

## The Ugly American, Need for Speed: Riding Dunebuggies around Montego Bay

BY SHIRA LEVINE, FRIDAY OCT. 23, 2009

TRAVEL, JAMAICA, ADVENTURE TRAVEL, ADVENTURE, UGLY AMERICAN

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One nice thing about traveling out of New York City is the opportunity to drive a car, a staple many city dwellers give up. While much of the rest of the Western world views driving as a hassle, I associate getting behind the wheel with vacationing. Thus, while in Montego Bay, Jamaica, recently, I took full advantage of the chance to get behind the wheel and do some serious off-roading (my first

time). The green citizen in me would have loved to race a Tesla, of course. Instead, I compartmentalized my eco ethics and dedicated the next two-and-a-half hours to slamming on the gas and peeling out in a classic dune buggy. There was me and my lead foot, tearing apart the (sort of) open Jamaica terrain: Mud, rocks, grassy hills, riverbeds, beach and broken paths rolled beneath, with Jamaica's Blue Mountains and sugar fields for a lush landscape.

I went with [Chukka Caribbean's](#) \$76 Dune Buggy Adventure. They also run ziplines and horseback excursions. (The horseback riding tour took participants in the saddle into the sea. Many found that swimming near horses is less than romantic, as the horses tend to relieve themselves in the water, something like the pool scene from *Caddyshack*.)



I didn't mind *my* version of getting filthy. I launched the dune buggy through deep mud puddles and too quickly down rocky hills, and took last minute sharp turns at a decently high speed. I hadn't been behind the wheel in a few years, and was grateful for the practice laps we took on Chukka's mini course of hills, deep puddles and bends. As someone with a history of speeding tickets there is something utterly thrilling about flooding the engine and slamming on the gas through a deep puddle, soaking everyone within 10 feet without worrying about the police. (Note: Bring your license and don't worry about that spotty driving record.)

Sadly, we never made it to the top of the mountain the tour promises for stunning views of the area. There is a give-and-take to off-road driving: We're destroying Mother Nature while she's blocking roads, via the harsh storms of the rainy seasons. My guide simply wasn't equipped with the requisite machete to hack away the large tree that had fallen across our path to Blue

Mountain's peak.

That disappointment aside, I made an art out of peeling out and gunning the motor at every break in the terrain. When you're in a country like Jamaica where the resort life trumps most opportunities for exploring (due to high crime rates), it's refreshing to get a taste of the real Jamaica.

Part of the tour took us through a small village where it seemed as if everyone and their toddler sibling ran out, barefoot, to slap us a high five then precociously ask for a dollar. From as young as two and on up to what looked like eleven years of age, children stood angelically and awfully close to the dune buggies. The youngest enjoyed the playfulness of a stranger's high five as we slowly passed by, while the more seasoned older kids half-heartedly tossed a hand out, realizing there wasn't going to be any cash tendered. We kindly demurred during the friendly fist bump and sped off. Those dedicated cherubs turned out to be persistent and savvy. Knowing the Chukka route there they were waiting for our return. Can we have a dollar now? Still sorry and still no. None of us were carrying a wallet or purse, as dune bugging through the mud isn't exactly the place for a Balenciaga.

As I approached what was to be our last big drop, I let the car ahead gain some distance. Given the appropriate distance, I jumped on the gas, plowing down a hill through what looked like a four-foot deep puddle. For a split second I was airborne—long enough to feel nothing beneath my wheels so the splashdown was stellar. That final jump was also, perhaps, the reason my dune buggy then made a very suspicious clanking sound as we returned, at last, to the Chukka compound.



*Shira Levine is an experienced travel writer who has covered everything from post-revolution Chiapas to "Gringolandia" Costa Rica. She's indulged in the wines of Argentina, sampled cevapcici along coastal Croatia, and luxuriated in Dubai and Iceland. Yet she still must fight the urge against becoming The Ugly American. Her column will help you avoid the pitfalls of loud T-shirts and even louder complaining, while uncovering the latest and greatest chic travel opportunities.*

*Images: Shira Levine*

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Katie  
October 24, 2009    Whoa! I just got from Jamaica and I would've loved to do this! Next time...

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