

Mush, mon

Dogsled tours of Jamaica. Jimmy Buffet as the team's sponsor. Olympic dreams. Could it get any more surreal?

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OCHO RIOS, JAMAICA -- Jamaica is full of surprises: the generosity of the people, the narrow roads dropping down into green valleys, the wild variety of fruits, and a fascinating cuisine. And there are dozens of activities for travellers from diving on Caribbean reefs to hurtling down a zip line while suspended in a harness 30 metres over forest. Nothing, however, surprised me more than what I was about to do under this 28-degree sun -- go dogsledding.

Devon Anderson, a stocky man with big hands and a deep rumbling laugh, has the distinction of being Jamaica's premier musher (in fact, given the scarcity of huskies, snow and sleds, not surprisingly, the only musher in the Caribbean). Anderson is giving me instructions for my first ride on a visit this past summer to Ocho Rios on the north coast of Jamaica. The directions are short and sweet.

"Hold on tight. It's bouncy!"

Okay, so I lived in Canada much of my adult life and I've never been dogsledding. Forgive my lack of patriotism, but I hate the cold, have no call to the North in my blood, and find ice an inconvenience, not a path to redemption as many Canadians who smack and hurl objects around on the frozen stuff do. But this is perfect. On lightweight, wheeled land sleds, we're going to race on a dirt road through scrubby grass with glimpses of the cerulean Caribbean, all under a tropical sun. Weird but cool. Cool as *Cool Runnings*, the Hollywood tale of the first Jamaican bobsled team. And weirder still because here, 90 metres from the Caribbean Sea, the shiny red dogsled I'm about to board has just completed a 5,000-kilometre journey from Edmonton.

How did this northern pastime migrate to Jamaica? Ask Jamaican tour operator Daniel Melville Sr. or his partner in the scheme, singer Jimmy Buffett, the official team sponsor. Buffett jumped on board after a chance meeting with Melville. As Buffett, who is a frequent visitor to Jamaica and owns a chain of restaurants here, put it, when he heard Melville's idea, he knew it was wacky. But that wasn't enough to stop him. "I take

harebrained schemes and make them happen. So it's nothing new to me. I just thought, 'Wouldn't it be cool if this could happen?'"

Melville, an adventure sport enthusiast, says the idea originated on a trip to Canada. He was in Edmonton searching out dune buggies when he saw a summer version of a dogsled. "All my life," he says, "sleds were what I saw on Christmas cards, heard about in *Jingle Bells*. Here was a sled I could use in Jamaica."

On the spot, Melville decided to start a Jamaican dogsled team, the island's first. Once there was a team, the well-known Jamaican entrepreneur who runs the adventure tour company Chukka Cove decided a good way for the dogs and mushers-in-training to stay in shape, would be to offer dogsled tours to tourists. The tours started this summer on Chukka Farm, a sprawling property of horses and polo in Ocho Rios, near the island's popular Montego Bay. The consequences of this offbeat venture are currently under my feet, barking, panting, jumping and champing at the bit to get harnessed up and out on the trail. This is no pack of northern huskies. The 12 mismatched mutts are rescued animal-shelter dogs, mottled, black, brown, small, big, with one thing in common, Anderson tells me as he rounds the dogs up and slips them into their harnesses: "These dogs love to go forward. We found dogs that just like to run . . . stray dogs."

There's no shortage of stray dogs in Jamaica, and with the help of the Jamaica Society for the Prevention for Cruelty to Animals and other animal shelters, Melville and Anderson recruited the 12 dogs now trying to get us humans to get going. On board behind Rusty, Smiley, Chukka, Jimmy (after Buffet, of course) and the whole JSPCA gang, I got an example of pooch passion for the sport. Panting and pulling, the canines bolted when the musher-of-the-moment, an apprentice named Newton Marshall, kicked off with "hike, gee and haw," commands spoken with a Jamaica accent.

The dogs lurched forward and we rumbled down a grassy path at a surprising speed . . . until Bruno, an easily distractible mutt, pulled off to the side, having spotted something interesting to sniff. Marshall, the driver, and Anderson, the mushing maven, were unfazed.

"The dogs are new at this," Anderson explained. "They're not used to 'work, work, work.' They're real Jamaican dogs . . . a little laid back, so they work a little and if they feel like taking a break they will stop, fool around and go again."

And go again we did, covering the 1.5-kilometre trail at 24 kilometres an hour, fast enough for me (though not near the 40 kilometres an hour of the famed Alaskan races).

The Jamaican Dogsled Team -- yes it's an official team -- won't be racing at Iditarod any time soon. Jamaican dogs aren't yet allowed to travel freely because of quarantine restrictions, but the neophyte mushers are going up against the dogsled hotshots.

In January, 2006, Anderson, using leased dogs, came in 27th in a field of 40 in his first race in Scotland. Marshall is in training and both men are hoping to race this winter in Minnesota. In the meantime, the Jamaican dogsled tour isn't an extreme adventure sport by any means, but is great fun for dog lovers who get a sled ride, a mushing lesson and time to pat and cuddle the rescued mutts with their new lease on life. (Concerned about the heat and mushing? The dogs run when it's cooler in the day -- in the early morning and late afternoon.) The dogs are also nipping at the heels of their predecessors, the Jamaican Bobsled Team, with a movie of their own. *Sun Dogs*, the story of the founding of the Jamaican Dogsled Team, a project of Canadian director Andrea Stewart and Island Records boss Chris Blackwell, are hoping to screen it at a film festival in the coming year.

And if Buffett makes his dream come true, we may just see the mutts on the hills of British Columbia. "I would love to see the Jamaican dogsled team in the Winter Olympics in Vancouver. That's what I'm shooting for!"

Pack your sled

DOGSLEDDING IN OCHO RIOS

Chukka Caribbean Adventures: 1-876-972-2506; <http://www.chukkacaribbean.com>. Ochos Rios-based, Chukka offers dogsled rides and meet-the-sled-dog encounters, as well as other adventures from kayaking to canopy tours. Tours, which cost around \$112 a person, are offered twice a day.

Jamaican Dogsled Team: <http://www.jamaicadogsled.com>. The website provides biographies and photos of each dog and news of upcoming sledding events.

Jamaica Inn: 1-800-837-4608 or 876-974-2514; <http://www.jamaicainn.com>. Take a break from dogsledding at the legendary hotel in Ocho Rios, minutes from Chukka Cove Farms and the sled dogs. The inn, a decades-old guest house where the likes of Katharine Hepburn and Noel Coward came to laze at the edge of the sea, is still unplugged. No phones or TVs -- nothing to interfere with the sound of the sea.

MORE INFORMATION

Jamaican Tourism: Toronto; 416-482-7850 or 1-800-465-2624; <http://www.visitjamaica.com>.