

BAHAMIAN BEAUTY

By Peter Robinson Created: November 1, 2017



It's easy to see why Darren Clarke, and other tour pros, spend so much time at The Abaco Club. The place is pure paradise, and has a relaxed atmosphere that will make you truly feel as though you have gotten away from it all.

THE ABACO CLUB

Largely spared the wrath of 2017's horrendous hurricane season, the Abaco Club is pure paradise when it comes to Bahamas escapes.

AT FIRST, I DIDN'T KNOW WHERE TO LOOK OR EVEN STAND, TO SOAK UP AND TRULY APPRECIATE THE ABACO CLUB.

So, positioned on the Cliff House patio perched high above Winding Bay, I listened intently to Northern Irishman Darren Clarke, the 2011 Open champion and most recent European Ryder Cup captain. The likable Clarke, an Abaco ambassador, was dispensing food and drink advice, two categories in which he's well versed.

"You can't make a bad choice here," said Clarke, Irish eyes glinting in the Caribbean sunset.

Clarke was talking about the menu but he could have been referring to pretty much anything. The Abaco Club, on Great Abaco Island, can be a place to come and play golf, practise, bonefish, scuba dive, or sit around and soak in the sun.

Whatever you choose to do, ending at Flippers Bar on the beach, or high above at the Cliff House, is about as close to idyllic as you can get.

I called home just as the sun was setting and my six-year-old daughter thought she was looking at a green-screen background.

Too beautiful to be real.

Beautiful but not easy. In fact, if it's your first time playing The Abaco Club's golf course and the wind is blowing, your self-confidence may be wounded. The layout is less difficult off the tee but as an approach-shot course, it's very easy to see why touring pros came to this place to keep their game sharp. Land it in the wrong spot and you'll give new meaning to the term short-sided.

Hurricane Update

The Abaco Club and the island of the same name suffered minimal damages from Hurricanes Irma and Maria, though both storms did pass through the southern islands of the Bahamas. As Irma and Maria painfully showed, travelling in the Caribbean during Hurricane season (August to November) comes with risks and should probably be avoided.

The entire layout — designed by Brits Donald Steel and Tom Mackenzie — is fast and firm but its 7,111 yards is so full of nuance, you'll never be bored. Interestingly, the routing starts by going outward for seven holes then inward for another seven, parallel to the shore the entire time, and with enough elevation to allow for eyes on the sea. Then, starting at No. 15, things really get interesting, with two par 4s playing around a deep rocky depression with the 16th, in your humble scribbler's view, being the best hole on the course. Next, the spectacular par-3 17th sits adjacent to the ocean, the spray from which is a fixture even on calm days, while the 18th is a 572-yard walk home where you'll rue the fact you might have to catch a flight out of this place.

One person who doesn't have to is Clarke. He first came to The Abaco Club at the behest of his acclaimed agent, Chubby Chandler, over a decade ago when it was under previous ownership. He was married on its beach a couple years ago and spends a large swath of his time there, with more to come as he plays the PGA Tour Champions in 2018. Clarke spent the golf equivalent of a gap year waiting to turn 50 and using The Abaco Club as his base to go to various broadcasting/corporate gigs and a few competitive tournaments.

With his two sons now in their late teens, a typical Clarke day involves a trip to the gym, the range and practice area, then fishing, not necessarily in that order. He gets around The Abaco Club in the golf cart gifted to him by the European Tour for captaining its 2016 Ryder Cup team at Hazeltine.

It's quite a life and Clarke knows it.

Clarke is not the only touring pro who lives at The Abaco Club. South African Thomas Aiken, who has played in Europe and on both the Web.com and PGA Tours (he made headlines a couple years back when he had to use his wife as an emergency caddie and then promptly won the African Open), also makes his home there.

The Abaco Club also hosted an event on the Web.com Tour in January, part of a two-tournament swing that circuit had through the Bahamas. The two tournaments were like Jekyll and Hyde: The Abaco Club playing tough but fair, while two weeks earlier Greg Norman's course at the Sandals Emerald Bay Resort on Great Exuma among the highest scoring in Web.com Tour history.

Through brutal in January for the pros, Emerald Bay's back nine is a sight for sore eyes, playing along the ocean in a classic resort course setting.

Other great options on the 700-island archipelago that makes up the Bahamas are the One&Only Ocean Club in Nassau, with a Tom Weiskopf-designed course that hosts the LPGA Tour's Pure Silk Bahamas event, and Grand Lucayan on Grand Bahama Island, which boasts an acclaimed Robert Trent Jones, Jr. design.

If You Go

The Abaco Club is a private club that rents out its properties. Prices range from \$400-\$700 (all figures US) a night for one-bedroom cabanas, to \$1,500-\$2,800 for multi-bedroom cottages. Estate homes are also available. Nassau is well-served by Canadian and American mainline carriers. It's a short flight to The Abaco Club from Nassau, into the airport at Marsh Harbour in Hope Town, a charming village that is the hub of the island. The airport has undergone a massive renovation and literally smelled of fresh paint while we were passing through. Marsh Harbour's airport is named for local hero Leonard M. Thompson, a Second World War fighter ace with the Royal Canadian Air Force who later had a long and distinguished career in the Bahamas as an aviator and politician.