



INSPIRATION

On a Self-Care Trip to Jamaica, Getting My Groove Back Like Stella

*At the hotel where the classic was filmed, two friends take vacation cues from *'How Stella Got Her Groove Back*—*25 years later.*

BY TONYA RUSSELL

The '90s were a time of all work and no play—at least, that's how it looked in the **movies**. Films like *Glengarry Glen Ross* and *The Associate* (led by one Whoopi Goldberg) illustrated the strictly business nature of the time. But in the sea of suits and briefcases came 1998's *How Stella Got Her Groove Back*, which gave permission for people—but especially Black women—to take a break. Angela Bassett starred as Stella Payne, an uptight, divorced stock broker in dire need of an escape from her daily routine and stagnant love life. Encouraged by her free-spirited friend Delilah (one Whoopi Goldberg), the two booked a vacation in paradise: at the five-star **Round Hill Hotel and Villas** in Montego Bay, **Jamaica**. While Stella first inspired Black women 25 years ago, her story reverberates to this day.

<https://bit.ly/3Ebqd89>

Earlier this summer, my friend and I followed in their footsteps by attempting to find our grooves at that very resort. Prior to the trip, Toni (a **divorced** attorney) and I (an over-scheduled freelance writer) rewatched the movie. It was my first time seeing it as an adult, and with the innocence of youth out of the way I found that my viewpoint aligned with that of Stella's tired executive: We were over the grind—not to mention the nagging misogyny that came with being divorced by 42. Being jaded fit us too well.



Angela Basset starred as Stella, an overworked executive with a stagnant love life, in 1998's *How Stella Got Her Groove Back*. RGR Collection/Alamy

I imagine that, at its start, Round Hill was quite a bit like it is today—classic, quiet. Upon arrival, visitors descend a steep and winding hill to the white-sided lobby building, shielded from the sun by a striped green-and-white awning with glimpses of cerulean waters beyond. The furnishings reminded me of Ralph Lauren Home—preppy and patterned but bright and clean—which made sense when I discovered that Lauren himself, who owns one of the villas onsite, redesigned the hotel rooms (which sit in what's called the “Pineapple House”) as well as the Grill, where photographs of the resort's hallowed guests adorn the walls. It's all very Jackie **Kennedy**-esque— fittingly, as this is where her husband came to write his inaugural speech. This is exactly the soft, quiet luxury that you crave when work is intense and you have the funds to splurge.



Round Hill includes 26 individually-owned villas, some with outdoor showers—separate of the 36-room Pineapple House hotel. Courtesy Sukiko Kapahi



Cottage 11 made the perfect choice for Stella thanks to its ocean views and clean white interiors. Courtesy Sukiko Kapahi

Speaking of a splurge: Toni and I took advantage of every amenity that the resort offered. Our routine was: heading to the beach in the mornings to watching the resort wake up from afar, hitting the spa, and Toni (while I enjoyed a back facial and a massage) took to the property's winding hills for a three-mile run. Afterwards, we returned to our villa for egg-white omelets and ackee with saltfish, prepared and served on our patio. In the evenings, we delved into **Caribbean** fusion cuisine—like jerk snapper, and ice cream infused with spicy scotch-bonnet pepper. While I sampled the wine list, Toni danced along with a bridal party (the resort is becoming a hotspot for **bachelorette** weekends.)

Off site, we explored every corner of Montego Bay—slowly, with intention. We rafted down the Great River with **Chukka**, sticky from champagne and peeling mangoes with our hands. Toni lit up some bud that she purchased right along the river while our captain Aldean massaged our feet with limestone. Later, we shined up for dinner at the **Sugarmill Restaurant**, trying breadfruit gnocchi for the first (and probably for the only) time in our lives. We took a makeshift raft to the **Houseboat Grill** to gorge on escovitch and rice and peas.

But there were also times when we really wanted to stay put; play pickleball or get our groove on at the patio of the restaurant. Our trip was missing one thing: a Winston (played by Taye Diggs)—neither of us picked up a younger man, although the resort was not lacking in eye candy: I haven't figured out if Toni actually struggles at **pickleball**, or if she just wanted the extra attention from Kevin, our instructor. And, speaking of instructors: Donavan, the resort yoga instructor who played himself in the film, is still just as sassy, and just as muscled as he was in the '90s—and we laughed through the sweat at his beachside yoga class.



Stella and her friend Delilah (Whoopi Goldberg) enjoyed the beach at Round Hill as much as the writer and her friend Toni did. TCD/Prod.DB/Alamy

How did it all come to be? Round Hill managing director Josef Forstmayr reminisces on those days of filming, and remembers how the Round Hill was chosen for the movie as follows: “They wanted to focus on a luxurious experience, and they looked for a location that combined tropical lushness with very light decor, which they found to be very romantic.”

He says that cottage 11 was determined to be the perfect setup for filming—and the aesthetic choice still holds up today. The raised cottage gives the illusion of being tucked away, and the bedroom opens up to a sun-soaked terrace. Forstmayr also explains that, in the movie, the living room and bedroom were swapped, so that the latter would have a more immediate ocean view.

The last night of our trip, we sat in our plunge pool reflecting on life and what awaited us back home—men, jobs. We both felt a tug, and it made me think of something Forstmayr had said. “Jamaica ties you. There’s an ease in everything. No pressure, no keeping up with the joneses. Doesn’t matter how rich or how poor you are.”

That was true for him, as it was here that he met his partner and started his life—and for us, as we sunk into the scenery. As a Black girl and a Latina who blended in and snuck fresh mangoes into our suitcases, *How Stella Got Her Groove Back* gave us permission to seek out radical self care, and channeling Stella and Delilah was exactly what we needed.