

## 'House-Warming' Devon House - the new hotspot

Devon House is undergoing a social facelift, of sorts. In fact, the historical landmark, built in 1881 by George Stiebel, is emerging as one of the city's chicest endroits.

Try day-to-evening offerings like the newly opened chocolatier Chocolate Dreams, wine bar Bin 26, Rêve jewellery store and Norma's On The Terrace (owned and operated by the grand dame of Caribbean cuisine Norma Shirley), among other attractions to truly understand the transformation taking place. It's not unusual to see the city's style belles, perfectly coiffed clutch purses in hand, gliding across the estate eager to share in a night of fine dining, vino sipping and hearty laughter. More and more, the courtyard and indeed the sprawling lawns are becoming not only a place to be seen, but also a much-sought-after locale for haute weddings, corporate functions, festivals, hot-ticket events, even the odd party or two. "It has been an objective in my career to integrate the social classes," says Edward Seaga, former prime minister and guardian of the island's culture. "Devon House, like Jamaican music, is another step in that direction." "Some enjoy the lawns and admire the gardens, some lyme with friends and others enjoy the shopping... but it's undeniable that there's a charm there," adds Seaga, who officially opened Devon House in 1967 after stopping negotiations to destroy the mansion, two years prior. "I had overheard discussions one night at a dinner party during which an American developer was telling one of the guests that they were going to be bulldozing Devon House mansion in the morning to build apartments. So, I got a preservation order restricting them from doing anything to the property under the National Trust Act."

The Government then bought the property from Agnes Irene Lindo, who was living in New York following the death of her husband Cecil. "At the time, we didn't know what to do with it, and then the idea came to me that it would be an excellent platform from which to showcase Jamaican culture, our food, music and folklore," Seaga tells SO, noting that the Government-commissioned English architect Tom Concannon, who had experience in re-establishing other national monuments, was chosen to spearhead the restoration of the Devon House mansion. The house is once again being refurbished under the auspices of the Devon House Development Company, of which Seaga's wife Carla is chairman.

"The transformation Jamaica is seeing is a direct result of teamwork and the shared vision of giving this attraction pride of place in the hearts of our people," Carla shares. Funded by the Ministry of Tourism, the restorative effort has facilitated improved landscaping, the introduction of new shops, as well as attracting revenue resulting from the hosting of various events. "If you think about our society, there's a yearning for us to cleave to what's good about Jamaica," she says adding that, prior to this new thrust, the property had been rundown. Fortunately, there's now an aggressive move to turn things around. And if turning things around means hosting events like shows - for example, the recently staged W session - and the food fair Journeys Through Jamaica, then the Devon House Development Company might just be on to something. Carla tells SO that the venue is growing as a social hub largely because it is one of the safest spots in Kingston. There's now ample parking, security checkpoints at the entrance and exit, and overhead lighting. She lauds her husband for saving this colonial relic, pointing out too that the centrality of Devon House - nestled between Waterloo and Hope roads - makes it a perfect chill spot. "The location appeals to both downtown and uptown and that's exactly what we want: a mix of attractions that will appeal to a cross-section of individuals," Carla says. "We want to make it a hotspot, and it should be swinging as soon as early next year," Janet Taylor, Devon House executive director, informs. The transformation, Taylor says, is quickly taking place on the 11-acre property thanks in part to the introduction of the aforementioned shops, which continue to attract a younger set. "We'll be rolling out a lot more ideas in the coming months," adds Taylor, who didn't want to spill specifics, but managed to disclose that there's a proposal to build a wedding chapel on the East Lawns and that the Grog Shoppe Restaurant & Pub will reopen under new management. Also, that tours of the Devon House Mansion will resume in December, after an all-too-long hiatus, and on spot a logo shop, which is to retail Devon House paraphernalia. But whether it's Devon House's verdant lawns and tranquil atmosphere that create their own particular brand of Zen, or simply the need to challenge the definition of Kingston-chic, something's happening! "I see the vision for Devon House," remarks Steve Ferguson, Chocolate Dreams exec. "I think it's a multifaceted recreational ground that transitions beautifully from morning to night."