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From cabbie to the Caribbean!

By [Claire Borley](#)

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AS he lies in his hammock of an evening gazing at the stars in the clear night sky, Jem Winston knows he has come a long way from his days as a taxi driver in Leigh.

Back then he dreamt of building and owning his very own eco lodge, promoting green tourism and revelling in the natural beauty of the Caribbean.

While most of us can still only dream of such an escape from the nine to five drudgery, for Jem it became a reality five years ago.

Jem, 38, owns and runs the 3 Rivers Eco Lodge on the Commonwealth island of Dominica, in the West Indies.

Set in a lush rainforest valley, surrounded by rivers and unspoiled mountain landscape, it is a little piece of paradise and, despite attracting tourists and winning awards for his holiday complex, Jem is determined to keep it that way.

"Dominica is fondly known as the Nature Island of the Caribbean, for good reason," says Jem. "And so it seemed only appropriate that the business be eco-friendly.

"I also did my research and saw eco tourism to be the fastest growing tourism market, so it made business sense, too. What sets us apart is the fact we do so many little things all in one place. The hotel is run entirely on renewable energy, we offer environmental education, and we play a key role in the local community, ensuring the locals benefit from our guests being close by through our community tourism programme."

Born in Leigh, Jem attended Westcliff High School for Boys before starting work at Coutts Bank in London.

But at the age of 20 he was bitten by the travel bug.

"I left the bank and went travelling at the age of 20, working my way around the world, and returned to Leigh at the age of 25," he recalls.

"I discovered Dominica on my travels and fell in love with the place, vowing one day to return."

With his heart set on his Caribbean eco dream,



Eco warrior - Jem Winston saved for years to make his green dream come true



Piece of paradise - as well as stunning surroundings, 3 Rivers includes an education centre where Jem teaches people about sustainable energy

Jem set about raising cash to buy land on the island and develop his green business plan, with no job too small to further the vision.

"I worked around Leigh collecting pools coupons, delivering curries from a local takeaway and catalogue parcels, while studying to take my knowledge to drive a hackney carriage taxi with ACS in Southend," he chuckles. I then drove nights for about six years saving money, and spending very little, and came to Dominica to look for land in 2000. I moved here at the start of 2002."

Jem's vision of a green getaway was realised with the development of 3 Rivers, which not only houses the award-winning certified eco lodge, but also a sustainable education centre where he works with the local community to promote conservation through sustainable energy.

At 3 Rivers there is a range of accommodation, from self-contained cottages with hot showers, their own balcony and private organic gardens, to isolated natural jungle cabins and a bamboo treehouse, nestled deep in the rainforest. There are also dormitory and camping facilities for backpackers.

Jem says: "We have a fully licensed restaurant and bar and offer a wide range of nature, adventure and community-based eco tourism activities, as well as being a visitors' centre for renewable energy technology through our Sustainable Living Initiative Centre."

Jem teaches about the benefits of wind, solar and hydro energy through his workshops there.

He said: "We are on the edge of the Morne Trois Pitons National Park world heritage site, making us ideal for hiking and wildlife watching. We are only a short walk from a spectacular beach, which happens to be a popular nesting ground for giant leatherback turtles.

"I had fallen in love with the island in my early twenties and always dreamed of returning to set up a campsite or something like that. The project has grown since then and has its own momentum, almost.

"But I believe in what I am doing. Working with the local community is financially and psychologically rewarding, and I have found that working in win, win, win circumstances is the only way for a sustainable future."

Jem's eco paradise is aimed at anyone looking for an idyllic break with a conscience. He explains: "It is for anyone who thinks green, cares about the planet, or just wants to try out something different. Eco tourism is the fastest growing tourism sector. It has almost become mainstream. We also offer budget accommodation for the backpacker, and actively encourage locals into the property, so people who like to really experience a mix of people will find 3 Rivers most interesting."

Despite the hard work, Jem believes the trade-off in terms of his quality of life makes it priceless.

"Here the general pace of life is slower, people are not in such a rush, and everyone says hello to each other, even total strangers," he explains.

"In Dominica, hitchhiking is the most common form of transport. We have one of the lowest crime rates in the world, and incredible nature - 365 rivers, with pools and waterfalls everywhere. I bathe every single morning in a 10ft deep natural river pool - in my garden."

With natural facilities like that, it is no wonder he is determined to stay put with no plans to return to the UK, instead offering advice for others to follow their dreams.

"Go for it, persevere, the hard work pays off in the long run," he says. "But do not imagine it is easy, be ready for a serious effort that brings incredible rewards."

"I came back to the UK a couple of years ago for the world travel market, but I am absolutely sure I will not return permanently."

With the lodge's success, he has attracted attention in the travel industry for his green ideals, and is in demand as a consultant and speaker for other tourism businesses.

"It is aimed at helping owners achieve environmental best practice for their lodge or hotel, in completely sustainable ways," he says. "I travel frequently as a guest speaker for green or tourism conferences, to explain how going green can be easy, eco-friendly, and profitable."

"I try to practise what I preach, and am so proud and surprised with the success of 3 Rivers so far."

For information visit www.3riversdominica.com

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[In touch with nature - a traditional hut on the 3 Rivers site](#)



[Idyllic - a waterfall at the resort, which is in Dominica](#)