

Toasting the Family Tree: Grand Bahama Island



Birders scout the treetops for West Indian species. (ERIKA GATES)



GALLERY: Rebecca Tibbitts, the island's... (DAVE MACKEY...)

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FREEPORT, Bahamas - When did choosing the winter escape for your modern family get to be such a challenging proposition?

It seems there was a time when the ideal sunshine getaway was a simple triangulation of travel budget, holiday allocation, and beckoning beach. But with your family tree sprouting in new directions, training all those branches in a singular route to the sun poses a serious test to your role as head arborist. Sure, the 17-year-old is content to toast on the beach and shop for eye candy. But the twins need concerted distraction from their electronic devices. Aunt Allie and Uncle Vinny proudly tout their status as adventure

junkies. And while Grandma and Grandpa may chafe at the recent hits to their vigor, their vim remains staunchly undiminished.

And you? Suffice it to say that you wouldn't say no to a little shade away from the familial blossoms.

Enter Grand Bahama Island.

Oft-overlooked since the economic hit of 2008, this largest of the Bahama islands is reinventing itself from resort hotspot to cruise port-of-call. Beyond the cafes, shops, and stalls of Port Lucaya Marketplace, canals shimmer past homes of the rich-and-(sometimes)-famous to probe pine forests and casuarina-fringed shores. By their nature, cruise-ship day-trippers are limited in their time and scope, leaving the bulk of the island's gems for your family to explore.

Though you may not be able to espalier your clan along the same trellis, you can at least keep them happily branching back to the main trunk.

For the adventurer. Snorkel or scuba-dive Owl's Hole, the cavern named for the burrowing owls that nest near its entrance. Certified dive-guide Shamie Rolle will help you scout out freshwater eels, shrimp, and gobies in this inland blue hole - or dive among the stalactites, stalagmites, and fossilized conch of Ben's Cave. (www.calabashcoadventures.com)

For the foodie. Sign up for a Monday-night class at Flying Fish restaurant for chef Tim's intro to molecular gastronomy, a French cuisine refresher, or a comparison of Old and New World wines by the island's only certified sommelier, Canadian export Rebecca Tibbitts. Indulge any nostalgia for winter with the crudo of beef dusted with truffle snow. (www.flyingfishbahamas.com)

For the "authentic" traveler. E-mail the Grand Bahama Island Tourism Board in advance of your trip to register for "People-to-People," a cultural-exchange program that matches visitors with island residents according to age and interests. Once paired, volunteer hosts share their local activities with guests, anything from favorite hangouts to service clubs to home-cooked meals. (www.bahamas.com/bahamas/people-people)

For the birder. Track down those target species with eminent birder Erika Gates (author of *Natives of the Bahamas: A Guide to Birds & Vegetation of Grand Bahama*) - who points out that the island's extensive network of defunct logging roads means "birders don't have to climb mountains" to tick species off their life list. (E-mail erikagatesgb@aol.com)

For the aspiring cook. Try your hand at crafting the traditional Bahamian fare of peas and rice and cracked conch at Cindy's Roti Hut. With her booming laugh and candid manner, owner and head cook Cindy Hall inspires confidence in even the most culinarily challenged. (E-mail bahamianillustrated@gmail.com)

For the serenity seeker. Decompress to the ceaseless symphony of doves and grosbeaks at the 12-acre Garden of the Groves, a U.S. Wildlife Federation-certified wildlife habitat. Meditate in the labyrinth, find a private corner within waterfall earshot, or sip a latte at the multidecked alfresco cafe. Pretty shops include a bookstore stocked with West Indian titles. (www.thegardenofthegroves.com)

For the energetic and nature-deprived. Team those teens and tweens into a double kayak for a day of exploration. Dover Sound offers easy paddling and ready fauna-viewing. Lucayan National Park combines a mangrove float with a short tramp to secluded Gold Rock beach. And Peterson Cay provides an open-crossing challenge with color-drenched snorkeling. (www.grandbahamanaturetours.com and www.calabashcoadventures.com)



If those activities are not up your family's alley, here are my Top Five activities for all ages, what I call Multi-Gen Venues.

Junkanoo. Contribute to the cacophony of cowbells and drums as flamboyantly costumed musicians and dance troupes "rush" the streets in a fierce kaleidoscope of competition during the Boxing Day and New Year's Day Junkanoo Parades. (www.grandbahamavacations.com/things-to-do/festivals-and-events)

The Dolphin Experience. Customize your cetacean interaction to each family member's level of intrepidity - from toe-dabbling on the boardwalk, to skin-to-skin contact with your dolphin playmate in the lagoon, to frolicking with your bottlenose buddies out in the deep blue. (www.unexso.com)

Paradise Cove. Snorkel the reef with angelfish, turtles, and spotted rays. Paddle a kayak, play beach volleyball, or simply loll at this secluded and immaculate beach hideaway. Extend your retreat with an overnight stay at one of the two airy beach villas. (www.deadmansreef.com)

Chibah Cafe. A sweet niche is filled by this new coffeehouse and wine bar, with omelettes and pancakes for breakfast; paninis, salads, and burgers for lunch; coffees and blended drinks a la Starbucks; and tapas with a side of jazz for evening. Fresh pastries, vegetarian options, and free WiFi ensure everyone is happy.

Cappuccino's Italian Restaurant. This family-owned Port Lucaya Marketplace mainstay combines attentive service with family-friendly fare. The three-course special (including salad, choice of pasta, and a taster-size dessert) seals the deal with wallet-friendly pricing.