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THE MARLEYS

Bob Marley's family has opened a resort and spa in the Bahamas, inspired by the life and work of the late musical icon. We ask if it's a worthy tribute



Members of the Marley family involved in the resort and spa project include his wife Rita (far left), his eldest daughter Cedella (centre), and Stephanie, his seventh child (left)

The sound of Bob Marley tunes wafting through the air is not what one would usually expect to hear at a spa, but at the new Marley Resort & Spa, in the Bahamas, it is totally fitting, and surprisingly relaxing.

Situated on Cable Beach in the capital of Nassau, the 16-suite boutique, oceanfront resort opened softly in June with rates starting at US\$425 (€338, £301) a night. The property includes a fine-dining restaurant, two pools and a hot tub, a bar/lounge, a Marley music gallery, a Marley boutique and the Natural Mystic Spa.

The property was purchased as a family home in the late 1970s following an assassination attempt on Bob Marley, the Jamaican musician, singer-songwriter and cultural icon, who died in 1981. Stephanie Marley, the seventh of 11 Marley children, and CEO and managing director of the resort, says the family saw Nassau as a refuge: "We lived in the mountains in Jamaica, so the highlight of the year was going to Nassau for vacations."

With her husband gone, and the children grown, Rita Marley – Bob's widow and Stephanie's mother – decided in 2002

to turn the property into a guest house and "bring it back to life". It is, says Stephanie, "totally Mom's inspiration and vision". The goal was twofold: "To keep the legend alive and... to extend our family's brand and legacy in an industry that is not about music," says Rita.

Stephanie admits they were concerned they wouldn't be able to compete with the local Sheraton, Hilton and Sandals, but says her mother was determined to proceed nonetheless. "Mom said, 'it's not about selling rooms, it's about sharing a feeling,'" she says.



The spa is located in a former laundry area (left); the signature bathing rituals are performed in an Asian-style, sunken bath (right)



WARM, INTIMATE AND FUNKY

The renovation process, which took four years, began in 2004. As it was important to the family to maintain the integrity of the place, the main house remained largely the same, with the sole addition of a 'courtyard building' containing a ground-floor boutique and eight 'garden suites' above it. They also turned a wing of the property (previously a laundry area) into an intimate, two-level spa.

The spa's name, *Natural Mystic*, comes from one of Marley's songs, and the resort's guest rooms and public areas are also named after some of his best-known tunes. "We selected the songs that elicited a feeling or connection," says Stephanie. Examples include *Nice Time* for one of the guestrooms, *One Love* for the honeymoon suite, *Stir it Up* for the bar and *Simmer Down* for the restaurant.

Making sure the resort was environmentally conscious was another concern. Stephanie points out that although there was little awareness of green issues in Bob's lifetime, "he was a naturalist". In line with this, the resort works with local food producers, and has its own water treatment system, recycling programme and energy conservation protocols.

During the development period, Stephanie – a psychology graduate – lived in Nassau. However, as a self-proclaimed "island girl", she is now back in Jamaica, travelling to Nassau once a month and staying in touch by phone and email.

Along with Rita and Stephanie, the other family member involved in the project is Bob's eldest daughter, Cedella Marley. "Cedella is the creative genius, the designer, investor and the family's home decorator," says Stephanie of her older sister, who has given the resort an energetic, Afro-Caribbean vibe. "We wanted it to feel warm and intimate with a bit of funk."

According to Stephanie, the concept for the resort has been entirely the family's own, and they've been closely involved in the development. On the operations side, however, they're working with hospitality professionals. "This is an investment, so we need the professionals to make the brand successful," acknowledges Stephanie.

Despite this, the resort has already seen a high turnover of managers, as the Marleys have struggled to find a candidate who is a perfect fit. But Stephanie is confident that in their most recent appointee – operations manager Barbara Hanna-Cox – they have found what they're looking for: someone with a broad range of experience, who is "open-minded and willing to rise to the occasion". Previously a director of operations for Hilton and a former president of the Bahamas Hotel Association, Hanna-Cox has, says Stephanie, "increased our occupancy, mileage and revenue."

GLOBAL FUSION

A global traveller, Rita never stays at a property without a spa, so she was determined to have one in Nassau. "I'm a

The Marley family's vacation home was renovated to create the resort; facilities include an open-air dining area (above)

spa-lover, and I like to work relaxation and renewal into my lifestyle," she says. "It's about self, wellness and rejuvenation."

From décor to products and treatment protocols, *Natural Mystic* is a fusion of African, Caribbean and Asian traditions. These specific cultures were selected, says Stephanie, "because they all employ traditional methods and natural ingredients."

The desire to use the natural resources of the Caribbean led the family to Linda Hall, a Caribbean-based spa consultant and owner of the product line *Caribbean Essentials*. Hall joined the Marley project in 2004 – when development was already well under way – to create a spa menu in keeping with Rita's Caribbean/Asian/African vision, with everything from manicures, pedicures and facials to massages, body wraps and scrubs.

When it comes to treatment protocols, "the aim is to deliver something unique... not a factory [experience]," says Hall. She cites the example of body services that begin with a full stretch, and facials that include chakra-balancing or lymph drainage. As for pricing, the signature 80-minute bath ritual is US\$90 (€72, £64), while a 60-minute massage or a 75-minute facial are US\$110 (€88, £78) apiece.

The spa includes a small reception, three treatment rooms (two single and one for

ABOUT BOB MARLEY

Robert Nesta Marley was born on 6 February 1945 in the small village of Nine Mile in Jamaica, to a white father and a black mother. He left school at 14 to make music, going on to find fame as a singer, song-writer and guitarist with a band called The Wailers in the 1960s, before forging a successful solo career after the band split in 1974.

Largely credited with bringing the Jamaican music genres ska, rocksteady and reggae to an international audience, Marley's best-known hits included *I Shot the Sheriff*, *No Woman, No Cry*, *Exodus*, *Could You Be Loved*, *Stir It Up*, *Jamming*, *Redemption Song*, and *One Love*.

Having married Rita Anderson in 1966, Marley had 11 children: three with Rita and eight with separate women. He also adopted two from Rita's previous

relationships. In the late 60s, Marley became a leading member of the Rastafari movement, an Abrahamic religion that recognises Haile Selassie I, the former Emperor of Ethiopia, as the returned Messiah promised in the Bible. Tenets of Rastafari include the spiritual use of cannabis, rejection of Western society and Afrocentric social and political views.

In December 1976, two days before he was due to perform at the Smile Jamaica concert to promote peace between two warring political factions, Marley, Rita and Don Taylor, his manager, were shot by assailants inside the Marley home. Rita and Taylor sustained serious injuries but later recovered. Marley, with minor injuries, performed at the concert, saying: "The people who are trying to make this world worse aren't taking a day off. How can I?"



In 1977, Marley was diagnosed with a form of malignant melanoma, but rejected surgery on religious grounds. After a four-year battle with the disease, he died on 11 May 1981, at the age of 36.

couples), mani-pedi areas, male and female locker rooms, and an open-to-the-sky wet area – known as the Wata Passage – with a lounge, whirlpool and steamroom. There are also two Asian-style, sunken baths, where the spa's signature bathing rituals take place.

In keeping with the resort's philosophy, the products used in the spa – South African brand Africology and Asian line Sabi Sabi – are very eco-friendly. For the signature bath rituals, Hall has worked with local soap company Botani Bath to create a range from scratch. All products are also available as retail items, and Hall is confident that retail, overall, will eventually account for 25 to 30 per cent of spa revenue, perhaps more.

In place of a spa manager, Hall is working with a spa coordinator/receptionist. In addition, Natural Mystic employs three locally recruited therapists, plus a Jamaican masseuse called Sister Iyata – "the family's holistic mentor" – who worked closely with Stephanie's grandmother (Bob Marley's mother) before she passed away.

When it comes to finding staff, "we look for experience and a natural, caring instinct," says Stephanie. Although already qualified, all the therapists are undergoing an advanced training programme with Hall, which includes a written exam and ongoing performance evaluation.

Hall is confident Natural Mystic will be a big draw for the resort, while Stephanie says she expects the spa to contribute at least 30 per cent to overall revenue.



The Marley family vibe makes Natural Mystic stand out from other resort spas

At the time of my visit, just following the soft opening, the Marley Resort & Spa was still a work in progress. While I was impressed with the vision, I felt much work was needed to make the project the "intimate, world-class sanctuary" the Marleys were aiming for. As the sole guest, I felt as though I were in a family home rather than a luxury, boutique resort, although therein lay part of its charm. There wasn't a full management team in place, many operational protocols still seemed to be under discussion and there was only one full-time spa employee – although, according to Hall, the spa is now fully staffed and "training is going great".

But even during my visit, there was no denying the resort's potential. In the spa, in particular, the décor, blend of cultures and unique services all wrapped up in the Marley family vibe elevated the Natural Mystic experience above that typically offered by a boutique resort spa.

SPREADING THE WORD

Musicians, entertainers, music-lovers, Marley fans and "anyone who wants to experience something different" will be the prime target markets for the resort, says Stephanie.

Print advertising is being considered for a number of publications, including *Rolling Stone*, *Billboard*, *Condé Nast Traveler* and *Travel + Leisure*. The internet will be a major component of the marketing plan and, in Nassau, the spa is also being promoted using local media outlets.

Stephanie is projecting 80 per cent occupancy for the resort by the end of the first year, and estimates that at least 70 per cent of guests will use the spa, although at the moment locals are driving business. "The local community has totally embraced what we're doing," says Hall. She adds that they're toying with idea of making the spa accessible only to resort guests plus a fee-based membership; but for the time being the spa continues to welcome day guests.

Looking ahead, Stephanie says the hope is that the Nassau property will be successful enough to launch a chain from Jamaica to Japan – and not only for profit, she says, but in order to be able to better support the family's favourite charities.

So what would Bob Marley – the down-to-earth man of the people – have thought of what has become of his former vacation home? His daughter is confident he would have approved. "Daddy was a socialite and a people person," says Stephanie. "His home in Jamaica was always full of friends, family and fans... he would love this place." ●