

Friend-Ship

Sailing the Islands of Abaco

By Lisa Codianne Fowler



“It’s not a glitzy vacation,” I warned my friend Tracey, a former party diva. “There are no nightclubs, no casinos, no scheduled activities.” Now a devoted wife and multitasking mother of two – three, if you count their therapy dog – Tracey was about to turn 40. Friends since our single days, we planned a couples’ sailing trip to celebrate this passage. We rendezvoused in Miami, she and Jim from Toronto, and Patrick and I from Sarasota, for the short flight to the Bahamian archipelago called The Abacos.

Our prop plane bounced along a sandy airstrip and rolled to a standstill at Marsh Harbour’s sleepy “international airport” on Grand Abaco. Staffed by a handful of smiling Bahamians, it made Sarasota/Bradenton look like LaGuardia. First order of business, provisioning for four days at sea. A taxi awaited to take us to Solomon’s Supermarket, a quirky jumble of fresh island food, gourmet coffee and cheeses, refrigerators, patio furniture and clothes; a hot spot in this, the “metropolis” of The Abacos.



With one traffic light on the island, traveling on to the marina was a breeze.



“God must have had a smile on his face when he made Abaco,” said our captain Ali Penn, as he greeted us aboard “Pawsitive Latitude”, Florida Yacht Charter’s 46-Hunter. “And he smiled again when I was born,” Jim quipped. Introductions and settling into our comfy cabins completed, we motored out to sea.

Within minutes, the purr of the engine ceased and Ali hoisted the sails. They rustled loudly as they unfolded, but became silent once billowing in the wind. The only sounds were the rhythmic lapping of waves against the boat and an occasional creak of the mast. Our bow sliced through diamond-clear waters, no more than 14-feet deep. The shallow seas presented not only spectacular marine life viewing, but also a boating challenge. Hence, our wise decision to hire one of FYC's licensed captains.

Ali was a native Abaconian and a friend, it seemed, to everyone. As we were visiting during a fishing tournament, the normally isolated waters were dotted with anxious anglers. "Ali, Ali, Ali!" came a voice from a passing boat. "How many fish you catch?"

At that moment, Jim, with his Adonis-type body, walked toward the back of the boat, reached down and clutched a fish in his bare hands. Well, that's Jim's version. In reality, while this area is a fisherman's dream – with mahi mahi, marlin, sailfish, wahoo, tuna and bonefish – we were content to catch the sea life on camera while snorkeling off the reefs.



Free from commercial development and cruise ships, The Abacos is a 120-mile necklace of unspoiled islands and abandoned cays. Time would not allow us to explore them all, so we deferred to our captain to chart our course. Great Guana Cay with its powder-white beach, colorful New England-style clapboard cottages and friendly residents was an appropriate start. "Traffic" here was an occasional golf cart zipping past us on dusty paths... one of which

led us to Milo, a local legend (and friend of Ali's), his produce stand spilling over with organically-grown fruit and vegetables.

T-shirts, island art, seashell jewelry ("made with me fingers, not in Japan") and fresh caught fish and lobster, made for serendipitous one-stop shopping.



We trekked on to Nippers Beach Bar and Grill, an Abacos institution for lunch, dinner and dancing. Bar stools, painted in rainbow colors, overlooked the striking blue Atlantic and sugar-white sands that stretched for miles.



Here, locals and visitors lingered over meals at umbrella-topped tables and discussed everything from politics to “Potcakes” – ubiquitous island dogs.

Cruising away from Guana Cay en route to Green Turtle, the winds kicked up just enough for the waves to splash our sun-drenched bodies as we languished on deck, alternately reading, napping and chatting. I overheard Tracey say, “At some point, we’ve got to check in with our kids,” to which Jim replied, “Who?”

Green Turtle Cay was an 18th century storybook village, and paid homage to its Loyalist history with a sculpture garden, the Albert Lowe Museum, and even Miss Emily’s Blue Bee Bar. As we toured the island, we happened upon Shirley Roberts, the first female pilot in Abaco (and a friend of Ali’s).

Now proprietor of the Shell Hut gift shop, she was reclining under a shady tree with her dog on a typical two-hour break. Many colorful tales later, we hugged goodbye and headed on to Hopetown, home of the legendary candy-striped lighthouse built by the British in the 1860s. We admired cheerful gingerbread homes, tip-toed through a circa-1800s cemetery, and saw the church from which melodic chimes filled the Sunday morning air.



Every morning began with tropical fruit and coconut bread... and a refreshing dive off the boat. Happily, the hammerheads, tiger and bull sharks dwelt further south in cooler waters, and it was dolphins that accompanied us from cay to cay. Days ended with barbecues on board, champagne under the stars and story-telling into the night.



All too soon we reluctantly left what Tracey termed our “floating cottage” for the journey home. We traded bear hugs with Ali, his parting words, “Friends for life.”

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