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“Keeping Our Beaches Bare”

In Jamaica, nude weddings highlight growing nude travel industry

News Wire Services
(Runaway Bay, Jamaica)

When you get married in the nude, where does the best man keep the wedding ring?

That question will be answered and little else will be left to the imagination Wednesday when 11 couples tie the knot in the buff on Valentine’s Day.

“We’re nudists because we’re comfortable nude, so why not get married the way we’re most comfortable,” said Paige DeBell, a 34-year-old artist from Hamburg, N.J., who will get married at Hedonism III – a Jamaican resort known for its wild ways.

The nuptials have sparked protests from clergy and the government, but the weddings also highlight the growth of a burgeoning nude travel industry, estimated at \$300 million a year worldwide. The amount is triple what it was a decade ago, says the Trade Association of Nude Recreation of Los Gatos, California.

“In the last five, maybe 10 years, it’s become a very organized industry,” said Donna Daniels, a nudist and owner of Houston-based Castaways Travel, a company specializing in “clothing optional” vacations. “This used to be a word of mouth thing.”

Daniels, who also runs a more conventional travel company, stumbled into the nude travel business through a chance encounter with a businessman at a chamber of commerce meeting. The man – whom she declined to identify – came by her office a few days later and politely inquired about nude travel options.

“I said come on in the back room . . . I started rattling off things with him and his eyes just got as big as silver dollars and I realized as I was talking with him (that

our hobby information might be valuable,” she said. In 1995, the first full year Castaways was up and running, the company booked around 200 nude vacations. In 2000, the number jumped to around 5,000, with each trip averaging \$3,000.

Over the last 30 years the options for American nudists have continued to grow. Their European counterparts have traditionally had it much easier because of relaxed laws on public nudity. By the late 1960s, the number of official nude beaches in the United States could be counted on one hand. Today, however, there are nearly 250 nude beaches and private clubs and resorts in the United States, according to the Florida-based American Association of Nude Recreation.

Nudists also head to a few resorts in the Caribbean and Mexico that offer nude beaches, such as the Superclubs chain with resorts in Jamaica and the Bahamas. Hedonism III is owned by Superclubs.

And what do the couple’s families think about their nude nuptials?

They’re “totally cool,” says DeBell’s fiancé, Ronald Sissman, 48, who has two teen-age children from a previous marriage. Sissman, Jones and others say it is a myth that nudism is about public sex. Still, that hasn’t stopped protests in Jamaica.

Despite the Caribbean nation’s reputation as a place where people come to escape civilization, the weddings – which have been mentioned everywhere from Modern Bride magazine to the Playboy television channel – have proven to be a bit too risqué for many in this largely conservative and Christian country.

A coalition of Caribbean-American clergy wrote to Prime Minister P.J. Patterson expressing shock and urging him to try to stop the weddings. The prime minister hasn’t responded.

Jamaica’s government tourism agency also lambasted the event as improper and offensive. And there have been small protests outside the Jamaica Tourist Board’s offices in New York, at Superclubs Kingston offices and outside Hedonism III.

At Hedonism, the protests have mostly been regarded as an amusing sideshow with guests sharing tales of having to brave placard-waving protesters shouting “Jesus!” at cars near the resort.

While some of the grooms will be wearing little else than a top hat, and the brides only a veil, one of the most common questions asked of the couples has been, “Where does the best man put the ring?” ☆



Rev. Frank Cervacio, president of Central Florida Naturists and unrecognizable in clothing, officiates wedding.