

The Abaco Club on Winding Bay in the Bahamas marries world-class golf with private beaches and unparalleled fishing charters.



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WELCOME TO THE CLUB

BAREFOOT LUXURY IS THE ABACO CLUB'S MODEL, AND IT TAKES ONLY ONE VISIT TO EMBRACE ITS APPEAL

BY SHAUN TOLSON

I'm stuck. Again. In this battle between me and low tide, low tide is winning. And it's not close. In fact, I can cling only to the tiniest of moral victories: there's no one around to witness it.

During the final afternoon of my stay at The Abaco Club on Winding Bay, I've climbed into a sea kayak and ventured out to Sugar Key, a spit of land no more than 1,200 feet long, set only a quarter mile from the residential club's white sand beach. The tiny island offers tranquility and solitude to those wishing to further escape the club's already bucolic lifestyle. Four chaise lounges under two thatched umbrellas punctuate its sliver of sandy beach. Remote sunbathing, how-

ever, is not what brought me to the key.

I've made this aquatic pilgrimage to see—and hopefully paddle with—a flotilla of sea turtles that I've been told often inhabits the shallow, azure waters just off the key's rocky, western shore. That is, if I can ever get there.

The waters of Winding Bay are perpetually shallow, but at low tide their depth can drop to only a few inches in certain places, especially around the protected bay side. After multiple run-ins with discreetly positioned sandbars—encounters that each time required me to pull my kayak to marginally deeper water only a stone's throw away—I've finally reached the western tip of the island.

But there are no turtles.

Disappointed, I paddle alongside the rocky cliff face, enjoying a gentle breeze and the sun on my face. Suddenly, a dark, oblong piece of coral about ten yards ahead of me drifts out toward the deeper water, and I realize that it's not coral at all. The turtles are here.

In only a few minutes of paddling around the calm waters on this side of the key, I've encountered at least a half dozen turtles, some less skittish and more curious than others. One even floats only inches away from the bow of my kayak, poking its head above the surface to get a closer look at me. Some Abaco Club residents say that snorkeling with the turtles is possible, but today I'm content to observe them from above the water's surface.

BIRDIES IN THE BAHAMAS

Besides its pristine two-and-a-half-mile stretch of private beach and the serene, turtle-inhabited waters of Winding Bay, The Abaco Club is actually best known for

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF THE ABACO CLUB ON WINDING BAY

its superlative boating, fishing, and golfing experiences; the latter brought me to Great Abaco Island.

Standing on the first tee, you can see Flippers Beach Bar no more than 100 yards away and the inviting waters of the bay just beyond. Parrots swoop across the playing area as you walk down the first fairway, reminding you—in case you somehow forgot—that this is the Bahamas in all its glory.

It's not until you get to the fourth hole—a downhill par 3 whose green is framed by a tantalizing view of Winding Bay and the crescent of white sand along its edge—that you find yourself easily distracted from the task at hand. The course's oceanfront location also plays a pivotal role on the next hole, a short par 4 that doglegs slightly to the left, hugging the beach, tempting longer hitters (and anyone impervious to risk) to go for the green, hitting their tee shots over the edge of the beach.

Darren Clarke, the 2011 British Open champion and the property's club ambassador, opines that the oceanfront fifth could be the course's signature hole; however, a full round reveals numerous holes that could carry such a distinction. The entire



location is akin to an exclusive Caribbean resort, and the course itself is far more challenging than a typical resort layout.

"This is a proper golf course," says Clarke, who became a member back when the club opened in 2004. "The course is sensational and it's really not easy."

The course's degree of difficulty was a primary selling point when Clarke decided to buy a home here more than a decade ago. "First and foremost, it's important for me to have somewhere where I can come and work on my game," he says. "I didn't want a golf course where I could hit it anywhere and shoot 63 or 64. That's not conducive to getting myself



ready to play [on tour]. I wanted something that's going to be a test. When the wind blows here and I play off the tips, if I break 70, I've played really well."

Thankfully, the wind isn't howling during my round, but the course's innate difficulty still shines through. By the time I've reached the 18th hole—a dramatic par 5 that runs parallel to the property's rocky cliff and coastline only about 30 yards away—I've taken more swings than I would like, but the course's natural

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Clockwise from top: Abaco Club's fourth hole, the shallow waters off Sugar Key, a trophy fish caught just off shore, and a stretch of the club's private, white-sand beach.



The Abaco Club offers a range of residences to buy or rent, starting with one-bedroom golf cabanas (bottom), as well as beachfront and golf course estate homes.



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beauty and the friendliness of the staff prevent my blood pressure from rising.

“It’s an amazing view,” says the club’s head golf pro, as we stand on the 18th tee box, watching the waves crash against the cliff face. “And just think,” he adds, pointing to the horizon, “there’s nothing out there in that direction until you get to Africa.”

That fact actually impacts another of the club’s most popular activities.

REEL DIVERSITY

While The Abaco Club delivers pure Caribbean golfing bliss, its location also makes it a fisherman’s paradise. When Southworth Development acquired the property in 2014, the company partnered with Blackfly Lodge, a fishing resort set a few miles south along the island’s west coast, to provide members and guests with access to a team of expert guides and charters that specialize in saltwater fly fishing along the flats of Abaco Island.

When the deep-sea season booms in April, May, and June, The Abaco Club is ide-

ally located to take advantage of the big game species that migrate along the coast. While the waters of Winding Bay are incredibly shallow, the waters of the Atlantic Ocean off the island’s west coast (along the golf course’s 18th hole and farther north) drop to incredible depths very near the shore. So members and guests who book deep-sea charters out of nearby Little Harbor with the club’s concierge can expect a

lot of action in a short amount of time.

“You pull out of Little Harbor and you’re getting ready,” describes David Southworth, the development company’s founder and CEO. “Your line is in the water in ten minutes. I could recognize you on the 18th fairway and have something on my line.”

As Southworth explains, members can experience a full day of sailfish, marlin,

