



Going Places

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Dive the
Abacos

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HELLO *Diving* The Abacos Harvey

by Sandy Klim



A brilliant array of fish and coral create an underwater wonderland of color.

I'M STILL GETTING USED TO THE diving gear, struggling to pull the tank-laden vest over my wet suit. Brendal, our host and dive master, laughs. "Your suit won't feel so tight when you're underwater." How I wished I had turned down the key lime pie the night before.

Brendal turns back to the task at hand—or foot. He is so intimately familiar with the waters around the Abacos Islands in the Bahamas, he steers the boat with one foot as he leans out the side window enjoying the perfect weather and summer winds.

The Abacos are a group of islands and cays that form a boomerang-shaped chain in the Bahamas. This unusual configuration of land creates the perfect wind in the Sea of Abaco and has become one of the world's most popular sailing destinations, commonly regarded as the Sailing Capital of the World. But we're here to dive.

I'm with a group of other novice divers who have just completed their certifications. Our destination is perfect. The Abacos are home to the third-largest reef in the world, which combined with warm, crystal clear water, make it a diver's paradise.

We're in the Pillars, a popular dive site along the 140-mile reef. The view is spectacular. The vivid colors of the coral and fish blend into a panorama of striking gold, purple, green, pink and cyan. Thick coral shafts reach long fingers toward the sunny surface as billowing purple sea fans gently sway in the soft current.

As I take in this remarkable view, I rotate to find myself staring into the face of a massive grouper. We're eye to eye, or I should say, eye to face mask. He slowly opens his mouth until it's gaping. It startles me briefly, but there's no fear on my part.

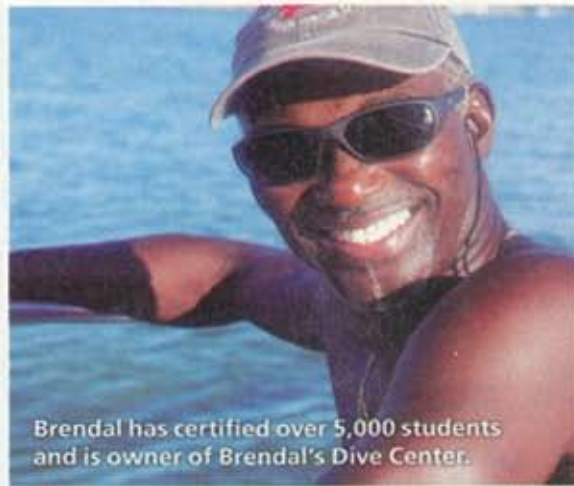
With fins, I'm about seven feet long and make breathing sounds reminiscent of Darth Vader of *Star Wars* fame. Even in these waters, I'm considered a pretty big fish. I've discovered that the occasional shark that swims by simply ignores me.

I assume the grouper is putting on a defensive face, but later Brendal laughs and explains, "That was Calypso, and he was just yawning."

These reefs are home to a variety of incredible marine life, from leatherback turtles to lionfish, grouper, green moray eels and a rainbow of smaller fish that swim about the colorful coral. Marine life around the reef are accustomed to divers visiting their "home" and Brendal has affectionately named many of them.

Brendal is a Platinum Pro Instructor, having taught over 5,000 students.





Brendal has certified over 5,000 students and is owner of Brendal's Dive Center.



Bahamian sponges are used for baths, dolls and paintbrushes.

He's been on the Discovery Channel and CNN, as well as in publications worldwide. He proves a wonderful combination of instructor, guide and storyteller.

On day two of our dive, he's going "grocery shopping." Brendal navigates the boat to a lobster bed. It amazes me how he's able to distinguish this lobster spot from others in these vast waters. We all set out to snorkel, including Brendal with spear in hand.

Moments later he pops to the surface with three wriggling spiny lobsters on the spear's tip. The more adventurous among us join in. I find it difficult to "free dive" to the bottom. It's against the law to scuba for lobster, so while snorkeling, one must take a huge breath and swim to the bottom. Once there, you attempt to spear the fast-moving creatures as they scat along the sand. After one attempt, I find I'm much more proficient with my camera.

After Brendal tosses about three dozen writhing lobsters onto the boat, we cruise off in search of our second

main course—conch (pronounced *konk*). Conch shells are synonymous with the Bahamas. The large pink and peach tipped shells are favorite souvenirs. The conch itself is a delicious mollusk that's served as "cracked conch," (fried pieces reminiscent of clams), conch chowder, conch fritters and conch salad.

This also requires free diving to the bottom, but the slower moving conchs are easier to retrieve. The true challenge with conch is removing them from their shells—a skill that takes years to perfect. Brendal retrieves a dozen or so conch, beautifully splayed out on the boat. To remove the meat, a small slit is cut in the end of the shell. This requires a hammer or mallet against a knife to "crack" the conch and create a slit. A sharp knife is inserted into the slit and a cut separates the conch from its shell. Now, the large piece of white meat can be easily removed. Conch is said to have been in the Bahamas for 65 million years and is officially known as *Strombus Gigas* (Queen Conch).

We head toward a private beach and Brendal pulls out a jug of icy "Goombay



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Smash." This potent concoction is a mixture of various rums and juices. It was invented at Miss Emily's Blue Bee Bar in New Plymouth, Abacos. Today, it's a staple on menus throughout the Bahamas chain. Later on our journey, we sample the original secret recipe at Miss Emily's, but we all readily agree that Brendal's is the ultimate winner hands down.

Visiting Abacos

- ✓ **GETTING THERE:** Several airlines fly directly into Treasure Cay in the Abacos. It's about a one-hour flight from many south Florida airports.
- ✓ **TRANSPORTATION:** Ferries run throughout the day to the various islands in the Abacos. Once there, take

local transportation, such as taxis, or rent a golf cart.

- ✓ **MONEY:** The Bahamian dollar is equal to one U.S. dollar. They are both accepted throughout the islands.
- ✓ **LANGUAGE:** English is spoken everywhere in the islands.
- ✓ **SHOPPING:** Quaint shops feature local crafts, artwork and jewelry.
- ✓ **WHAT TO DO:** Great fishing, sailing, diving and snorkeling, glass bottom

boat, and dolphin watching tours. Brendal's Dive Center offers a multitude of options, including "Learn to Dive" programs. Visit www.brendal.com.

- ✓ **FOOD:** Restaurants serve lots of local fresh seafood, including lobster, conch and grouper.
- ✓ **LODGING:** An array of seaside hotels and rentals are available at moderate prices.
- ✓ **DRESS:** Completely casual!