

Going Bahamas — a long weekend in Nassau

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What struck me first about the Bahamas was the friendliness of its people.

Arriving in Nassau on New Providence Island with my husband, we were greeted by a local band playing folk songs in the airport arrivals hall and welcoming customs officers, followed by the most pleasant taxi ride we have had in a long time.

Chatting with our driver, James, about everything from the weather forecast ("Sunny, no rain") to the best tips for local food ("Frankies, for the conch fritters") and souvenir tips ("Straw Market for shopping and rum cake"), the 25-minute ride into Nassau town passed in the blink of an eye and before we knew it, we had arrived at our final destination — Graycliff Hotel.

Originally built in 1740 by famous pirate Captain John Howard Grayson, the hotel became Nassau's first inn in 1844, before hosting such nobility as the Duke and Duchess of Windsor (formerly King Edward VIII), Lord Mountbatten and Sir Winston Churchill.

Graycliff conveys a mysterious, nearly melancholic atmosphere — a house detached from time, a piece of England far away from home. We, too, were treated like royalty on check-in.

After being given a tour of the colonial house, the lush gardens and our room above the Humidor Churrascaria Restaurant, we were ready for some "island time."

First time's a charm

This was our first trip to the Caribbean, and while we did not really know what to expect, we were certainly hoping for vast white beaches, crystal blue water with tropical sea life and a slower pace of life.

Like a scattered string of pearls, the islands of the Bahamas stretch alongside Florida about 500 miles across the Caribbean Sea. Only a small number of the 700 islands are inhabited.

Nassau, the capital, is home to around 70 percent of the 350,000 Bahamians. What used to be a sleepy, quiet town is now the economic, political and infrastructural hub of the nation, and its narrow streets can be crowded at times.

A popular attraction for shopping is Nassau's Straw Market, which is conveniently located on Bay Street, the main shopping mile. Here locals, mostly women, sell Bahamian straw works, T-shirts, accessories, wood carvings and other souvenirs.

In the 1940s the straw-vending industry replaced the dying local sponge industry. Today, finely crafted items such as baskets, table mats, handbags, hats and dolls are made of dried leaves of palm trees and sisal plants.

Libations and the lagoon

Outside the market we were approached by a local who sold coconuts from the back of his car. With much skill and an impressive machete he chopped the coconut, then beheaded it and offered the delicious coconut milk with a straw to my bemused husband, who clearly would've liked a go with the machete himself.



PHOTOS PROVIDED BY CARTER WIBKE

The pool at Graycliff Hotel, an icon in Nassau, was a favorite of many members of England's royal family.

As if that were not enough for \$5, after the first sip a generous portion of gin was added to the cocktail by the friendly vendor.

The sun seemed even hotter for the next hour or so.

The beaches in downtown Nassau are small, crowded and devoid of the white sand we were associating with tropical islands, so we opted for a day trip to the Blue Lagoon.

After a scenic boat ride through Nassau's historic harbor, we reached the private island, which for more than 60 years was owned by the McCutcheon family. John F. McCutcheon was The Chicago Tribune's chief foreign correspondent and a Pulitzer Prize winner who named the property Treasure Island. It was known by that name in the Bahamas for decades until it was sold to L.A. Meister, the current owner, in 1979.

A day at the beach

The white beaches, turquoise waters and swaying palm trees on the island surpassed all my expectations. I enjoyed a day of lying in a double hammock and reading, while visitors around me snorkeled, kayaked or tried the paddleboats.

Blue Lagoon Island is also home to several dolphins and sea lions, but they are held in cages. Although they live in their natural habitat, it made me uneasy to see them in captivity.

Another, closer choice for a day on the beach is Paradise Island, which is connected by a toll bridge and ferry boats to New Providence Island. This is the island of millionaires' villas, beach clubs and the mega-resort Atlantis, around which the beaches are pretty crowded. But walking a few hundred meters is worth it, rewarding you with the relaxing sound of waves hitting the pristine shoreline and hardly anyone else in sight.



This is a sampling of the many items available for sale at Nassau's famed Straw Market.

The food

There is plenty of choice for eaters in Downtown Nassau, but following James' advice we made our way to Frankie's — or Frankie Gone Bananas, as the restaurant is properly called.

Sitting under the palm roof on the balcony we tried local specialties such as fresh grouper and the famed conch fritters, which were delicious and in texture, I thought, similar to squid rings.

Conch shells also constitute a popular souvenir, selling for about \$10. The Bahamian dollar is pegged to the U.S. dollar on a 1:1 basis and you can pay in U.S. money.

Colonial past

The Bahamas' colonial past is present everywhere, from the architecture of the buildings to the red postal boxes placed outside the Parliament Buildings and Queen Elizabeth's portrait on the currency.

Since 1973 the island nation has been

part of the British Commonwealth, and English remains the national language. Our long weekend was over too soon. When James drove us back to the



A street vendor sells coconuts from the trunk of his car in Nassau.

airport, I glanced at the wide blue ocean for the last time thinking about the rum cake stowed safely in my luggage.

On a cold winter afternoon I will let the sugary,

moist delicacy melt in my mouth. I will close my eyes, and it will take me back to the white beach, turquoise waters and swaying palm trees of Blue Lagoon Island.

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