

**Nigel Tisdall** *discovers the ultimate Caribbean beach holiday experience – swimming with horses in Jamaica*

# NOW THAT'S WHAT I CALL

I'm in deep water with a Jamaican beauty. He's got flowing hair and lovely copper-coloured eyes, and his strong chestnut body moves with a supple grace. Dready used to race and play polo, but now he loves to frolic in the warm waters of the Caribbean and makes no complaint as I hang on to his tail for dear life.

Swimming with horses is hardly an everyday holiday activity, but it's one of the most popular at the magnificent 400-acre Half Moon resort in Montego Bay.

'We've got 25 horses, seven birds, five dogs, three ponies, two donkeys and a goat called Jean,' explains Trina deLisser, the spirited Jamaican director of its equestrian centre, which has been taking in injured, strayed and abandoned horses for more than 30 years.

Blessed with two miles of beach-front, Half Moon seems an ideal spot to go riding in the waves, and that's confirmed when I'm joined by a group of lively American ladies who call themselves the 'Georgia Peaches'. They've come here because the near two-hour 'Turf and Surf Experience' is something special. 'At other places you just walk in the sea,' one explains, 'but here the horses really swim, and they go a long way out.'

You can take a horse to water but you can't make it swim. That's a skill they must learn themselves, and as former racehorses, many in Trina's stable have done so as part of their training.

After a short ride through the palms, we swap our helmets and trousers for swimsuits and a yellow lifebelt that makes us look like sumo wrestlers. Javon, my groom, explains how to ride bareback



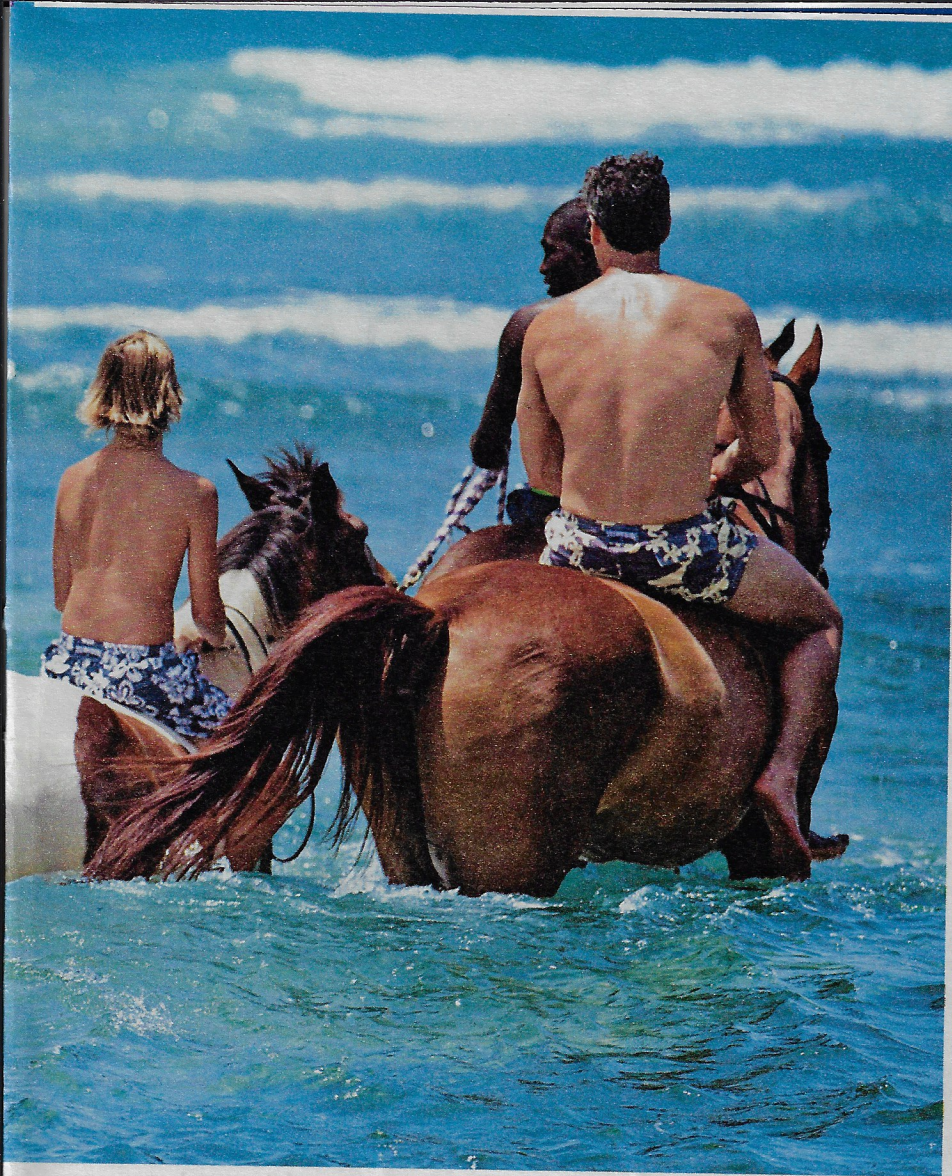
**SEA VIEWS:** The over-water spa at Half Moon and, top, the view from one of the rooms at the Montego Bay resort

in the sea. 'Just hang on to the mane,' he chirps, 'then when Dready starts swimming slide down his back and grab the tail.' As we march boldly into the waves, Javon adds there's no worry about being kicked.

While more sensible guests are flopped on loungers sipping rum punches, we plough towards the reef, gradually sinking into the waves until Dready is forced to swim.

He makes forceful snorts like heavy yoga breathing, and when I slip back and hold his tail





## Three more chances to saddle up shoreside

**Jamaica isn't the only Caribbean island where you can ride along the shore and into the surf. Here are three more places where you can splash out with a horse...**

**1** Want to swim with horses? There are few places better than along the northward shores of **Grand Cayman**. Confident riders can take advantage of empty beaches and canter away in and out of the waves.

There's even more riding on offer all along Grand Cayman's glorious Seven Mile Beach and sunrise, sunset and romantic 'rides by moonlight' are particularly popular.

There are also a variety of special family-based rides with no experience necessary. More details at [caymanbeachrides.com](http://caymanbeachrides.com) or look at [visitcaymanislands.com](http://visitcaymanislands.com).

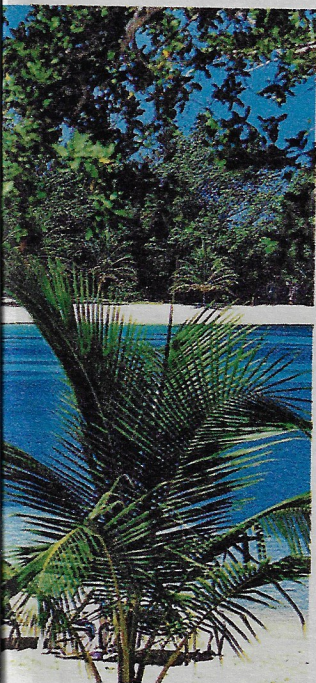
**2** Over in **St Lucia**, you can saddle up at the **International Pony Club** in the town of Gros Islet. Here two-hour-long tours lead your group of riders to Cas en Bas where you (and your horse) can splash in the Atlantic coast surf.

Two of the most popular providers on St Lucia are [hoofprinttranch.com](http://hoofprinttranch.com) and [islandroutes.com](http://islandroutes.com).

**3** In **Antigua**, horse riding is popular with local people as well as holidaymakers – as you will see at the **Antigua Equestrian Centre** based near English Harbour.

The centre offers daily rides in small groups (normally just four people, so it's perfect for families) with stops at Falmouth Bay for a fabulous dip with your horse. [antiguaequestrian.com](http://antiguaequestrian.com).

# RIDING THE WAVES...



### TAKE THE PLUNGE:

Heading off into the sea, top; the beach at Half Moon, above, and, above right, Nigel's partner Alice being towed along by Dready



it's like being pulled along by a dog straining on its lead. As our group's confidence grows we frolic in and under the water with the horses as Javon takes pictures of it all.

'This is awesome!' the Peaches scream, and while some participants later admit to being petrified, I find this fast-paced fusion of sun, waves and mighty horse utterly exhilarating.

Back at the stables, Dready is rewarded with some fresh grass while I lunch on jerked pork and baked sweet potato at Moonchies, a wooden shack on Sunset Beach.

It was this perfect curve of soft sands that gave Half Moon its name back in 1954 when 17 American families banded together to create a beach escape on Jamaica's north coast.

This year the resort is celebrating its 65th anniversary with an upgrade that will bring new ocean-front rooms and an infinity pool, and down the decades it's welcomed so many celebrities

from Jackie Onassis to Prince Harry that it was dubbed 'the Royals' favourite Jamaican hotel'. Today most guests are active couples and families here for its championship golf course, 11 tennis courts, Olympic-size pool and palatial Fern Tree Spa, which recently opened a brilliant vegan cafe. For me, though, there's only one place to be – back with Dready and his chums, for as well as lessons in jumping, dressage and polo, Trina offers a fascinating equine session in 'Empowerment'.

'It's about how to gain a horse's attention through trust,' she explains as I'm handed a 5ft training whip and led into an arena to meet a six-year-old mare, Maxi.

I'm not allowed to talk or wear a hat or sunglasses, and when Trina shouts instructions, I can't help thinking how they sound like advice for a happy marriage. 'First establish who's in command...'

My body language is meant to be authoritative, but Maxi trots away. 'You're more similar than you realise,' Trina sighs, 'unfocused and anxious.' After half-an-hour running after this horse, a right little madam, I feel hot and flustered, but my attitude changes when I later hear about Maxi's traumatised past.

As a racehorse she was beaten and blindfolded to get her in the starting stalls, and then she moved to breeding but lost the foal.

Eventually, Trina gets me to stand by the gate holding out a clump of grass like a nervous lover trying to propose. It works. Suddenly there's a mood change, and Maxi walks up for a cautious nibble.

When I move closer to stroke her neck, I feel a drenching sense of release. This is the euphoria that comes when you engage with wonderful rescued horses and there's only one very Jamaican word that sums it all up – respect.

### KEY DETAILS

#### Virgin Atlantic

([virginatlantic.com](http://virginatlantic.com)) flies from Gatwick to Montego Bay.

B&B rooms at **Half Moon** (half-moon.com) cost from £299 per night. A Turf And Surf Experience costs £106 and Empowerment sessions cost £75.