

Road less traveled: Abaco Islands

By RUTH BASHINSKY Sunday, August 8th 2010



Ruth Bashinsky
The panoramic views of the Atlantic coastline from the balcony of The Delphi Club at Rolling Harbour, South Abaco.

As I set sail on a 42-foot yacht steered by Capt. Benjamin Dunable, I was eager to explore and experience the local flavor of the Abacos, the third largest island in the Bahamas.

Considered the sailing capital of the world because of its 120-mile-long coastline, Abaco is a perfect destination for boaters, scuba divers, snorkelers, fishing enthusiasts, bird lovers and beachgoers.

Abaco's naturally protected waters once served as a safe harbor for British loyalists during the American Revolution. Its two major islands – Great Abaco and Little Abaco — boast dozens of offshore cays and barrier islands that abound with game fish, including marlin, sailfish and the

the world's best bone fishing flats. The fish that were the most abundant during my visit were grouper, snapper, amberjack, bonefish, mackerel and dolphin.

A 20,000-acre nature preserve containing rare species of plants and wildlife, including the Abaco parrot, also features freshwater caves known as Blue Holes (a water-filled sinkhole). In 2004, a fossil discovery led to National Geographic funding an exploration of Abaco's blue holes and caves. The findings revealed landlubbing crocodiles and tortoises that were previously unknown to mankind.

With approximately 13,000 human residents, the island bears a resemblance to New England, offering visitors and its residents the same small-town appeal, but in an island setting. Enchanting restaurants, shops, inns and cottages line the islet. One popular destination is the Abaco Beach Resort and Boat Harbour, a cozy paradise located in Marsh Harbour, the capital city of Abaco

As our sleek yacht glided with ease across the tranquil waters of the Atlantic toward Great Guana Cay, we pulled into Baker's Bay, an exclusive community and site of the new Baker's Bay Golf & Ocean Club. The development is among the many second-home offerings dotting the Abacos, which are only a 50-minute flight from West Palm Beach, Fla.

As we continued on our island-hopping venture, we made a quick stop at Nippers Beach Bar & Grill, a favorite among locals and tourists that is perched upon a 40-foot dune overlooking the Great Abaco Barrier Reef. Although we weren't able to participate in the weekly Bahamian wild boar roast and barbecue, we did get to try the popular Guana Cay "Nipper." The fruity and refreshing frozen cocktail is made with lots of rum and lots of juice. (I was told the rest of the ingredients are a closely guarded secret). Even so, after drinking a few frozen Nippers, don't be surprised if you start hugging the person next to you. Lucky for me, that person was my husband.

Hope Town was the next stop, a popular settlement lined with quaint cottages, villas and restaurants, and home to one of Abaco's most recognized landmarks – the historic Elbow Cay Lighthouse. Built in 1863, the candy-striped lighthouse is only one of three hand-wound kerosene-burning lighthouses in the world.

Although mostly undeveloped - especially compared to Freeport or Nassau - the Bahamian government has invested heavily in Abaco's physical and technological infrastructure in recent years, adding smooth highways,

fiber-optic cables and cell phone towers.

South Abaco is quickly transforming itself into a prime real estate location. Two properties taking shape are the Abaco Club on Winding Bay, a Ritz Carlton facility that features the world's first Scottish-style tropical links course, and The Delphi Club at Rolling Harbour, a new luxury bone-fishing lodge built in the style of an 18th-century plantation.

Another project gaining attention is the eco-friendly Serenity Point, a private beachfront community located on Schooner Bay Beach and developed by Canadian real estate magnate Alexis Nihon 2nd. The multimillion dollar project includes 46 homesites built on beach, ridge or hilltop sites that start at \$230,000. The exclusive community not only offers spectacular sunrise and sunset views but, a full-service beach clubhouse, an infinity pool, tennis courts and a concierge service that include private chefs, butlers, yacht charters and fishing trips.

Another new development, Schooner Bay Village, will encompass 220 acres adjacent to Serenity Point. This urban, eco-friendly harbor village, developed by the Lindroth Development Company, will house a farmer's market, restaurants, shops and inns, as well as a marina.