

CANNIBAL CORPSE



## 70,000 TONS OF METAL

MIAMI / FT. LAUDERDALE, FL - OCHO RIOS, JAMAICA

**“Y**ou like Rolling Stones? Mick Jaguar?” says the motor-mouthed Jamaican leading my roommate and I through the maze-like public market in Ocho Rios. We’re about a couple kilometres east of the cruise ship port, clearly the only non-locals who have ventured this deeply into civilian territory so far, my pale, sunburned skin and Meshuggah t-shirt a dead giveaway.

“Yeah, of course, who isn’t?” I don’t have the heart to correct him. Keith Richards owns a place here, not Mick, erm, “Jaguar”. Besides, I’m more preoccupied with where he’s taking us, as we’re led deeper and deeper into the bowels of the place, the darker it gets and the stronger the smell of ganja becomes. Weaving past a group of stoned kids watching bootlegged action movies, past a crude stand of used Nike sneakers, my pal and I decide then and there that if it gets any sketchier we’re doubling back.

We were aware of the risk going in; hustlers are rampant in Ocho Rios, and naïve cruise passengers are easy prey. Want a tour guide? Some weed? Coke? Girls? It’s a constant bar-

rage. Later on in the day one fellow traveller will spend half his day reporting his adventure to Jamaican police, how one “tour guide” took he and his girlfriend deep into the nearby rain forest and demanded \$50 US or they would never find their way out. But there was something we like about this guy. He gets our piss-taking humour, and seems to understand our desire for something a little more genuine than Made In China trinkets. Still, we couldn’t help but feel unsettled as we struggled to retain a sense of direction in the labyrinthine complex.

**I**f there was one place attendees of the 70,000 Tons Of Metal cruise wanted to visit, it was Jamaica. Besides, the bands that play the self-described “world’s biggest floating heavy metal festival” are only half the attraction. The vessel used on the previous five trips, Royal Caribbean’s Majesty Of The Seas, simply lacked the speed to make the long trip from Florida to Jamaica and back



GOD DETHRONED

in four days. This time around, though, 3,114 headbangers are on the massive Liberty Of The Seas, the third biggest cruise ship in the world, where a whopping 60 bands are playing two live sets each, from ten in the morning to six in the morning. It’s an exhausting, beer and cocktail-fueled bacchanal on the high seas under a blazing January sun, and this year the potential decadence of Jamaica awaits us, a green, black, and gold beacon to the south.

The decision to expand from 40 bands to 60 had many wondering if 70,000 Tons had finally bitten off more than it could chew, and early on it doesn’t look good. Taxis in the Fort Lauderdale area are in short supply, and Hollywood Beach partiers quickly learn that getting to Port Everglades will be a chore. Upon arriving they find themselves in a clusterfuck of taxis, sheriffs blaring whistles, luggage handlers hollering where to go, followed by a lineup that makes a 90-minute crawl through an uncomfortable warehouse-like terminal.

That was mere inconvenience. On the other hand, the pool stage, a massive structure built atop the top floor pool deck, would be set up a fraction off the mark, requiring a complete dismantle and rebuild. If that isn’t enough, the Caribbean wind has the structure rocking literally rather than metaphor-







ically. An entire day of performances in the gorgeous sunshine on the cruise's marquee stage would be lost, organizers scrambling to reschedule those shows in the cruise's three other indoor venues. Coming off the 2014 cruise, which had to endure a brutal rainstorm on its final day, things look even more calamitous, and we've barely set sail.

But the drinks start flowing, the bands start playing, and as the sun sets over the South Florida skyline on the first night, even with only three stages of the four operational, the mood brightens. The third-deck ice arena is an immediate hit, as an exuberant, inebriated crowd jams into the cozy venue to see **Equilibrium** energetically play its liquored-up pagan tunes. Symphonic innovator **Therion** makes its subpar recent output a distant memory with a redemptive, powerful performance in the lavish, 2,000 seat Platinum Theatre. **Arch Enemy** are tight, albeit a little too scripted – it doesn't hurt to loosen up and improvise that between-song banter, Alissa – while formidable singer Ralf Scheepers and **Primal Fear** turn in a rousing theatre performance at two in the morning. The best of Day One is one of its last, **Melechesh** turning in a bracing performance of its Sumerian-themed black metal in the ice arena at three A.M.

**W**ith stage construction putting a serious damper on the outdoor shows on Day Two, many relax in the sun more, and by dusk everyone is raring to go. **Cannibal Corpse** play their usual live staples with ferocity in the pristine-sounding theatre, followed by an astounding set by **Michael Schenker**, who backed by fellow former Scorpions Francis Buchholz and Herman Rarebell, plays an hour's worth of classics by UFO, MSG, and yes, the Scorpions. The pool stage is finally ready by eight, and Max Cavalera and **Soufly** play a bevy of originals and Sepultura covers to a huge, energetic crowd. **Venom** are next with a raucous, oddly efficient 75-minute set loaded with favourites. Following that, **Behemoth** turns in one of the fest's finest performances, heavy on material from 'The Satanist' and full of flamboyance from Nergal and his band. Meanwhile, nine floors below – this ship is massive – Blind Guardian play to a worshipping throng, who sing songs like 'Welcome To Dying' and 'Nightfall' like they're hymns, not power metal anthems, hanging on Hansi Kursch's every last word.

Day Three is dominated by bands making up their postponed pool deck shows, playing the ice arena instead, and the change in venue benefits **Amorphis** and **Destruction** immensely, the former playing a sterling set of their more



melodic post-2005 fare, the latter dishing out an immensely satisfying helping of classic German thrash. Despite sorely missing the retired Algy Ward, NWOBHM greats **Tank** are a pleasant surprise with former Dragonforce singer ZP Theart doing a tremendous job on vocals, while **Napalm Death** assault a small crowd with their peerless brand of ground-breaking grindcore. A good-sized gathering awaits Finnish pagans **Ensiferum** at two in the morning, and the band doesn't disappoint with such favourites as 'Ahti' and 'One More Magic Potion'.

Day Four is all about having as much fun as possible as we make our way back to Florida, catching one last afternoon's worth of rays, and the mood ranges to lighthearted to hilariously drunken as **Korpiklaani**, **Primal Fear**, and **Cannibal Corpse** dominate the pool stage. **Venom** riskily perform their new album in its entirety and pull it off in front of a fun-loving theatre audience. **Annihilator** reel off some vintage thrash outside in the windy night, while **Origin** and the recently reunited **God Dethroned** lay waste in the intimate Sphinx Lounge. After hopping into an elevator at midnight, a cruise worker holds the doors open and replaces the "Sunday" floor mat – it's easy to forget which day it is – with "Monday". The young Finnish woman in the patch vest and pajama bottoms next to me cries out, "Noooo!" Our sentiments exactly.

**M**y eyes squint as we step outside the market, facing south toward the big green mountain that overlooks Ocho Rios. "See up there? The house on the top? Mick Jaguar's house." Indeed, perched at the top is Richards' stately looking Point Of View estate, along with several other mansions, denoting a clear class divide in the small city.

"Very cool," I nod appreciatively. Our guide, who proves to be legit, leads us to his small spice stand. I buy several bags of locally made spices – whose aromas are to die for – tip him a few bucks, and head out in the sun, craving local jerk chicken.

"Hey, you want a taxi? I'll take you anywhere," hollers an old-timer next to a cop, handing me his license to prove he's on the up and up.

"Yeah, take me to Scotchie's for lunch, and show me whatever free photo ops you can fit into two hours."

"Sure, 65 dollars."

"35, take it or leave it."

"Deal. Tell you what, I can show you the falls, the mountain, and then bring you to an *even better* jerk place."

I sigh, tired of the hustle. "Look, just take me to

Scotchie's, and we'll go from there. Just get me back to the port by one."

"Hey," he says cheerily. "No problem."

90 minutes later I'm full of jerk, yams and bammy, mouth still abuzz from scotch bonnets, happily sipping a Red Stripe in a backyard in a run-down neighbourhood, where a young local man has set up a crude wooden platform, offering an astonishing view of the entire city and bay. We leave for Florida in two hours, the metal mayhem starting anew. But all that can wait.

Not yet.



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