

The Great Adventure –

By Errol Ballantyne

Preface

During the 1950's, 60's and 70's, many people from the Caribbean Islands, made a life-changing decision, to accept the invitation of the British Government. They came and worked in various roles all throughout the United Kingdom. After the Second World War, there was a depletion of the work force and much needed manpower was required, to help rebuild the British economy. Many people, including my father had used their savings or borrowed money, to take the six-week boat journey to a much colder climate; England the Motherland, was their destination. I'm reliably informed that for some, this was only meant to be a two-year trip. Their intention was to make some money and then return home to make a better life. The majority ended up staying, for well over forty plus years, but for others the bitterly, cold temperatures and even frostier reception, from some of the British people, caused them to ditch their plans and return home early. I'm told, that 1963, was particularly a bad year for sub-zero temperatures and weeks of not seeing the sunshine, caused numerous West Indians to become home sick.

In 1984 after twenty-three years of being in England, my parents decided, they would finally return to the Caribbean. I was born in England, so for me, this was to be a great adventure. Plans were made and put into action for us all to migrate, to St. Vincent, where my dad was from, and my mum was from Jamaica. St. Vincent is a very small Island in the Windward Isles of the Eastern Caribbean. It was once a French colony until the Treaty of Paris in 1763 and then became a British colony. The island largely consists

of green, fertile vegetation and is eighteen miles long and thirteen miles wide, with lots of dangerous, steep cliff-edge roads. There is an active volcano called the La Soufrière, which last erupted in 2021, causing my dad and many other people to leave their homes for safety.

Preparations

At the age of thirteen I was filled with excitement and sadness, because I knew I would be leaving, the rest of my family and friends behind. Short day trips or weekends visiting relatives, would soon be a thing of the past. If I was to see my family again, they would have to take two planes to visit us and so this would not be very often. I was in my third year at secondary school and now about to embark on not just a holiday, but a complete change of residence and country. Preparations at home were somewhat bitter-sweet. My parents spent days packing most of our furniture and household items in my dad's van. The van was going to be shipped over on a boat, but for some reason all my toys were either given away or burnt on a garden fire. I remember, I was really upset, as some of my favourite toys I had received as presents, were now being burnt to a crisp. I cannot remember the reason I was given, but I was not allowed to take any of my toys with me. This was to be a complete fresh start, perhaps when we got there, I would get some new toys. My one consolation was that I was able to pack my Rayleigh racing bicycle in the van. I would have great fun with my bike riding around this new country.

Goodbyes were all said and unfulfilled promises, to write letters were made. After a long and arduous, nine hour flight over the Atlantic Ocean, and then another thirty minutes from the Barbados International Airport,

we finally landed on a short runway at the Arnos Vale Airport in the sunny Isles of St. Vincent. As I walked down the steps, attached to the plane, I could feel the warm air hit my face and body. It was like someone was blowing a heater fan, on full blast, directly at me. The airport was very small, and after walking across to the terminal, which seemed more like a small hall, we then went through immigration and then collected our luggage.

Later that day, we went to the Port Authority to collect my dad's van with all our stuff. All of our possessions, beds, tables, a trunk and sewing machine were in the van, apart from our clothes which we had in our suitcases. I remember my dad had to pay a huge sum of money, for the van to be released.

The trip from Kingstown, the capital to Chateaubelair, a small village situated on the north-west of the island, was exciting and scary at the same time. The sights were breathe taking, with lush, green trees and mountains, clearblue skies that met an amazing shimmering turquoise sea, and all topped with the delightful warm sunshine. With the windows fully opened and enjoying the sea breeze, we travelled along the coast and around cliff-edge roads, which could switch in an instant, to a steep hill and then into a bendy uneven road. It was hard trying to avoid the massive potholes that littered the roads. As we drove around many of the corners, I could see straight down the rocky cliffs. Some low brick walls had been built, in the most dangerous places, to prevent people from driving over the cliff, but even with that, I still felt a bit uncomfortable. In some places, small rocks had fallen onto the road, making it even more dangerous.

Driving through the various villages, we saw many of the locals congregate by the roadside. Some of them sat down on the walls chatting and smoking, whilst calypso music blasted, loudly from massive speaker boxes.

Occasionally some of the children would wave at us as they walked home from school in their khaki uniforms and white shirts. At one point I became really concerned, as a group of Rastafarians smoking their potent marijuana, shouted out, 'Fyiah Bun' or 'Fire Burn'. I worriedly said to my Dad, 'I think the van is on Fire! I just heard them shout Fire Burn'. I only recently found out, that this is a popular Rastafarian expression, used to strongly denounce someone or something.

Wooden shack

When we arrived at the cross-roads in Chateaubelair, we had to turn right up a very steep hill, called the Barracks. I would say, it was more than forty-five degrees in angle. It was a struggle for my dad, as he drove up in first gear pulling the hand brake as he stopped, so we did not roll down. We eventually levelled off about halfway up, as we had arrived at our destination. Along the way I had seen many brick houses, painted in bright colours of blue, pink, green, or yellow. I guess I was thinking ours would be like ones of these, but instead I was greeted by an old run-down wooden shack. The green paint was patchy and mostly faded. There was a large set of concrete steps that led up to the front door. I noticed the house was built on large concrete stilts, holding the large wooden beams of the house. There was no glass in the windows, just two shutters that opened sideways. We had to sweep out the entire house, as there were rat and bat droppings everywhere. A lot of the wood had small holes caused by woodworms and had become rotten.

Over the next few months, lots of repairs were done and planks of wood were replaced. We stored a lot of the wood under the house ready for the work to be done. There were three rooms in total, two bedrooms and a large kitchen/living room area. There was no electricity, no bathroom, no

toilet or even taps. As such, one of my first jobs, which became a daily chore, was to go down the steep hill with a large white bucket and queue up at the pipe for water. Many others were there, with their containers of all shapes and sizes collecting water. After filling up my bucket I tried to carry it up the hill. This was really difficult and lots of water spilt on the way up. Some of the locals wrapped a cloth into a circle and then placed it on their heads with the bucket on top. I was amazed at how they balanced items on their heads. It looked so easy, but when I tried, I just got soaked. I had to do this several times a day as we used the water for drinking, washing up and bathing. As there was no boiler, with running hot water, we heated the water on our gas stove and poured it in a large metal pan for us to bathe in. We also boiled all drinking water as our stomachs were not accustomed to it. After a few months of this, I was relieved as we had some pipes and a new kitchen sink installed. Another tap was installed outside the front of the house for us to shower with and my dad put up some galvanised zinc sheets for privacy, around the shower. I remember sometimes the sun would heat the pipes up first thing in the morning and when I went to shower the water would be warm, but we grew accustomed to cold showers and warm water was a luxury.

By now I'm sure you're wondering about the toilet. Well, one day a man with one leg, hobbled along with his crutches. I was shocked when he said he came to make a toilet for us. Just a few feet away from the house, 'One foot Freddie' as I called him, started digging a large deep hole at the side of the house. Whilst he was digging, I would occasionally peep into this dark hole. After a few hours of digging, Freddie climbed out with a make-shift-ladder he had made and then covered the surrounding area with a concrete slab and concrete toilet. A wooden toilet seat was place on top

and more galvanised zinc sheets were used to make the walls and door to this pit latrine.

Inside the house, we did not have any electricity and so my dad bought a Lantern, which was filled with kerosene oil. This lamp was what gave us light during the first few months of being there and often when there was a power-cut we would take the lamp out. Like the wise virgins in the bible, we always had oil in our lamps. Each day, I had to remove the glass cylinder and wash it or use newspaper to remove all the soot. I remember many evenings having to do my homework or read a book with the lamp.

A short excerpt from 'The Great Adventure' by Errol Ballantyne