

## Mush, mon!

For Jamaica's dogsled team, cool runnings don't require snow

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At first I thought my hearing was off. Did I want to go to Jamaica to write a story about the Jamaican dogsled team?

Dogsled? You mean bobsled, I corrected my editor. Of course, everyone had heard of the first Jamaican bobsled team, the stars of the 1988 Calgary Olympics as well as the subject of the 1993 film *Cool Runnings*.

But it was she who corrected me. No, dogsled, she replied.

Then she showed me the pictures. There, hurtling through a tract of lush Jamaican fields, was a pack of the rangiest, motliest, happiest mutts you've ever seen, hauling a metal contraption that looked like a wide-track tricycle, the "musher" standing on its back rail driving the pack on. Sun, sand, sea, cool drinks, good food -- and dogs. It couldn't miss.

Which is how I found myself at the beautiful Chukka Cove Farm near the tourist town of Ocho Rios, on the north-central coast of Jamaica: Picture a turquoise ocean on one side, lush hills on the other, punctuated by magnificent waterfalls and cool mountain rivers.

I was here to talk to Danny Melville, the imaginative and charismatic founder of Chukka Caribbean Adventures, and his most ambitious new venture, the Jamaica Dogsled Experience. A few metres away, in a wire-screened paddock, the main attractions were being strapped into their harnesses, eager to head out for a practice run.

"The deal is to race abroad, train our mushers and have an actual tour. And we want to promote Jamaica," Melville said, his voice a gentle lilt, his full white beard set off nicely by his tanned bald pate.

"What we are doing is very good for the sport because of the outrageousness of this whole thing," he went on. "We're probably exposing dogsled racing to more publicity than it's had in a long time because we are a Jamaican team."

And then he launched into the familiar refrain: "Everyone remembers the bobsled team. They say, you mean the bobsled team? And I say, no, dogsled team. And they say, you mean bobsled? And I say, no!"

The story goes that Melville was shopping for dune buggies in an Edmonton fabrication shop for another of his adventure tours, when he tripped over a metal frame with wheels. When he learned the thing was a dog sled that could be used in summer, he grew positively giddy. "What, no snow!? he practically shouted.

A chain of events followed: a call to renowned dogsled trainer Alan Stewart in Scotland, the enlistment of Chukka Cove's resident Dr. Doolittle, Devon Anderson, to train as Jamaica's first musher (never mind that he had never seen snow or a dogsled team) and a rigorous Dogsled 101 crash course from a group of sledding experts from Minnesota. And, of course, the recruitment of dogs.

And this is where you get out your handkerchiefs. Many of the team dogs are strays and abused dogs who landed in the care of the Jamaica Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. Most had never received any affection, and many had aggressive tendencies. Almost all of them would be dead by now had it not been for Danny Melville.

Which is why meeting the dogs at Chukka Cove is an emotional experience. Take Pinky, for instance. Pinky

is a deaf albino who was abandoned and later picked up by the JSPCA. No one wanted to adopt her and as a last resort the shelter called Chukka Cove Farm, who took her in. And though Pinky can't hear the musher's commands, when placed near the back of the team she is a strong and valued member. Then there's Benji, who has a mottled coat, which Melville says is viewed with superstition by many Jamaicans. Benji languished at a JSPCA shelter for many months and was about to be put down when he was brought to the farm.

The goal, once they're there, is to train them and the mushers, and to compete abroad for Jamaica. (Devon Anderson has done well in dry-land races in Scotland and Minnesota.) The dogs, in turn, assist with Jamaica's most unusual tourist attraction.

Two years ago, Jimmy Buffet caught wind of the Sun Dogs, as they're known, and signed his Margaritaville empire on as the team's official sponsor. (As he makes clear in the 2007 documentary *Sun Dogs*, by Toronto filmmaker Andrea Stewart, he had only one Appleton and Ting when he decided to endorse "Danny's crazy idea.")

By this time the dogs were hitched up, a pack of yapping, howling, frantic mutts, though it was hard to say who was more excited, the dogs or the crowd that had gathered to watch. The "mush" command was given and the team sprinted off.

Melville is thrilled at the prospect of tourists returning home and saying, "I went dogsledding in Jamaica!" And, of course, he hopes to make a profit with the Jamaica Dogsled Experience. Guests first receive an orientation on sled-dog racing and how the Jamaican team was formed. They also get the lowdown on the stray situation in Jamaica. (A percentage of the tour fee goes to the JSPCA.) Finally, visitors get to meet, hug and pet the dogs and learn their personal stories before receiving instruction on mushing technique and heading out on the three-kilometre trail around Chukka Cove Farm.

"This is going to help the dogs because you'll soon have everybody wanting to get a dog to train them to participate," says musher Anderson, who is easily spotted on the farm by the pack of dogs following close at his heel. "And eventually, we'll get rid of the stray dogs on the street." - Chukka Caribbean Adventures runs 28 adventure tours across the Caribbean, such as canopy tours over the jungle, mountain-to-sea cycling, river kayaking, a horseback ride and swim and, only in Jamaica, a Bob Marley retrospective bus trip. For more information, go to [chukkacaribbean.com](http://chukkacaribbean.com).

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