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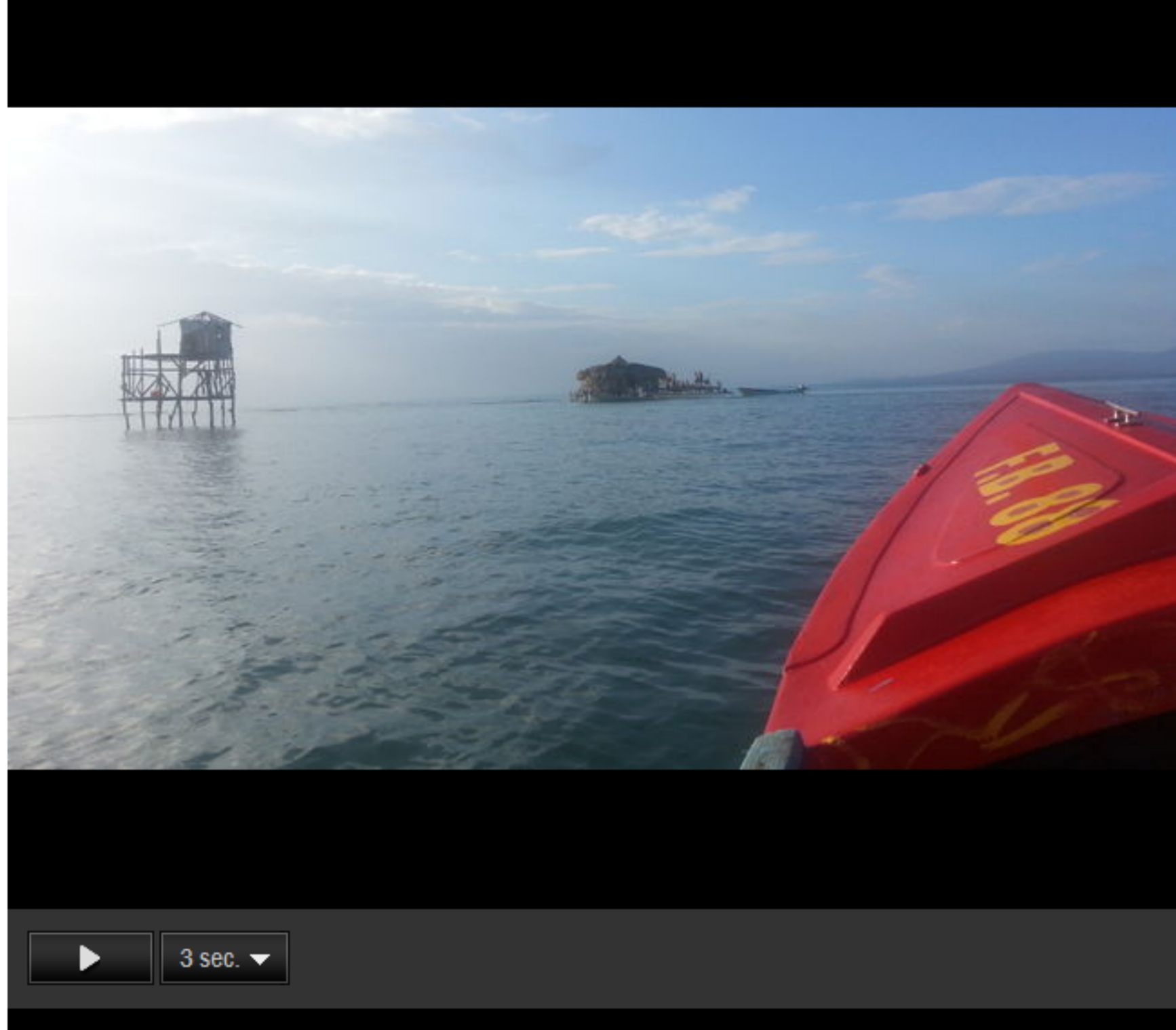
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JAMAICA True taste of Jamaica's island culture

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A boat en route to the Pelican Bar, a makeshift affair built of driftwood and palm-fronds. VICTORIA REVAY/QMI AGENCY

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How do you like to vacation? Are you adventurous? A history buff? Culinary tasting-friend? And then, there are the all inclusive lovers: Beach all day and swim-up bar 'til the sun goes down.

While I don't have the right formula for your next holiday, I like my vacations the way I like my food prepared: A main ingredient showcased in different ways so I can experience a new sensation with each bite. On a recent trip to Jamaica, this is exactly what happened.

THE MAIN EVENT

I'm a runners' runner. I've run two marathons and five half marathons, so even though I didn't suffer time to run the Reggae Half Marathon in Negril, I wasn't too nervous about it — until the pre-race Rasta Pasta party, that is.

The party is where runners fuel up on pasta the night before the race. Feeding off the energy of others, I could feel butterflies start to make an appearance in my stomach. Good thing there was a cool youth calypso band churning out pop hits to keep us entertained.

On race day, our wake up call was at 3 a.m. Walking to the bus in darkness, it was hard to believe I'd be running in a few hours. The air was humid, and other than a few torch-lit spots, the only flickers of light were created by stars.

Cars with large boom-boxes strapped on top lined the streets and blasted Bob Marley and '80s pop music. It felt like going back in time.

Not far into the race, I was exhausted. With another 15 km until the finish, the spectacular sunrise helped boost my energy to keep going.

On my left, the crystal clear and seemingly endless Caribbean Sea emerged, while on my right, up popped a vast area of hills and flatlands blanketed in lush green.

Locals making their way to work walked along the road beside us. Each gave us a quick smile or nod as we huffed and puffed past with one goal in mind: To finish the race.

Knowing that fresh coconut water and Red Stripe beer were waiting at the finish line helped me do just that.

THE MAIN COURSE

With my muscles now relaxed, the athlete in me was ready for the foodie to take over this holiday — and it did.

"I'll have another one please," I proclaimed with enthusiasm while slurping the last gulp of a Drunken Coconut cocktail at Pushcart restaurant in Negril.

Sampling warm and doughy seafood fritters, spicy curried-goat and grilly pepper-shrimp, I was making up for the calories previously burned in a hurry. (Bonus entertainment: Friendly bats accustomed to humans appear regularly in the sky above restaurant. They need to eat, too!)

In a foodie's paradise, snacking is considered an activity, so you can imagine how busy we were as we made our way from the Middle Quarters — an area in the hills just north of Negril — to the South Coast.

The Middle Quarters area is famous for one thing: Pepper-shrimp.

Caught in the nearby Black River, the shrimp are boiled with spicy-hot scotch bonnet peppers and sold by "higglers" at simple outdoor stalls. Coconut bananas, sweetsop (sugar apple), peanuts, green oranges, coconut, pineapples and mangoes dangle in your face from the stalls, so clearly you have to try these, too.

SOUTH COAST CHILLIN'

My food coma ensured I was a little groggy when we arrived at Treasure Beach in St. Elizabeth parish on the island's South Coast.

The South Coast felt like a completely different Jamaica than the one I was in a few hours ago.

Dirt roads served as cushions between the natural rugged coastline — marked with rows of palm trees as boundaries on one side — and rolling farmlands on the other.

Life is slowed waaaay down here. The mega-resorts of Negril are visibly absent. There was one small coffee shop and no hustle-bustle.

After easing into my day with yoga and then a mug of Blue Mountain black coffee at Jake's Hotel and Driftwood Spa, I couldn't wait to try my hand at making Jamaica's national dish — saltfish and ackee with fried breadfruit, dumplings and plantains. Head chef Dockery Lloyd's huge smile made the dish, which resembles scrambled eggs, taste even more delicious.

Next on my to-do list was a boat ride to Pelican Bar, a makeshift driftwood and palm-branch bar constructed on a sandbar in the middle of the sea. The 20-minute boat ride went by quickly thanks to a pod of playful dolphins frolicking nearby.

The interior of the bar, decorated with flags of visitors from different countries and sports memorabilia, added novelty. A few beers, an island storm and a sunset later, and we were ready to head back to shore.

On the way back, it was pitch dark and the waves were huge. It made me feel like I was taking part in a great secret adventure.

Later, as I bid farewell to Jamaica, I couldn't have imaged a better way to get to know this beautiful place.

ON THE SIDE

Foodies and folks interested in the Jamaican South Coast slow-food movement can take part in private, farm-to-table al fresco dinners hosted by Jake's Hotel on "Farmer Dool's" farm.

From November through April, these are planned for the Saturday closest to the full moon. A four-course meal is served with wine and welcome cocktails for about \$120 including tax.

If you want to visit with local farmers, for \$25 Jake's house-chef — Dockery Lloyd — takes guests to meet peanut, beetroot and watermelon growers.

ISLAND ESSENTIALS

YS Falls: Seven cascading waterfalls offer family friendly fun with zip-lining and tubing. See ysfalls.com.

Raggaie Marathon: Don't wait to sign up for next year's race. Registration is open now at reggaemarathon.com.

WHERE TO STAY

Grand Palladium Jamaica Resort and Spa, Montego Bay: The massive resort has the largest pools in Jamaica and many 24 hour snacking options. See grandpalladiumjamaicaresort.com.

Jake's Hotel and Driftwood Spa, Treasure Beach: To experience a rustic and completely non-mega resort vibe, where you're treated like family, go here. See jakeshotel.com.

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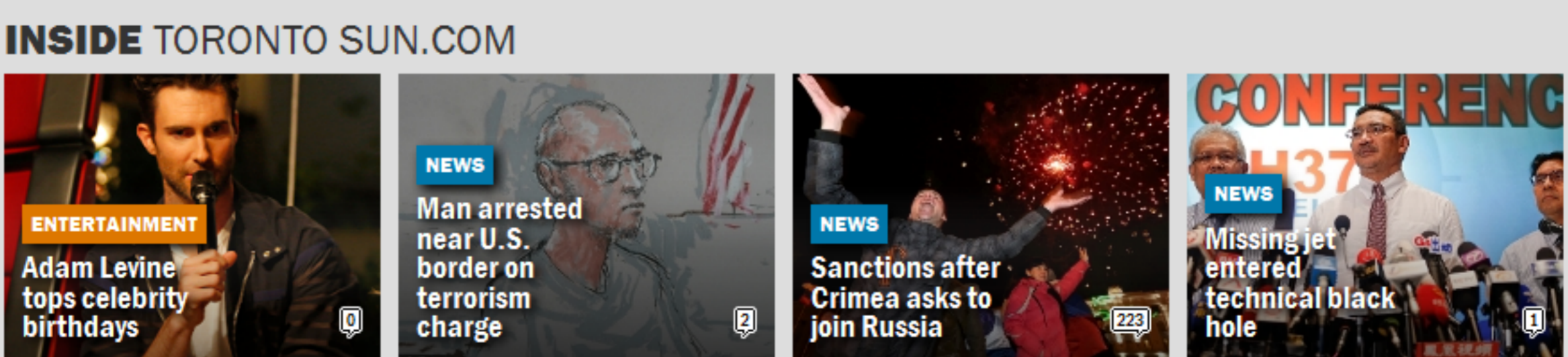
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