

Mush mon! - Get a ride with man's best friend

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Left: All harnessed and ready to go, the dogs of the Jamaica Dogsled Team are anxious to demonstrate at the Chukka Caribbean Adventures Dogsled Tour. Right: Devon Anderson and his dog sled are featured in the Chris Blackwell film, 'Sun Dogs'.

Mush: to drive or spur on sled dogs or a sled drawn by dogs.

"Everything about Jamaica is extraordinary, even we mongrel dog," rightfully commented a colleague as we waited for the demonstration of 'mushing' by the Jamaica Dogsled Team.

Yes, you read right, Jamaica has a dogsled team and for almost two years at that; and Chukka Caribbean Adventures last Friday launched the newest addition to its complement of tours - the Jamaica Dogsled Team tour.

"Mush mush mush!" shouted Devon Anderson, Musher of the Jamaica Dogsled Team, as he urged the canines under his charge to pull the sled to which they were harnessed. The perky mutts, most of them rescued animals from shelters of the Jamaica Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, gleefully obliged and took off panting - a remarkable sight for me and the other observers who gathered at the launch.

Before meeting Devon and those remarkable dogs, I, who had never seen snow much less dog sledding in live action, thought the word 'mush' to be nothing more than a description of the consistency of my first attempt at cooking rice and peas as a young girl. That outlook has changed, thanks to the ingenuer of a few Jamaican pioneers.

Dog gone abroad

The idea for a Jamaican dogsled team was a spark of genius, ignited by a few rum punches as Danny Melville, the Chairman of Chukka Caribbean Adventures and friend Jimmy Buffet, owner of the Margaritaville chain, enjoyed a relaxing afternoon. Melville had previously seen a unique sled that was designed for dry-land sled dog racing and

thought it would be a great idea for Jamaica. Even then, when most thought the idea to be crazy, Buffet pledged his support, and has since been the 'godfather' and sponsor of the Chukka Dogsledding project.

Devon Anderson, Chukka's director of operations, was first choice for musher because of his way with animals, and in December 2005, the Jamaica Dogsled Team was launched.

Chukka reigned in Rick and Annette Johnson, owners of the Ah-Regah Kennel in Minnesota, U.S.A, who gave their time, expertise and hearts to Devon and the dogs. The team has since raced in Scotland, at the Byllesby Dryland Classic, where they placed second, and in the U.S. at the International Dry-Land Race, Brainerd, Minnesota (ISDRA).

On film

Their story has been put to film in Sun Dogs, produced and directed by Toronto-based filmmaker, Andrea Stewart and her company, Dog Leg Media, in association with Chris Blackwell's Palm Pictures. It was premiered at Canada's Reelworld Film Festival last Thursday to high acclaim as many were enthralled by the remarkable story of the Jamaican Dog Sled Team.

No 'cussing dog'

Now Jamaicans and visitors have the opportunity to experience the ride of their life at the Chukka Adventures Jamaica Dogsled Team Tour - no snow required! The tour is a must-do activity for all dog-lovers, where you will hear the amazing story of the dogs of the team, learn the history and art of mushing around the world, and assist with harnessing of the team.

Minister of Tourism, Sports and Culture Aloun Assamba, who also attended the launch, wisely noted that Jamaicans should now think twice before continuing the common practice of 'cussing dog'