



# True colours

Natalie Marsh finds out what's new on Nassau Paradise Island in the Bahamas

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**I**t's getting closer – I can feel the beating of the drums in my chest and the horns of the trumpets in my ears.

I can sense the excitement building as people crane their necks to catch a glimpse of the performers' brightly coloured costumes as they dance into the room in time with the rhythm.

This is the second Junkanoo we've experienced today in the Bahamas, and I already hope it won't be the last. Like its masquerade festivities, the Bahamas is a treat for the senses. Crystal-clear seas, sounds of wildlife and Bahamian cuisine were just some of the reasons I thought I'd fall in love with this Caribbean nation and, after experiencing all this and more, I soon discovered I was right.

#### ▶ CULTURE AND CUISINE

I had barely been in the Bahamas for 12 hours before I found myself chomping down on a plate of conch fritters. Five minutes before, I hadn't even known what a conch was, but I soon learnt it was delicious – although with

five more food stops ahead of us, I resisted the urge to fill up too quickly.

The Bites of Nassau Food Tasting & Cultural Walking Tour, by Tru Bahamian Food Tours, was a thorough introduction to the capital city's history and places of interest, including its oldest wooden building, Balcony House, and the surprisingly pink Government House, the official residence of the governor general.

Food and drink stops consisted of hearty portions of authentic cuisine, from pigeon pea hummus to conch chowder, and from steamed chicken and rice to traditional rum cake, leaving visitors with a stomach full of food and a head full of knowledge.

To help wash all the delicious food down, rum was just a short walk away at John Watling's Distillery. On stepping in, I was immediately handed a sample of frozen piña colada and whisked through a short tour of the property. Tours run throughout the day, seven days a week, and are free for visitors.

The distillery produces a pale



**I fell in love with the Bahamian cuisine, Junkanoo, sounds of wildlife and crystal-clear seas**

rum, amber rum and Buena Vista rum, packaging every bottle by hand. Guides encourage you to smell the rum from the barrels (though be warned, you still need to navigate a flight of stairs!)

For those who prefer the grape to the grain or the sugar cane, last autumn saw the opening of Bahama Barrels, the first winery in the country, where visitors can create their own wine blends.

Owned by Graycliff Hotel & Restaurant, Bahama Barrels is just one of the strings in this grand dame's bow. The hotel prides itself on its guest experiences, boasting a cigar factory – which has a six-month waiting list for its cigars – a culinary academy and a

chocolatier. After tasting different types of chocolate straight from the taps, I really did die and go to chocolate heaven.

#### ▶ BAHAMAR

From one of the island's oldest hotels to one of its newest, the Baha Mar development on the north coast has been in the offing for some time, but its phased opening – which began with the Grand Hyatt last year – is now complete.

The \$4.2 billion Baha Mar resort consists of three hotels, adding 2,300 rooms to Nassau Paradise Island's offering. SLS opened its doors at the end of 2017, while the Rosewood welcomed its first guests in June this year, completing the trio.

Guests staying at any of Baha Mar's three hotels can share many of the facilities across the 1,000-acre resort, including its enormous – though surprisingly airy – casino. I opted instead for the animal sanctuary, and was greeted by nurse sharks, sting rays and sea turtles, as well as a flamingo habitat – the resort

### TOP TIP

Nassau Paradise Island Promotion Board has 19 member hotels, with agent training and incentives: [nassau.rewards.com](http://nassau.rewards.com)



**RIGHT:**  
Conch fritters

**FAR RIGHT:**  
John Watling's  
Distillery

**BELOW:**  
Baha Mar



## ASK THE EXPERT



**Ashley Pilkington,**  
assistant product  
manager for  
Americas &  
Caribbean,  
Gold Medal

"We have seen great demand for the Bahamas recently, showing a 30% rise in passengers for 2018, and early growth for 2019, with an 80% rise in passengers, predominantly staying in the Nassau Paradise Island region. The long stretches of white sandy beaches alongside calm turquoise waters are amazing. There are hotels to cater for all budgets and demographics, with some amazing places to eat at, from the local fish fry to fine-dining restaurants."

➔ took great delight in posting a job earlier this year for a CFO, or chief flamingo officer.

Murals and paintings by local artists can also be seen across the site. The Rosewood Baha Mar has a 3,000sq ft mural in its Living Room that draws on the islands' lush landscapes, while Baha Mar is also home to a full-time studio, with 2,500 works of art. It holds workshops for crafts, painting and ceramics, and fosters engagement with the local community.

### ▶ PARADISE ISLAND

With a mouth full of saltwater, I reluctantly fed Naia the dolphin a fish, despite the fact that just five seconds earlier she had flicked her nose up and drenched my face – on purpose. Wiping the water out of my eyes, it was hard not to love her nonetheless. Naia was one of 17 dolphins rescued after Hurricane Katrina and brought to Dolphin Cay at Atlantis Paradise Island, just minutes away by road bridge from downtown Nassau.

A shallow water interaction let us get up close to learn some of her behaviours, though the cay also offers a deepwater swim for those keen to view the dolphins under the surface.

Marine conservation is a focus at Atlantis Paradise Island, home to the largest open-air marine habitat in the world, containing more than 250 species of marine life. During our stay, one of the resort's best-known residents, Leyley the manta ray, was released back into the wild as part of its release and research programme.

The Dig is one of the best places to spot sea life. Walking through the

lost city of Atlantis, guests can see lionfish, lobsters, seahorses and more. Alternatively, they can embrace their inner water baby by diving in at the 141-acre on-site water park, Aquaventure. Start off with a drift through the river rapids – the easiest way to get a view of the entire park – and decide which water slides you want to try next.

It's a world away from the tranquillity of The Cove, the most luxurious of the five hotels that make up Atlantis Paradise Island, which also boasts a villa retreat. It's home to an adult-only pool with a bar area, gaming pavilion and private cabanas (at extra cost) – the perfect place to sit at the edge of a private beach, Kalik beer in hand, to wind down after an action-packed afternoon.



And if you think the kids might miss out, think again. Atlantis has Crush nightclub for teenagers, with a live DJ, stadium equipped with games consoles and private gaming cabanas, while Atlantis Kids Adventures caters to those aged three to 12.

The facilities at Atlantis are enviable, but for those who wish to stay off-site, the neighbouring Comfort Suites offers guests access to all amenities at the resort. The hotel also offers a complimentary breakfast – a big plus for families – and easy access to the row of boutique shops at Marina Village, at the edge of the resort.

Luckily, I made just enough room in my suitcase to squash in a box of rum cake, to bring a little taste of the Bahamas back home. **TW**

## Sample product

Seven nights at **Sandals Royal Bahamian**, staying all-inclusive in a Balmoral Oceanview Luxury Room, starts at £2,199 per person, departing August 27, including flights from Heathrow and resort transfers. Valid for bookings made by July 31. [sellingsandals.co.uk](http://sellingsandals.co.uk)

**Gold Medal** offers seven nights at the Grand Hyatt Baha Mar on a room-only basis from £1,459 per person, including economy flights with BA from Heathrow, for travel between September 13 and 27. [goldmedal.co.uk](http://goldmedal.co.uk)

PICTURE: DENNIS WELCH; TRU BAHAMIAN FOOD TOURS