

Negril's rebirth

Made famous by the hippies of the 1960s, Jamaica's Capital of Casual, Negril, is experiencing a rebirth, as new and traditional players pump millions of dollars to the look, feel and taste of their properties.

Both Sensatori Azul and Blue Diamond have cleared lands for the construction of five star resorts, while RIU, Sandals, Lee Issa, who recently bought Moon Dance Villas, the Vagabond Group and Vera Club have brought a renaissance to the resort town. RIU Negril has closed its oldest Jamaican plant, with plans to reopen brand new on November 15. The 420-room resort is going through extensive facelift, said director of sales, Angella Bennett. Boasting that the results would be "impressive", Bennett said the rooms have been upgraded, so have the common areas. "Among the modifications guests can look forward to are: a newly redone front desk and lobby bar; a brand new swimming pool; a new children's swimming pool with slides and a new sport bar, instead of a discotheque," the director of sales revealed. **MORE RESTAURANTS** She added that a new Asian restaurant, Mandalay, has been placed in the mix, bringing the number of restaurants to five. Its gourmet restaurant, which is popular among guests, has been renamed Kulinarium. According to Bennett, the bathrooms will now have walk-in showers instead of bathtubs, while the junior suites will have an integrated lounge area with split levels and sofa beds. "We have completely redecorated the 'Rastaman' bar, and turned it into a lounge bar with a terrace." Not to be outdone, just up the road, the resort which has been one of Sandals Resorts International's most successful, Sandals Negril, since opening its doors in 1988, has also had extensive work done to its plant. "The amazing work we are doing to this product will guarantee that it remains ahead of the curve, not only in Negril but the region," stated Wayne Cummings, director, business process and administration at Sandals. Cummings said the chain had long ago completed 104 rooms in the centre of the property and are now doing the blocks that were previously the Coconut Cove Hotel. "That block comprises a 78-room and suite block refurbishing." Combined 182 rooms have been refurbished at the resort at an estimated cost of US\$18 million. The refurbishing exercise is scheduled for completion, December 15, the same day the winter tourist season commences. Complementing all the work being carried out, Blue Diamond will construct approximately 600 rooms, employing over 1,000 staff, at what the group plans to name Royalton Negril. The lands have been cleared, the buildings that housed the former Grand Lido Negril have been demolished, making way for Royalton. However, there seems to be a delay in getting approval for the project. Efforts to get a comment from Blue Diamond's Kerry-Ann Quallo-Casserly proved futile. In the case of Sensatori Azul, work is also expected to start on their new property before the end of the year. Minister of Tourism and Entertainment Dr Wykeham McNeil, excited about the prospects, said Negril overall was doing well. "Occupancies have been up this year across the board. Both large and small properties. The increased demand is driving investment in refurbishing as well as the construction of new rooms," he stated, noting that the trend was important to the industry. **ECONOMIC GROWTH** "It ensures that the tourism product that we offer is fresh, viable and exciting. The investment, he said, will continue to drive the economy, providing economic growth and job creation." Dr McNeill added that he was expecting this trend of increased investment, refurbishing and building of new rooms to be replicated across all Jamaica, with at least 1,600 new rooms to start construction this year. In the meantime, Florida-based developer, Avra Jain, has teamed up with former Jamaican hotelier, Mary Phillips, culinary greats, Delius Shirley and Cindy Hutson, to acquire Negril's Moon Dance Resort on the cliffs. The 33-room boutique property, which include four villas, a restaurant, spa and public areas, has been closed for refurbishing and is scheduled to open on October 1, as The Cliff Hotel and Spa. Lee Issa, who operates the five Couples resorts on the island, having bought Moon Dance which is located on the beach, has renamed that boutique property Idle A While Villas. VeraClub is a European group which is now attached to Merrill's One. It is not clear whether or not this group will market the other two Merrill resorts. janet.silvera@gleanerjm.com