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A PILGRIMAGE IN THE BAHAMAS

by Russ Stark

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DEPARTURE FROM THE NORM

It's 3:30 a.m. and I'm as awake as I can be after lying my head on my pillow just two hours ago. My cab to the airport will soon arrive to steal me away from my family and deposit me on a jet bound for The Bahamas. I'm reluctant to leave. I'm eager to press my toes into the Caribbean sand.

Being picked up by my Bahamian host at the Nassau Airport in April is like being greeted by my aunt and uncle, with family in tow, in Tampa, Florida. Big smiles and extended arms. Immediate and genuine concern about my flight. Abbreviated inquiries on the whereabouts of my luggage. Obligatory remarks and probing questions intended to remind me of the obvious temperature difference between where I was this morning and the ideal temperature where I stand at the moment, as if the humidity had suddenly softened my brain and caused momentary delusional thoughts of barometric phenomena. I do struggle. But only to keep up with questions from Nassau Promotion Board Representatives Renea Knowles, Kristal Bethel, and Prescott. These are only the formalities. These are only the first few minutes of a seven-day journey.

Joining my Bahamian hosts on this "familiarization tour" is like being corralled into my cousin's room to see and hear his latest interests and accomplishments. A new girlfriend. A new football trophy. A glimpse at the chaotic order in his daily life. I am a fly on the wall. I am a bird watching from a wire. I am a patient duck watching the bread crumbs gather on the shore until I feel compelled to waddle in and nibble on the abundance.

I feel out of place. I feel taken in. If The Bahamas are a family of islands, then I am a new family friend. Suddenly, I feel too self-aware to be comfortable with my newly adoptive family. Am I worthy of their gesture? Can I live up to their expectations? I am certain I am not and cannot. Quickly I realize that my captures, my new friends, expect nothing of me at the moment and want simply to share the true natural treasures of The Bahamas—the Bahamian people and their way of life—with me. Yes, my host wants me to use my skills to help build a better Bahamas.com and bring more business to the islands. But first and foremost, they want me to see the islands they see: rich, diverse, grounded Bahamian culture held together by a people who thrive on and value human interaction.

DAY ONE :: Nassau

Our white stretch-limo brings us directly from the airport to lunch at Twin Brothers restaurant, a local hangout. For appetizers, we dive right in to conch, (pronounced "konk") a sweet mollusk and Bahamian staple. Soon the table is covered with various preparations of conch; conch fritters, conch salad, cracked conch, steamed conch, and fried conch. I started slow, sticking with conch fritters, bits of conch mixed with scallions and bread rolled into ping-pong-sized balls and deep-fried. If it was on a stick, it would win blue ribbons at the Minnesota State Fair. It's warm and greasy. It's delicious. It's a promising first encounter with Bahamian fare. For an entrée I enjoy the fried grouper.

After lunch we're off to the Ardastra Gardens, Zoo and Conservation Centre for up-close experiences with many native plants and animals, including, but not limited to, the world-famous marching flamingos, goats, parrots, ducks, striped lemurs, and wandering male peacocks that are unafraid of us while they shamelessly display six-foot diameter arches of blue-green feathers. I think about my son. He would have slouched and turned down the conch fritters at the restaurant, but the lemurs and peacocks would lift his spirit.

Next we drop our bags at the Radisson on Cable Beach, but not before the bellhop gives us his mother's name and phone number on Cat Island. He says to call her when we arrive there, and she'll cook us a meal. He also volunteers the beer we would find in her fridge. Marc Gowland pockets the name and number with full intentions of taking this friendly man up on his offer. From the hotel we ventured downtown Nassau near Prince George Wharf to haggle for local crafts at the straw market. Bahamian women sat weaving baskets and bags in front of their vendor stands. Bahamian men stood sculpting indigenous mahogany into animal-shaped figurines of all sizes. I escaped with souvenirs for my wife and two sons at bargain prices.

We returned to the hotel for dinner. By this time an aggressive migraine triggered by sleep deprivation, erratic diet, six hours of air travel, and an afternoon of stop-and-go ground transportation has crippled my ability to follow the simplest conversation. I opt out, as we say, of being entertained for dinner. I retire to my room at 7:30pm, medicate myself, darken the room, and fall asleep for my first night in The Bahamas.

DAY TWO :: Nassau

My first activity today is a dolphin encounter on Blue Lagoon Island off the eastern shore of Nassau. After a 20-minute ferry ride with 100 or so eager adults and children, Laura Fischer and I arrive in a lagoon that was the backdrop for the popular T.V. show, *Gilligan's Island*. We de-boat and listen to instructions meant to prevent us from accidentally starting something with a dolphin that we can't finish. For your reference, don't pet below the belly button. Within minutes I'm carefully petting, embracing, kissing, and dancing with a bottle-nosed dolphin. No long good-byes here, just a back flip with a twist. I buy a photo of my new dolphin friend spitting water in my face.

We board the ferry and return to Nassau for dinner at Compass Point with the group. We tour individual huts on stilts lining the beach, complete with kitchenette, king-sized bed, full bath, and cable and Internet access just in case guests want to reconnect after being serenely disconnected. In the dining room I choose the grilled duck with peaches on French toast drizzled with mango syrup. For dessert we all share a plate of guavaduff (I'm not sure of this spelling, everyone I asked spelled it differently), a Bahamian specialty made from guava-stuffed sweet pastry that's rolled and sliced and covered with a creamy vanilla-flavored sauce—the ingredients of which, despite my efforts to acquire them, remain unknown.

Our hosts this evening, Greg from the Ministry of Tourism and Maxine from the Nassau Promotion Board, speak of the importance of letting visitors to Bahamas.com openly express their likes and dislikes of their experiences in The Bahamas: "Bad feedback equals good information because we learn where we are failing."

The resort manager echoes the sentiment, calling attention to the patron surveys on the table—his newest means of getting feedback. He asks us to complete a survey before we leave. Then he encourages us to stop by and say hi the next time we're on Nassau. I assured him I would return to Nassau simply for the grilled duck. When I do return, I'll ask for the manager to give him my feedback in person.

DAY THREE :: Nassau

First stop, Sandals, a beautifully manicured all-inclusive resort. A wonderful facility to enjoy your vacation, if you're not interested in experiencing the true Bahamas.

Now it's afternoon. Nate Hinz, Marc Gowland, and I are slated for a thriller boat ride aboard a 1000-horsepower Airborne racing vessel converted for tours to accommodate 48 passengers. We sat in the last row and were soaked to the bone within five minutes of departing the dock. I laughed until I cried. I held tight until my arms were numb. I was a willing recipient of a salt-water exfoliation treatment that doubled as a 45-minute amusement park ride.

Now it's evening. A bus takes Tom Kunau, Jim Park, Nate Hinz, and I inland for a People-to-People experience in East Nassau. Away from the busy beaches filled with vacationing Anglo families, we see bustling communities of African-Bahamian families. People-to-People is to The Bahamas as the foreign-exchange student program is to the United States. Only with People-to-People, the intention is for a single, intimate dinner that allows for a visitor to The Bahamas to meet a Bahamian with similar interests. In many cases, as I'm told by Priscilla, director of People-to-People, these one-time encounters often turn into lifetime friendships and reciprocal meetings around the world. Then we arrived at our destination, the home of James and Janice. Their last name escapes me, but their hospitality made a lasting impression. On their own dime, our hosts prepared and served us fried chicken, jack fish, baked macaroni, conch salad, peas and rice, and Guavaduff. Delicious food, genuine one-on-one conversation, open cultural exchange, and another adoptive family.

DAY FOUR :: Nassau to Abaco

Off to Abaco Island aboard a six-passenger Piper Aztek aircraft with Marty Davis and Laura Fischer. Our pilot, Faron Sawyer, takes us north at 185 knots, 2400 rpm, reaching an altitude of 7600 feet. The back two seats hold our backpacks. The middle two seats hold Marty and Laura. The co-pilot seat holds me. And the pilot seat holds our only hope of seeing our families again. Missing is the familiar sensation of being pressed into my seat by massive jet engines. Instead I feel afloat, drifting, as though the smallest lick of wind could flip this hunk of metal over like an autumn leaf that has departed from its tree. I scan the instrument panel, take a picture of my knees straddling seemingly toy-sized steering equipment, and turn around to capture nervous smiles. After 102 miles, Faron sets us down on a white coral-colored runway with the touch of a mosquito.

On the ground we are greeted by Abaco native Wynsome Ferguson, our hostess and guide for two days and two nights on Abaco Island.

"Win some?" I ask carefully to confirm the pronunciation of her name.

"Yes, like you win some and you lose some. I'm Wynsome."

"Got it."

Wynsome drives us to the Treasure Cay Hotel. Check in to Marina-side room. Drop bags. Marty goes scuba diving. Laura and I hop on a ferry to Green Turtle Cay to tour the quaint, historic town of New Plymouth which was settled by Loyalists shortly after the American Revolutionary war. Colonial architecture. Narrow streets. Origin of the Goombay Smash. Home to Mr. Lowe (after three attempts I still fail to catch his first name) master model ship builder and descendant of New Plymouth founder, Sir Albert Lowe. We lunch at the Green Turtle Club, popular stop for sailors seeking a secluded resort town. For lunch I order deep-fried grouper, French fries, and iced-tea. I concentrate on people watching while Laura and Wynsome catch up on girl talk.

We return to meet up with Marty for an afternoon on a beach rated "Top Ten" by *National Geographic*. While I soak up multiple applications of sunscreen, I find irony in today's history lesson. Christopher Columbus may have discovered The Bahamas in 1492, and Sir Albert Lowe may have been the first Loyalist to settle here two centuries ago, but at this moment, even though my teammates are within shouting distance, the beach beneath me is all mine.

DAY FIVE :: Abaco

It's 9:45 a.m. and I'm running late for the ferry to Guana Cay. I chose to have breakfast by myself and get in an hour of writing. I was on time until, while walking back to my room along the dock to drop off my new 12-inch Mac after a quiet breakfast and hour of writing, two women in yacht attire stop me to comment on my "cute little Mac." They've never seen a Mac so small. I explain that I'm here on business research and this little Mac comes in handy for writing down what I find.

"That's a fun job you have," they say, stating the obvious.

"Yes," I agree, telling them that I'm working with a team to build a new Bahamas.com. Their husbands arrived just in time to hear that I'm working on the Bahamas Web site, and before I could excuse myself, I was receiving unsolicited instruction on how to make the site easier for the yachting community to access.

He enlightens me, "Don't make the common mistake of using big pretty pictures. I can't download them. When I'm coming into port and need to find where I can take my friends diving today, all I need is text. I'm only running on 96 baud, you know." Turns out he has a satellite dish and computer on his boat, as do most sailors on these waters, so I'm told. He excuses me. Turns out he and his party now have an appointment to keep. Which reminds me, so do I. It's 10 a.m. and I'm officially late.

Captain Ozzie Hall, a fifth-generation Bahamian of British decent, is waiting patiently. Wynsome and Vivian of the Promotion Board, Marty, Laura, and I depart on a 45-minute boat ride to Guana Cay. We're surrounded by yachts, fishing boats and sail boats of all sizes, and the shores and small Cays of Abaco, giving the appearance of a large Minnesota lake, only this lake has clear water no deeper than 15 feet, dock to dock. Marty and I learn from Ozzie that a man named Sinclair lives on Abaco and is currently building Abaco Net, a series of cell towers that allows boats to connect wirelessly as they enter Abaco waters. Marty pockets his name and number. We arrive and enjoy some quiet beach time, hunting for shells, working up an appetite for a pig roast lunch at Nippers Bar.

It's now 7 p.m. We're on mainland Abaco in the town of Marsh Harbour, walking into Abaco Beach Resort for dinner. 92-foot yachts line the slips, including the personal yachts of such sporting stars as Dale Earnhardt, Jr. and Greg Norman. Their boats are here, but they may not be. At \$150,000 a year just to keep a captain onboard, these boats are often chartered or filled with friends of the stars. With these insights our elegant hosts, John Neofito and Terry Eck, barely scratch the surface on the lifestyles of their clientele. It's intriguing, but I've heard enough to remind me that as cool as my job may be, it's far from the coolest. I order a Glenfiddich. For dinner I choose a greens salad with balsamic vinaigrette followed by coconut crusted grouper, mashed potatoes, and steamed vegetables with coconut curry sauce. Throughout the course of dinner, I find Neofito to be a Greek-Canadian, good story teller, brilliant businessman, world traveler, Guinness Book of World Records-holder for 24 hours of golf, and a new acquaintance who is eager to see me return with my family to witness the lavishness and excitement of a big-game fishing tournament. Wow. It would cost me two years' vacation savings just to be a spectator. I'm game.

DAY SIX :: Abaco to Bimini

I start the day with a rushed yet heartfelt goodbye to Wynsome, my new Bahamian friend who I will look up not if, but when, I return to Abaco. Marty, Laura, and I board another six-passenger Piper Aztek aircraft. Our pilot, Roland, takes us southwest at 185 knots, 2400 rpm, reaching an altitude of 7600 ft. bound for North Bimini Island, population 1600. We are graciously met by our hostess, Larmour Rolle, a mature native of Bimini. She takes us to the Big Game Resort to drop off luggage before our half-day bonefishing excursion.

My fishing guide for the afternoon is Ansil Saunders; he prefers a spin reel and conventional rod. It is 10 a.m. While Marty and Laura wait for Tommy, a fly-fishing guide, Ansil takes Vivian and me across the flats off Bimini's southeastern shore. In waters no deeper than three feet, we encounter starfish, barracuda, pelicans, eagle rays, box fish, mangrove trees, and, quite unexpectedly poking out of the water toward the sky like the legs of a stiffened dead bird, the landing gear of a downed plane. Shouting over the sound of the outboard motor, I asked Ansil, "What is that?" knowingly asking an ignorant question to get a feel for his personality.

"A plane that didn't make it." Ansil replies frankly, without raising his eyes from the water where they diligently seek the signs of bonefish. But his eyes aren't seeing any bonefish today. "The fish are not cooperating," he confesses. Save a few barracuda. Vivian reels in one. I reel in two. The skiff takes a run across the bay searching for the elusive bonefish.

Maybe it was his 70-year-old wise face or his 44 years as a fishing guide, I'm still not sure why, but I suddenly sensed that Ansil was much more than a bonefisherman.

"Ansil," I said, waiting for his attentive reply, "to me you seem to be the kind of man who knows the secret to happiness."

"The secret you're looking for I'm not sure," he replies humbly, "but I know fishing must be one of them."

"Yes, I suppose it is," I admit.

"Because A bad day of fishing beats a good day at work," he expounds, as if he were baiting me along and the moment came to set the hook.

I was hooked. Here, in a small boat on the flats near a tiny island in the Bahamas, I've met a man with the answers to life's biggest questions. I am still hooked, for he immediately cast another line.

"The other secret I'll tell you when we get to the creek," Ansil says, fishing for an inquiry.

"I have to wait?" I reply impatiently, "what's so special about the creek?"

Dropping the tone of his voice as if lowering an anchor to hold his boat steady in the current, Ansil states, "That's where I recited my 152nd psalm to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1968."

"You took Dr. King bonefishing?"

"I took him to the creek so he could write his sanitation speech. That's where I brought him in 1964 when he was here to write his acceptance speech for the Nobel Peace Prize."

"Dr. King came to Bimini twice to write speeches, and you were his guide?" I was so impressed I didn't mind being reeled in.

"It's quiet here. Look around you."

But I didn't need to look around, I had already noticed. I simply wanted to hear, see, this man's point of view. And, after stopping in the creek and tying a line from the boat's stern to a Mangrove tree, he offered it without hesitation.

"In 1968 Dr. King sat right here in my boat and told me that he was tired of hearing himself talk," Ansil confided, "he wanted to hear me tell him what made me so sure that God exists. So I recited what I call the 152nd psalm. And it goes like this..." Standing with his left foot on the edge of the boat and his right foot on the rear seat, Ansil eloquently pontificated for five minutes about the proof of God's existence in our immediate surroundings: "Boats and cameras are made by fools like me, but who except God could make the Mangrove tree...look around you and you'll find sermons in the stones, sermons in the stones."

These words are all I remember, but they are all I need remember. They are what I took away to share with my family and friends, like a fish seeking the school after being released back into the water. When Ansil was finished with his psalm, he had one last thing to share with me. He told me that when he finished reciting his psalm to Dr. King, tears were streaming down the Reverend's cheeks. Dr. King thanked him and went about writing his speech. That was April 1, 1968. Two days later Dr. King delivered a speech that included the phrase: "I've been to the mountaintop." On April 4, three days after sitting on a boat in the creek waters of Bimini with Ansil, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was shot dead at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis. Back in Bimini, a fisherman went fishing.

As I step off Ansil's boat late in the afternoon and thank him for his time and sermon, I search for a way to let him know I heard what he was saying in the creek. My thoughts immediately take me to Annie Dillard's prose in Pilgrim at Tinker Creek. Her appreciation for the details of nature reminded me of Ansil's psalm. Her book's title is uncanny. The fact that I have the book with me back at the hotel is serendipitous. So I mention Annie's book to Ansil and recommend he read her.

"Why don't you give me yours," Ansil requests, "you can always get another copy—I can't."

"Consider it yours," I say. I return to the hotel and inscribe my book to Ansil, thanking him for sharing so much with me, a stranger. I stop by his boat house later that evening and hand the book to him. He says thank you, and in return, hands me a picture of him and his granddaughter standing over a fresh catch of bonefish.

DAY SEVEN :: Bimini to Ft. Lauderdale

I'm aboard Chalk's Ocean Air flight 401, a Grumman Mallard float plane that moments ago took to the air from the sea, and is now headed for the tarmac in Ft. Lauderdale. I'm thinking about the beautiful islands behind me and my beautiful family at home. My wife and kids will recognize me despite my darkened hands, forearms, face, and feet. They will know my familiar walk and crooked smile. They will welcome me the way a Mangrove tree welcomes a tired pelican. But I can't stop thinking about how my family will not be greeting the exact same man they new. I've been thinking about this since that afternoon on a flats skiff with fisherman Ansil Saunders. After he shared his wisdom with me, I felt compelled to share an observation with him, the kind of observation I like to pass off as wisdom. "I believe that every person I meet and every experience I have in life has a hand in shaping who I am," I told him, "but only if I am open to letting such a transformation happen."

Right now, looking 3500 feet down at the reef formations and vegetation beneath the ocean's surface, I'm thinking about the changes hiding under my surface. If I'm as pliable as I think I am, my family will not know the entire person they will be welcoming home. A smile cracks my face like a wave breaking on a reef as I daydream of describing to Melissa and Max all the new magnificence and serenity and wonder and people I now possess within me. After this time away, I look forward to introducing myself to my family.

ARRIVAL AT A REALIZATION

Sun, sand, and sea are merely perimeters of the Islands of The Bahamas. At the core of the islands I found a big heart, open arms, and a way of seeing daily life, daily moments, that is all at once timeless and revolutionary. My encounters with a racial mixture of indigenous Bahamians are the experiences that follow me home. I feel fortunate and honored as the serenity of my seven days on the islands yields to the bustle of life back home. Only now do I realize that, in many ways, I felt at home the whole time I was away.



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