

Cool kid stuff in the Caribbean

HAVE A GRAND TIME WITH THE GRANDKIDS ON GRAND BAHAMA ISLAND

By SHEILA FIELDS

S ecluded beaches with pristine turquoise waters, romantic strolls at sunset, candlelit dinners for two. When most of us fantasize about taking a vacation to the Caribbean, we don't imagine taking the grandkids along.

But as I discovered on a recent trip to the Bahamas, there is plenty of pin-stited fun on these sun-drenched islands. And it sure beats the hubbub of kiddie mecca like DisneyWorld. What better place to make some extra special memories with your grandkids than on a trip to the Bahamas?

The Bahamas is an archipelago of more than 700 islands dotting an area greater than 100,000 square miles in the western Atlantic Ocean and boasting the world's third longest barrier reef.

My first impression of the Bahamian people – in the person of the driver who met me at the airport – was that they are gracious, hospitable, friendly, dedicated to making tourists happy, and take pride in and feel blessed by the beauty of their 96-mile-long island home.

My home for the four days of my visit to Grand Bahamas Island was the casually elegant Old Bahamas Bay Resort and Yacht Harbour (OBB). Not long after I arrived, weary after a day of travel with many layovers, I got a second wind – that took my breath away – walking across the luxurious marble floor of my handsomely appointed suite and out through the French doors that opened onto a balcony overlooking the ocean. The sight of the waning moon and the silver glow it cast on the water illuminated the palm trees that edged the beach and soothed my frazzled soul.

Our group breakfasted the next morning at Bonefish Palley's Restaurant at Old Bahamas Bay. Savoring such island specialties as Coconut French Toast for breakfast and conch fritters (obligatory on the island over and served any time at all), the restaurant is named in honor of Fred Rolfe, a 95-year-old grandfather and award-winning master bonefisherman, famous world-wide. Bonefishing, I later learned, is more of a boat than a catch, taking great skill and patience as you stalk the elusive, mercurial fish that feeds in sandy bottomed tidal flats off the islands.



Don't be surprised if you're talked into partnering with your grandchild in order to meet the weight requirement (usually at least 125 pounds) for parasailing. You will be harnessed to a parachute and tied to a boat which launches you into the air. Scary, sure, but what a view!

A walking tour of OBB's pastel-hued beachfront properties and 72-slip marina was highlighted by a perk inside John Travolta's four-suite, two-story cottage! Other amenities at OBB include a fitness facility, the Straw Hat, an oceanfront cafe and bar, and an oceanfront pool.

Vice President of Marketing Jennifer Bluman points out some of the site's plans for expansion including Voyages Spa Village, which will feature "floating" massage rooms affording clients an underwater view while they are face down on the massage table, meditation areas adjacent to the ocean, a yoga pavilion, Zen garden, and relaxation and lap pools.

Voyages will provide guests with escapes for body, mind and spirit including treatments such as thalassotherapy – using seawater and plank-

ton, exercise activities, meditation and astronomy, explains Bluman.

But what can the grandkids do for fun while grandma is enjoying a massage (currently offered in-room) and grandpa is sleeping peacefully? Youngster can be safely ensconced at Camp OBB! Children ages 6 to 12 are offered supervised fishing lessons, underwater treasure hunts, snorkeling, kayaking, and sandcastle building.

Of course, there are some more adult activities for older kids and teens. From the peaceful pace of the walking tour, our group kicked it up a notch when we boarded speed boats bound for diving areas a couple of miles offshore and a Bahamian native fishing adventure. Our "captain," a local employee of OBB who said he had been "fishing like this since I was a boy," periodically hung upside down off the side of the boat holding on with one hand while spying out the underwater zone for conch and Bahamian lobsters.

Outfitted with snorkel gear, we held a tow line at the back of the boat as we searched for the prized crustaceans. One individual in our group was successful in diving for a baby conch, the shell of which made a lovely souvenir.

Later, we boated to calmer waters where we snorkeled for pleasure. A colorful underwater display of purple and yellow sea fans, brain coral, fire coral and multi-banded tropical fish was captivating. Visitors to Grand Bahamas Island – which is located 55 miles east of the Florida coast – can snorkel along the intricate coral reefs bordering the island including local favorite, Paradise Cove, home to Deadman's Reef where brilliantly colored fish dwell among the coral.

While the fish we saw while snorkeling were amazing, even better was chancing upon the famous fisherman, Bonefish Palley, who was boating with a grandson and who graciously posed for pictures!

After a fun day of sun and sea, we headed off to Prospero's Our Lucaya for a night on the town complete with dinner at Eric's Restaurant at the

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Westin and Sheraton Grand Bahama, and a "Cultural Explosion" show in Coast Breeze Square featuring the Port Lucaya Fire Dancers.

Dinner at Irie's, while good, was not as enjoyable as dining the previous night at Agua, the elegant and serene gourmet restaurant at OBB which features "Bahamian Fusion" cuisine.

The load crowd at Irie's — a repeat winner of the annual "Chief Noel" competition and serving Caribbean and Central American cuisine — was apparently due in part to a "school" of holsters, including fishermen who were in town for the annual Wahoo Fishing Competition.

Boasting big activity and night life, Freeport/Our Lucaya, located on the east end of Grand Bahama Island, boasts major chain hotels, the site of Capri Casino located at Our Lucaya Beach & Golf Resort, Port Lucaya Marketplace, the Underwater Explorers Society (UNEXSO), world-class golf course

and the 40-acre Lucaya National Park, home to the largest underwater cave system in the world.

The Culture Explosion we saw that night was bright, colorful and loud with lots of smoke on stage for special effect. Dancers clad in Las Vegas style costumes made this show less than family friendly, especially for younger kids who nonetheless were present in the audience. Outstanding among the performers was a young naive Bahamian man who successfully performed the hula several times — even slobbering under a flaming bar propped up on two beer bottles!

The next day proved fair and temperate, which was to be expected in this island's sub-tropical environment whose temperatures range from 70 degrees during the winter season to the low 80s in the summer. A 15-minute boat ride from UNEXSO in Port Lucaya transported us to the Dolphin Experience Lagoon where we dangled our feet in the water as trained Atlantic bottlenose dolphins performed a



You'll garner that "favorite grandparent" title if you take the grandkids to the Dolphin Experience in Port Lucaya. There, you and the youngsters will swim with the dolphins and you may even receive a wet dolphin kiss!

series of tricks and jumps which left us all quite soggy!

But the dolphin pair more than compensated for their "bad behavior" by sweetly kissing each of our faces as we stroked their sleek, glistening bodies while standing in the water next to them and their handlers. This is a great family activity that shouldn't be missed, but don't be surprised if younger grandchildren exhibit some hesitancy at first, as one little girl did.

Later, we lunched at Irie's at Le Mod, a Mediterranean restaurant overlooking Port Lucaya Marina. Good, making its requisite appearance in salads and soups, was on the menu in addition to French crepes, Greek salads, tapas and paella.

Post lunch, we headed to the Port Lucaya Marketplace to shop. A mix of fine shops selling upscale clothing and jewelry mingled with straw hat vendors offering authentic Bahamian crafts and coach jewelry as well as quality tee-shirts and key chains. The shops accepted Visa and MasterCard, but most of the local vendors wanted cash, which allows the buyer an opportunity to haggle for a better price.

Returning to OBB, our driver, the lovely and gracious Paddy Wilgison, a retired pre-legal, showed us the Star Hotel, the oldest hotel and reported site where Al Capone purchased bowling liquor during Prohibition; Pineridge Community Church, the oldest church on the island; a section of coastline eroded in gullies from

cut-off beach shells; and then the most beautiful sunset this writer has ever seen.

Once back home at OBB, we headed to the coastal Straw Bar for the much anticipated "Goon to the Moon" celebration. This monthly ode to the full moon is full of fun and good food, music and dancing.

With tiki torches lining the water's edge and a bonfire yielding a soft glow, we ate by candlelight enjoying roast beef, chicken, salads and vegetables, and an array of desserts which persuaded this sugar-overdoser to sample not one but two delicious homemade specialties: pineapple upside down cake and coconut cake.

The food paled in comparison, however, to the '60s style musical revue performed by OBB employees. Complete with wigs and vintage costumes, the group regaled us with the lip-synched songs of Aretha Franklin, Gladys Knight and the Pips, and Tina Turner, among others. By the end of the revue, we were all up dancing to the tunes of Love Train and the Macarena.

The last day dawned all too soon. Time had come to bid Grand Bahama Island farewell. Four days of "Isle de Bahamian ting, moe" left me wanting more! With jars of island-made passion jam, bits of photos and just a bit of sand between my toes, I said so long, hoping that it won't be too long till I return.

Freelance writer Sheila Field lives in Danvers County but is dreaming of her next Caribbean adventure.

5 great adventures just for kids

While most hotels have camps for younger children, older kids can take part in many adult activities on Grand Bahama Island.

■ **Hullit Circus** — Both adults and children can experience flying 35 feet in the air on a trapeze (with a safety harness, of course). hullitcircus.com

■ **Horseback riding on the beach** — Two-hour guided horseback rides through pine forests, rocky coppice and wetlands, along the beach and into the sea. A 90-minute guided beach ride at sunset is offered by Think Pony Adventures. www.thinkpony.com

■ **Kayak nature tours** — Kayaking and snorkeling adventures through mangroves to the best beach in Grand Bahama Island for a Bahamian lunch. grandbahamamariners.com

■ **East End Adventures** — All-day safari, with a 4x4 ride through Grand Bahama Island's eco-zones, a Bahamian culture course and exciting speed boating and snorkeling. bahamasoutdoors.com

■ **Junkanoo** — A colorful parade characterized by colorful costumes with large headpieces, music, food and art. Performed in Coast Breeze Square in Port Lucaya on Friday and Saturday nights. junkanoo.com