

ONE WEEKEND IN: Nassau, an Authentic Visit

BY SHIRA LEVINE, FRIDAY SEP. 04, 2009

TRAVEL, BAHAMAS, UGLY AMERICAN

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Chances are good you've already been to the Bahamas, either as a brief stop on a Royal Caribbean cruise, or flying into Nassau's Lyndon Pindling International Airport *en route* to the [Exumas](#), the Abacos or the Bimini islands. Nassau is sometimes a forgotten sister in the Caribbean—a little unpolished, often overlooked. The alternate version of Nassau is the larger-than-life mega-resort, packed with manic families riding dolphins. However, an astute traveler, employing research and careful planning, can uncover spectacular experiences, even in a city seemingly dominated by Dunkin' Donuts, and Captain Morgan pirate shot glasses. Of course, it's always possible Lenny (as in Kravitz; Bahamians are on a first name basis with him as they are with Patti, as in LaBelle) left you the keys to his palatial "shack" in Eluthera. (Fun fact: his mother, the late actress Roxie Roker was of Bahamian decent, as is his cousin, weatherman Al Roker.) If not, here's a one- or two-day look at how to jet around and get your authentic fill of Nassau, Jay-Z style, before hitting your next land or sea destination.

NEST

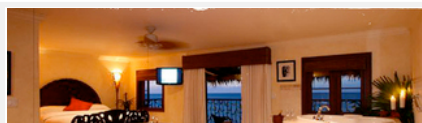


For those aching to escape chain hotels and mega-resorts like [Atlantis Paradise Island](#), there are a few Nassau hideaways providing a little refined luxury and privacy. You'll find easygoing tranquility at the 20-suite mansion known as the [Graycliff Hotel](#), Restaurant and Cigar Factory. Originally built by a 16th-century pirate, the unassuming (from the outside) manse twice headquartered U.S. troops, and at one point served as an inn operated by one of Al Capone's girlfriends, who apparently was also a live jazz fan. The elegant [Marley Resort and Spa](#), run by Bob's wife Rita since 2004, is your destination for "island Zen." The Marleys' bought the former governor's oceanfront mansion and kept it as a family beach retreat until Miss Rita renovated it for tourism.

ADVENTURE

Hire a private boat in the morning. Be prepared to negotiate prices, which start at \$600/day for a speedboat and a driver/guide, and range into the yachtage stratosphere. I spent the day on a speedboat that skimmed the water, chauffeuring me from location to location: Rose beach for sunning and swimming; Lunch on the island where "Gilligan's Island" was filmed; jet past Eddie Murphy's old island as we sightsee (a compound that, at least from the outside, looks uninhabited and is rumored to be for sale).

A day in the sun can knock you out for the afternoon. Head back to your hotel around 3pm. At the Graycliff, you'll find two pools (the Alhambra-inspired Large Pool is considered by staff to be Olympic-sized) and a renowned cigar factory, added eleven years ago. Avelino Lara, a former personal roller for Fidel Castro's, trained the staff here. Graycliff's factory offers rolling classes while its kitchen offers cooking classes (where you can learn to make the signature Graycliff Guava Soufflé). In the hotel, dark hardwood floors and stately antiques give each room a sense of uniqueness and a Colonial European charm. Rather than room numbers, you'll navigate by names like "Baillou" and "Woodes Rogers." Rooms run from \$325 per night for a Deluxe Room in the summer to \$700 per night for the garden-view Graycliff Suite. [Graycliff.com](#)



At the tastefully appointed Marley compound, indulge in the Natural Mystic Spa. The treatment menu, with its ambiguous description about minerals, salts and...ahem...herbs, suggests just how



Nassau—authentic the spa’s rejuvenating and revitalizing massages, facials and wraps can be. Treatments are available in-room for resort guests who like to get irie (“feelin’ good”) in private. Despite kitschy names for the rooms, lifted from Bob’s

iconic reggae songs (like the “One Love” honeymoon suite), inside you’ll find contemporary, stylish island designs and ocean views. Rooms range from \$295 (in the off season) to \$950 per night for the Royal Rita suite. Check the website for packages and discounts. The “Ultimate Spa Junkie Package” is \$800 per night, based on a five-night stay. MarleyResort.com

EAT & BE MERRY

Jay Z and Beyoncé are among the celebrities who dig the Graycliff Restaurant, and the restaurant’s 275,000-bottle vintage wine cellar (yes, you read that right). They visited the week before I did, and the rapper/actor dropped nine large (considered recessionary restraint, according to my informant) for one bottle of red wine. The cellar is world famous, boasting the oldest registered bottle of wine—a 1727 Rheingau from Germany—among its collection, along with an extensive collection of ports and cognacs. The guava soufflé is the unforgettable dessert and its a little too easy to (accidentally) throw back three Graycliff Champagne Cocktails.

You’ll find another much-ballyhooed Nassau scene at the Italian restaurant [Cafe Matisse](#). Nicolas Cage and Sidney Poitier pop in for a bite on occasion. Steak cooked by a Bahamian chef is heavenly (maybe it’s the herbs again?).

After dinner, head to nearby local night club [Da Tambrin Tree](#) where Lenny has been known to belt out a little impromptu “Let Love Rule” for locals and tourists to collectively shake their bongis to. Hire the limo services of Romeo for the evening. It seems as if everyone in Nassau knows the uncharacteristically punctual older gentleman—one of the few residents who doesn’t operate on casual “island time.” Romeo’s Taxi and Limousine Service (242) 557-8953 or romeoslimo@batelnet.bs

Of course, you *must* eat conch while in Nassau. Any restaurant along the so-called [Fish Fry](#) in Heritage Village does the job. I managed to sample six different ways to eat the sea critters: raw, cracked (fried), steamed, grilled, as conch fritters and conch salad. Wash it all down with the local Kalik beer.

For those seeking an even more authentic experience, the Bahamian Tourism Board can arrange a “People to People” free dinner in the home of a local Bahamian. I ate at (and suggest requesting) former Prime Minister Lyndon Pindling’s daughter’s home. She’s been dubbed The Bahamas’ Martha Stewart, but prefers a Barefoot Contessa comparison. Her feast was accompanied by adventurous stories, singing family members and high-profile friends. Between too many bites of conch fritters, lamb, chicken, macaroni & cheese and apple pie, I discovered, peacefully, that I’d had more than my fill of Nassau, but in a most decadent manner.



The Graycliff Champagne Cocktail

1/2 oz Chambord

1/2 oz Grand Marnier

dash Angostura Bitters

1/2 tsp Sugar

1/4 tsp fresh orange juice

Champagne or Sparkling Wine

Combine first five ingredients in a Champagne flute and stir. Top with Champagn and garnish with an orange wedge and strawberry. May also drop a maraschino cherry into the drink.

Shira Levine is an experienced travel writer who has covered everything from post-revolution Chiapas to “Gringolandia” Costa Rica. She’s indulged in the wines of Argentina, sampled cevapcici along coastal Croatia, and luxuriated in Dubai and Iceland. Yet she still must fight the urge against becoming The Ugly American. Her column will help you avoid the pitfalls of loud T-shirts and even louder complaining, while uncovering the latest and greatest chic travel opportunities.

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Reader Comments (6)



Erica
September 04,
2009

Sounds like I've found my next vacation destination.



Katie
September 04,
2009

Wow! This column is great...I'll add these places to the others I've learned about from you previous columns, great info!



Alyson
September 04,
2009

Thanks for the info! I'll take these places into consideration on my trip to the Bahamas!



Sue Rhodes
September 04,
2009

Very helpful for both planning and dreaming. Love the extra personal info.



Sarah
September 05,
2009

We went to the Bahamas and did the whole Atlantis experience--we enjoyed it but decided that if this resort is the biggest thing the Bahamas has to offer, we're going to say, "Been there, done that" and never visit again. Your article highlights some other local and authentic activities that definitely make us curious to go back! Thanks!



Natasha
September 07,
2009

Again, another excellent adventure eloquently described. Shira, I want to travel with you!