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SPRING FARM, Jamaica -- Beautiful thoughts emerge like butterflies from homes in the hills of Jamaica. When reggae legend Bob Marley was 3 months old, his family moved into a hut on the hill now called Zion on the North Coast of the island. The Johnny Cash estate is on Cinnamon Hill, two miles west of Spring Farm.

I am staying in Greatview, a 5-month-old villa in Spring Farm.

The 12,000-square-foot, five-bedroom house is on a cliff overlooking the Caribbean Sea. I am trying to have great ideas, like the collaboration John and Bob could be working on in the afterlife: "I Shot a Sheriff Just To Watch Him Die." I am alone for this trip, obviously.

But you are never spiritually alone in the hills of this wispy island.

Spring Farm cannot be found on a map. It is a small community of villas, about 20 miles southeast of Montego Bay (pop. 70,000). Spring Farm was developed in the late 1960s by American industrialist John Rollins. There are older homes in the neighborhood, but the newer villas are growing in popularity.

The idea is to buddy up with great friends and family and rent out the villas. The homes are popular for weddings and reunions, and I'm already planning my Sun-Times 20th Anniversary Party for next February at Greatview. Children are welcome. You will not see a Jamaican villa in "Girls Gone Wild" segments taped in Montego Bay. Greatview is for everyone.

The Greatview house is handicap accessible with ramps on the main floor. Books in my bedroom include James Joyce's *Dubliners* and Susan Sontag's *In America*. Most Jamaican villas have a butler, chef, chambermaid and laundress. This must explain why I feel I've time-traveled back to my parents' house.

Having a butler is not my style, but butler Aaron Atkinson is a delightful help while at Greatview. He brings food to my room while I am writing and serves as concierge for my day trips. He is smiling all the time. I prefer to think of Atkinson as my "recreation facilitator." I need him in Chicago. Atkinson, 32, is a former furniture builder. When on duty, he lives on the property "24/7," one of his favorite phrases.

Delores Miller is my personal cook. Guests can plan meals and stock Red Stripe beer before arrival. By all means check out Miller's pepperpot soup, made of boiled and seasoned green calloo from the garden in Greatview's backyard. The garden is filled with okra, yams, squash, pumpkin and other delights. Miller's pecan salmon with a light avocado sauce also is delicious. Miller bakes her own bread, using wheat germ, honey and yeast.

Like many Jamaicans, Miller seems distant when we first meet, but by the end of my stay she is explaining how she likes to dance to Gregory Isaacs and Nat "King" Cole tunes as she prepares her meals. "I cooked for my entire family growing up," says Miller, a 43-year-old native of Montpelier. "There were 11 kids. I have four children of my own, between 14 and 27. Parents who cook for big families understand the efficiency of soups. Jamaican cooking is different than other islands because we grow herbs in a natural style. Our sunlight enhances the flavor." Miller says herbs are at the core of her jerk chicken, which she considers her specialty.

Besides Miller's modern kitchen with 40 cookbooks, the villa has a community den and a gym that includes a bicycle, treadmill and StairMaster. A majestic teak railing heading upstairs was hand-carved by a local craftsman. The interior trim of South American cedar creates a soothing feeling throughout the villa. Outside, there's a 20-by-40-foot infinity edge pool with a teak deck and waterfall that drops into a hot tub. But I'm sitting in my master bedroom, grinning and typing away like the guy lost in the "The Shining" mansion. At night, I write to the steady beat of chirping tree frogs and crickets.

Greatview was built by Canadian Dr. Margaret Kerr and Canadian-Jamaican architect Jeremy Millingen of Kingston. Kerr imported Barbados coral stone for the walls of Greatview's poolside veranda. The villa's floors are made from pressed bamboo.

Bathrooms are marble and mine has a whirlpool bath and a cut stone open-air Swedish drench shower. The whirlpool bath was even more tempting after my first day of sightseeing -- and I had no hot water when I came home. (The problem was fixed on my second day at Greatview.) There are elegant black and white pictures of women I do not recognize in my bathroom. I later find out these are Kerr's daughters: Caitlin, 24, who studied at the Art Institute of Chicago; Megan, 28, a Toronto lawyer, and Davis, 30, who works in a technology company in Kingston, Ontario. The family portraits are a reminder that this is Kerr's home.

The villa is appointed with furniture and antiques imported from the former Kerr homestead in Toronto. Another deeply personal touch of trust at Greatview is silverware settings that are family heirlooms. I am proud to report I didn't drop a piece of fine china during my four-day visit.

I was invited to hang out at Greatview by Linda Smith, who is rental agent for 54 villas along Jamaica's lush North Coast. Smith is a former Pan American Airways flight attendant based in Cabin John, Md. In 1985 Smith and her husband began looking for a second home in the states. They traveled to Jamaica to play the Tryall Golf Course with its seaside fairways. "As we rode around on the golf cart, we saw these gorgeous villas," Smith says in a phone call from Cabin John. "We wondered who owned these places. On our way to the airport we met a Realtor by the side of the road and he took us to Tranquility villa. It was a total disaster. Beer bottles in the

bushes. Broken glass. A horrible place on this beautiful piece of land on the water."

No problem, as they say around here.

Smith bought Tranquility within weeks of her visit. She resigned from a Baltimore talent agency she was running and temporarily moved to Jamaica to begin renovation on the villa.

Greatview is a dramatic 1,600 feet above sea level.

The cliffs that surround Montego Bay take on a near-mystical air. Johnny Cash retreated here on and off for the last 20 years of his life. His beloved Cinnamon Hill is 280 feet above sea level. In his 1997 autobiography, *Cash, the Man in Black*, he wrote, "I can go barefoot, even if my 65-year-old soles aren't nearly as tough as an Arkansas country boy's. I can feel the rhythms of the earth, the growing, and the blooming and the fading and the dying in my bones. My bones."

Kerr is a native of Toronto, Ontario. Cash's spirit can still be felt in the area. "He was part of the community here," she says. "In his will, he left several of the orphanages here quite well-endowed. His kids are going to keep up the property." Cash was a religious man. It is not surprising he connected with Jamaica. The country has the greatest number of churches per square mile in the world. More than 80 percent of Jamaicans are Christians.

During the early 1980s, Kerr was head of environmental affairs world wide for Alcan (a Canadian equivalent of Alcoa, which makes aluminum). Alcan has a bauxite mine in the center of the island. "It ran into problems with the Michael Manley government, for good environmental reasons," Kerr says in a conversation on Greatview's veranda. "I sorted some of that out on behalf of Alcan with the Manley government. I flew across this island, from Kingston to Mandeville. It is the most beautiful Caribbean island, and I've been to them all. The mountains are just fabulous. It is lush with waterfalls."

Kerr also works three days a week in family practice at the nonprofit MoBay Hope Hospital, down the hill from Greatview. She can see up to 60 patients in one day. "Last year I spent more time in Spring Farm to crack the whip on the workmen," Kerr says with a gentle smile. "The more I stayed, the more I liked it and the more drawn I was to go back to medicine." Kerr now lives in a cottage 33 stone steps below Greatview. She is the villa's resident manager. Kerr found Villas by Linda Smith Inc. on the Internet. Smith did not intend to take on any more villas in Jamaica, but she fell in love with Greatview.

Montego Bay has been a tourist destination since 1954, when the 98-acre Round Hill resort opened west of Montego Bay on the road to Negril. In earlier times, the Round Hill property was a 100-acre spice and coconut plantation. The piano on which Leonard Bernstein and Noel Coward fiddled about is still at the Round Hill

## Hotel.

In later years, Jackie Kennedy, Paul McCartney and Ringo Starr vacationed at the complex of 27 private villas, hotel, beach club and tennis courts. Smith has four villas within Round Hill, including the newest Seaside Cottage at Round Hill. The four-bedroom, four-bath villa has a 620-station international satellite television in every room. This channel surfing is one way to avoid sunburn by the sea.

An English feel still exists around Montego Bay. Jamaica gained independence from British Colonial rule in 1962. The newfound freedom was celebrated in cheerful ska music, such as the 1962 Millie Small crossover hit "My Boy Lollipop," produced by Chris Blackwell.

A villa makes sense for Montego Bay. There are several reasons not to leave the property at night. Montego Bay doesn't have much to offer in terms of live reggae clubs and restaurants. There is an overpriced Jimmy Buffett's Margaritaville on downtown's Gloucester Avenue. (Buffett also has a couple of places in the Montego Bay airport.) Buffett's friend and record mogul Blackwell owns the Goldeneye house on a dramatic cliff in St. Mary. The James Bond flicks "Live and Let Die" and part of "Dr. No" were filmed at Goldeneye. St. Mary is two hours east of Montego Bay.

Automobile drivers around Montego Bay can be goofy. Lynford Thompson was my dependable driver while at Greatview. Montego Bay street hustlers have calmed down in recent years, but they still get on your nerves asking if you need a cab. All this action takes place on the two-mile strip of Gloucester Avenue along the sea. Locals have named it "The Hip Strip," but I am so un-hip that in two nights on the strip, not once did anyone offer me a hit of ganja. Maybe it had something to do with that Josh Groban T-shirt I was wearing.

Montego Bay has more than 4,500 guest rooms, the largest number of any resort area in Jamaica. The island is the birthplace of the all-inclusive hotel, so a villa concept is a logical high-end extension of this format. The idea is to have the service come to the guest instead of the guest seeking out the service. "I've never done this before," Kerr admits while looking around Greatview. "I've had staff to hire, training to do, protocols to write on how to greet guests, how to set a table. This is my home I am sharing." She is off to a great start.