quietly hiked my way back to the top, as I had to hit it up one more time. A sublime trail. There's absolutely nothing more to say about it.

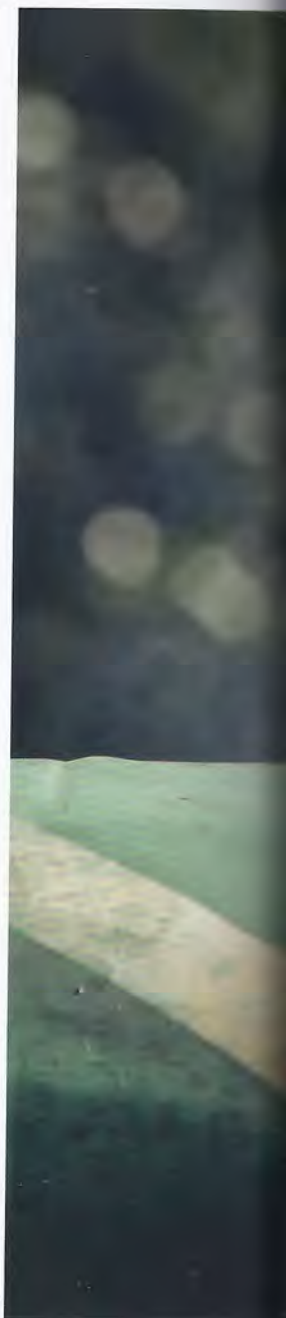
Off The Hook

From the minute we'd met as a group, the rumour mill had been churning with talk of the bike park in the Blue Mountains. Those who had experienced it on previous trips simply laughed and said: "You just wait, you're not going to believe it!" How right they were.

Set high up in a rugged and picturesque mountain range is one of the highest concentrations of manmade trails in the world, all painstakingly handcrafted for the perfect ride in the most unexpected of settings, namely an old coffee plantation in the heart of Jamaica. Literally tens of thousands of man hours must have gone into these trails and the facilities around them. It's a hard one to sum up in words, other than to say it's completely off the hook: heli pads, 4WD drive buggies for uplifts, rivers and waterfalls and some of the longest and best handcrafted purpose built trails I have ever had the pleasure of riding. A truly unbelievable place and the only way most of us will ever get to experience this place is to join in with the Fat Tyre, as the bike park welcomes the festival through its gates each year.

We spent two days hitting the various trails there, getting hot and sticky and then cooling off in the stunning waterfalls surrounded by bumper sound systems, BBQs and drinks chillers. The second day spent at the resort shredding the trails with Katie Holden and Dodzy was probably one of the most enjoyable and memorable days I have had on a bike, laughing and grinning all the way down these epic runs. This was made all the more poignant by the tragic recent loss of Dodzy. That day charging the trails in Jamaica is one I won't forget. Rest in peace, buddy.

[James 'Dodzy' Dodds, a kiwi legend, died in a hunting accident on September 7, 2012.]







Looking back on the whole experience, the bike park in the Blue Mountains was a highlight of the trip. It's also a stark contrast to the rest of the adventure. Everything you ride up to that point is on natural trail with the odd tweak along the way to help the flow – the places you visit are all the real deal out in the Jamaican countryside and it's pretty invigorating. Then all of a sudden you hit the bike park for two days of completely surreal trail hedonism.

The trails are some of the finest I have ridden, with superb flow, milking the terrain for all it's worth and for some truly epic descending. So much so that some riders in the group were done after just one run. We squeezed three runs into the final day, which was some serious vertical. All the time you are there you find yourself asking the same questions: how and why?

The simple answer is: because they can. It turns out this set up in Jamaica is one of a number of bike parks on different properties around the world owned by the Global Conservation Mountain Bike

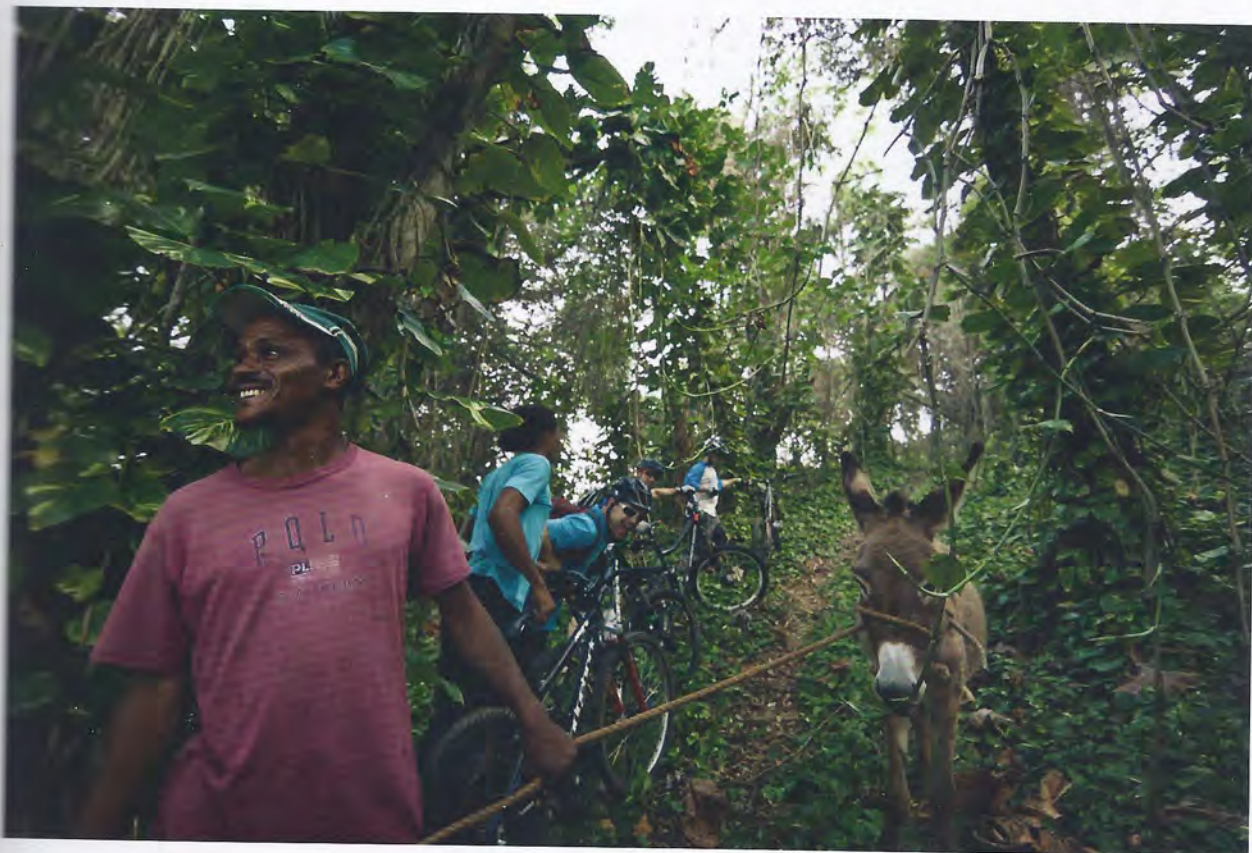
Club. What they have created is a paradise for riders, trails that deeply satisfy you in locations that are truly beautiful. It's an experience to savour.

Ackee And Callaloo

The food we ate all week was both simple and wholesome; not extravagant in any way but no less delicious for that. I must admit to being thrown off balance when I woke, bleary eyed following a few too many rums, unable to recognise any of the food on offer for my first breakfast of the trip. It wasn't long, though, before I was familiar with ackee, saltfish, callaloo and plantain just for a start.

Out on the trail you can hack into a fresh coconut for the cool milk or enjoy the fruits growing everywhere – watermelons, paw paws, mangoes and guavas. I even spotted my namesake, used to create the traditional Christmas drink on the island. But disappointingly Sorrell never did try Sorrel...

Carnivores shouldn't miss jerk pork, chicken and fish, made special by a rich



marinade deeply infused into the meats. But some of the meals I enjoyed the most were the vegetarian Rasta dishes piled high with UFOs (unidentifiable food objects). The street food is good too and the patties are not to be missed, a delicious pasty style snack, fried and flavoursome, guaranteed to pick you up when energy is low.

Jamaican beer comes in one main form – Red Stripe. Now this is a pretty weak flavoured beer and could be hard to stomach at home in the local pub. But add 30 degrees of heat, high humidity and a long day in the saddle and this stuff becomes a life tonic both during and after rides – totally refreshing and surprisingly tasty. Sometimes when you try things on their own terms they make sudden sense.

The beer is the soft stuff. Later night entertainment takes the form of rum and any available mixer, or as it comes if you feel hard enough. The local guys drink some serious proof white liquor but most of us felt more at home with the smoother tasting and darker Appleton Rum.

The Scene

Looking back on the whole trip I still feel surprised that the MTB scene in Jamaica isn't taking off big time. I was hoping to stumble upon a burgeoning trail scene, hear stories of new areas, clubs and groups around the island but this was not the case. The scene at present revolves around a few key people and areas: the annual Fat Tyre Festival, Andrew, Jonathan and a few friends based around Ocho Rios, the Sherwood Mountain bike resort and the Kingston MTB club – a group of ex-pats mostly who have been searching out old paths and tracks from historic maps of the mountains and slowly testing those that remain to see which work on the bike.

Jamaicans don't get involved much, partly because there is no real MTB shop on the island but mostly because the cost of bikes puts them out of reach for the vast majority. Also, as Jonathan points out, trail riding doesn't fit well with the local mindset, which has always been about the sprint events – short bursts of fun, activity or competition. To spend six to eight hours out on a bike riding at a steady pace just doesn't stack up to the average Jamaican. That said, what



[Right] Andreas Hestler riding in the Blue Mountains – incredible trails

little scene there is well worth immersing yourself in. It's why there is an annual exodus from Europe and America to partake in the Fat Tyre Festival, with local riders and many long serving attendees from around the globe returning for the buzz and excitement that surrounds what is a truly great week.

Main Men

Jonathan Gosse and Andrew Giles remain the key men behind the Festival, pulling the whole thing together and shaping the way it runs with a solid team of helpers.

Jon is the executive director of the Oracabessa Foundation, funded by Chris Blackwell, a UK born Jamaican who created Island Records in 1959. Chris is passionate about Jamaica and his backing helps to support the island at a grassroots level. The annual Bicycle Bash held at James Bond Beach and the brand spanking new BMX track just a couple of kilometres from the bay are two projects that have emerged with his help. The Bicycle Bash is as vibrant a two wheeled gathering as you will ever encounter and the BMX track

should be a huge success – skill and speed are two things that are not lacking among the local kids. Ultimately the programme aim is medals at the Olympic Games.

Andrew Giles is an optometrist from Yorkshire who has been living on the island for over 20 years. Our guide on the trails for the week, Andy is the man who has discovered, cleared and improved many of the trails we rode. The exploring for new trails didn't always end well. On one occasion he got completely lost and benighted in the middle of the thick forest and had to hunker down for the night in a random hut.

"I were shitting meself," he recalls in the remnants of his northern twang. But as it was on that trip that he discovered my favourite trail of the week, I say Andy's terror was well worthwhile.

Much of the trail maintenance and building is now carried out by Natty Grant, a tall, slight, dreadlocked man who should be knighted for the job he did for us that week – uncovering old paths and clearing back vegetation, building berms and drops with Andy and generally making stuff work.





“

What they have created is a paradise for riders, trails that deeply satisfy you in locations that are truly beautiful

”

We also owed gratitude to our supervisors for the week, Norval and Martin. Two fishermen from one of the local fishing villages, the guys drove the bikes from place to place and were a superb double act, always present with a few choice words. The only Jamaican rider on my trip, Sanchez Hubbard, also earned a special hurrah. On board a Ridgeback hardtail with original Marzocchi Z1s, plastic pedals and V-brakes, he showed up the vast majority of the guests with his silky

yet lairy riding skills. Sanchez was a chilled character and was a whole lot of fun to ride with. Unafraid to push hard down the trails chasing after us on our full suspension bikes, he brought a lot to the week.

Impressed

I have been involved in trail centres and all that goes with that for a long time. That means I'm not easily impressed but yes, the festival really delivered. There were no attitudes in the group and the vibe was relaxed and honest; the organisers' first priority showing off the trails and some of the more beautiful spots of the island. Sure I might have done more hours in the saddle and more vertical feet in the Alps but I came away from Jamaica with a whole lot more than that.

Fancy the 2013 festival? www.smorba.com

