

BASKING IN THE BAHAMAS

The warmth and calm of tropical revitalisation might be closer to home than you imagine. It's only 100 miles of blue sky from Miami to Freeport in the Bahamas, and just a few miles more to find the beaches and golf courses of your sunniest daydreams

IT HAS NOW BEEN more than a year since Hurricane Dorian struck the Bahamas, in September 2019, which was the most intense tropical cyclone to strike the islands on record. The eye of this category five storm narrowly missed The Abaco Club [main picture] but did not spare the nearby town of Marsh Harbour, the island's largest town and home to most of the club's staff. The Abaco islands lost 60 people. The Treasure Cay Beach Resort and its Dick Wilson-designed golf course, to the north of Marsh Harbour, were also destroyed, but ongoing reconstruction there points to an exciting future.

To the destruction and despair, the local community responded with determination and speed. "Abaco Strong" is what they say and actions have backed up the simple, unifying message. Home owners and members at The Abaco Club offered compassion and generosity, opening up their exclusive homes to shelter hundreds of club staff, their families and other locals who were left homeless. Southworth Development, the owner and operator of The Abaco Club, acted quickly to set up the Abaco-Winding Bay Fund to assist the people of Abaco. Thanks to the generosity of many, with donations both large and small pouring in from Abaco Club members, Southworth sister club-members and caring citizens far and wide, more than \$3 million was quickly raised, including a \$1 million donation match from Southworth Development Chairman, Joe Dietch. Some of the fund was spent on bringing in 34 trailer homes, which were installed at the 600-acre club and opened up rent-free to staff and their families.

The sense of community at The Abaco Club has never been stronger and the sense of positivity is unflinching. The past cannot be changed but the future is bright and there for the taking.

BAREFOOT LUXURY

While Freeport on Grand Bahama is only 100 miles from the Florida shore, the string of Abaco islands are not much further; only 186 miles east of Palm Beach to be exact. Yet this haven of tropical tranquility feels like it is 1,000 miles from the mainland. From the white sands of Winding Bay, along the western fringes of Great Abaco, the panorama is defined by blue skies over the azure waters of the Sea of Abaco, with the occasional small uninhabited island or cay to which visitors can sail.

The Abaco Club, which hugs the tranquil crystal-clear waters of Winding Bay, is a private sporting club that sets the standard in the Bahamas for golf, water sports, fishing, island living, real estate, hospitality and as they aptly call it, for "barefoot luxury".

The 18-hole championship golf course is widely recognised as the finest in the Bahamas. It is a lush, tropical



The Abaco Club from the skies [top left], Flippers Beach Bar on Winding Bay [top right], Darren Clarke bone fishing [above], the 13th at Sandals Emerald Bay [right]

challenge yet the layout is shaped distinctly like an ancient Scottish links, complete with pot bunkers and fast-rolling, undulating oceanside greens. The fairways are not as firm-running as a true British links, and Scottish gorse is replaced by Bahamian palms, yet those who can steer their golf balls below the ocean breezes will often reap rewards here, in true links fashion.

The Abaco Club brought in British links specialists Donald Steel and Tom Mackenzie to design the course, which opened in 2004. Mackenzie told *Kingdom* at the time: “The mixture of tropical turquoises and cliff-top views is pretty potent.”

Properties at The Abaco Club come in three guises: the Estate Lots all have ocean views, many have their own beach access and they vary in size between one and two acres. Homes can be built on the plots, which start at \$1.5 million. Cottages of three to five bedrooms are available from \$3.35 million, while one-bedroom cabanas start from \$400,000. The Abaco Club is a private member’s club but prospective members are welcome to make one-off discovery visits.

There is a blissful calm to be found here in every direction you look

Being a member here is made even more special by the feeling of family created with its Southworth sister club members, who often enjoy group pilgrimages to this tropical oasis for friendly cross-club competitions and long relaxing days on the beach. Abaco Club members also enjoy privileges across Southworth’s portfolio of luxury private clubs and award-winning golf courses across the globe.

Other than sport on the beautiful golf course, fishing, island hopping, snorkeling and SCUBA diving on the surrounding coral reef head the list of activities here. Darren Clarke, the former European Ryder Cup captain and [British] Open champion, has long been a homeowner at The Abaco Club, and these days he can be found casting out a bone fishing line into the warm shallows more often than teeing up. You can’t blame him. After a career of intense competition on tour and a cell phone that never stops buzzing, there is a blissful calm to be found just a few feet out from the beach.

GLINT OF AN EMERALD

The Exumas are a string of over 300 (mainly tiny) Bahamian islands. The largest of them, Great Exuma, is only 37 miles long, and halfway down its north-eastern shore lies the dynamic Sandals Emerald Bay Golf, Tennis and Spa Resort. The 500-acre, five-star property has a mile of beach all of its own and one of the world’s most visually stunning golf courses: an 18-hole championship layout designed by Australian legend Greg Norman.

“The largest challenge of creating the course at Sandals Emerald Bay was to make sure that the non-ocean side—the front nine—was as spectacular as the ocean holes [on the] back nine,” starts Greg Norman when we got in touch. “We created a special nine holes carved against the wetland areas and in the rocks to make it really unique. We also built an island green to complement the course on that side. The wind direction was always on our minds and this gave us an opportunity to create a course with varying shots—downwind, crosswind and upwind—which we did quite nicely.”

As for that ocean-side back nine, it reaches out on a promontory with the lime green tones of the golf course—fringed by the soft white sand of Exuma’s beaches—leading to the turquoise ocean as a backdrop. The views are intoxicating but the ever-present breezes demand the golfer’s full attention.

“Enjoy the front nine and try to make your score here as it tends to play a bit easier,” adds Norman, whose

personal best here is a sizzling 66, six under par. “The trade winds do not affect your ball flight as much on the front, but beware of the back nine! When playing the ocean holes, try to forget about the views and focus on your shot making! The amazing scenery can be distracting and the wind along the ocean holes can be deceiving.

“Don’t try to bite too much off at the tee. The play is to keep the ball in the fairways which are very wide comparatively. The dramatic contrast of the ocean and the fairway doesn’t let your mind believe that the fairways are spacious, but there is plenty of room to find the grass. This way, you can have a nice second or third shot into the green area, and have a decent shot at scoring well.”

Readers may have caught sight of the golf course on television from the past four years hosting The Bahamas Great Exuma Classic at Sandals Emerald Bay on the Korn Ferry Tour. Tommy “Two Gloves” Gainey is the reigning champ while 2018 winner, Sungjae Im from South Korea, went on to secure Rookie of the Year honors on the PGA Tour in 2019.

The Sandals Emerald Bay Resort boasts an ocean-front hotel with 249 rooms and suites, which has just been named the Bahama’s Best Golf Hotel in 2020 at the World Golf Awards. It features a broad array of 11 restaurants and attractive all-inclusive packages that extend to green fees. Visitors who book for seven nights and really want to attack the golf course can enjoy unlimited golf.