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The Abacos — paradise with or without a boat

BY DEBBIE MARTINEZ



They say ignorance is bliss but in this case I was missing out on a whole new experience. I have always thought that to enjoy the Bahamas you had to own a boat. Living in Miami, talk of the Bahamas is like saying your going to Publix. I would listen as people would talk about stocking their boat for a weekend jaunt over to the Bahamas, feeling a bit out of the loop since I belonged to the, dare I say, non boat owner crowd. News flash, you don't have to be a boat owner to enjoy all the great, fun things that the Bahamas has to offer. My final destination, The Abaco Beach Resort.

My plane touched down in Marsh Harbor, Abacos after a one-hour flight. A short ride later, I was settling into an amazingly spacious room with my own balcony at The Abaco Beach Resort, overlooking a vast beach and the ocean. Next stop the pool bar where I was promptly informed by the bartender that the resort had the best Goombay Smash in the Bahamas. Never heard of it and not wanting to offend, I graciously accepted one. Had to admit it was now going to be my drink of choice. By the time I was having a second, I was starting to like the Bahamian hospitality of this resort.

The Abaco Beach Resort dates back to 1955 and is currently owned by Andrew Sweeting and Manny Alexiou who are ever present on the 40 beachfront acre property. It boasts the largest marina in the Bahamas accommodating 198 boats up to 200 feet. For us landlubbers, you can choose to stay in one of their oversized, inviting guestrooms or one of the two-bedroom cottages with a pull out sofa that is perfect for families. In addition, their private condos, Harbor Residences are breath taking not only in views but décor.

The resort has a restaurant, two outdoor



pools, tennis facilities, kayaks and two very unique programs. One is called Bahama Buddies. It's unique in that it includes Bahamian children who explain Bahamian life from the perspective of a child.

The other program is run by Ricky Johnson, a Bahamas National Trust certified tour guide. He offers eco tours that involve biking, kayaking and bird watching but it's his enthusiasm and his infectious sense of humor that keeps you smiling. He makes you want to ask questions and learn about the eco system on the island.

Through his sheer determination we tracked down the elusive Abaco parrot. It was mesmerizing to see them in a tree so close to us and with the binoculars Ricky provided for everyone; I was able to get up close and personal.

An impromptu visit to Stephen Knowles home workshop where he turns wood into gorgeous bowls with inlays of tile or sea glass was a welcome surprise. If I thought the tour was great up to that point, I had no idea what lay in store for the finale.

Walking through some underbrush we came upon a Blue Hole (underground cave systems). I have never seen anything like it and I immediately felt like I was in a scene from Lost World. What lay before me was a huge water hole encircled with rock ledges. At that point I did what anybody would do, I jumped in. The water felt like sateen sheets flowing over my body. Ricky explained that it's the combination of salt and fresh water that makes it feel that way. Truly a once in a lifetime experience.

Returning to the resort for lunch, I had the best conch salad I have ever tasted and it quickly became my lunch staple the entire



weekend. For dinner, it was an absolutely fabulous fish dish, sugarcane shrimp and lobster, at the Angler Restaurant. After an amazing dessert accompanied by the sounds of Stephen whose voice kept me in my chair till closing time, I silently walked back to my room under dimly lit lights, opened my sliding glass door to hear the call of the waves, tucked myself in under cool sheets and beckoned the Sandman.

The next day I made the rounds of the surrounding cays. Not having your own boat doesn't limit you to experiencing all the other cays. There is a ferry from Marsh Harbor that will drop you off or you can arrange with the resort to rent a boat.

My first stop was Man-O-War where Albury's Sail Shop has every canvas tote imaginable. At Joe's Studio and Emporium I had the honor of meeting 67-year-old Joe Albury, who is a 7th generation Bahamian and according to him, last of his family to make wooden boats by hand. He breathes new life into Abaco Pine from torn down houses by using it for his boats. As we said good-bye, with the sun glinting on smoothly sanded wood, he paused for a moment and started to recite the Wreck of the Hesperus by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. What a fitting end to my visit!

It was onwards and upwards to Guana Cay where I stopped in at Nippers. A colorful outdoor bar and pool with great dance music and oh, yes, a Goombay Smash. Hope Town reminded me of Martha's Vineyard with its quaint cottages and narrow streets. A lone dolphin hanging by the shores edge made for a great swimming companion as I took a last minute dip before departing to Lubbers Quarters.

As we entered Cracker P's, a bar and grill situated on a quiet stretch of beach, Patrick,

the owner, brought out the best smoked fish dip and conch chowder and enticed me to try a Bushwhacker. Several dart games later and with some great laughs we started our 5-mile boat ride back to the resort.

The Abacos isn't just for boat owners anymore. There is so much to do and explore from scuba diving, snorkeling, fishing, island hopping, the national parks, eco tours, biking, golfing and visiting local artists and points of interest. There are boutiques and dancing with the locals at Snappas can't be missed. And there is no better place to enjoy all this than The Abaco Beach Resort. It's central to everything and the staff make you feel like you're family. A whole new world for non-boat owners just opened up. Who knew?

Getting off the plane in Miami was a stark contrast from where I had just come. Jostling around for my bags the thought occurred to me that the only things I had jostled the last few days was my Goombay Smash and my conch salad. "Passport". I looked up to an outstretched hand of a customs agent. I dug in my bag and handed it across the desk. He stared at me. I realized I had a tight grip on it. He tugged the passport again, and my fingers held tightly as I intently stared back. "You do want to get back in, don't you?" I relinquished it as he slammed it down on the desk with the loud sound of the stamp. "Next". I made my way back into the masses, like salmon swimming up stream. "I'm back for now", I thought. Reaching for my phone, I punched in Abaco Beach Resort on my speed dial.

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