

MISSING

CLAUDIA KIRSCHHOCH

travel guide editor

caucasian, 29 years old, 5 feet 2 inches tall, slim build, long dark brown hair



LAST SEEN:

**NEGRIL, JAMAICA, WEST INDIES
ON MAY 27, 2000**

May have visited other areas surrounding Negril

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You Do Not Have To Give Your Name

REWARD

US \$50,000, J \$2,000,000

Last May, 29-year-old Claudia Kirschhoch vanished from a Jamaican resort. All she left behind were questions: What happened to her and why can't anyone—the local police, her parents, the FBI—find out?
By Sabrina Rubin Erdely

Tropical oasis:
 Claudia's room at the
 Beaches hotel



Murder in Paradise?

■ Seated at a table overlooking the pool, Claudia Kirschhoch languidly speared chunks of pineapple on her plate. It was the perfect start to another balmy day in Jamaica, and as Claudia relaxed over breakfast on her hotel restaurant's patio surrounded by lush palm trees, it seemed hard to believe that this jaunt to paradise was actually a business trip. Twenty-nine-year-old Claudia was a New York City editor for Frommer's Travel Guides—a dream job for the adventurous, dark-haired beauty. "It's incredible," Claudia had earlier marveled to her dining companion, freelance writer Tania Grossinger. "I write, edit, travel, and get paid for it!"

The women were in Jamaica quite by accident. Their press junket, sponsored by the resort chain Sandals, was supposed to have been to Cuba but was abruptly canceled during a layover in Jamaica's Montego Bay. Sandals was instead hosting the writers at its Beaches hotel in Negril. Claudia, a savvy and experienced traveler, had been disappointed by the change in plans but was determined to make the best of it—after all, there were worse places to be stranded than in Negril, a gorgeous vacation spot that lures sun-worshippers from around the world. Upon her arrival, Claudia had called her Frommer's supervisor to report her whereabouts. She'd also called her parents, who were relieved to learn of Claudia's new itinerary—they'd

been concerned that Cuba might not be the safest place for American tourists.

At Beaches, Claudia quickly bonded with Tania, 63, and the two women spent a good deal of time together over the first few days, lounging on the beach under thatched-palm sunshades and eating at the hotel's restaurants. But upbeat, curious Claudia was also anxious to leave the hotel grounds and had fearlessly been exploring Negril on her own. In fact, one night after she and Tania had met for drinks at the hotel bar, Claudia left with one of the bartenders, a Jamaican native, to see a reggae band at an open-air seaside nightclub frequented by both locals and tourists. The following day, Claudia flashed Tania her wry, apple-cheeked smile and admitted that she and the bartender had smoked marijuana and gone skinny-dipping.

It was May 27, 2000, the third morning of Claudia's eight-day voyage, and she was having a final breakfast with Tania, who was returning to the States. Lingered over coffee, they discussed Claudia's plans to hang around Negril for two days, then go to Montego Bay and Kingston to scour record stores for hard-to-find reggae albums. Finally, the women hugged goodbye. They promised to keep in touch. "I had every expectation that we'd see each other again," says Tania regretfully.

Claudia set out for the beach wearing a multicolored bikini and a cover-up. She

had her room key, Walkman, sunglasses, and probably the notepad she always carried to jot down her thoughts. She was spotted that afternoon strolling along the shoreline, where the turquoise Caribbean waters lapped serenely at the sand. It was the last time anyone would see her.

Six days later—a day after Claudia was supposed to be back in New York—hotel security unlocked her room and found her belongings still there, just as she had left them. Her parents hadn't been able to reach her in New York and had called the hotel to check on her. Her bed had not been slept in, her clothes were neatly packed in her luggage, and her passport, plane tickets, cash, and credit cards were locked in her room's safe-deposit box. It looked as though Claudia had merely stepped out for a moment. But she wouldn't be back. Claudia Kirschhoch had vanished without a trace.

A Desperate Search

"We don't know what to think," despairs Claudia's father, Fred Kirschhoch. "How could she have just disappeared?" In the lovely suburban New Jersey home where Claudia grew up, Fred sits on the living-room couch, looking bewildered and tense. For months, the Kirschhochs have been conducting a desperate search for their daughter, but despite the case's twists and turns, they have found nothing. "It's like

a nightmare," Fred adds quietly, "but one you live during the day." In a nearby armchair, Claudia's mother, Mary Ann, nods wordlessly, her brown, almond-shaped eyes—Claudia's eyes—full of sorrow.

Countless theories have emerged to explain Claudia's disappearance. Some Jamaicans insist she must have been kidnapped, but no ransom notes have arrived. Others wonder if she drowned, since she was last seen by the water's edge—but if she had, the tides around the island would have caused her body to wash up by now. "I've had missing persons cases before, but never one as intense as this," says Detective Sergeant Orrel Simpson of the Negril police. "We have found no trails, no bloody clothes, no indication of anybody seeing her." Even a \$50,000 reward, 20 times the average annual income in Jamaica, has failed to unearth any informa-

But the Kirschhochs have found themselves wondering whether such unrealistically sunny assertions are merely public relations spins from an island whose economy relies so heavily on tourism. Their frustration mounted when they met with obstacles from the Sandals organization. And then there's the matter of the handsome Beaches bartender, Anthony Grant, who has lied repeatedly to investigators about his involvement with Claudia.

Why Did He Lie?

When the Kirschhochs first heard about Claudia's disappearance, their main concern was that the tiny Negril police department was ill-equipped to conduct the investigation itself. Five days later, they flew to Jamaica, where they combed Negril's seven-mile beach and handed out hastily printed posters of their daughter.

go off without telling us," stresses Mary Ann, who points out that there's been no activity in Claudia's bank account.

Supposed sightings of Claudia poured into the Negril police department; people claimed to have noticed her on the beach or in a bar or in villages miles away. But after police investigated nearly four hundred tips, they concluded that none of the sightings had been Claudia. Oddly enough, the police seemed reluctant to pursue the case further, the Kirschhochs say, neglecting to follow through on several strange developments that occurred at the hotel itself. For instance, there was the disturbing fact that the Beaches' security logbooks for the month of May—maintained by security guards, recording every person and vehicle's arrival and departure on the property—had mysteriously disappeared. According to Sandals

"In my professional opinion, she is dead," says

tion on the gossipy island. Although Jamaica's murder rate is five times that of the United States, with more than 800 murders each year, Negril is a slow-paced town where, according to Simpson, tourists are rarely victims of crime. "Americans treat this like it's some kind of murder case," says Ralston Simpson (unrelated to the detective), a friend of the bartender who took Claudia to the reggae club. "Jamaicans don't see it that way, because Jamaica is not like that. Jamaica is the happiest island in the Caribbean."

Much to their astonishment, some of the locals they spoke with volunteered the theory that Claudia left of her own volition, having "broken loose" from her "oppressive" American lifestyle and run off into the mountains with a Rastafarian lover. Though it's true that foreigners do occasionally run off in Jamaica, Claudia's parents dismiss the notion, pointing out that not only did she have no reason to run away but that she also never went more than a few days without calling her parents or older sister. "That's just not like Claudia to

public relations director Maggie Rivera, "It seems that our security guy inadvertently misplaced them or accidentally threw them out. Just one of those unfortunate things."

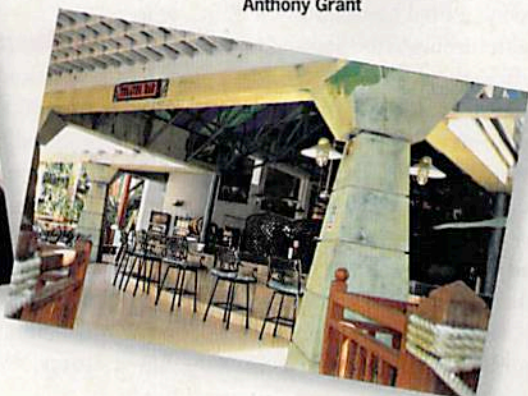
There was also the discovery that after Claudia's stuff was found in her room, Beaches had the film in her camera developed. "We wanted to see if any pictures she took would lead to a clue," says Rivera, adding that the roll of film was empty.

The Kirschhochs' greatest hopes for information rested on the young bartender Anthony Grant, who they knew, from speaking to Tania, had gone out with Claudia. He was a tall, ever-smiling man in his 20s from the nearby town of Green Island, where he lived with his mother and sisters. Known as a jokester, he'd been a popular bartender at Beaches ever since its 1997 opening. But when questioned by police, Anthony flatly denied having gone out with Claudia. The Kirschhochs say that police merely filed his statement away, even though it conflicted with Tania's account—and even after they discovered that Grant had called in sick for several days after Claudia was last seen.

Claudia's parents, who have never spoken to Anthony Grant, were beside them-



Intrepid traveler: Claudia, left, in 1998. Below: The bar at Beaches where Claudia met Anthony Grant



(from left) Courtesy Fred Kirschhoch; courtesy Sabrina Rubin Erdely.

selves with grief when they flew back to New Jersey. It was unbearable to be home, knowing that the investigation was stagnating. "As far as the police are concerned, out of sight, out of mind," Fred says wearily.

They returned to Jamaica two weeks later to stage a press conference. Sandals generously paid for their airfare and lodging, for which the Kirschhochs were appreciative. But gratitude turned to confusion when, at the conference, Leo Lambert, the Sandals public relations representative, announced, "I don't have a choice but to say what Tania told me." He went on to assert that Claudia had told Tania Grossinger that she had not only smoked pot with the bartender but she had also had sex with him, since "she doesn't mind screwing around sometimes."

"I never said such a thing, because Claudia never told me such a thing!" fumes

immediately fired from his job.) According to the Kirschhochs, the FBI also asked Anthony if he had killed Claudia. He insisted he didn't, and the polygraph indicated that he was telling the truth. (The FBI refuses to release any further information about polygraphs while the investigation is ongoing.)

Meanwhile, a search-and-rescue dog handler in Oregon offered to donate his services for free to see if his dog could pick up Claudia's trail. The Kirschhochs gratefully accepted the offer, then faced a month of red tape from the Jamaican government, which has quarantine laws against bringing animals into the country. Once in Negril, handler Harry Oakes and his dog Valorie—an expert team that has successfully performed people-finding missions all over the world—went right to work. Valorie did indeed detect Claudia's

search expert Harry Oakes.

Tania now, insisting that although Claudia had freely mentioned smoking pot, she'd never breathed a word about sleeping with Anthony Grant. "This is pure character assassination. It's 'blame the victim.' Everyone is so concerned about covering their own asses," Tania adds. "If people spent half of that energy looking for Claudia, they might actually find her."

The bitter episode reminded the Kirschhochs that Jamaica is an island that relies heavily on tourist dollars and that local establishments like Sandals (whose owner also has a large stake in Air Jamaica) don't want business to suffer. Sandals apologized to the Kirschhochs and chipped in \$25,000 toward the reward, but the damage was done. Desperate to push the investigation forward, the Kirschhochs lobbied their Congressman and managed to enlist the assistance of the FBI. In July, FBI agents questioned Anthony Grant, who agreed to take a lie-detector test.

Wired to the polygraph machine, Anthony once again denied going out with Claudia...and failed the polygraph. Faced with the results, he finally confessed that he did go out with Claudia but said he'd lied to the police because Beaches had a strict policy against dating guests. (He was

scent: in the hotel, along the ocean to an adjoining hotel, and to a gate leading to the street. She also indicated that she found Claudia's scent in a wooded area nearby and on the backseat of Anthony Grant's car and on a pair of boots in the trunk.

The FBI took the lining of Anthony's trunk, some gloves, and the boots back to the States for extensive testing. But the dog's findings were enough to make up Oakes' mind. "In my professional opinion," he pronounces, "she is dead."

Waiting for Answers

Claudia's parents insist that she must still be alive. "We have to believe it," her father says. The Kirschhochs are clinging to the idea that perhaps Claudia was kidnapped and is being held captive somewhere. They aren't ruling anything out until the FBI calls with its results of the lab tests, which, at press time, they were still waiting for. At the very least, they hope these will help investigators determine whether or not Anthony Grant knows more than he's been willing to say.

"He had nothing to do with it," declares Anthony's lawyer, Michael Erskine, who contests the credibility of Oakes and his dog. "And he certainly doesn't know what

Gone but Not Forgotten

Other women who've disappeared



Samiya Haqiqi

Last seen on
November 12, 1999

The 25-year-old
Quinnipiac Law School
student told friends

she was going to her parents' house in Queens, New York, for the weekend but never made it there. Her locked black Volkswagen was discovered two days later in a nearby parking lot, less than a block from her boyfriend's house.



Suzanne Lyall

Last seen on
March 2, 1998

The 19-year-old was
spotted getting off
a bus on her way to her

dorm at SUNY Albany. The next day, Suzanne's ATM card was used to withdraw money at a convenience store. Police have been searching for a male shopper who appears on the store's security videotape, hoping he may help the case.

happened to that girl. It's unfair for people to come down on him just because he went on a date with her," he adds. "He is a person of extremely good character, a man who doesn't even have a traffic ticket, and the people in this community are solidly behind him."

But Fred and Mary Ann Kirschhoch have their own ideas about what might have happened to their daughter. "What we've suspected is that the bartender introduced her to someone else while at the club that night whom she might have run into a couple of days later," says Fred. "The bartender says he didn't introduce her to anyone, but we know he's lied before."

It's just one theory among many as to what happened to Claudia Kirschhoch. But for now, it's all the Kirschhochs have. ■

If you have any information about Claudia Kirschhoch, please call 888-967-9300.