

'Outrageous' mush mutts

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Ah, the thrill of dogsledding: gripping onto the sides of a sled while 16 crazy canines thunder down the path, freezing the smile on your face. Suddenly the musher yells "Gee"! The team turns and sand billows up into your face.

Sand?

Yeah, mon -- sand. This is Jamaica, after all.

The Jamaican bobsled team proved to the world that location isn't everything when they entered the 1988 Winter Olympics. They didn't win the race, but they won international acclaim.

Jamaica's back to winning our hearts with a bunch of Caribbean pound puppies taking on new lives as sled dogs.

Next to the Chukka Cove Farm near Ocho Rios is a fenced-off kennel with dogs comfortably lazing about. A few pace but most, like Hedges, sprawl out, dozing away the afternoon. (Maybe that's because he, along with brother Benson, was donated by Keith Richards of the Rolling Stones). The scene is identical to any dogsled setup in North America except for the shade tarp cooling the dogs and, of course, the lack of snow.

Danny Melville, owner of Chukka Caribbean Adventures, was in Edmonton a few years back and saw a dogsled contraption that runs on wheels for summer training. When he told everyone his plans to create a Jamaican dogsled team, all he heard was "outright laughter."

One person laughing with him and also endorsing the business was none other than the team's "Godfather" -- Jimmy Buffet. Both men see the opportunity for the advancement of Jamaica on many levels. The dogs are mostly stray mongrels getting a second "leash" on life. It's stable employment for Jamaicans and it's a new tourist attraction in which the profits stay in Jamaica. Best of all, Jamaica is back in the snow business.

Chief musher Devon Anderson has already been all over the northern hemisphere tearing up the snowy trails with borrowed dog teams. Here at home, though, more than 40 dogs take turns learning the commands and dragging grinning tourists around the route in the dryland sled.

Melville is thrilled with the response. "We can't be just outrageous, we have to be outrageous and good at it."

With smiling canine faces like Tallowa, Jimmy, Chukka, Rusty and Marbles on your team, you're on the right trail. Check out the Sun Dogs when you go to Jamaica at the Chukka Cove Farm or at jamaicadogsled.com -- watch for the excellent "mush-y" documentary, Sun Dogs, and prepare to fall in love with the mutts and the snowless beauty of Jamaica.

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