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Expect the unexpected on Bahamas' Great Abaco Island

Sustainable community takes root under helm of Canadian developer

BY THERESA STORM, FOR THE CALGARY HERALD AUGUST 9, 2010 BE THE FIRST TO POST A COMMENT

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This wide, pink-tinged beach is the longest of Schooner Bay's two beaches. It will be left in its natural state, ungrooved. The sand dunes will also remain to protect the beach. They are being replanted with native flora.

Photograph by: Theresa Storm, for the Calgary Herald

Like fly-fishing southern Alberta's Bow River, flats fishing off Great Abaco, the Bahamas' third-largest island, is also world class, says avid Calgary fly fisherman Dave Byler.

Abaco owes its natural assets, including great fishing, to location, location, location.

"It is very near to deep water and does not get a lot of fishing pressure," Byler explains as we gaze into a glassy sea so clear we see silvery fish darting about.

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The world's clearest water -- to which Bahamas claims bragging rights -- aids the shallow water sport, which first requires sighting the fish and then casting to it.

Excellent fishing is just one reason the retired Suncor Energy vice-president and wife Carol decided to invest in emerging Schooner Bay Harbour Village in southern Great Abaco, partnering with three others in the Black Fly Bonefish Club and purchasing a vacation home.

Lauded as a leading-edge sustainable development guided by the principles of New Urbanism -- essentially a return to traditional neighbourhood design and Bahamian architecture -- 88-hectare Schooner Bay is the brainchild of Canadian-Bahamian developer Orjan Lindroth.

Swedish-born Lindroth spent his childhood in the Bahamas and later immigrated to Vancouver, where for 18 years he built more than 1,500 properties in B.C. and Alaska and became a Canadian citizen, before returning to the Bahamas in 1993.

Schooner Bay is located on the Atlantic side of the boomerang-shaped island, 92 kilometres north of Nassau/Paradise Island.

Construction of the first homes is underway, including the Byler's, slated for completion early next year. Forty-five of the 120 phase one lots are sold or reserved, 20 per cent to Canadians and 60 per cent to current Bahamian property owners.

The community, which is not gated, is centred on a working harbour, which, like the sea villages of 18th-century England, will be a vibrant hub with shops and fish market, restaurants and bars, a yacht and beach club, spa, and other public buildings. All will be constructed to LEED standards using green materials.

"The rules of building places are identical to the rules of nature in an ecosystem," Lindroth explains.

With streets laid out as a network between beach and harbour, Lindroth is creating a walkable, vehicle-free small harbour town. The mixed-use community will draw vacationers and families to live, work and play.

"In terms of Schooner Bay we love the whole concept," Byler says.

In the heart of the development, the Black Fly Bonefish Club, comprising a lodge with 10 guest rooms, restaurant and outfitter store, and 18 furnished one-and two-bedroom angler's cottages from \$270,000 US -- Schooner Bay's most affordable residences -- will break ground late summer. They, as well as some homes, will be available for vacation rentals.

Well-known fishing guides Clint Kemp, Paul Pinder and Vaughn Cochran, also a renowned artist, are the other three partners in Black Fly. They will provide guiding services, including kayak fly-fishing, a burgeoning new trend.

Byler says he became a partner because it will be a boost for the community and provide the services he needs.

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Stuart Cove's, the Nassau dive operator well known for shark diving, will open a dive shop, and Antonius Robert, renowned Bahamian artist, will live in Schooner and operate an art studio.

On the property's periphery, 40 hectares of Crown land called the Commons at Schooner Bay, managed by the community, will be home to an equestrian and a community centre, a commercial plaza and Goodfellow Farms, a grocery selling regionally produced food. It opens next April.

Natural landscaping is key to the development's sustainability. Invasive flora is being replaced by native varieties. Schooner's two wide, dune-protected white sand beaches, the longest stretching for 792 metres, will not be groomed. Both are nesting sites for turtles.

The Bylers chose Great Abaco because of its proximity to Canada, beautiful scenery and beaches, and laid-back lifestyle, as well as the Bahamas' stable government, and legal and banking systems, including Canadian banks.

From capital Nassau/Paradise Island, getting to this "Out" island -- as the 25 inhabited islands outside Nassau are called -- is a 30-minute direct flight, landing at one of the island's three airports, a surprising number given the island chain of The Abacos is only 193 kilometres long.

Great Abaco, the largest, is partially protected from the open Atlantic by a string of barrier islands to the east. The warm, turquoise body of water between is the calm, shallow Sea of Abaco, one of the world's top boating and sailing destinations.

Forty kilometres northwest of Schooner Bay is Marsh Harbour, the Bahamas' third-largest settlement and The Abacos commercial centre, with plenty of shops, fast food, restaurants, bars, and services, but just one traffic light -- the only one operating in the Out Islands.

For activity-seekers, fly-fishing is not the only sport. Great Abaco has two golf courses, great snorkelling and diving, freshwater blue holes for refreshing dips, kayaking tours, big game fishing, and kilometres of stellar beach.

Resident Wendy Bishop spends hours beachcombing for fantastic seashells and sea glass, usually encountering no one, she says.

The small village of Little Harbour offers a surprise. It is home to the Johnston family's internationally acclaimed bronze sculpture foundry and gallery, and popular, sandy-floored Pete's Pub.

Nature lovers enjoy sighting the endemic, endangered Bahama parrot and scores of other species, visiting the reserve protecting the world's six remaining Abaco Barb wild horses, and exploring Abaco National Park. Another popular jaunt is to Hole-in-the-Wall Lighthouse on the isle's southern tip, the first after crossing the Atlantic.

The colonial harbour settlements of the Abaco Cays, like Hope Town on Elbow and New Plymouth on Green Turtle, are fun to explore, as is island hopping to Man-O-War, Great Guana and other cays. All are quickly reached by ferry.

Expect the unexpected in The Abacos, an out-of-the-way, yet easily accessible, destination for Canadian vacationers, homeowners, and fly-fishing lovers like Byler.

If You Go

GETTING THERE

-WestJet has direct winter seasonal flights to Nassau from Calgary. Westjet.com.

-Great Abaco has three airports served by direct charter, including Bahama Hoppers and Cherokee Air, and scheduled flights from Nassau on SkyBahamas, Abaco Air, Bahamas Air, and Western Air. Sandy Point is the closest airport to Schooner Bay, 15 minutes away.

-Marsh Harbour Airport also has direct flights from West Palm Beach, Fort Lauderdale, Jacksonville and Miami, Florida.

-Bahamas Ferries operates Friday and Sunday between Nassau and Sandy Point, taking 4.5 hours. bahamasferries.com.

-Schooner Bay Harbour Village Residences range from \$270,000 to \$600,000 US. Six hundred homes will be built over 15 years. Sales office, 242-366-2048, schoonerbaybahamas.com. Lindroth Development Company, Ltd., www.lindroth.cc. WHERE TO STAY

-Black Fly Beach Club -- Black Fly is offering three-to seven-night guided fly-fishing packages. Guests are temporarily housed in a villa coined the Beach Club, until construction of the permanent Bonefish Club at Schooner Bay is complete. Three night packages with two days fishing are \$1,795 US per person, including transfers, meals, accommodations, and fishing. blackflybonefishclub.com.

WHAT TO DO

-Pete's Pub & Gallery

Tour the foundry and visit the gallery, December through August, opens at 11 a.m. 242-366-3503.




-Abaco Wild Horses

Call to arrange a tour, \$35 US, 242-367-4805, arkwild.org.

MORE INFO:

-Abaco Tourist Office, 242-367-3067, destinationabaco.net. Bahama Out Islands Promotion Board, myoutislands.com. Bahamas Tourist Office, bahamas.com.

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