

Heaven can wait...



Rosie Millard and family were the only ones at Tobago's secluded, sensuous Villa Being – apart from the 10 people tending to their every need

As I walked into the Villa Being, it was clear that here was luxury on a spectacular scale. And not the opulent, faux-marble, water-fall-clad, air-conditioned hell that defines 'five-star' Caribbean hotels like Barbados's Sandy Lane, which asks tourists to cough up £2,000 a day for a menu full of 'international' cuisine, and the delights of Michael Winner hanging out on the beach. Villa Being, on a mountain plateau at the south-west tip of Tobago, offers pure sensuous indulgence.

We arrived at night. The moonlit garden, fragrant and packed with flowers, was offset by tall candles protected from the breeze in glass shades. White linen curtains blew in at the long windows, with their almost panoramic view of the dark Caribbean Sea hundreds of feet below. We were handed rum punch with the blossom of something divine floating in it. Home-made split-pea soup arrived at a perfectly laid dinner table. Our bags were spirited away.

The Villa Being was built by Trinidadian tourist consultant Auliana Poon, who could see that the once-exclusive hotels on Tobago had mostly descended into inclusive-deal land, where no one dressed for dinner and holidays were flogged by the package load. Which is fine if you want a cheap, sunny getaway, and don't mind water aerobics or chatting to friendly but inquisitive people from Britain all the time. But Poon cannily realised that there was a significant market for people who can afford, and want, something else. And if what you want is bespoke rock-star treatment, utter privacy and total comfort come to Villa Being.

The villa can sleep 10, but doesn't feel big if there are only four of you. It has six or seven rooms, with floor-to-ceiling windows canopied in rose, navy or white shades. The rooms are linked by a series of stone walkways and terraces surrounded with grass. I spent at least a morning choosing where to chill out. It's a tough call. You can either loiter around the sitting room on a chaise longue or a William Morris chair, listening to Bach or Miles Davis and flicking through *The Story of Art*; or you can sit out on the breezy, sunny terrace. Or you can watch the koi in the fish pool.

After tiring of the fish, you could grab a mat and do some yoga on the 'Being Structure', a special blue-tiled square in the middle of the terrace. Surrounded by four tall white pillars, it has been designed with feng shui in mind, for 'cleansing energy'. We used it as a venue for drinking piña colodas – just as relaxing, I find. Our two small children delighted in lining up their cars and dolls on...
And when this all felt a bit couch potato-

ish we simply wandered down on to the lower deck to find a 40ft pool built on stilts above the lush forest. The edge of the pool is level with the water, so when doing your breaststroke it appears as if you're swimming into the ocean. Occasionally a gull flies by. And that's it. No disturbance. No television. No group parties and certainly no theme nights. It's as gorgeously stylish as London's best boutique hotel, but it's a boutique hotel in which you are the only guest.

The Romantic Room has a vast four-poster bed surrounded by 12 doors on three sides, all of which open to the sea. If you're not too busy being romantic, you can see the moon setting on your left and the sun rising on your right, while Tobago's noisy national bird, the cocorico, will serenade you by shouting its name from the treetops as dawn breaks.

In the morning, after you've spent a few moments casually acknowledging that, indeed, you are in heaven, you might saunter across the walkway to the bathroom. Here, white towels are bound in blue ribbons, and everything is carefully put away in long white cupboards, because at night large insects tend to invade the bathroom. In a miracle of architecture, the shower hangs outside the bathroom so you can wash alfresco under the blue sky with only far-off boats as your witness.

The brochure boasts that Villa Being's team of 10 staff will look after you as 'gods and goddesses on Mount Olympus'. The villa is built on a five-acre organic farm: the fresh fruit that appears every morning is picked the day before by Spice, the gardener. Fresh flowers are everywhere. Little black-and-yellow bananaquits and big grey mockingbirds flew around us as we munched pawpaw, sweet bananas and watermelons by the plate-load. Apart from bananas, the children would only eat things including the word 'Kellogg's', which were also provided, alongside boiled eggs and soldiers.

On the first day I had a conversation with Marilyn, the housekeeper, and Petra, her assistant, to discuss what food we might like to eat. I asked if they wouldn't mind just cooking Tobagan specialities for us. They smiled. All week long, the most delicious food possible came out of the kitchen: curries, roti, kingfish, spicy chicken, fry-bakes and callaloo. We had formal seven-course dinners inside in the dining room under a chandelier; informal lunches outside. We took picnics to the beach. There was a sense of occasion about everything, yet nothing was too much trouble, even chicken nuggets with chips for the children, who were con-



Rosie Millard, main picture, enjoys the Being Structure and, inset, one of the cool bedrooms

stantly hugged and kissed by the staff as if they were their own.

I had forgotten my driving licence, so we couldn't drive the Villa's jeep. 'No problem,' said Philip, the supervisor. 'I am like this,' he said, bending down a large palm frond. 'Flexible!' So Philip drove us around the island, although after a few days, and an underwhelming experience in a glass-bottomed boat, we felt like staying at home. Our home. The Villa.

It took some time for my husband and I to acknowledge this, because unless you actually are a member of the Royal Family, being waited on hand and foot does take a bit of getting used to. However, once we realised that it was fine to ask for a cocktail at sunset, or lunch a bit later than normal, we got into

the swing of it. The staff are unobtrusive, yet on hand; at night there is always someone on duty, primarily for security. Even if there are no guests staying, the staff remain at the house, so there is never a feeling that the building has been 'opened up' for your stay.

The concept of Villa Being is that once there, you will 'relax your body and your soul'; and indeed, after a week, we flew home in an almost horizontal stupor.

The experience is so delicious that some people spend merely a day there. It's expensive, certainly, but if you team up with friends, it's financially possible.

And for a really special holiday treat, let me assure you a stint at Villa Being is far, far more pleasant than the spectre of swapping restaurant notes with Michael Winner over dinner.

Factfile



You can hire the Villa Being (www.being-tobago.com) online or by phone from Tourism Intelligence International (00 49 521 163883). It is also available through ITC Classics (0870 751 9400; www.classics.co.uk).

Prices usually include rental of the entire villa (sleeps up to ten), breakfasts, an evening meal, one day's car hire and staff. As a special offer this low season (May–November) all meals are included in the price of £925 a day or £6,475 a week. High season (December–April) prices are £1,350 a day or £9,450 a week. British Airways (0845 7733377; www.ba.com) flies twice a week from Gatwick to Tobago. Fares start at £524, including taxes.

The Observer, London - "Heaven can Wait..."

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