

THE ABACOS – 97



View from our Beach Villa



Picnic in cabanna near villa



Enjoying pool next to Villa



Castle Restaurant



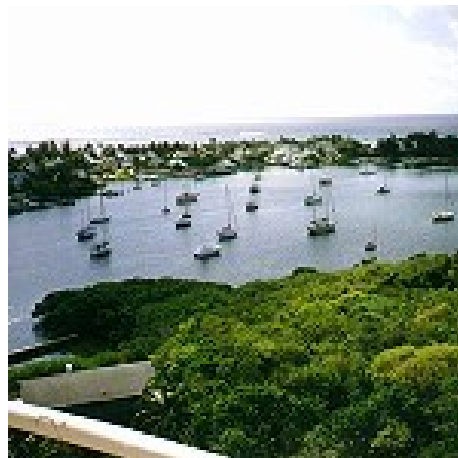
Starfish murders at work



Evening snacks on patio



Lighthouse on Elbow Cay



View from lighthouse



Martha checks rules on nude bathing



Monster from the deep



Monsters



Swinging Party



Mermaids



"Get Off MY Beach!"



Positioning for that perfect
"snapshot"

ABACOS 2001

This year winter seemed unusually boring. Our weather was neither La Nino nor La Nina. It was La Nada – neither too cold nor too warm, neither too wet nor too dry – just nada. We needed a change to break the doldrums. Like a shot of Geritol to get our old bones moving again, our return trip to the Abaco Islands was what we anticipated.

This year six couples chose to make the trip: the Bucklin's, the Evans's, the Kelly's, the Lotz's, the Thomason's, and the Wilson's. In our anxiousness we had our planning get-togethers, and our pre-planning get-togethers, and our pre-pre-planning get-togethers. What was there to plan? Wardrobe was a swimsuit for the day and shorts, tank top, and sandals for the evening. Food was whatever and wherever we found it. No matter to what remote site we roamed from island to island in our 18-foot *Privateers*, there was always some little open-air stand, serving the local favorites – conch or grouper sandwiches and *Bahama Mama's* (aka *Guana Grabbers*, *Bahamian Smash*.).



Originally, the *Abaco Islands* were our selection for last year's spring vacation. But, after *Hurricane Floyd* passed over them the prior fall, we changed our minds. We had called the *Abaco Beach Resort* at Marsh Harbor where we planned to stay and they said, "Come on down. The resort has sustained some damage, but we expect to have everything repaired in the spring." It sounded inviting; however, *Floyd* was not your innocuous thunderstorm. It was a category five hurricane whose "eye" passed directly over our "intended" villa. Hurricanes of this magnitude were powerful enough to propel a 2x4 through the side of a brick house. We only anticipated the worst and, despite their optimism, we changed our plans.

Located in the upper northeastern section of the 700 Islands that make up the Bahamas archipelago, the *Grand Abaco Island* was one hundred and eighty miles off the coast of Florida at the same latitude as *Ft. Lauderdale*. It was one hundred and thirty miles long and only two to four miles wide. On a map the island looked like a bent arm lying in the ocean. Along its eastern side was an eighty-five miles of outer rim of cays, the third largest in the world. It protected the *Sea of Abaco*, the inter-coastal passage, from the most effects of the weather. Whereas, the ocean could be pounding the exterior beaches with 15-foot or better waves, seaside the waves would be barely rough enough to disturb the moat around your sandcastle, with one small exception. If the wind rolled in from the northwest, parallel to the

waterway, there was sufficient "catch" to build up some tall waves. It could bring much of the island activity comes to a halt, as we found out.

Home to only ten thousand people, there were few roads on the islands. They were, at best, intended for secondary travel. Many supported nothing more than "golf cart" scale vehicles. Everything of significance moved on the Sea by boat. Ferries ran between and along the shoreline every couple of hours during daylight hours. Boats delivered most the supplies, picked up the trash, landed most of the visitors, and were the primary interest of the island inhabitants.

Our port-of-call, *Marsh Harbor*, was seaside at the inside bend of the elbow and directly across the water from the appropriately named *Elbow Cay*. It was a peninsula, one city block wide, and looked like the barb on a fishhook as it stuck out from the island. Our resort was midway, directly opposite the Harbor area and the town.

Pine trees were the tallest structure on the islands. There were none that horrible commercial sprawl of high rise condominiums, nightclubs, casinos, hotels and fancy vacation spas that polluted the popular resorts. They have miraculously remained unspoiled. There were only miles of empty salt-white (from carbonates, such as coral, not silicon dioxide) sand beaches, undisturbed coral reefs, and clear, shallow seas (with underwater visibility approaching 200 feet). There were over 60 anchorages safe for boating and warm enough for most water sports.

Frommer's travel guidebooks and *National Geographic* said, "the beaches rank



in the top ten in the world."

Likewise the internationally noted cruising authority, **Julius Wilensky** (Author of "**Cruising Guide to the Abacos**"), noted "*I've explored the Biminis, the Exumas, the Berry Islands . . . and the Abacos wins hands down for variety and interest ashore; excellent harbors; interesting and hospitable settlements and excellent beaches, [which] are among the world's clearest and most colorful.*"

No wonder we were excited about returning.

This year we rented two villas and two hotel rooms along the seashore. The villas, 1000 square-foot homes, had two bedrooms, a living room with sofa bed, a kitchen, and two patios and cost \$600 a night. We hadn't much use for a kitchen. The refrigerator held our beer and the microwave oven warmed the snacks for our nightly cocktail party. The Bucklin's and Evans's planned to share one villa and the Kelly's and Lotz's planned to share the other.

The Wilson's and Thomason's chose the hotel rooms. They were comfortable, but weren't much more than your standard motel accommodations. They rented for about \$200 a night. On Wednesday before we left, Beth Bucklin became ill and was unable to join us. We rearranged the living arrangement and Wilson's moved into the villa.



Getting to the **Abacos** could get dicey. The commercial airlines between the **Ft. Lauderdale** and **Marsh Harbor** weren't reliable. Not many people chose our destination. If a flight didn't have enough passengers, it didn't fly. You could fly from Miami with considerably less risk, but the trip took longer and was about a hundred dollars per person more expensive. To avoid getting stranded either coming or going through Ft. Lauderdale, our troop chose to charter a couple of small planes. As we soon found out, the charter planes didn't provide any more reliability.

Although the charter planes were intended to minimize our logistics problem, they introduced another element – fear – at least among the women. We were flying in the **Bermuda Triangle**. The ladies were having second thoughts. They remembered, from previous visits to the Marsh Harbor airport, the aircraft wreckage near the landing field. Who knows why the officials hadn't removed these dead carcasses – maybe to scare tourists making the trip in light aircraft. It was working.

The women reasoned that we needed to divide up the families. Husband and wife should fly on separate craft. According to their morbid thought processes, if one plane went down then an entire family wouldn't be lost. This concept escaped male analysis. It had to be purely female "logic". In our minds we reasoned, why wouldn't it be better to "take out" the entire family and not leave one person to live alone. It didn't matter; all worries were for naught.

When we got to their gate, **Air Sunshine** decided we were going in the manner that was most convenient to them. Forget the two planes. Forget what they promised. Nine of us were on next plane and one was on a second plane that would leave as soon as they filled it. Jimmy chivalrously volunteered for the second plane on the way out and Terry volunteered for the return trip. "It didn't matter", we were told, "their planes would be leave at the same time as ours." But, we were then on island time where "same time" meant same day, not same minute or same hour. Whereas we departed immediately, Jimmy left two hours latter. Terry had better luck with only an hour delay.

Aside from this scheduling problem, the flights were great. We flew smoothly at an altitude of 7800 feet with a nearly unobstructed view of everything. From the air we could see how barren the **Abaco** islands were. They were flat, barely a few feet above sea level. There were scattered patches of pine trees, almost no structures, almost no roads, and endless stretches of salt ponds, mango and scrub bushes. The western ocean side with its hundreds of islands was uninhabited, due to a shoreline that constantly moved hundreds of feet in the shallow waters with three-foot tides. What little habitation there was on the island, clustered exclusively on eastern seashore.

Upon landing we grabbed a couple of taxis and headed for the resort with one small stop – the liquor store for the men and the grocery store next door for the women. We had to stock up for our nightly cocktail parties and to fill our coolers for those thirsty boat trips between the islands.



As we drove we noticed not much had changed from our trip four years ago. There was no sign of damage from **Floyd**. The simple one-story cinder-block and clap-board buildings were neat, albeit with some new paint and new construction – probably a gift from the insurance companies. The Resort, which was a couple of blocks off the main road and back in a relatively wooded section opposite the harbor area, appeared unchanged and



undamaged.

The taxis let us off at the reception center where we checked into our rooms. Porters loaded our luggage onto golf carts and took them to our villas. First past the pool and bar complex, then past a single story, 200-person conference tent and restaurant, and lastly to our temporary homes for the week, which set back 100 yards from beach in our own little tropical jungle of palm trees, schefflera, magnolia tress, and hibiscus. The three-story 50-room, strip motel was about a block away.



The villas and hotel were not the center of activity at the resort. It was the Marina. A boardwalk led from our patio to the edge of the water and the southern most end of the Marina. From here to the north, there were six city-block long piers with space for 180 fishing trawlers or luxury cruisers that ranged from 40 feet to 150 feet in length. Our first question was "Where does all this money come from?" No matter how financially fortunate we felt we were, this sight was humbling.



The crews and passengers of these vessels fished and sailed around the islands during the day and returned to party at night. Music blared, brilliant multi-colored fireworks erupted in the sky, and the air was filled with piquant smell of dozens of fish fries.

What a life! We watched their merriment with a cringe of envy. We gave them our best "poor country cousin" gaze, but it didn't work. We didn't get invited to any of their parties.

This week was the **Annual Billfish Tournament**. Twenty-five boats had entered the contest at a cost of \$8,000 each. One sun weathered old fisherman explained the rule to us, "the boat that kills a fish gets the money." It was a "catch and release" contest, except if the trophy was over 110 inches in length. It could be brought back as evidence. He continued, "only your blue fins get that big. In the past these tournaments would kill a lot of fish. Now only two or three were sacrificed." The winning fish this year was a 512-pound blue fin. Pulling that beast on board just didn't sound like fun. It took a minimum of an hour and a half of back breaking tugging and pulling. The rumor was a 90-pound female angler landed it.



Nevertheless, we shared their fun. When a boat landed a trophy, they radioed the details on marine channel 71 back to the Marina. About a hundred people, including us, gathered at the docks to welcome them, officially weighted the catch, and snapped hundreds of pictures.

We had our traditions. One was to have a champagne brunch at **Soleil's** in **Hope Town** on **Elbow Cay** and then spend the afternoon sunning on **Tilloo Cay**. This year we had some problems. Part of the group was in town delayed at church while the rest of us stood on the docks watching some very rough seas. We had lunch reservations at eleven. At ten AM the church-goers, who had left two hours earlier, had not returned from St. Francis.



On a day with small waves it was a twenty-minute ride in a small boat across the sea to **Elbow Cay**. Today, the wind was from the north and the white-capped waves were breaking ominously. That combination always meant trouble. It didn't look good to Dick and Shirley; they opted to ride the **Allbury Water Taxi**. The rest of us selected the adventure. With four people in each of two Privateers we went to sea.

Inside the break wall there was barely any wave action. "Looks good", we consoled each other, "It shouldn't be much worse beyond the wall." In the open waters the waves increased to three feet, which about all our craft could handle.

Waves hit hard on the port side and broke over the edge like a geyser. Launched from the top of a wave our boat would go airborne, landing painfully and straining necks, backs and bottoms. Quickly we stripped down to our swimsuits and packed the clothes into lockers to keep them dry. We didn't wish to sit in the restaurant drenched from head to toe in salt water.

We arrived safely, but with tales to tell. The Catholics still had to explain why they were so late. On the islands mass was a major event; there was not much less to do. They stretched it out to a tiring hour and forty minutes with a seemingly endless number of songs. When it came time to give a "sign of peace" that was an invitation to "meet and greet". Everybody got and gave a warm welcome. Lastly, there was no "cutting out" early, typical at mainland services. Here, you were captured. The "mass bus" picked you up along the side of the road promptly to arrive in time for the first homily and didn't depart until that last melodious verse had been raised into the pearly gates.

I am not sure the quality of the food at **Soleil's** was worth the pounding we took to get there. Brunch was a buffet set out on no more than a couple twelve-foot tables. The food was "average". The restaurant, even with our group of ten, was half-empty. The champagne was probably primary attraction. As we looked across the harbor we saw where everyone else this morning. They were at the **Harbor's Edge Restaurant**; there wasn't an empty chair.



Because of its beach, the passage between **Elbow** and **Tilloo Cay** was a favorite stop. It was too shallow for boat traffic. At low tide several acres clean white sands magically appeared, like a scene from **Brigadoon**. At high tide they disappeared allowing Neptune's maids to cleanse our beach twice daily.

We anchored the boats at a convenient spot where the sand rose through the sea. We remained until the tides eventually recaptured it. We rested semi-submerged on our momentary oasis with beer or wine in hand and watched the ocean waves break in a 100-yard wide passage. Today, it was especially picturesque. With ocean waves at twelve feet they trumpeted their fury in loud roars and displayed

their displeasure with enormous white splashes rising into the air like the sails of a schooner dashed helplessly against the shoreline rocks.

Another tradition was our nightly BYOB cocktail party. Each villa took turns hosting it. The gals prepared the hors d'oeuvres and invited the others. It started at 5:30 and lasted for about three rounds of drinks. Afterwards we walked into town and continued the party at our "pick of the night" restaurant. It was known for some of our party to be "over served", thereby even making this short hike an adventure. No one in particular, it seemed we passed this dubious distinction around to both the men and the women.

We had half-dozen establishments from which to choose. However, tradition dictated, we always started at the **Conch Inn** for a Grouper or Conch Burger, then did Mangoes. This year we noticed that most the restaurants had "up scaled". Prices were a bit higher, seating was a bit more fancy, and the menu had an "evening section". Gone were the ubiquitous burgers. All our favorite haunts were losing their simplicity and innocence in the quest for tourists.





Still another tradition was to listen to the *Cruiser Net* every morning at 8:15 to 9:15AM on Marine channel 68. It provided a weather report, announcements of area activities, Bulletin Boards, e-mail, "open mike" exchanges, arrivals/departures, and "specials" at the restaurants. They relayed messages from the *Green Turtle Cay*, thirty miles to the north, and from Little Harbor, about the same distance to the south. It was the big "party line" for the islands and reminded me of the old "Arthur Godfrey" radio show. It was popular on the islands for as long as there was a marine radio. There always were enthusiastic, energetic, young female voices taking their turn hosting it.

The conversation was particularly of interest to us for the weather report. Our experience on Sunday in our ride to *Hope Town* only got worse toward the middle of the week. The seas were so rough and each morning we tried to make plans. Boats, both out in the *Sea of Abaco* and out in the Ocean, commented on water conditions. Winds were at 25 knots, gusting to 30 knots. That kicked up the waves on the sea to over four feet and on the ocean to over fifteen feet. If you were in a boat heading into the wind, you had the pleasure of being hit in the face with a 60 knot (or 70 mph) breeze. Believe me; that was brisk. We were told, "stay off the water". That relegated us to traveling between the islands by Ferries that were large enough to handle the swells and rolling seas.



Regardless, we were fortunate. Prior to our visit it had been continuously rainy and windy for over three weeks. We lost only two "boat days" including a half-day with rain, due to the northeast wind. All the other days had a moderate breeze and were bright and sunny with temperatures in the mid- to upper-seventies and with negligible humidity. Nevertheless, most of the people we met, had no reason to complain. We would have loved to have the financial independence to take off for a month or longer and sit in a million-dollar yacht, even if it were in anchorage.

Even when the *Sea of Abaco* was calm, we couldn't go too far by little boat. On most days, there was enough "chop" to limit our speed to fifteen knots. Our elderly physiques could only handle about a half-hour of banging at a time. Of course, we had our "boys" who wanted to run the boats at full throttle, while their passengers clung with teeth tightly clenched, to any seemingly permanent fixture to avoid being launched from the boat. Well, that was, until the mutiny. They surrendered their captain's caps when the preferred mode of travel for the others became the ferry.

The longest time we dared to travel was an hour. *Elbow, Tilloo, Man-o-War, Lubbers Cays*, were a relatively easy ride, all within a half-hour. *Great Guana Cay* was almost an hour away. Normally, that was as far as we chose to go. Other Cays were technically accessible by our "runabout", but they required us to cross a passageway - a misnomer, boundary was more descriptive. Here, the placid sea and the contrary ocean met and melded into an unpredictable conglomeration.



The foremost attractions on *Elbow Cay* were *Hope Town* at the northern end and *White Beach* at the southern end. *Hope Town* was the home to the Lighthouse. With its "barber pole like" exterior and kerosene powered lantern it was the world famous icon for the Abacos. Visitors climbed 100 feet up the winding staircase and walked out on a pedestal with its parapet circumvallating the cylindrical window around the Fresnel lens. From that height we could see almost all the island to the west and the seemingly endless expanse of ocean to the east.

Hope Town with only the sound of ocean waves rhythmically pounding the beaches was a great place to go to find real solitude. About 400 people lived around the bay in their pink, lavender, lime green, or aqua colored clap-board houses, often no larger than two-car garage. Another quarter of the population camped on about fifty sailboats and yachts that were semi-permanently anchored in this protected cove. Although the town was only one street deep, it had all requisite amenities for a vacation retreat: a couple of little grocery stores, several arts and crafts stores, rental houses and rooms, and three restaurants (*Captain Jacks*, the *Harbor's Edge*, and *Soleils*).

As I roamed, I met the caretaker in the two-room *Wyannie Malone Museum*. He saw my Tortolla shirt, and excitedly asked me if we sailed the islands. When I said yes, we started sharing old Caribbean sailor stories. Eventually, he told me how he happened to be here. He and his wife were retired and were invited to be nannies for their daughter's three kids

while she vacation here for a month in a rental house. While on the Cay the Methodist Church needed some volunteers to work with young people and his wife volunteered him and herself. They were there for about six months and were anticipating another two-year stint.

His enthusiasm was infectious. I volunteered Barbara and Terry to spell them. They were retiring within a year. Well, that was until Barbara walked in, and re-volunteered Jamie and Jodie. Then I knew she didn't like my idea. She made it even more apparent when she stood outside the door and yelled back in at me, "Tom, it is time for us to go."



Our special beach was probably the only reason to go to *Tilloo Cay*. However, just north of it on Elbow was *White Beach* and the *Abaco Inn*. It sat high on a ridge that straddled the ocean and the sea. As we had lunch there, we watched a lone swimmer attempt to surf the fifteen-foot high waves, commenting both on his bravery and stupidity. He was getting pounded and spent more time under water than on top of a



wave.

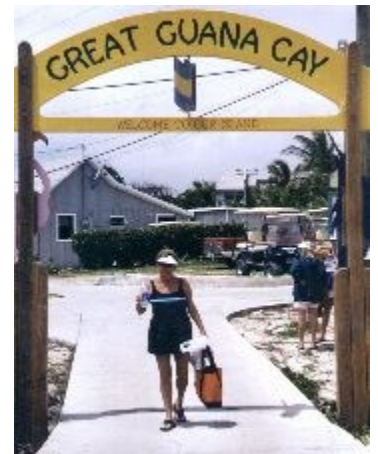
But only after a few minutes, we knew he was in trouble. I watched him the best I could with the telephoto lens on my camera. His wife who remained on shore also lost sight of him. She walked back and forth along the water's edge, working herself up into a fit of hysteria. When Noel and I walked down to where she was pacing, she was sobbing, "What should I do? Who can I call?" I kept reassuring her, "he is okay. I can see him". But it was obvious, he was caught in a rip current. I lied, everything was not okay, and I had lost sight of him.

I hadn't seen him for five minutes. I pulled out my binoculars and searched the waters. The three of us walked down the beach, trying to find him. Finally, in the white foam of the surf I saw a dark form moving. He was alive and was moving toward the shore. He had been pulled more than a mile from where we were watching. Finally, when he beached, I told the wife where he was and she took off like a sprinter toward him. I suspect it was one of those bittersweet reunions. We saw the embrace. We didn't hear the most likely subsequent tongue-lashing.



Man-o-War Cay was about as far as we dared travel when there was a lot of wave action. It was about a half-hour boat ride from *Marsh Harbor*. In order to get there, we hugged the shore along the harbor peninsula and moved through a narrow channel staying out of the wind. When we ran out of land, we made a beeline across open sea to Cay.

Ever since Loyalists from the Revolutionary War founded it, *Man-o-War Cay* was the center of ship building in the *Bahamas*. It had a mile long by city-block wide cove that is protected from the ravages of the wind. On either side of the island waves may violently pound, but in this protected harbor, the few ripples on the water, were created only by the boat traffic. We, consequently, expected to see no evidence of hurricane damage even though the eye of the storm passed directly over it. There was none, but there were all kinds of new construction and signs of encroaching tourism.



Most of the boat builders were gone. We did find one shop that built boats like it had been done for hundreds of years. Four years ago we found three shops. An example of what was happened was *Ms Allbury's Sail Shop*. Many years ago she abandoned that work and started earning her living sewing bags, shirts, light coats, purses, and other souvenirs. Her workmanship had the reputation for quality and value. A stop at *Ms Allbury's* was always on our itinerary.

Short, stocky, rectangular, a bit pale, were the features all the Allbury women. The last time we saw *Ms. Allbury* she was approaching sixty years of age and planned to retire. This year nothing had changed. As we drove up to her dock, she still sat with her back to us at her sewing machine at the open end of her shop. She was still conversing with shoppers as she guided pieces of fabric through the foot of her Consew. This ageless personality was typical of people on the out islands - pleasant and approachable. In a "*I Remember Mama*" sort of way she laid out homemade pastries, provided coffee, and met her "guests" as they tied their boats to her dock.

What else was there to see or do at *Man-o-War Cay*? Nothing, but relax.



The bad news of our vacation this year was - the outside world appeared to have found the Abaco Islands. With the advent of the Internet (try www.abacos.net, go-abacos.com, www.oii.com) the islanders were reaching out and inviting visitors to share the uniqueness of their home. There were new condominiums, new housing, and up-scaling of virtually everything. They referred to it as a "boomlet". The cost of living on the island had dropped to the point where it was not much more expensive than stateside when you

remember Abaco had no Sales Tax. Food (excluding beer, which some of our tribe consider an essential nutrition group), including restaurant dining, was no more than 10% to 15% higher.



ALL our favorite restaurants had one-man bands that bellowed "calypso style" music into the early morning hours. Fortunately, there still were no casinos, no obnoxious crowds of people, no crime, and no American-style fast foods. Cell phones didn't work well, if at all. VHF radio was the preferred method for communications, even to order "Pizza to Go." Boaters still ruled and the International Rules of Boating Etiquette still applied - everyone waved or said "hi"; total strangers met, hugged, and excitedly shared daily adventures; and anyone could ask you for a dance - just ask Sharyn, who found another new friend.

ABACOS 2006



Rum 'n Coconut



Starboard Side