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Dear Reader,

Letter from Jamaica No. 10

Living in Jamaica ain't no problem

IF YUH GET SPOON YUH-WI DRINK DE SOUP

With the right opportunity you can prosper

“Wha’ yuh problem? It your water. Yuh mus use it. Wha’ yuh du wid it, then?” The lady was shocked by the Water Commission lady’s response to her querying of her J\$8,500 bill. Every month the bill was J\$5,000. Or near enough. Thames water would never talk to her like that. Why had she ever left leafy Tooting, after all?

Then there was the client that we met one evening out in east London. To discuss house drawings. A query arose, that the parish council officer should easily be able to resolve. She rang the contact at his north coast office. “Oh, good afternoon, Mr Ward. Thanks again for your help last week. I just have a quick question, if you’ve time?” On the phone’s speaker, we could hear loud aggression: “Wha’ yu wann ? Wha’ yu wann agenn?”

We all have stories like these. Some of us shrug our shoulders. That’s just Jamaica. Some of us have worse experiences - and change our plans. Some buy a standard new house on an estate, giving up on the dream of building their own home. Some give up altogether.

But what has living and working in Jamaica for long spells taught me? Have I had lots of experiences like at the Water Commission and the planning office? That got me thinking. Is life in Jamaica “no problem”? Or a darn big series of problems? Heaven on earth? Or hell on earth?

Well, all I can go on is what I’ve seen and heard. Take public services. Most planning officers that we have met have been a great help. Always civil and respectful. Going out of their way to help. The same for other officials, be they at the National Land Agency, the parish tax office, the TRN office or the Water Commission. Or the business registration



persons. Or in the Jamaica Constabulary Force.

The same goes for most workers in the health system. When I took a badly injured worker to Mandeville hospital we were shocked by the vast number of persons waiting in Casualty. “Jus tek mi to the pharmacy. Get pain killers, that all I need. Let’s get back to work.” “Not likely!” came my response. Within two minutes we had found a line to join, then the correct one. Within five we were explaining the incident to a concerned nurse. A ten-minute wait, with tea, and we were seeing a senior nurse. She cleaned the wounds. She ordered an X-ray. She arranged for the doctor to call round. They removed material and stitched him up. Another X-ray. I returned with food but he’d already had lots. Stay in overnight, to make sure he was alright. Hard to see that he could have had better treatment in England. And, like England, no charge. Everyone treated him well. All striving for better health. And a better Jamaica.



From hospitals to schools. The system is far from perfect. Just like in Britain. But many persons are striving to improve things. From the basic school assistant and teacher to the minister for education. One example. A school in Piedmont, Trelawny, identifies many primary pupils that are not progressing. Nowhere near enough progress. So the teachers are organising early school starts for those pupils. With a good breakfast, for free. Teachers get no more pay. They are helped by volunteers. Who help in whatever way they can. All striving for a better future. And a better Jamaica.

“That’s all very well”, I hear you say. “But if I live anywhere else, I must be able to use my “technology”. My smartphone. My tablet. There’s no “3” or “EE” in Jamaica”. Well, that’s true. But, believe it or not, Jamaica has better! Over a year ago we used 4G technology in Jamaica, via a mobile internet dongle. Loading pictures on to the website was so much faster than in England!

You can phone better, too. Buy a month’s international credit for less than £10 and you get over 1,000 minutes to Britain, USA, Canada, parts of Europe and some other places. Or, if you are on Skype or Viber, you can call at no extra cost.

“Well, even if true, I need my Kindle, wherever I am. Jamaica’s wi-fi coverage is awful!” Well, no it’s not – it’s awesome! Sure, free wi-fi is not everywhere. Just like it’s not everywhere in England. Far from it. But for those Kindles that only need GPS, almost all of Jamaica will be your friend. We use the Kindle all over the island. Up hill. By the sea. Up river. Down town. Any where. Any time. No problem.



“May be. But free banking matters a lot to me. I don’t want a charge every time I swipe my debit card. I want to use my UK debit and credit cards all over the place without massive charges and mauger exchange rates. I can’t do with opening a local account and watching the J\$ sail on by. That’s even worse than watching the £ sail on by!”

Six years ago I would have agreed. The hardware store wouldn’t take a local debit card. They even rang the building society to confirm the authenticity of our banker’s draft! But now there are UK debit and credit cards with good exchange rates and no charges. Try the UK Post Office international credit card. And, for example, First Direct’s debit card.

Okay, some local building society branches can make you think you took a time-machine back to the Victorian era! Procedure, procedure. Check, check. Sign, sign. Triple signatures behind the desk just so you can withdraw £100! Even though you’ve been using the same branch for weeks on end for the last five years! Annoying, sure! But these guys never were in the sub-prime business. They weren’t even part of Jamaica’s “Cash-Plus” pyramid fiasco of 2007.

“Well, all very well! But I’m sticking with Sainsbury, Waitrose and Tesco.” Fine, then. Your choice. But along with the great local markets across Jamaica, there are now some great, quality supermarkets. MegaMart and Boulevard Super Centre are like Sainsbury and Waitrose combined with WalMart. Without the Waitrose prices. Fontana is more than a pharmacist; much, much more. And now e-shopping is taking off, with the option of home delivery thanks to ATL and others. What’s more, Woolworth still exists. So no need for Wilkinson! And, of course, you can still “haggle with the many higglers”!

May be some persons would miss England’s satellite tv channels. But you can still buy an endless number of channels in Jamaica, if you so wish. Mostly the same American programmes. Or broadcast from the English Premier League. You’ll miss many BBC tv stations; but you won’t have to pay the licence fee. And you can get all their radio programmes via the internet – for free. Just as good, for some: you can read the next day’s UK newspapers before you go to bed!

“But getting home from the shops or the bar is much harder in Jamaica. No tube. No tram. Potholes everywhere. Blaring headlights everywhere. Expensive cars. Or rickety cars. Many fewer buses, unless you’re in Kingston.” Well, again, that’s one person’s view! In reality, petrol is much cheaper. Still by quite a way. There are



plenty of really good repair shops. There are many improved roads and fewer potholes. With more gains to come. And don't forget that "route taxis" are akin to mini-buses in England – except that they are cheaper and don't stop quite as often; but do stop when you want them to.

So, if you ask me, there are many, many ways in which living in Jamaica can be easier, cheaper and nicer than living in the UK, USA or Canada. And that's ignoring the weather!

Yet, quality of life can be enhanced in various other ways. Lots of persons are now capturing water from their roof. Bespoke Homes Jamaica always fits guttering and water tanks. Photovoltaic (solar-powered) hot water and photovoltaic power for the rest of the house are taking off. You can even sell your surplus to the grid.

And you can quite easily grow three-quarters or more of all your yam and vegetable requirements. Fresher food. And healthier. Organic living is an easier option in Jamaica. And it's cheaper. Some persons raise most of their own protein as well, with a few hens, the odd goat and a bit of fishing. There are even the almost ubiquitous almond trees.



Don't forget. Jamaicans were found to be in the top-10 happiest peoples on earth in a recent study. Everywhere has its problems. But "Jamaica, no problem" is truer than many dare believe.

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PS. If you enjoyed this Letter from Jamaica, please forward to friends - and encourage them to register by emailing me. Thanks, Stuart