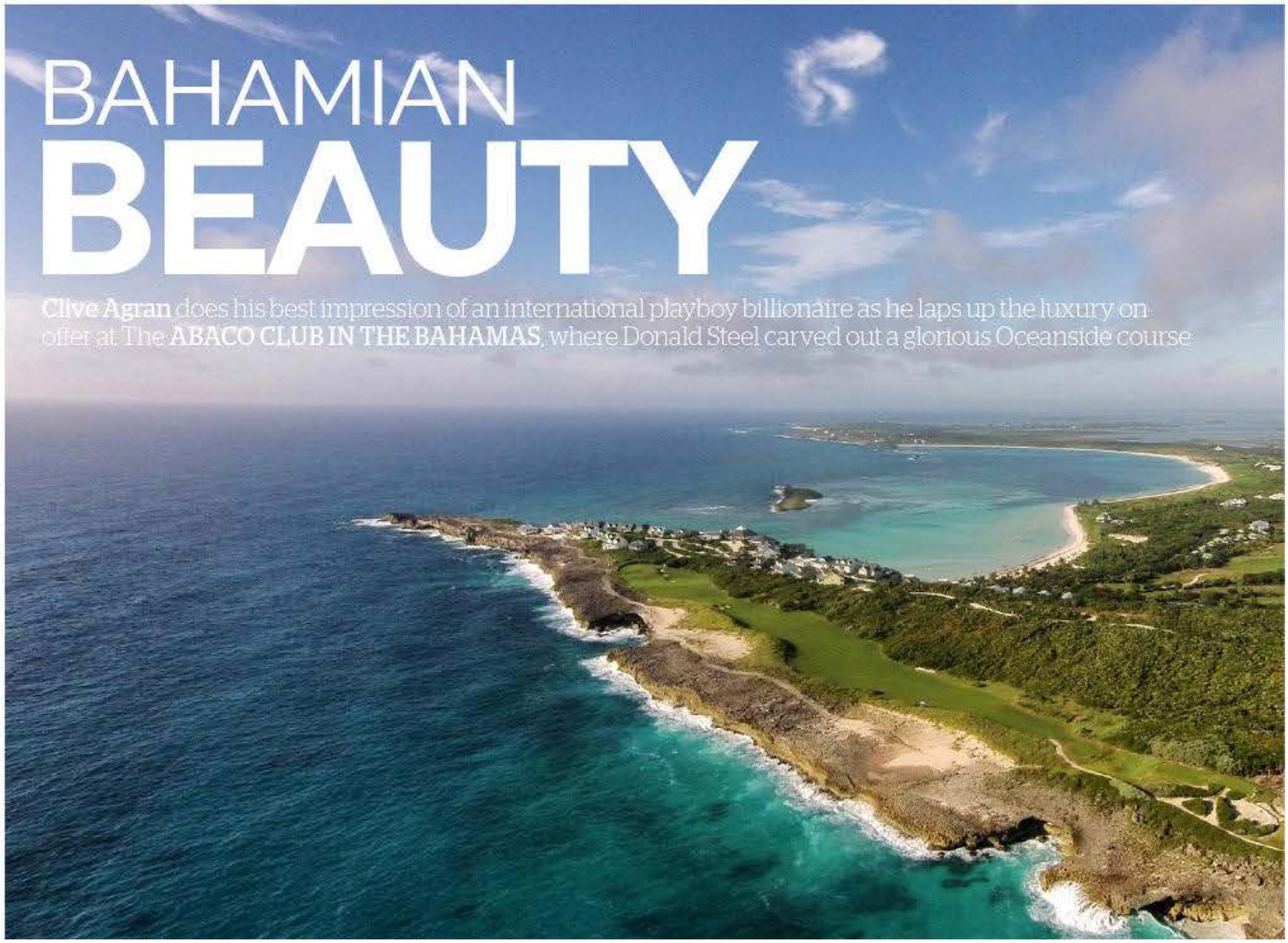
TRAVEL REVIEW

BAHAMIAN BEAUTY

Clive Agran does his best impression of an international playboy billionaire as he laps up the luxury on offer at The **ABACO CLUB IN THE BAHAMAS**, where Donald Steel carved out a glorious Oceanside course



Simply mention that you are going to the Bahamas, stand back and watch the predictable reaction of friends and family as they exhibit an unattractive mix of astonished disbelief and undiluted envy.

The fact that these inoffensive islands lying a little to the east of the southern tip of Florida have come to be synonymous with self-indulgence, extravagance and high-living is perhaps partly due to the popular perception of them as a tropical tax haven providing a perfect playground for the super rich and hugely famous.

Well, the Abaco Club will certainly do nothing to alter this image as its unashamed upmarket appeal is to the fabulously wealthy seeking luxurious exclusivity. Peter de Savary, the club's founder, had a knack for knowing what the well-heeled wanted and created a string of top-notch boltholes including Skibo Castle in Scotland and Bovey Castle on Dartmoor.

DONALD STEEL DESIGNED THE BREATHTAKING 18-HOLE COURSE AT WINDING BAY

The formula he employed is surprisingly simple. Find a fabulous site in a spectacular setting well away from the great unwashed; create quality accommodation that combines comfort with something distinctly different; provide a rich array of activities to ensure your guests are always happily occupied; generate a supremely relaxed and friendly atmosphere; and, finally, price it beyond the reach of common folk to keep it exceedingly private, gloriously quiet and frightfully exclusive. De Savary knew what his wealthy clients wanted and gave it to them with coconuts on top at the Abaco Club.

Although the name has been re-fashioned so that's it's now known as the Abaco Club on Winding Bay and the property has been recently acquired by Southworth Development, a company based in Massachusetts, the glorious experience has not changed at all. In fact, with work nearing completion on a new driving range and short-game area, and plans to construct a nearby marina already well advanced, the prospects for the place have never shown brighter, and a new mood of optimism is evident throughout the resort.

Whereas fishing, walking along the sandy beach, tennis, cycling, snorkelling and sailing are important ingredients in the overall mix, golf is clearly the key component, and a large chunk of the sizeable investment that has been sunk into this previously undiscovered corner of the charming island of Abaco has helped create an outstanding course.

Purists might quibble at the somewhat outrageous description of it as 'Scottish style tropical links', as you will never for a moment mistakenly imagine you are in Aberdeen not Abaco. But by the time you have sunk your last putt on the 7,123-yard course, instead of assuming the quote originates in a malt whisky or rum cocktail, you will understand what lies behind it.

The first four holes run parallel to the dazzling white sands and turquoise water of Winding Bay. Cute one-bedroom cabanas in pretty pastel shades initially obscure your view of the sea. Be patient, for the wait is well worthwhile. All is revealed when you reach the fourth green, but let your eyes adjust to the almost blinding spectacle of the breathtaking beach before

attempting a putt.

Classic links courses traditionally follow a nine out, nine back pattern and Donald Steel's design does its best to adhere to this historic template. However, to accommodate a mini-loop of four holes that provides a final flourish, it has been abbreviated here to seven out and seven back, with the holes running east to west along a narrow neck of land stretching between Winding Bay and Yellow Wood Creek.

Although the terrain is essentially fairly flat, the wind has sculpted genuine dunes, and the consequent mounds, bumps, ridges and hollows help create an unmistakeable 'linksy' feel, which is markedly superior to the horribly contrived so-called 'links-like' courses that are manufactured all too frequently both on clay and hundreds of miles inland.

The bunkers, too, appear natural. Generously proportioned and full of sugary white sand, they threaten both tee shots and approaches, and oblige you to plot your way carefully.

Invariably raised, frequently tiered and with a mass of subtle borrows, the greens are both decidedly tricky and an authentic recreation of what you might find stretched along the Fife coast. Dangerous little run-off hollows that suck balls down into them faster than a disappearing pina colada on a hot afternoon, lurk alongside the greens with more menace than a basking shark.

"DANGEROUS LITTLE RUN-OFFS SUCK GOLF BALLS INTO THEM FASTER THAN A DISAPPEARING PINA COLADA ON A HOT AFTERNOON"

The fairways are generous and sympathetically shaped to encourage the ball back into the middle. However, stray too far off line, and the slopes work the other way and roll you into the colourful but inhospitable brush that skirts most holes.

The only point at which you might regret eschewing a buggy in favour of walking this gentle course is as you leave the 14th green and begin a steep ascent to the 15th tee. However, the fatigue will soon be forgotten when you take in the glorious panorama that awaits you at the top. What makes both the course and the Abaco Club unique in the area is the significant elevation provided by the rocky bluff that resembles a gnarled old finger pointing into the ocean. The views from the final four holes and the prices of the adjacent properties are almost equally spectacular.

The best, however, is undoubtedly saved until last as the 18th is one of those majestic holes that make you glad you took up golf. A sweeping par five that runs along the cliff top with glorious views over the sea on both sides, it is surely destined to make its way into any decent selection of golf's greatest finishing holes.

Reserved for the handful of wealthy members lucky enough to own property here, and a sprinkling of guests, the course is absurdly uncrowded, so there are no tee times and you are more likely to record an albatross than be held up or pressed from behind. So if you need any motivation to make oodles of dosh, the Abaco Club on Winding Bay should provide it. It is simply the perfect place to relax and have fun. Anything further removed from the hassle and aggravation of everyday life is almost impossible to imagine.

GUESTS CAN STAY IN A RANGE OF LUXURIOUS PRVATE CHALETS

Clive Agran was a guest of the Abaco Club. For more information visit www.theabacoclub.com, or email info@TheAbacoClub.com.