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Stripping Down to the Bare Essentials in Jamaica



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by **Brandon Schultz** 2 days - edited

BLOOM festival's spirit of inclusion and clothing freedom helps bolster confidence and weaken traditional defenses.

When I told people I was going to **Jamaica** for an **LGBT** festival, I was usually met with wide-eyed surprise. It's not exactly a gay-friendly destination; in fact, it's one of the nine remaining Caribbean nations that still criminalize homosexuality, thanks to old laws and deeply ingrained culture left behind by colonial oppression. I wasn't telling the full story, half by intention and half by ignorance.

Intentionally, I wasn't always forthcoming with the information that the fact that would both relieve some concerns about safety (since the event would be isolated and protected), and raise a few eyebrows because the resort is famously ... *uninhibited*. While there are plenty of nudist and naturist resorts around the world, where people go to casually live a clothing-free lifestyle, Hedonism II introduces a hefty dose of sexually-charged energy to the atmosphere, heartily earning its "free" lifestyle reputation. All of this to casually say it's a sex resort.

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anything LGBT in the official festival materials, the website, or anywhere that I could find afterward. It's called **BLOOM**, and it's designed for the "**Tribe of Love and Celebration**," open to everyone, "regardless of ethnicity, gender, religion, or sexual orientation." It began as a primarily African-American group, and it still is, but, as with anything else related to BLOOM, it's not exclusive. It turns out I was wrong about a lot of things, including some things I thought about myself.



Hedonism II is divided into two parts: nude and prude (where clothing is optional). There's no mistaking which side is which, with a very clear, highly marked dividing line forbidding clothes and cameras (and, therefore, cell phones) beyond a certain point. My room was on the prude side and it seemed that most of the festival guests and events were there, too, but I didn't see a ton of people crowding the beach, the pools, or even the bars the first day. When I asked about the lack of a crowd at dinner, people laughed.

"They're all on the nude side."

Several times my partner and I had discussed whether we'd take our clothes off during this festival and hadn't come up with a conclusive decision, but when we found out that's where almost all of the fun was, we marched up to the dividing line along the beach, dropped our swimsuits, and never looked back. Or up or sideways. We marched along the shoreline looking for a pair of open lounge chairs without ever looking up from the sand, completely self-conscious and 100 percent afraid of looking at the wrong person the wrong way, knowing nothing of the etiquette. We sunned on the chairs for a couple of hours, hearing all sort





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Because we picked chairs directly on the shore, our view had been nothing but the sparkling sea, and that was no accident. But it seemed that sunset was a special time on the nude beach—a time when couples waded into the shallow water to enjoy the inspiring sunset together. Unless I feigned a nap, it was impossible not to watch, and I don't suppose one goes into the water to do such things in front of people if they don't want to be seen (and heard), so that was that. We witnessed a fiery sunset over the Caribbean, with plenty of sparks along the shore, as well.

We chuckled quietly. I think we giggled less over what was happening and more over the realization that we were the only people who seemed to be scandalized. We were truly in another world—something that, even as a full-time travel writer who encounters dramatically different cultures and customs regularly, I rarely experience. And sometimes when you're all alone and realize that "life is different here," you can only laugh at some of the things you believed about the world before that moment.

We heard that there was great pizza on the nude side, baked fresh for each order with all sorts of toppings available, so we ventured further in to grab a bite before heading back to the land of the prude, but it turned out the pizza oven was only fired up at midnight so we'd have to come back. We took a tour of the pools and found that the nudes didn't just have multiple pools and a giant hot tub, but a cave hidden behind a waterfall. It wasn't hard to guess what that was for, but wow. **Waterfalls, party pools, and pizza**—the nudes had it all.

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There were themed parties every night at Hedonism II and, during BLOOM, there was a second themed party hosted by the festival. That night, my partner, our new friends, and I opted for a toga party. None of us brought togas, but the resort provided them. Sorta. I waited in line outside a small shack until it was my turn, and I was told to strip down as far as I was willing to go. I had been nude on the nude beach for a couple hours earlier in the day, but I wasn't ready to bare all on the prude side, in front of all of our friends and other clothed people, so I kept my underwear on and was maniacally wrapped in red fabric, ripped, tucked, and folded until a tight, relatively short toga appeared on my body. Clearly these people were used to wrapping bodies into togas. My partner and I darted back to our room to drop off a few things didn't want to carry around the party, and there decided to ditch our underwear, too. Why not? We'd still be covered (stairs and chairs aside).

I don't remember much of the party. I think I was too distracted by what I was (and wasn't) wearing. I enjoyed the novelty of it. Once midnight came, we remembered the pizza so we traversed the beach toward the line of nudity again, tore off our togas, and got in line. We were second, but freshly baking pizza takes time, so we spent about 20 minutes standing at the counter. It didn't feel like much, though, because we made new friends. I don't think they gave me their real names anyway, but I'll change them here to **Salsa** and **Hunter** (it's not that far off from what they provided). They were a fascinating husband and wife duo—she a shorter woman with long black hair, and he a giant, towering over her—who chatted about pizza and Trip Advisor. Salsa is apparently a big deal on Trip Advisor, with more than 150,000 followers who seek her advice on where to stay and eat around the world. I'm not sure if they know that her wealth of international experience comes from having visited more than 230 cities to attend kink festivals with Hunter. One time she dressed him in a custom white leather bodysuit with platform boots and paraded him around on a leash somewhere in Europe. I learned lots of facts like that in 20 minutes.

We saw Salsa and Hunter at plenty of parties and meals, and always stopped to say "hi" or have a brief chat. They were our best nudist friends. As we stood waiting for another pizza one night, Salsa told me that, of everywhere she's been in the world, for this specific purpose Hedonism II was friendliest environment she'd ever encountered. Apparently nudists can be rather clian



Perhaps it's just that Hedonism II really is that welcoming and friendly, and it may not be the case that we'd have been so comfortable elsewhere, but my partner and I were truly surprised by how chill we felt after just a couple of days. It's also likely that the BLOOM festival's spirit of inclusion and freedom helped bolster our confidence and weakened our traditional defenses. It wasn't long before we didn't think twice about being nude on the prude side, or even having conversations with fully-dressed strangers while nude ourselves. That was admittedly the most challenging hurdle. When others bring a barrier to an encounter, even unknowingly, it's more nerve-wracking to leave your own behind, but once you discover you can do it, you find a new strength of power and personality you didn't realize you had. Or at least I did.

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