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JANUARY 2, 2019

On the GO: Showing All: Hedonism II is Jamaica's no-judgment, pleasure-seeking paradise

BY ROSS FORMAN

Travel Trio: Jamaica

I was preparing to fly from Chicago to Montego Bay in late-November for my first-ever visit to Jamaica, yaah mon. And yes, they do use that saying all the time in that Caribbean island. I had a connecting flight in Atlanta, thus meaning I was flying on Delta Airlines, not my multi-million-mile airline-of-choice, United Airlines.

The Delta agents startled me in their all-purple attire. Didn't realize that's their fashion-of-choice these days. Not really a fan of it, so of course I had to text some smartass comment to my friend Will, a former Chicago resident who now lives in Tampa and is a Delta frequent-flyer.

The thing about flying Delta that really ticked me off was, unlike United where I have status, I would be forced to pay \$30 for the checked piece of luggage. That's when my friend Lisa reminded me: 'You're going to Hedonism II; you don't need much clothing.'

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Ah yes, Hedo – the lifestyle-friendly, clothing-optional resort, which attracts people from around the world for an always-memorable, minimally-dressed, special, sassy, sunny, sexy stop at the tip of Negril's famous seven-mile beach. About a 90-minute drive from the airport in Montego Bay, Hedo is surrounded by warm water, white sand beaches, open bars and open minds. Hedonism II is an all-inclusive resort that serves food, good food all day, including a wide-selection buffet, plus cocktails a-plenty, beach activities and more.

Hedo has five on-property restaurants, and the Japanese-style Harrysan Restaurant puts Benihana to shame. There's great food and entertaining servers at Harrysan, even though the chef didn't flip the egg into his hat, which I was expecting. He did, though, stress multiple times that everything was cooked from the heart and presented with love ... or something similar to that.



There also is the Nude Beach Grill & Bar and the Prude Beach Grill. Both have tasty jerk chicken and great made-to-order pizza. (Maybe the pizza isn't great in comparison to the gems we know and love in Chicago, but when you're getting a pizza from midnight to 5 a.m. when it is served, it is amazing, especially after a few cocktails.)



Hedo offers such entertainment activities as snorkeling, sailboat rides, kayaks, catamarans, or a game of pool at the pool-in-a-pool table. Hedonism II is a 4-star resort with a 5-star adult playground experience. Can't remember who said it to me, so I can't give credit, but I agree: Hedo is, Adult Summer Camp.

I can't say enough good things about Hedo.



First, the staff is exceptional. Other than a couple of bartenders who just seemed bored, perhaps annoyed having work at one evening party during my five-day stay, everyone was super nice, super friendly, super outgoing and always helpful. Gotta give it to Wayon, who was entertaining, literally, and exceptionally nice. He dressed as a Chippendale dancer one night during the Hedonistic School Girl party, which had resort visitors dress in some school style, include nerds and more.

Hedo has nightly dinner-time shows in the Main Terrace Dining Room that are entertaining and seductive, with good singers and sexy outfits. My first night on-property featured the Toga & Foam Party – and I enjoyed both.

There also was a Rock Star Night and more.

Hedo attracts a wide variety, mostly in the 25-65 age-range, at least that's what it appeared. There is, of course, the "Prude" side of the resort where guests are usually clothed, perhaps shirtless. On the "Nude" side, yep, everyone is wearing their birthday-suit, nothing else, as required.

Hedo is, without question, a pressure-free, no-judgment, pleasure-seeking resort. I talked to men and women from the U.S., Canada and elsewhere, including the husband-wife couple of 18 years that,

moments earlier, had their first-ever "experience" with another couple. They talked openly about their lives with me and my friend Gabriel as all of us enjoyed freshly-made pizza at, oh, about 4 a.m. And they weren't shy to show the content of their bag of toys, and how they enjoyed using each item.



Hedo delivers amazing memories and brings new, life-long friends for many.

One of the noteworthy areas at Hedo is its playroom, called, The Romping Shop – designed for pleasure and play, with soft lighting, white flowing drapery, soft fluffy pillows on beds surrounded by waterfalls, and more. I only went in there briefly, just to check it out. But the couple I had late-night pizza with was there an hour earlier – and still smiling, and sharing their tales.



The pool and hot-tubs at Hedo were busy throughout my stay. Guests enjoyed the water, drank, joked and sure, some were intimate, some very intimate. There were fun, er, funny games and contests. There's Nude Twister and Dirty Minds Trivia (did not play either). There were body shots aplenty and twerking contests that certainly showed who has the moves and, well, who doesn't.

BLOOM FREEDOM FESTIVAL

My Hedo trip ran concurrent with the eighth-annual Bloom Freedom Festival, the brainchild of founder/author and motivator Olubode Shawn Brown, a New York resident who stresses that everyone, regardless of ethnicity, gender, religion or sexual-orientation, should belong to a Tribe of Love & Celebration. "We created a community aimed at connecting and awakening the heart, mind and spirit of all humankind," it says on the BLOOM website. "We are a global movement of people who are creating alternative social structures that allow for unique self-expression, personal growth, visibility, connection and belonging.

"Our purpose is (to) facilitate safe spaces for individuals and communities to explore their spiritual, leisure, work, relationship and communal life areas in ways that inspire, inform and celebrate our humanity."

BLOOM started as a New York City party in 2008 and has evolved as a brand that serves the diverse needs of people who are called BLOOMERS.

"We are a celebration of well-being, fun, adventure, creativity, inclusiveness and community," according

to BLOOM.

BLOOM attracts mostly gay African-American men, with some I met from New York City, Atlanta, Chicago, Toronto and as far away as Helsinki, Finland. Local Jamacians also ran the BLOOM trip during my time at Hedo. The kindness and friendship of the BLOOM bunch, when mixed with my small crew, was special to say the least. We danced, drank and certainly enjoyed the late-night hot-tub fun. Race was not an issue, at all – just the race to have fun. Heck, some of the BLOOMERS were quick to fill my vodka-anchored drink or surprise me with shot, just as I did for them.

Thanks to social media I really look forward to keeping in contact with the BLOOMERS who I met.

"It's always a pleasure working with Olubode and hosting (the) Bloom Freedom Festival," said Randy Russell, director of sales and marketing at Hedonism II. "I enjoy seeing the growth and evolution of this group, as well as those new and familiar faces it brings in each year."

There were plenty of BLOOM first-timers who I spoke with, along with some who have been attending year after year after year. Some met their significant-other at BLOOM, and they too were enjoying the 2018 event.

"Word-of mouth is very effective for Hedo," Russell said. "Guests love sharing their experience on property with friends. Social media has proven to be a successful tactic in marketing to specific groups. We also spend money online with specific keywords and phrases and we search for relevant backlinks that focus on (the LGBT) market segment.

"LGBT guests staying at Hedo should feel very safe. We're welcoming to all. It is true that Jamaicans are generally more conservative in their views, but travelers shouldn't shy away from the destination because of that."

In five days, I saw one man who gave off a vibe that he wasn't gay-friendly, or that he wasn't comfortable around gay men. Do I know that for sure? Not at all. He might have just been having a bad day, or maybe my vibe was way wrong. But, with 300-plus people around when I was at Hedo, to say there might have been one bad-apple speaks volume to how accepting Hedo and its visitors are. There were three gay and four straight people eating together at Harrysan one night, and no issues whatsoever, just a few rounds of 'Cheers!' among everyone.

"We consider every market an important one at Hedonism II," Russell said. "As many of our repeat guests will tell you, there are no labels required here. Providing each person who visits the property with an unforgettable experience regardless of race, religion, or sexuality truly is at the core of what we do."

That definitely is a fact, or should I say, the naked truth!

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BLOOM Freedom Festival

bloomlivefree.com/freedomfest2019

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