



Southern Stingrays swim around the ankles of awestruck and hesitant waders as they feed cut up hogfish to their new friends at Manjack Cay. (Photos by Jim Kerr)

Lunch with Brendal on Manjack Cay includes several guests from the sea

By Jim Kerr
Abaco Life Editor

"Goombay, anyone?"

Brendal Stevens, a mischievous grin across his ebony face, glances toward the 11 adult guests aboard his dive and snorkel boat. He doesn't have to ask twice, as plastic cups are thrust in the direction of a jug he holds filled with a potion made from Castillo Gold, coconut rum and pineapple juice. After a stimulating dive and snorkel over "The Pillars" off Manjack Cay, these people are thirsty.

The boat is less than an hour from Brendal's dock at White Sound Harbour on Green Turtle Cay. A giant Eagle Ray flapped his wings in farewell as we left the harbour on this sunny summer day, and a bottlenose dolphin followed us across the channel to Manjack. The trip is a seven-hour, combination dive, snorkel and picnic that Brendal operates every week. This morning there are 15 souls aboard - three couples from Germany, their four small children, two men off a boat anchored at Green Turtle, Brendal, his helper, Bev Smart, and me. The

Pillars are thick coral fingers that tower 35 feet from the sandy bottom. Below we find purple sea fans waving from thick coral heads and a ridge that shelters an incalculable assortment of colourful fish. A mid-size reef shark slides by, paying us no mind, and "Junkanoo," a large black grouper eyes us from a few feet away.

Back in the boat, goombay in hand, Brendal deftly cleans a couple of conch, giving his guests an opportunity to make a mess of things by trying it themselves. He cuts up grouper filet and marinates it with Real Lemon juice, lemon pepper, hot sauce and salad dressing in a pink, plastic bucket. We anchor halfway to Manjack beach, and 10 minutes later one of our boater guests has two hogfish and a mutton snapper on a spear from a Hawaiian sling. They'll be used later for our special close encounter with several Southern Stingrays. For now, however, the purpose of the speared fish is a mystery.

A sliver of white, crescent beach runs for a mile or so along Manjack's lee side where Brendal ties the boat to a private dock he uses with permission from the owner.

We gather firewood, and soon flames and sticks are crackling under a big metal grill. The grouper cooks in foil-covered pans for six minutes, then sits for another two before being served. There's also snapper in cilantro and onions, regular tossed salad and the conch salad made earlier. It's an incredibly tasty picnic feast, served at a table in the shade of casuarinas. Our bare feet curl deliciously in the cool sand, and before us is an almost searing panorama of sun and blue sky against an aquamarine shoreline and white beach.

Even before lunch, we couldn't help notice we had company in the clear, shallow water off the beach. A nurse shark and his cousin, a large, black stingray, glided inches from the shoreline as we unloaded the boat. Now it was the stingray's turn for lunch.

With cut up chunks of the hogfish and muttonfish caught earlier, Brendal coaxes us into ankle-deep water offshore. Soon there are not one, but four large stingrays circling our feet. Warily, we hold pieces of raw fish in the upturned and submerged palm of our hands. The jet black stingrays, their brown eyes watching us from the top of their heads, swim over and gently take the food into invisible mouths underneath their bodies. Their soft, satiny wings brush lightly against our legs and ankles, an unexpected but pleasurable sensation. Their long tail, with its venomous barb, somewhat rougher in texture than the wide wings, also rubs harmlessly against our legs.

After the cautious and protective parents are satisfied there's no danger here, two four-year-olds join in the feeding and the rare and gentle communion with these strange and fascinating creatures. It's the highlight of the day, and something to ponder as we head back to Green Turtle.

Brendal, a very trim 51-years-old, has been operating dive trips here for 15 years. He and his wife, Mary, have a new dive shop and dock adjacent to the Green Turtle Club with three boats, including the 24-footer we've been on this day. He has many guided dives, instruction programs and sight-seeing trips, but his scuba-snorkel dive and beach cookout is one of the most popular excursions. The all-inclusive expedition costs \$75 per person for adults. For more information, call 1-800-780-9941 or in Abaco at (242) 365-4411. Also see their website at www.brendal.com or e-mail: brendal@oii.net. ↓