

# THE INDEPENDENT

## ON SUNDAY

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### THE CARIBBEAN

# Bond-style luxury with a Jamaican vibe

A resort has opened at GoldenEye, former home of Ian Fleming. It's a tourism model the island should copy, says **Kate Simon**

**K**ate Simon. I've got a friend called Kate Simon." Chris Blackwell, the founder of Island Records and producer of some of the most influential popular music of the past half-century, gives me a wry smile. "I know," I say. "She's a bit more famous than me."

Blackwell is referring to the American photographer Kate Simon, whose images of the pop stars that he helped to create we now conjure up as default pictures of these famous faces in our mind's eye – not least of his most important discovery, Bob Marley.

It's OK, my family are used to being the not-famous Simons – my brother Peter isn't the founder of the fashion store Monsoon; my brother David didn't write *The Wire*. So, while I may not be the Kate Simon he's used to seeing, Chris Blackwell fits my image of the multi-millionaire music mogul who has been a resident of the most laid-back country in the world for 74 years. He sits before me unshaven, barefoot in an open shirt and shorts.

We are chatting in the shelter of a thatched umbrella on the beachfront of his new resort at GoldenEye on the north coast of Jamaica. It's barely 9am yet the sun is sucking

the damp from the sands where, as a child, Blackwell would watch men haul bananas on to tenders, singing "Day-O". The banana boats are long gone; today, what was once scrubby shoreline has been transformed into a sandy playground for the well-off.

The well-off, not necessarily the super-rich – I choose my words advisedly. At £360 a night, it's not exactly a snip to stay in one of the 21 houses and suites that Blackwell has set on these sands. But there are many more expensive resorts in the Caribbean with less history and fewer stars to spot in the dining room. (On my first night, I shake hands with Grace Jones and say hi to Harry Belafonte.)

From the outside, the 21 wooden cottages, with their homely verandas, look simple. Yet, inside they are stylish, luxuriously furnished, open-plan spaces with polished concrete floors, white walls and wooden jalousies. They have kitchens, wet-rooms and walk-in wardrobes, and a tropical back garden with a rainfall shower. But it's the way the big, softly dressed beds and cushion-strewn sofas have been positioned for maximum exposure to the views through the picture windows that makes these cottages feel different. Even tucked away in your room, you're encouraged to engage with Jamaica at this resort.

The cottages sit in the shadow of

#### COMPACT FACTS



#### HOW TO GET THERE

Seven nights at GoldenEye ([goldeneye.com](http://goldeneye.com)) with Virgin Holidays + Hip Hotels (0844 573 2460; [vhiphotels.co.uk](http://vhiphotels.co.uk)) costs from £2,389 per person, based on two sharing, including return flights with Virgin Atlantic, private transfers and B&B accommodation in a Lagoon Suite.

GoldenEye, the cliff-top bungalow in which Ian Fleming lived from 1946 until his death in 1964 and where he wrote his James Bond books. Blackwell bought it in 1977 to ensure his mother, a member of a prominent Jamaican family and a friend of Fleming, could continue to swim in the sea here. He has a home hidden in the trees above the lagoon.

Fleming's house, which is also available to rent, has been on the jet-set circuit since he built it on a donkey racing track here on the outskirts of the village of Oracabessa. The author had a penchant for getting his guests to plant trees in the grounds. The first to stick a trowel in the earth was the British prime minister Sir Anthony Eden and his wife; a plaque marks their rubber tree. Blackwell keeps up the tradition – on my visit earlier this year, the garden had just been graced with a cherry tree, planted by Mr and Mrs J and B Carter, better known to you and me as Jay-Z and Beyoncé.

Like his choice of guests, Blackwell's relationship with Jamaica and its people has been different from the one had by the former owner of GoldenEye. As a young man, Blackwell travelled the island befriending musicians and recording Jamaica's reggae sounds, which he introduced to the from the back of his Mini in London's Portobello Road. He may

remain close to his mother, but he acknowledges that she and her friends – plantocracy and expats – were of another generation and didn't understand his friendships with the locals.

That relationship with the community informs how Blackwell runs his hospitality empire, Island Outpost, which includes four hotels on Jamaica. He despairs of the kind of tourism that has excluded Jamaicans from benefiting from their own natural industry. Many of his team, to senior level, are locals, and much of the produce used in the resort comes from the island – including from Blackwell's organic farm – in an effort to promote Jamaica's agricultural sector, too.

The company is also involved in a variety of non-profit organisations – his foundation, Island Acts (Assisting Communities Toward Strength), aims to fund and promote better health, education and welfare in some of the poorest communities. At GoldenEye, guests are welcome to get involved in tree planting and coral restoration, and to volunteer at the Oracabessa Foundation, a project to improve lives in the village.

"We need to encourage visitors to go into the community. Jamaicans are extraordinary people," he says. GoldenEye may be small and elite, but as a model for sustainable tourism it has much to teach Jamaica.

