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The Player's Guide to the World's Best Trips

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Jamaica way: the front nine at Tryall as seen from the Great House bar. Opposite: the resort's Windrush Villa



ISLAND ESCAPES

The Ageless Caribbean

Where imperfect fairways are part of the charm

I first played at Tryall, about a dozen miles west of Montego Bay, Jamaica, in 1960, one year after the Ralph Plummer-designed course opened for play. Forty-seven years later, I'm still playing there and enjoying it every bit as much, which is something I can't say about my game.

Tryall is what I've come to think of as an old-fashioned Caribbean course. It's a very good layout, with terrain that's wonderfully varied—holes along the sea, holes that trace the foothills, holes that require

carries uphill, over water, downhill—and shotmaking demands that involve all the clubs in the bag. That's true, I suppose, of a lot of newer Caribbean courses—the well-publicized viridian marvels in places such as the Dominican Republic, Barbados and Nevis. All are great tests of golf, I'm sure. But they're not old-fashioned, which is to say they lack a certain raggedy quality, a charming whiff of goat pasture, if you will.

Back in the olden days, golf in the islands during the winter months was

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truly a pastime. It wasn't the big deal it has become. The point of the Caribbean exercise was sun and water and friends and family and rum. Golf? Well, maybe a casual three-hour round on a course that was primarily pleasant to play, that wasn't a "test" (that wretched word again!) set up to thwart the scratch player and the rest of us be damned. It was fifteen minutes on the range for lack of anything better to do. A few holes with a couple

things are ranked today, but I have never heard a game at Mill Reef described with less than love.

Modern courses inevitably reveal the spoor of the bulldozer and backhoe. This is especially true in the Caribbean, where most course locations tend to be flat. Few contemporary golf architects know how to work with a flattish piece of ground. They bring in the machines and throw up mounds and dig great troughs and wallows and build bunkers filled with impossibly white sand, and then they make sure that everything is green, green, green!

The old courses follow the land and occasionally bring the odd palm tree into play. The grass tends to run to a pale shade, and their caretakers don't mind if here or there a rough

edge or scruffy patch intrudes. This is the tropics, don't forget. Life isn't neat and orderly and rustproof—not the way it can be in, say, John's Island, Scottsdale or Rancho Santa Fe.

of clubs and the grandkids. Those were nice add-ons, were what island golf was about. Who comes to the Caribbean for a test, anyway? The point is to relax. In all things. I love my golf as much as most men, but when I'm at Tryall somehow the pull of the game is less insistent. The islands' lure is the lovely, indolent indecisiveness they instill, which adds up to a state of mind that's hardly conducive to eighteen holes on a 140-slope track.

That's probably the key point about the old-fashioned game. The courses weren't so finished, a decision that was based on taste rather than on budget. There's not a club in the world I can think of that can claim a richer aggregate net worth of its members than Lyford Cay, outside Nassau, but it was only about twelve years ago, after a good half-century in operation, that the club finally put in a watering system. Likewise, no one familiar with the Mill Reef Club, the Antigua retreat of the Mellon family, among others, would rate its ancient nine-hole layout among the world's top thousand courses, as these

At the old courses, it wasn't just the fair green that might be irregular. The caddies at such places were eccentric, many of them "characters" (a word I use in, again, its old-fashioned sense). The practice grounds were usually a matter of indifference, haphazard affairs of nets and signs that read DON'T People did take lessons, because many of these places employed top teaching pros from first-line British and U.S. clubs who were likely to impart useful swing thoughts to be committed to muscle memory once back home among the snows.

And finally, there's this: About as good a way as any to

tell whether you're on an old-style Caribbean course is if you can listen to nature. To the parrots in the mango trees or, at Tryall, to the noisy donkey that lives up the hill off the thirteenth fairway. The reason you can do this is that the mowing machines aren't out there as they are on high-maintenance courses where everything has to be in a state of botanical impeccability. Modern golf architecture seems to take as a given the availability of a panzer division of course-tending machinery; the earlier generations didn't. Nature was at least a 60 percent partner when it came to lawn care.

In the islands, you live with what you're given, with courses built back in a day when people responded to life's irregularities and imperfections—what used to be called "rub o' the green"—with a shrug and a smile and a sigh: "Well, hey, what do you expect? This isn't Augusta; this is Jamaica!" —Michael M. Thomas





Elegant and unspoiled (clockwise from below): the sixteenth, a one-shopper at Teeth of the Dog; Half Moon's Seagrape Terrace; the par-three tenth at Tryall; the Georgian-style Royal Villa at Half Moon



Old-Time Caribbean Classics

	DOMINICAN REPUBLIC	JAMAICA
THE PLACE	<p>Casa de Campo (1971) 800-877-3643, casadecampo.com.do With polo grounds, an equestrian center, a 250-slip marina, fishing, tennis, a full-service spa and now three outstanding Pete Dye-designed golf courses, this seven-thousand-acre resort on the island's southeastern coast has been its own universe of activity for more than thirty-five years.</p>	<p>Half Moon (1954) 866-648-6951, halfmoon.com Encompassing more than four hundred lush acres on Jamaica's northern coast, this regal resort—a favorite of U.S. presidents and British royalty—was founded during the Eisenhower administration. The colonial-style architecture of its whitewashed buildings recalls an even older era.</p>
PLAYING	<p>The resort's trio of courses (\$95–\$225) may be the strongest combo in the entire Caribbean. The standout Teeth of the Dog, which has seven holes that play along the ocean, benefited from a renovation by Dye three years ago. The Dye Fore is an engineering marvel benched into a rock escarpment three hundred feet above the Chavon River, and the shorter Links course skirts several lakes and lagoons.</p>	<p>Robert Trent Jones Sr. designed Half Moon Golf Course (\$85–\$150) in 1961, coupling holes in two long out-and-back strings that run parallel to the coast. In 2005, Jones's principal associate, Roger Rulewich, rebuilt the layout, reconfiguring tees, greens and pillowy white-sand bunkers. The trade winds are always a factor, and the eastern and western extremes of the course rise up to offer views of the Caribbean.</p>
STAYING	<p>Guests can either choose from a range of privately owned villas and condos or stay in oversize hotel rooms with mahogany furnishings and plate-glass doors that open onto private balconies (from \$178 per night).</p>	<p>Half Moon's nearly four hundred rooms and suites (from \$250 per night) are scattered throughout the property among a variety of airy, elegantly appointed cottages and villas, many of them with sea views.</p>
DINING	<p>Chef Paul Scordino's menu at the Beach Club by Le Cirque, which opened last summer, showcases exquisite local bounty such as fresh pineapple, langoustines, snapper, octopus and river shrimp.</p>	<p>Of the numerous on-site restaurants, try the Italian-inspired menu at Il Giardino or dine overlooking the beach at the almond tree-shaded Seagrape Terrace. The Royal Stocks serves pub food and pints of ale.</p>
OTHER ACTIVITIES	<p>Perched on a bluff over the Chavon River is Altos de Chavon, a replica sixteenth-century Mediterranean village with artist studios, galleries, the St. Stanislaus Church and a Grecian-style amphitheater. The village was built by Roberto Copa, a cinematographer and set designer known in part for his work with Federico Fellini.</p>	<p>The clear, calm waters of the Caribbean couldn't be better for scuba diving, snorkeling, windsurfing or even taking a playful romp with dolphins in the resort's Dolphin Lagoon. The spa at Half Moon, Fern Tree, opened in late 2007. Treatments begin with a ceremonial footbath and a cup of Jamaican bush tea. ▶</p>

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT: COURTESY OF CASA DE CAMPO; COURTESY OF HALF MOON; COURTESY OF TRYALL; COURTESY OF HALF MOON



Island adventures (from left): the East course at Dorado Beach, host of many pro tournaments over the years; Tryall's Great House



Old-Time Caribbean Classics

	JAMAICA	PUERTO RICO
THE PLACE	<p>Tryall Club (1959) 800-238-5296, tryallclub.com</p> <p>Little has changed since the late 1950s at this hideaway in Sandy Bay, on the island's northern coast. At the center of the 2,200-acre former sugar and coconut plantation is the Great House. Built in the 1830s, it continues to serve as the hub for social activities, including afternoon tea.</p>	<p>Dorado Beach Resort & Club (1958) 787-796-1234, doradobeachclubs.com</p> <p>Laurance Rockefeller founded this environmentally sensitive oasis twenty-five miles west of San Juan. Although Hyatt closed the resort in 2006, efforts are under way to revive it, and in the meantime its courses remain open and nearby lodging options are available.</p>
PLAYING	<p>Laid out by Texan Ralph Plummer, Tryall (\$40-\$125) begins and ends on the palm-dotted coastal plains, stretching from the beach to the forested foothills. Even after \$5 million in recent improvements, it continues to be admired as a lay-of-the-land design with tricky greens and beguiling views of the Caribbean from the elevated holes of the second nine. The Johnnie Walker World Championship was held here from 1991 to 1995.</p>	<p>The resort's four eighteens (\$55-\$160)—the East and West courses at Dorado and the Sugarcane and Pineapple at the affiliated Plantation Club—slink through lagoons, canals, palms and fruit groves along or near the coast. Robert Trent Jones Sr. designed the courses, and Raymond Floyd renovated them. The East, host of many pro events, is highlighted by the Z-shaped par-five fourth, with its green just paces from the beach.</p>
STAYING	<p>Thirteen one- and two-bedroom villa suites (from \$475 per night) in the recently restored Great House overlook the golf course, and numerous larger villas are spread throughout the resort, many along the beaches.</p>	<p>Each of the tastefully spare thirty-six rooms at Su Casa Cottages (from \$329 per night), in a calming oceanfront grove near the Dorado Beach clubhouse, has a private balcony with a view of the sea.</p>
DINING	<p>The resort's Great House Restaurant emphasizes fresh local seafood such as lobster, crayfish and snapper. Its seasonings include not only traditional jerk but also sauces spiked with Blue Mountain coffee and island rum.</p>	<p>Try the seafood entrées prepared with zesty Caribbean flavors at Zafra in the Plantation clubhouse. Villa de Alberto (787-278-1715), a local favorite near the beach, also specializes in fresh seafood.</p>
OTHER ACTIVITIES	<p>Swing through a Jamaican rain forest on a Chukka Canopy Safari, which entails gliding through the trees in a cable harness from one elevated platform to the next above rivers and gorges. The adventure can be booked through the resort's tour desk.</p>	<p>Hike through the jungle trails of El Yunque National Forest (fs.fed.us). An hour's drive east of Dorado Beach, El Yunque is the only tropical rain forest in the United States National Forest System, and it's home to Puerto Rico's most famous peak (nearly 3,500 feet). —Derek Duncan</p>

FROM LEFT: COURTESY OF DORADO BEACH; COURTESY OF TRYALL