

796 Wayside Rd Ext
Woodstock, VT 05091

June 26, 2005

Countrystyle Tourism
The Astra Hotel
62 Ward Avenue
Mandeville, Jamaica

Dear Countrystyle Tourism and The Astra Team,

Thank you for giving me such a wonderful and authentic Jamaican experience. In many ways my stay with Countrystyle Tourism has opened my eyes to the challenges and overwhelmingly beautiful world of Jamaica.

Few hosts will welcome a stranger as family and even include them in birthday parties and family celebrations. Yet this is the environment I found myself in having come from the US to spend a month with the program. As a current student at the Cornell Hotel School, I am always attentive of how well people and organizations interact with guests, and you have exceeded all definitions of hospitality while creating many memorable and unique experiences.

The activities that you included in my stay with Countrystyle Tourism could never be replicated by larger tourist organizations lacking your vision, knowledge, and commitment to making community tourism such a positive experience. Specifically, you have created first-hand knowledge of Jamaica, taken care of my needs, and established new friendships.

Created first-hand knowledge of Jamaica

Every day I found myself learning through hands on immersion experience about Jamaican cuisine, culture, and land.

Within one week of being at The Astra, I had sampled an incredible array of novel fruits and traditional entrees from rotten appearing, yet sweet and enjoyable, naseberry fruit to and ackhee with saltfish for breakfast. I will be craving your jerk chicken with rice and peas for a long time.

The Jamaican culture is so real and active! I had thought that the rest of the world was over dramatizing the uniqueness of culture in Jamaica, so it was quite something to find reggae, the dialect, and dreads so pervasive. I will never forget exchanging laughs with a Rasta who called me Santa or learning Jamaican dance to an island band in Ocho Rios.

Just as the Jamaican beaches are a paradise, the land within is diverse and holds so many treasures left unturned by most visitors. The Countrystyle Institute center in cool and refreshing Mandeville served as the ideal location from which to explore and engage in the island – from Kingston to Montego Bay.

Taken care of my needs

Any traveler to a foreign country has certain needs for safety, service, orientation, and accommodation. Without my asking, you were aware and consistently met my needs in all these areas. I never felt unsafe thanks to your guidance that left me free to make my own educated decisions such as how to venture into the bustling market place without incident. While staying in The Astra Hotel, I found that the staff was well trained and willing to share perspectives and answer questions. The staff was also helpful in providing meals and accommodation.

Established new friendships

I have established many new friends from Billy, the pepper shrimp vendor, to Mrs. Ceceline McIntyre-Pike, the blessed and talented mother of Diana McIntyre-Pike. I have witnessed that the people of Jamaica in all positions seem to have a very welcoming spirit and invite interest and conversation about their lives and perspectives.

I have made fast friends with the students studying at the Astra who are preparing for a career in hospitality. They never failed to greet me and introduce me to their families when I went into town. I have never received so many invitations to go to church before, and I will always be grateful for having accepted them and having seen the Jamaican spirit in action. I must also point out that few resorts let you play cricket with new friends on the school fields or give you the opportunity to play dominoes with other Jamaicans while waiting for sunset on Treasure Beach.

*

*

*

I brought the willing and inquisitive attitude: Countrystyle Tourism provided for and exceeded my expectations of how one can learn about a unique community and country. I have so many positive things to say about this experience and highly recommend the Countrystyle Tourism experience for others seeking a taste or immersion into Jamaica.

I thank Barry Bonito, director of the Countrystyle Institute for Sustainable Tourism, for his exceptional accommodation and business acumen he needed to pass through customs or to have the opportunity to teach a class of Jamaicans. The institute has a bright future and has given hope and opportunity to the 4,000 students who have studied hospitality at The Astra. His work continues to reach and improve many lives, and he serves as a much needed pillar of strength in the Jamaican business community.

Diana McIntyre-Pike deserves great thanks for making this experience a reality at every step – starting from when she pioneered the concept and began tours before I was born. Occasionally you meet people in life who completely redefine what the human relationship can look like after a relatively short encounter, and the experience leaves you hoping one day to impart the same feeling and connection with others. In all ways – from including me in all activities to sharing many personal stories that reflect a purpose driven life passionate for Jamaica - Diana has been such a person to me.

As Diana has said, and I now feel, Jamaica will hold a special place in my being, and I consider myself extremely fortunate to have been part of the Countrystyle Tourism experience and family.

With deepest appreciation,

Ethan Hawkes