

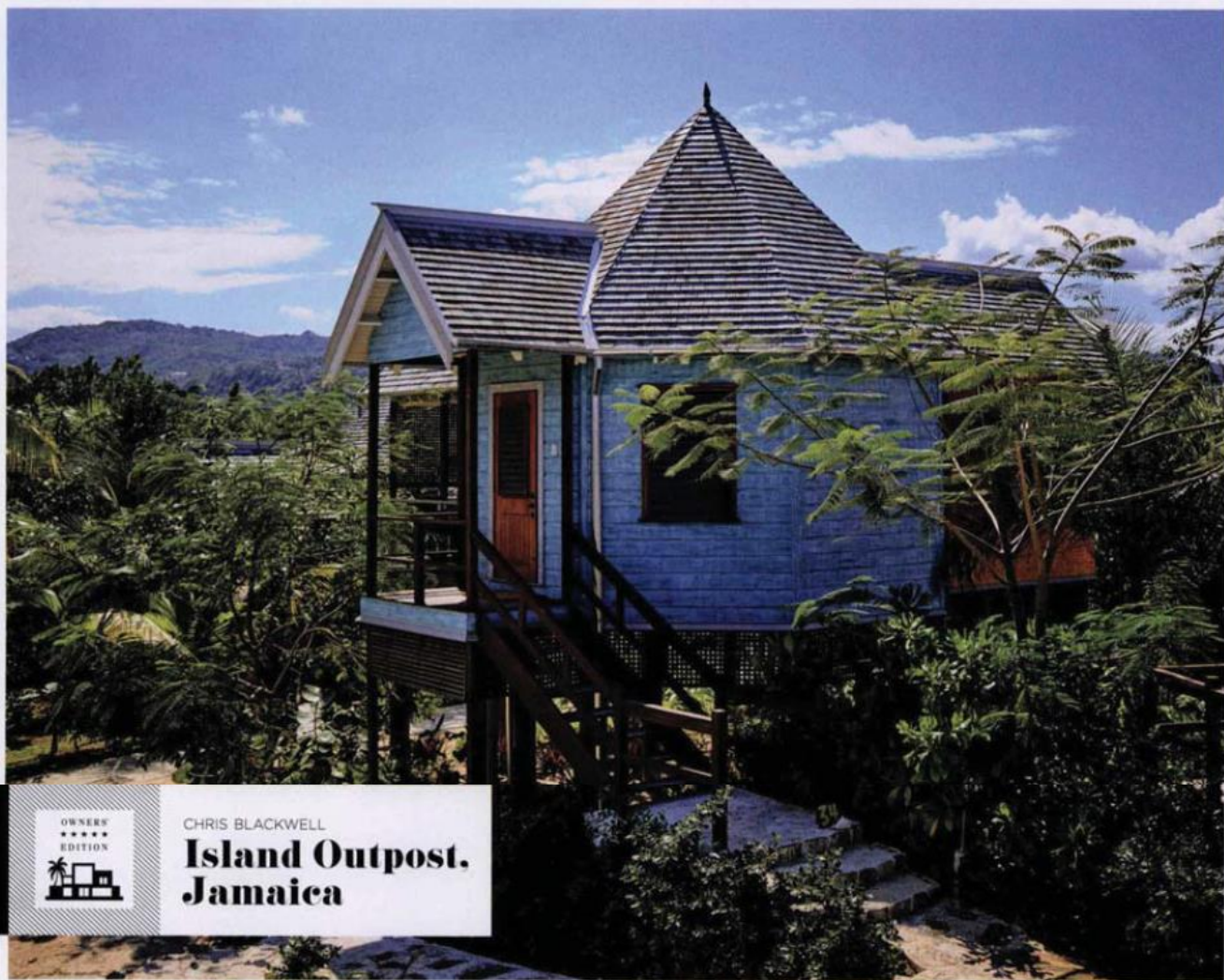


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Bill Prince

# OWNERS' EDITION

We meet the four master hoteliers bringing an independent spirit to worldwide stays

CHATEAU LA COSTE | ISLAND OUTPOST | AMAN GROUP | ZANNIER HOTELS



OWNERS' EDITION  
  
CHRIS BLACKWELL  
**Island Outpost,  
Jamaica**

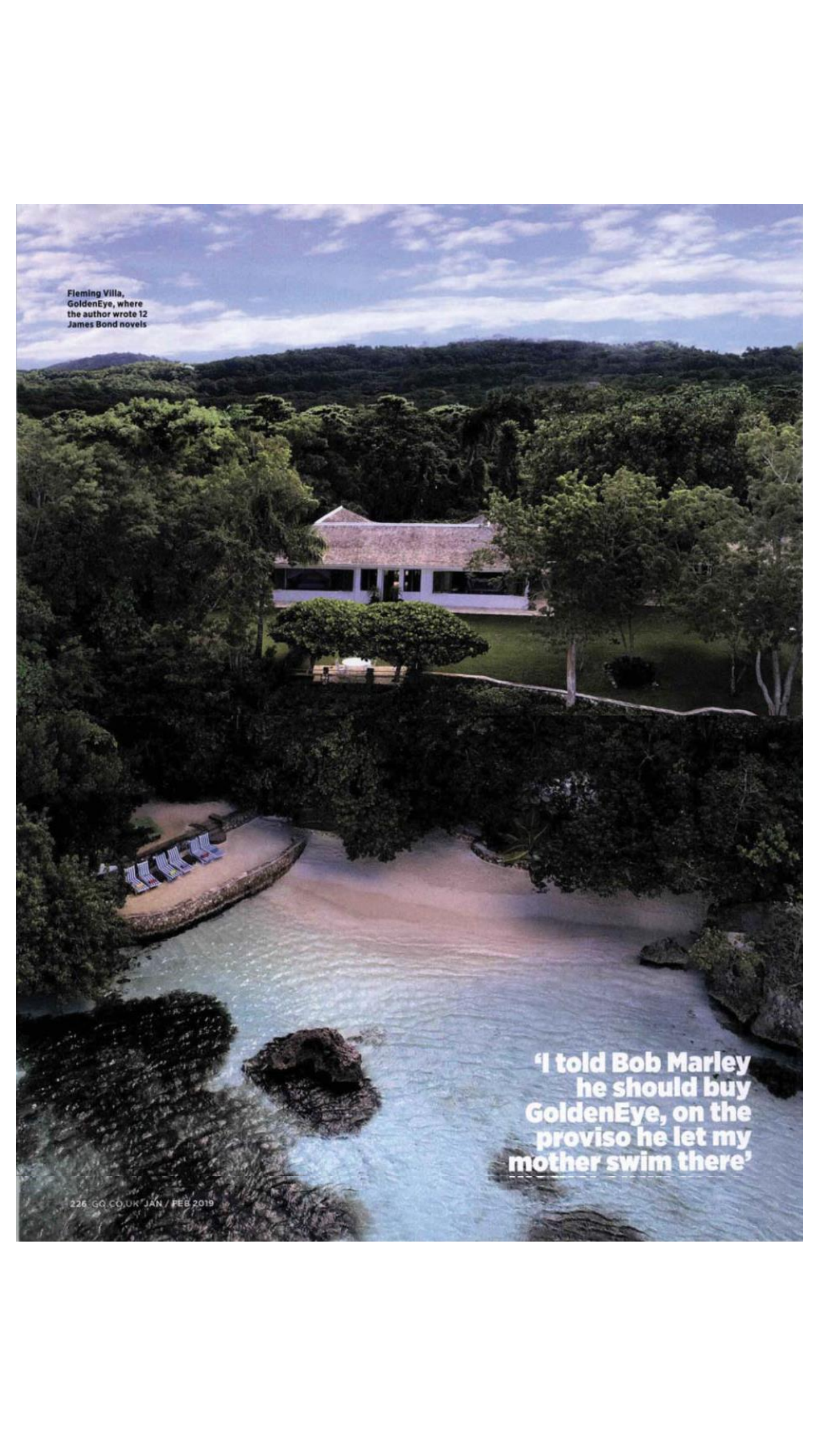
**C**hris is travelling lighter than any man I've ever seen – flip-flops, African-print clothes and what is basically a purse. He has no visas and seems to just talk his way into countries.”

So writes Tom Freston in “Showtime In The Sahara”, a 2007 *Vanity Fair* article in which the cofounder of MTV and former Viacom CEO documents an off-grid trip he made with two friends to the Festival In The Desert, a celebration of Tuareg music staged 50 miles northwest of Timbuktu in western Mali. According to Freston, musician Jimmy Buffet came prepared, arming himself with walkie-talkies and a GPS device. Chris Blackwell, the founder of Island Records and the object of Freston’s ill-disguised awe, on the other hand, had not – unless you count the feel-good value of his stash of Blue Mountain coffee, the second most famous export of his adopted homeland, Jamaica.

**GoldenEye's beach huts offer views of Oracabessa Bay and Snorkeler's Cove on Jamaica's north coast**

Still, whether you consider Blackwell’s ultra-lightweight packing regimen admirable or reckless, it displays a talent for largesse and understatement held in perfect balance or, as one of the artists signed to his groundbreaking label once put it: “an elegant understanding of the unorthodox”. But reminded of the incident a decade or more later, Blackwell, now 81, is not so sure. “What was I thinking?” he asks, bashfully. “I suppose I thought I was being rock’n’roll.”

If the man who launched the careers of Steve Winwood, Nick Drake, Cat Stevens,>>



Fleming Villa,  
GoldenEye, where  
the author wrote 12  
James Bond novels

**'I told Bob Marley  
he should buy  
GoldenEye, on the  
proviso he let my  
mother swim there'**

>> Roxy Music, Grace Jones and U2 before selling out to PolyGram in 1989 for \$272 million can't, who can? And as for the missing visa, well he can explain that too: "My association with Bob Marley was like a visa," he says matter-of-factly. No question about it."

It isn't the first time the Jamaican superstar had come to the aid of the man who took his band, The Wailers – and reggae with it – global: it was to Marley that Blackwell turned in 1976 when his mother, Blanche, rang to say that GoldenEye, the Jamaican home of her close friend and neighbour Ian Fleming, was for sale.

"I didn't know it that well," remembers Blackwell. "I'd had a few lunches with Fleming and his friends, but I hadn't seen it properly since about 1962. After Fleming died [of a heart attack, in 1964], my mother kept an eye on it, waiting for his son to come of age. Sadly, his son committed suicide and it went up for sale. My mum had always swum [off its private beach], so she asked me if I would buy it for her.

"I didn't have the cash at the time. So I rang Bob Marley, who I knew had cash, as I'd just paid him a fat royalty, and told him it was a really nice property and he should buy it, on the proviso he let my mother swim there. He said no problem.

Then, just as the documents were ready to sign, he rang to say he didn't think it was really his 'thing' – he'd come for a look and I think he thought it was a bit posh for him – and asked me if he could get out of it. And I said yes, because by then my finances had improved. It's kind of amazing that Bob Marley got into that story, but it's true."

Today, the simply styled bungalow Fleming built in 1948 as a tropical redoubt from Britain's grim post-war winters is the centrepiece of GoldenEye Resort, one of three refreshingly low-key getaways that

Blackwell operates on the island with partner Marika Kessler. And sitting here this moonlit evening, dining on the house chef's specialties of fish tea soup, grilled lamb chops and spicy kale from Blackwell's farm, Pantrepant (two hours and a world away from the bustle of Jamaica's northeast coast), it's easy to see why. The villa's sea-facing sunken garden is still fringed with trees planted by the author and while the garage and staff quarters have been converted into a media room (two further cottages have also been added, bringing total occupancy of the private rental to ten), the villa itself is remarkably well preserved. In the main room is the large desk where Fleming dealt with correspondence and in the master bedroom sits the tiny table at which he worked on the 12 Bond novels written here.

Not surprisingly, it's a Mecca for 007 fans, many of whom are astonished to bump into Fleming's gardener, Ramsey, still working here more than 50 years on. But the villa has seen its fair share of important house guests too: British PM Sir Anthony Eden took an ill-advised vacation here at the height of the Suez Crisis, when it briefly became the seat of British government. There's a now-mature tree commemorating the premier's visit, beside which grows a sapling planted by "Mr and Mrs J Carter" during a more recent stay by Beyoncé and her husband.

Their tributes are not alone: stroll the shoreline between the resort's main hangout, the Bizot Bar, and the even more laidback environs of Button Beach, where you'll find many of the island's signature dishes cooking over a charcoal fire, and you'll see hundreds of plants bequeathed by departing guests, just one of the ways Blackwell encourages visitors to build their own connection with a country he adores.

"Always, for me, it was about coming back to Jamaica," says Blackwell, who, though born and educated in England, considers the

**Below, from top:** Hotelier and music mogul Chris Blackwell; the white-sand beach at GoldenEye; inside a beach hut at the resort

island his spiritual home. No wonder: apart from a slight detour into film-making, when he worked as a location scout and production assistant on the first Bond film, *Dr No*, he's consistently championed its music. "It's a miracle the amount of authentic, original product that's come out of Jamaica," he says. "There was a time in the late-Sixties when Jamaica was releasing more music than anywhere else in the world. It's outstanding."

Blackwell founded Island Records in Jamaica and, despite having joined the exodus of young, educated whites in the run-up to the country's independence in 1962, he's remained profoundly loyal, even if the itinerant lifestyle of a hit-making label boss and producer ensured his frequent visits were "never particularly visible. I was never part of the society here."

Still, whenever he had a little loose cash, he would buy "a little bit of land in different places". Which is how, in 1972, he came to own Strawberry Hill, the former home of another English émigré, Horace Walpole, with the idea of reopening what had become a boarding house as a hotel.

Today, it's famous for being the tranquil spot in the foothills of the Blue Mountains where Bob Marley recuperated after an attempt on his life in December 1976 and it retains the closest links with Blackwell's Island Records days, with a Gold Room displaying the numerous industry awards he's received, together with pictures of the acts – local and international – that inspired them.

Like GoldenEye, Strawberry Hill came to Blackwell via a phone call, he says; this time from a friend who also sold him a further property, 56 Hope Road in Kingston, which today serves as the Bob Marley Museum, having been the home of The Wailers' Tuff Gong record label as well as the site of that failed assassination attempt. Blackwell remembers the reception they received when he first offered the musicians the home in what was then the capital's government quarter: "It caused quite a stir – we were moving the Rasta uptown."

Then, years later, Blackwell got a shock of his own: "About ten years ago, I discovered it's where my mother lived as a child," he says, still marvelling at the coincidence. "She showed me a photo of her with her siblings by a gate that looked familiar. She'd lived there from 1922 to 1924 or something. Isn't it incredible, that it would come back?"

Incredible, but in a way perfectly fitting. After all, this is a man who's thrived on taking chances, often choosing the road less travelled – with little but the barest necessities – and always in the best possible company. **BP**



● GoldenEye, from £520 per night. [goldeneye.com](http://goldeneye.com). Strawberry Hill, from £295 per night. [strawberryhillhotel.com](http://strawberryhillhotel.com). British Airways flies from London Gatwick to Kingston, from £556 return. [ba.com](http://ba.com)