

Jamaican dogsled team takes road less travelled

You can find a perfect example of the Jamaican spirit in an unexpected place: the Chukka Cove Farm, home to the 30 or so mutts that comprise the Jamaica dogsled team.

"It's about the can-do attitude of Jamaicans," says founder Danny Melville, 64, as he rattles off several other examples of Jamaicans' determination, including reggae music and the beloved Olympic bobsled team. Located near Ocho Rios, in St. Ann Parish, his Chukka farm offers visitors an opportunity to ride on a dryland sled pulled by 15 dogs, all of them strays that Chukka has adopted. It's one of several thrill rides offered by Chukka Caribbean Adventures. Melville, who lives in Toronto, was first drawn to the concept when he spotted a dryland sled while shopping for dune buggies in Alberta. He thought a dogsled tour would be a great addition to Chukka's dozens of other offerings, which include everything from flying through the trees on a zipline and riding an ATV into the mountains to taking a pilgrimage on the Zion Bus Line through musical history to Bob Marley's birthplace. You can even go swimming in the ocean on horseback, a signature tour that Melville says he pioneered himself nearly three decades ago. It was a challenge for Melville, who had only ever seen sled dogs on TV, to form the team. "You're getting a bunch of dogs off the street and they're kind of looking at you like, 'What do you mean, pull?' What is this all about?" says Melville. Today the dogsled team, which Melville says is the only such operation in the Caribbean, is much more than the adventure tour that it was intended to be. In addition to taking visitors on high-speed dryland runs, some of Chukka's mushers compete in races, from smaller ones in Ontario to the world-renowned Iditarod race in Alaska. The mushers lease dog teams for those endeavours, says Melville, because the Jamaican mutts would freeze to death in the sub-zero temperatures. "You don't just enter those races by going and paying an entry fee," says Melville. "You have to qualify for those races because you could die. People get frostbite, lose fingers. These are tough races." The expeditions, which can take two weeks to complete, are a true test of one's ability to survive in some of the world's harshest winter conditions, says Melville. "When you leave Whitehorse, Yukon, to head to Fairbanks, Alaska, you're going a thousand miles across places where there are no roads. When you go over Eagle summit, if the weather changes on you, you hunker down or you freeze to death." That's what makes Jamaican-born musher Newton Marshall, 28, such an unlikely competitor. Marshall, who started working at Chukka as a horseback guide, competed in the Yukon Quest in 2009 and the Iditarod in 2010 and 2011. "He had to learn to survive in minus 40, coming from plus 30," says Melville. "It shows a lot about the character and determination of this kid. I wouldn't do it." For Marshall, competing in dogsled races is about "letting the whole world know that (Jamaicans) can do things that people think we can't do." "A lot of people didn't think I was going to finish," Marshall says about one of his first races. "Most people thought it was a publicity stunt." He recalls the cold breeze that hit him as he was stepping off a plane in Minneapolis in March 2006, his first time outside of his native Jamaica and long before his dogsleding days. "I said to the guy behind me, 'Why do they have to turn up the AC so high?' He said, 'Brethren, that's not the AC. That's outside.' I did not know that anywhere in the world could be that cold," Marshall said in an interview from St. Ann Parish. "And it was probably zero." Since then, the musher has endured temperatures as cold as -54 C. During last year's race, Marshall suffered frostbite to his face when he got stuck in one particularly nasty storm. Marshall will spend this winter at home in Jamaica, his first in four years. He'll be taking care of the dogs and running the tours at the Chukka farm while he takes a season off from racing. Visitors who take the tour will get to meet and greet the dogs before the ride. They'll also get to experience the only dogsled museum south of the Arctic Circle before the thrilling ride