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THE **GOLF INSIDERS**

“Inside Take”

The Abaco Club: Barefoot Luxury That Lives Up to the Hype

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How many times have you heard wonderful things about a place you are about to visit, only to be disappointed when you get there?

That was my fear when we recently visited The Abaco Club at Winding Bay in the Bahamas. Could it possibly rise to the lofty standards set by those visitors who preceded us?

My fear proved unwarranted.

From the moment you arrive at The Abaco Club at Winding Bay, you know you have entered the world of extraordinary.

After a short drive from Marsh Harbour International Airport, you are greeted at check-in with a warm smile, a cold rum drink and a freshly baked cookie. Then you are treated to a golf cart tour of the lushly landscaped island, visiting all the places that promise to make this a vacation full of as much activity, or as little, as you could possibly want.

After the tour you are given a personal golf cart for use throughout your stay, and the promise of assistance with anything you need to make this a memorable getaway.

Many will be perfectly content lounging by the calm and colorful waters of Winding Bay. Flippers Beach Bar is right there with a willing crew to quench your thirst with a wide variety of island drinks throughout the day, while also serving breakfast and lunch. And you can't beat the view.

As tempting as that sounds however, you'll want to take advantage of some of what this impressive club has to offer. And I would start with a round of golf on the links-style golf course at The Abaco Club, host to a Web.Com Tour event each January.

The course offers a tour-level challenge, especially with its elevated, undulating greens that are protected by deep bunkers and run-off areas that swallow golf balls and provide a variety of options for attempting to save par.

Many of the fairways are bordered on both sides by vast waste bunkers, and at least a half dozen holes play along the shoreline of either Winding Bay on the front nine or the Atlantic Ocean on the back, providing stunning views.



When I played there in June the course was in immaculate condition. I felt as if I should email an apology to superintendent Matt DiMase each time I took a divot on an approach shot. Never saw a bare spot, and even took off my shoes and walked barefoot on one fairway just to see if the turf felt as good as it looked.

Most of the wide variety of holes are memorable, none more so than the closing four. No. 15 tee sits high atop a bluff, accentuating the elevation change that is so unique to the Bahamas. No. 16 is a par four that plays around an old quarry, uphill to a green from which the Atlantic Ocean comes into view.

If you had to choose a signature hole for photography, it would probably be the par three 17th, which is bordered on the right by a cliff feeding down to the Atlantic, very much in view throughout the hole. If you have a healthy imagination, you might think you were standing on one of the many holes overlooking the dramatic Fife coastline in Scotland.

My choice for best hole would be the 18th, a marvelous par five that hugs the rocky coastline from an elevated tee down a right-sloping fairway to an elevated green. Architects Donald Steele and Tom Mackenzie definitely utilized this amazing setting to the utmost on the closer.

A world-class practice facility is there for those wishing to sharpen their skills, including a short-game practice area that rivals any I've seen. Homeowner, club member and - oh yes, Open Champion - Darren Clarke utilizes the practice area when he is away from tour events.

DINING

The Abaco Club offers two choices. Flippers Beach Bar is the more relaxed option serving breakfast, lunch and occasionally specialty dinner – a la The Burger Bar on Friday nights – highly recommended. It matches the overall slogan of The Abaco Club – barefoot luxury – with a Tiki bar, sidewalk café kind of feel. From your seat in the open air at Flippers you can watch the sun rise or set while overlooking the sandy white beaches and the various shades of blue in Winding Bay.

The appropriately named Cliff House sits atop one of the highest points on the island overlooking Winding Bay and the daily sunsets. Nightly dinners at the octagonal shaped Cliff House feature the fresh catch of the day as well as many other delightful selections. Close out your night with a drink at the Cliff House bar or out on the poolside patio.

Pete's Pub is not officially part of the club offerings. But you don't want to miss it during your trip to The Abaco Club. Just let your concierge know you'd like to go and you'll be shuttled to this unique bar and dining experience a short ride away. If you are looking for white glove fine dining, Pete's is not for you. But if you want to relax, listen to some tunes in your shorts or swimsuit and enjoy a fresh, delicious meal, this is a fun place to go.

ACTIVITIES

Every water activity imaginable is available at The Abaco Club. It's the perfect setting. The small, offshore barrier islands and cays that surround Great Abaco make this an ideal location for boating and sailing. One of the largest reef systems in the world, stretching for more than 120 miles, is home to innumerable species of beautiful sea life, from dolphins to sea turtles to brightly colored tropical fish. So snorkeling is an obvious choice.

Open Champion Darren Clarke spends weeks at a time at his home at The Abaco Club with his family, and works on his game there. But one reason he absolutely loves the place is the fishing, specifically the saltwater fly-fishing that he calls "some of the best in the world."

If you are looking for a more relaxed day of leisure, the beach at Winding Bay is the perfect choice. A coral reef and a



small island, Sugar Cay, provide protection against the rough ocean waves, creating a tranquil, colorful and smooth body of water perfect for swimming, paddle boarding or boating, kayaking and more. Or simply enjoy the beautiful setting from a lounge chair under a natural palm-frond umbrella.

A full-service spa, gym, tennis courts and complimentary bicycle rentals round out the choices.

ACCOMMODATIONS

Though The Abaco Club is private, you can visit as a guest up to three times, choosing among luxurious rental options that start at \$495 per night. The one-bedroom, octagonal cabanas are situated among the beautiful tropical foliage between the first fairway and the two-mile stretch of the white sand beach. They are well appointed with four-poster beds, a comfortable sitting area in front of the flat-screened TV, and a screened wrap-around porch that is perfect for morning coffee or late afternoon cocktails.

The 2-, 3- and 4-bedroom cottages rest comfortably on the upper ridge of The Abaco Club, overlooking the ocean or the bay. The colorful island cottages offer several turnkey furnishing packages and floor plans, all of which provide ample outdoor areas for taking full advantage of your tropical surroundings.

The grand oceanfront estate homes are just what you would expect, luxury beyond belief. And all of these vacation options are available for purchase when you decide to make this private club community a permanent getaway from life's everyday hassles.

Yes, our trip to The Abaco Club matched the hype. There is something magical about this place, and the future is even brighter. Since taking ownership of The Abaco Club a few years back, the Southworth Development has made steady improvements, with more on the books.

