

James Bond's Jamaican roots



The tranquil main beach of GoldenEye resort, a 52-acre enclave in Jamaica with James Bond roots. (Norma Meyer)

Author Ian Fleming wrote his spy novels in beach-side home, now part of GoldenEye Resort

By NORMA MEYER JUNE 13, 2019 | 5:39 PM

Shake, don't stir, the martinis. You see, I'm in GoldenEye sitting at James Bond's birthplace, which is a small corner desk where Ian Fleming created the world's most dashing super-spy in 1952 and banged out all 14 Bond books. Fleming's three-bedroom Jamaica beach pad seems rather simple, considering the British naval officer-turned-bestselling-author hatched Pussy Galore, Auric Goldfinger, Scaramanga, assassin-thwarting gizmos, rocket bombs and other do-or-die havoc on this very spot. Anybody — covert or not — can book it for a vacation.

Never mind that just a few days ago, 007 killing machine Daniel Craig overnighted here.

“Fleming didn’t want the house to be fancy,” recalls nearly 82-year-old Chris Blackwell, whose spirited mother, Blanche, lived close by and purportedly was the longtime love of the married Fleming. “When I went there, it was very militaristic and very sparse. There wasn’t a cushion in sight. He would wake up, swim, write after breakfast, nap. He was very disciplined.”



Spymaster Ian Fleming wrote all 14 Bond books at this desk, which remains in his villa more than a half-century later. (Norma Meyer)

Your mission: soaking up sun, fun and iconic history. London-born, Jamaica-raised Blackwell built, owns and hangs out at the encompassing 52-acre GoldenEye resort, although he’s probably better known as the legendary music producer who vaulted Bob Marley and Jamaican reggae to international fame. Bring a license to chill because the disarming seaside resort — which includes what is now called “Fleming’s Villa” — is a spread-out enclave of 44 rustic-chic cottages, lagoon dwellings and multicolored beach huts, fringed by flowering jungle with gravel roads and funky

directional signs brightly hand-lettered on scraps of wood to keep you from getting lost. It's more enchantingly Gilligan's Island than secret agent glitz. Except you are being surveilled in the ocular-shaped saltwater "Eye Pool" — a giant turquoise eyeball stares up as swimmers splash overhead.



Someone appears to be spying on you in the saltwater "Eye Pool" at GoldenEye resort. (Norma Meyer)

Blackwell's own dossier is fascinating — for starters, he palled around in his teens with Errol Flynn, was rescued by Rastafarians after a boating mishap, founded mega-hit Island Records (besides Marley, his artists included U2, Tom Waits and Cat Stevens), and is a boutique hotel-and-rum mogul. He also saved nearby frozen-in-time Firefly, the tropical lair of illustrious raconteur playwright Noel Coward; this sunset hour, the laid-back Blackwell and I are sipping fruity Blackwell Rum-label cocktails on Firefly's lawn next to Coward's grave.

We'll get to that chapter shortly. As for Fleming's house, "It is creatively blessed. I lent it to Sting and he wrote his biggest record there, 'Every Breath You Take,'" Blackwell says. He mentions it not to brag because this is one unpretentious multimillionaire, clad in a well-worn lavender souvenir sweatshirt emblazoned "Montauk."



Ian Fleming's villa, where agent 007 came to life, is part of the GoldenEye resort in Jamaica. (Norma Meyer)

Guests staying at the resort can tour Fleming's villa if it's not rented. Three days before my peek, Craig slept in the fluffy white-canopied four-poster bed adjacent to Fleming's toiled-over writing desk. The extravagantly paid leading man was about to begin filming the untitled 25th Bond movie elsewhere in Jamaica, bringing the suave sleuth back to his roots. The first movie, "Dr. No" (1962) was shot in this Caribbean nation — Bond buffs will never forget when sultry shell-clutching Ursula Andress emerges from the ocean in a knife-belted bikini.

Fleming's GoldenEye got its start in 1946, when he bought 15 acres that had been a donkey race track, sketched out his idyllic hideaway and christened it after one of his clandestine World War II operations. He was infatuated with Jamaica, then a British colony, and each winter he ditched England to spend several months at his paradise perched above the azure, warm waters of banana port Oracabessa Bay. For 13 straight years, in between snorkeling, swimming and bird-watching, the urbane scribe tapped out Bond fantasies (sometimes on a gold-plated Royal typewriter) until his death from a heart attack in England at age 56 in 1964.

Since then, GoldenEye has hosted a bevy of barefoot VIPs from Bill and Hillary Clinton to Harrison Ford to Scarlett Johansson. The delightful Ramsay Dacosta, 82, was Fleming's gardener, and decades later he still helps visitors plant trees throughout the resort for a \$1,000 donation to Blackwell's Oracabessa Foundation benefiting the local community. Strolling around, you'll notice dozens of hand-printed weathered markers beside vegetation: the guava tree planted by Johnny Depp, the ackee planted by a teenage River Phoenix, the Julie mango stuck in dirt in 1998 by silver screen then-Bond, Pierce Brosnan. (Of course, "GoldenEye" is also the title of Brosnan's 1995 Bond caper. And Bono wrote the movie's theme song here.)



The reggae-and-jazz-bedecked Bizot Bar is GoldenEye's central hangout. It's staffed by locals who seem like family. (Norma Meyer)

Dacosta, like others who worked for Fleming, referred to him only as "Commander," a nod to his British naval intelligence rank. "The Commander always had a cigarette holder in his teeth that he was smoking," Dacosta tells me outside the villa. "I used to climb up the palm tree to get the right coconut for him. He loved rice and pea porridge with coconut milk."



The reception area of GoldenEye resort pays tribute to Ian Fleming's years at his Jamaican hideaway. (Norma Meyer)

In front of the home's open-air picture windows — the Commander shuttered them to concentrate when he wrote — is the “sunken garden,” where he entertained celebrity friends, including Katharine Hepburn, Truman Capote, Coward and swashbuckling Flynn, who had moved to Jamaica. Two almond trees that Dacosta planted for Fleming form an intertwined leafy awning.

From there, a steep stone staircase descends to Fleming's narrow ivory-sand private beach. Dacosta points to a jagged rock offshore, remembering how Fleming regularly waded out with fish-filled conch shells to feed an octopus that lived under it.

“Octopussy” was not only the title of a Bond story; it was the name of a fishing boat Blanche Blackwell gave Fleming.

Closer in, rugged boulders cordon off a shallow seawater pool. “This is where Caspar played,” Dacosta says, referring to the only child of Fleming and his British socialite wife, Ann Charteris. Neither Caspar nor Ann visited here much during the Flemings' troubled marriage. Following the author's death, Blanche Blackwell looked after the

villa for Caspar until, tragically, in 1975 he committed suicide in London by overdosing on barbiturates at the age of 23.

“That’s when my mother asked me to buy it,” Blackwell says. “She was very emotionally attached to it. She used to swim there every day.”

So in 1976 Blackwell purchased the spymaker’s refuge when the first potential buyer — renegade Marley — backed out, deeming it “too posh.”



GoldenEye proprietor Chris Blackwell, who also owns Noel Coward’s Firefly home, stands in the late playwright’s garden with his statue. (Norma Meyer)

Long before that, Coward fell for Jamaica while vacationing at Fleming’s villa, although the cheeky British “Private Lives” and “Blithe Spirit” playwright likened the white-walled, no-frills manor to a medical clinic. “He’d call it GoldenEye, nose and throat,” Blackwell recounts. (Yes, the villa has since been updated.)

In 1949, Coward built his first nearby retreat, Blue Harbour, and later erected his beloved, modest one-bedroom Firefly on a hilltop with a magnificent, sweeping view of Jamaica's coast. Visitors were a Who's Who — Elizabeth Taylor, Richard Burton, Winston Churchill, Laurence Olivier and Sophia Loren, among others. After Coward's death in 1973, Firefly sank into disrepair; Blackwell, who shared hilarious laughs with Coward there, bought it in 1992.

What's so extraordinary is that the entire home is a musty time capsule, seemingly untouched since the acclaimed showman suffered a fatal heart attack in Firefly's shower and died on the bed. A faded pink towel monogrammed "N C" hangs in the yellow-and-black-tiled bathroom as if he just wiped his hands. In the living room, a glass decanter holds a couple of inches of his now-oxidized brandy, straight across from the composer-singer's much-tinkled piano topped with photos of glamorous chum Marlene Dietrich. Decaying literary works line shelves. Frying pans clutter the stovetop.

In an outdoor corridor, a glass patio table is set with floral-patterned china, just like when the Queen Mother dropped by and quaffed a vodka-and-beef-bouillon Bullshot with Coward.

Firefly is also one for the books. And GoldenEye guests can privately tour it, capped with a picnic or sunset wine on the expansive lawn. You'll be joined alfresco by the bronze, life-size statue of Coward, cross-legged in a chair, cigarette in fingers, admiring the spectacular vista; he's buried close by, a rectangular marble slab marking his final resting place and favorite cocktail spot. Other ghosts lurk — in the 17th century, notorious pirate Henry Morgan lived in a still-existing look-out on the property. Inside, you'll find cannonballs.

To initially get to GoldenEye, if I had a Bond-piloted Acrostar or private plane, I could've jetted into Ian Fleming International Airport, about 10 minutes away. Instead, I fly economy commercial into Montego Bay's terminal, where cheery, gray-haired GoldenEye driver "Pops" pulls a Red Stripe beer out of a backseat cooler and hands it to my perked-up husband before our two-hour ride. "Ya mon, relax, you're on island time," Pops declares.



A beach hut's balcony -- and two welcoming cocktails called GoldenEyes -- set the scene for an escapist day. (Norma Meyer)

When we arrive at GoldenEye, there is no clue, other than a cryptic “Private Property” notice on a wrought-iron gate. After a guard gives us the OK, we not-so-stealthily reach the reception Fleming Room, adorned with vintage pictures of the mastermind, most taken at GoldenEye. Next door is the treehouse-style Gazebo restaurant, where Fleming pondered MI6 plots in a gazebo shack. (Coincidentally, charred octopus is on tonight’s menu.) In the restaurant’s entry, five framed stills from “Dr. No” show Andress in her classic bikini debut, one with hunky co-star Sean Connery. The scene was shot on a 20-minute boat trip from GoldenEye and arranged by the film’s then-24-year-old location manager — Blackwell himself.

Another reason to R and R here is that conservation — not nefarious SPECTRE — is a main concern. One morning, I chat with local fishermen at what they call The Bond 007 Beach, and a cigarette-stub-chewing angler dubbed “Quaker Oats” boasts about his huge jackfish catch. It’s a testament to one of Blackwell’s projects, the Oracabessa Bay Fish Sanctuary, which protects another offshore area in order to revive the overfished stock. During an outing on GoldenEye’s glass-bottom boat, I also witness

how coral is successfully being replanted on the eco-threatened reef where Fleming snorkeled. And I later meet “Turtle Man” Mel Tennant, a retired British school principal who, along with GoldenEye support and hands-on guests, annually saves and releases up to 22,000 endangered sea turtle hatchlings.

Fleming cherished the natural beauty of his Caribbean haven; he even picked the mild name of his birdwatching guidebook’s author — James Bond — for his cloak-and-dagger hero. Today’s resort, starting with a few cottages in the 1990s, remains remarkably down-to-earth with a kindhearted staff of townsfolk and a Jamaican “One Love” vibe. At the thatched-roof, record-album-covered Bizot Bar, I’m channeling my inner Bond girl as my husband and I sip frothy signature pineapple-and-rum GoldenEyes in a cocooning breeze with the rolling surf lapping against rocks, a drop-dead gorgeous sun setting, and resident cat Fleming meowing at our feet. Soon, tree frogs and crickets loudly chirp a bewitching symphony. I figure You Only Live Twice.

If you go

Miss Money Penny, take note. Through Dec. 19, GoldenEye (goldeneye.com) is offering reduced rates — starting at \$315 a night with breakfast for beach huts — due to construction of three new guest houses on the resort’s lagoon. Complimentary activities have been added, including guided snorkeling, “sound bath” meditation and Firefly excursions. The secluded Fleming Villa starts at a discounted \$4,455 a night, has a private pool, and with two satellite cottages sleeps 10. It comes with a butler, chef and housekeeper so you can devote your attention to penning a page-turning thriller.

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