

A Bahama Breeze

The Abaco Club offers island-style luxury with the added lure of adventure.

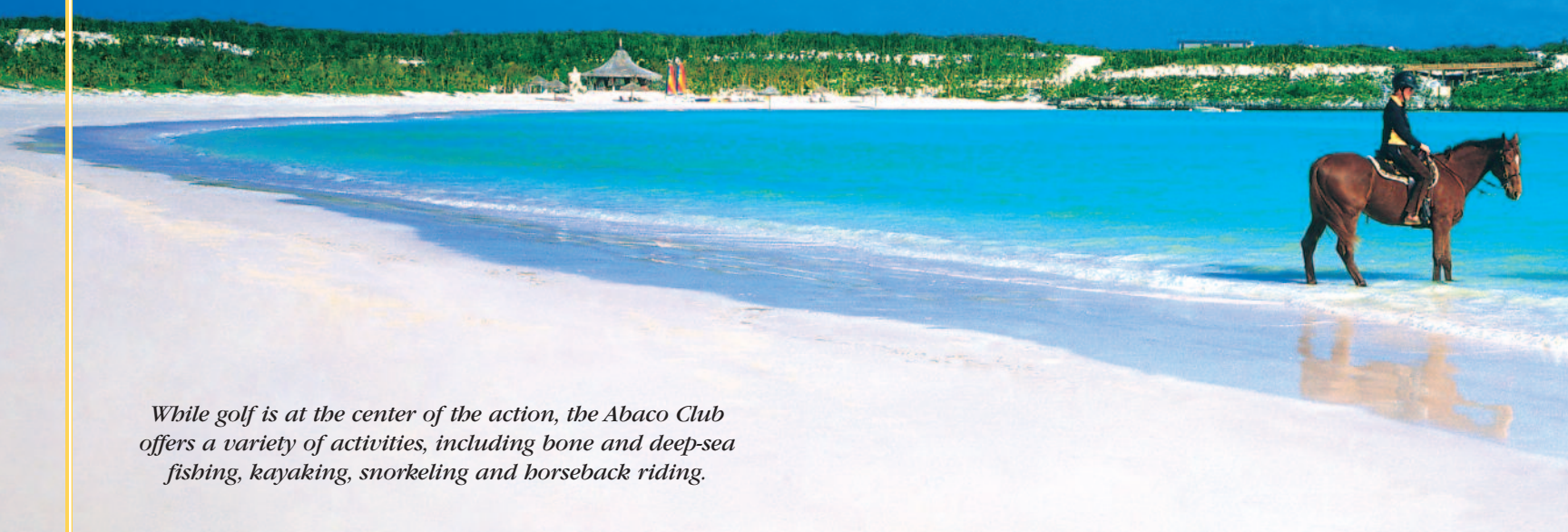
Archie stands behind the bar slinging aphorisms along with Bahama Breezes. “Any time is party time, yes sir,” he says, flashing his trademark smile, bone white against coffee-colored skin. “I got the juice to let ’em loose.”

Wearing a blindingly yellow shirt and ball cap, Archie is the self-proclaimed “mixologist” at the Abaco Club’s casual beachside restaurant, Buster’s. But his constant patter also passes for entertainment. His laid-back style and friendly

manner personify a new trend for Ritz-Carlton-managed properties like this one. In an attempt to cast off its stuffy image, the venerable chain is diversifying to include resorts that specialize in what it calls barefoot elegance: beautiful, upscale properties that feature natural, rustic settings highlighting local styles and customs rather than the traditional white marble and chandeliers.

The Abaco Club was a prime candidate for the Ritz, which took over management of the membership island retreat in 2006. Peter de Savary, who developed the St. James Clubs among other luxury properties, is the driving force behind the Club. It opened in 2004 as a private, sporting retreat on Great Abaco Island in the Bahamas.

Unlike Nassau, Abaco feels remote and unspoiled. Located 170 miles from Palm Beach, the boomerang-shaped island is 120 miles long and six miles wide, dotted with small settlements and fringed with soft, white beaches. Wild horses and boar share the island with about 18,000 human residents.



While golf is at the center of the action, the Abaco Club offers a variety of activities, including bone and deep-sea fishing, kayaking, snorkeling and horseback riding.

Small barrier islands to the east form the Sea of Abaco, a protected channel well suited for sailing and boating. On the west, the Marls, shallow waters dotted with small atolls and mangrove flats, offer some of the best bonefishing in the world.

The Club is built around a Scottish style links golf course on Winding Bay, a 2 1/2-mile double crescent of powder-white beach and clear, turquoise water. Residential property consists of cabanas, oceanfront cottages and estate homes. While the club's emphasis is on residential membership, rentals are available to non-members. The 20 guest cabanas run from \$650-\$950 a night, depending on the season. A four-bedroom cottage fetches \$1,800-\$3,500 a night.

Upon our arrival, my husband and I were issued a lipstick-pink golf cart and escorted to one of the 650-square-foot octagonal cabanas. Our quarters were clean and contemporary. Decorated in white with pink and key-lime green accents, the cabana had bamboo floors, windows on most of the eight walls and glass doors opening onto a patio facing the golf course. Amenities included a well-stocked wet bar, 42-inch plasma screen TV, Bose sound system, DVD and CD player. Best of all, we were a stone's throw from Buster's. That made it easy to visit our new friend Archie, whose pet phrase seemed to be "I wouldn't say no."

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In the past decade, Abaco has become one of the hottest

bonefishing destinations in the world, spurring an industry that generates millions for islanders. The silver, aptly named fish are popular for their speed and sport, but not much good to eat thanks to a profusion of bones. On the island, they are protected as a sport fish, strictly catch and release.

Dee, our bonefishing guide, met us at the reception area and drove us a short distance to the settlement of Cherokee Sound, population 160. The collection of neat, pastel-trimmed clapboard homes looked like they sprouted up at random on



Ritz-Carlton took over management of The Abaco Club membership island retreat last year.



a large patch of grass. Like several settlements on the island, Cherokee was settled in 1783 by British Loyalists from the Carolinas who fled the fledgling United States. The enclave endured for more than 150 years as an isolated fishing and boat-building community. Bonefishing changed everything. Cherokee is now a well-known bonefishing destination and, like Dee, many of the villagers earn their living as guides.

A quiet, soft-spoken man, Dee wore a long sleeved, striped button-down oxford shirt, shorts and a ball cap, but no shoes. His skin was deeply tanned underneath a graying mustache and two-day stubble, and he spoke with an island accent that he characterized as British.

We took our seats in a 16-foot shallow-bottomed skiff and motored out through the shallow water to a small cay. Dee showed us how to locate the bonefish by looking for patches of “milky” water. “That’s the bonefish churning up the bottom,” he says.

Bonefishing is often performed with a fly. But, perhaps noting our obvious inexperience, Dee pulled out a bag of crab and a conch for bait. As he punctured the tip of a conch shell with a hatchet and removed the meat with a knife, he explained the basics. Bonefish are very spooky, he said. Our talking wouldn’t bother them, but banging on the boat or walking around would scare them away. If we felt a bite, we were to gently flick our wrists to hook the fish, let it run, then reel it in.

The briefing completed, Dee poled the boat into position. We cast our lines and waited quietly. Cicadas buzzed. Water slapped against the sides of the boat. A ray jumped from the water directly in front of us, and a yellow shark swam past, but our lines got nary a nibble.

Finally, Dee declared the fish spooked, and motored off to another location. This time we hit pay dirt as soon as our lines hit the water. All of us. At the same time. What came



The Club is built around a Scottish style links golf course on Winding Bay. Shown here is a panoramic view of spectacular No. 4.

next must have looked like a Keystone Cops routine, with each of us trying to reel in our respective fish, tangling up our lines in the process.

“What a mess,” Dee says, with slight disgust.

Two of the fish got away in the confusion. But we were hooked. Bonefish were fun. The fish were small but feisty. My husband had managed to pull his out of the water, a large-eyed silver beauty about six pounds. We had better luck after that, reeling in the fish about half the time.

That evening, we watched an amazing Bahamian sunset from the Club’s open-air restaurant and toasted our success. In all, we had captured six fish each in a half-day excursion. Under the influence of Bahama Breezes, our accomplishment felt momentous.

Over the next few days, we sampled most of what the resort had to offer, including a boat trip to Hope Town on a nearby cay, a charming village with a candy-cane lighthouse and rows

of neat, trim houses in Easter-egg colors.

All in all, it was a memorable visit. If I have one qualm about the Abaco Club, it’s that the service is not as polished as some of the other Ritz-Carlton-managed properties. One reason may be that the resort, by law, must employ a majority of islanders, who may not understand American luxury resort standards. But what they lack in shine, they make up for in genuine friendliness and a sincere desire to serve. Would I go back? To quote Archie, “I wouldn’t say no.” ☺

STRATOS Details

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