



## travel log

Iris Sanderson Jones

## 'Place your bets, mesdames et messieurs'

PARADISE ISLAND, Bahamas — Here I stand with \$5 worth of American quarters clutched in my hot little hands. On every side I hear two statements repeated: "You know you can never beat the house" and "Let's go win some money."

The James Bond movie "Thunderball" partly was filmed across the street in the Cafe Martinique, just this side of the toll bridge that leads to the city of Nassau. Bond's doubles can be seen clothed in their impeccable black and white evening best dealing chips at every gambling table in the casino.

They sit on the platform high over the baccarat table where the people who gamble real money are watched from behind a brass rail by people who like to watch people who gamble real money. He is over there beside the wheel of fortune and he is the croupier at that first roulette table.

From the top of the stairs leading to the casino, you see a mass of people fixed in the lights shining from the slot machines banked left and right. The dust cones of ceiling lights shine on heads leaning bald and gray, blonde and black over the gaming tables.

GAMBLING IS SUPPOSED to be fun, but the crowd looks very serious about this entertainment. If you ask anybody what is going on, you'll probably get a short, very short, reply.

If you read the little souvenir guide, you won't need to ask why all those quarters are piling up on the crap table when everybody obviously is playing with chips.

The correct odds on certain numbers are against the house, so you must pay 5 percent commission to bet on those numbers. Twenty-five cents is 5 percent of \$5.

I thought to ask if the house would pay me the 5 percent when the odds were against the customer, but one look at the serious faces of formally attired croupiers and I changed my mind. This may be fun but it's no joking matter.

I WATCHED A MAN at the black jack table play three hands at once with \$100 chips. I watched men and women from places like Southfield and Peoria feed chips into the croupier's pile like a kid feeding peanuts to the monkeys, and then I scuttled away to the slot machines, my quarters still clutched in my hand.

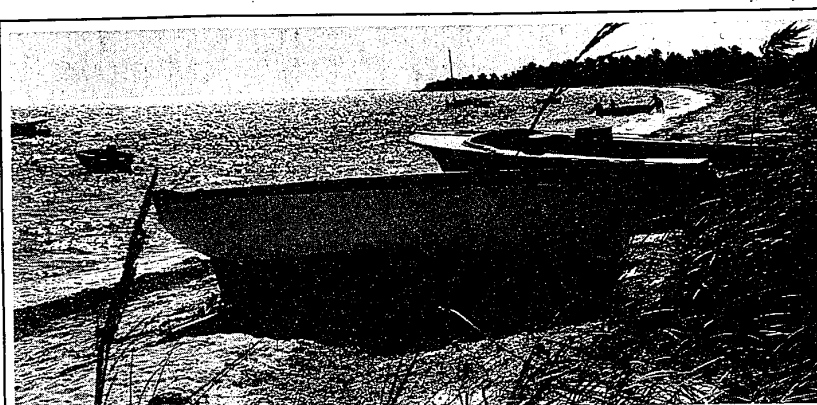
I know. I know. James Bond would be ashamed of me. Playing the slot machines seems innocent enough but those green tables scare the hell out of me.

Croupier David Ruffell understands us cowards. "Lots of people feel safe with the fruit machines, but they think they're really gambling when they play the tables." Yes, sir.

I LOST THREE and won one. I lost four and almost won one. If the cluster of cherries had gone one more ring on the middle line, I'd be a millionaire. There's a story in my family to prove it.

My father once walked up to a silver dollar slot machine in Reno, fed one dollar into it and won \$2,500. Unfortunately, that luck wasn't inherited.

There is a man in a blue flowered shirt who knows perfectly well that I warmed up that second slot machine in the third row with my \$5 worth of quarters. He never would have hit the jackpot on that machine otherwise. But you know he never will admit it.



South Andros sees very few travelers, so you practically have the island to yourself. A vacation there is like visiting a friend, perhaps not a rich friend but one who lives in a spectacular setting and is willing to let you share what he's got. (Photo by Iris Sanderson Jones)

## Andros, Bahamas

### An unmarred crescent of sand for miles in either direction

By IRIS SANDERSON JONES

SOUTH ANDROS, Bahamas — I am sunning on an island that is stitched with sand and palm trees to the turquoise waters of the south Atlantic.

South Andros is only half an hour's flight from the cruise ships and casinos of Nassau, but from where I sit, it must look as if it were pirates and explorers were here centuries ago.

Ahead of me, through the palm trees, the sea runs away without anything making a mast for a sky-line — clear blue-green and then dark blue under a powder-blue and white cloud-puffed sky.

Turning my head I see a tiny sailboat rounding the far point of the island and another, larger, sailboat pulled up on the beach. Otherwise the beach is an unmarred crescent of sand for miles in either direction.

Behind me, a newly painted white motel and dining room surround a swimming pool that seems superfluous in this setting. It's all fringed over with high palms like a picture postcard, and blown with a cool January breeze. Bahamians wear long sleeves and sweaters on a 70-degree day like this, but mainlanders sunbathe.

Out to sea, there is supposed to be a reef second only to the Australian barrier reef, but I am too busy lying on the beach staring at a huge conch shell to explore. Most of the time, travel is an exhausting business. Now that I have found a real laziness-around place, I plan to enjoy it.

ANDROS ISLAND is the biggest of the Bahama Islands. On the map it is a large green shape divided into cays, or separate island portions, sectional like the body of a caterpillar.

Tourists apparently are familiar with North Andros. The island has the resort facilities to accommodate travelers, so you practically have the island to yourself. A vacation there is like visiting a friend, perhaps not a rich friend but one who lives in a spectacular setting and is willing to let you share what he's got.

Everything runs on Bahamas Time, which loosely means whenever. Bahamasair schedules a 30-minute flight from Nassau daily, leaving the city at 8 a.m., stopping briefly at Mangrove Cay, landing in South Andros at 8:30 a.m. and leaving for Nassau at 9 a.m. But all of that is definitely done on Bahamas time.

We arrived at the Nassau airport one hour before flight time but we needn't have hurried. The flight was delayed an hour and instead of flying the blue and gold Bahamasair plane, we climbed the aisle of a DC3 obviously chartered to replace it.

The small, stucco airport terminal at South Andros was full of local women and children ready for their regular shopping expedition to Nassau. The island does not grow enough food to support its few thousand residents, so the trips are regular and frequent.

THERE ARE TWO hotels on the

island. Las Palmas is a contemporary board and stone motel that meets the standards of a good roadside motel in the United States. It costs about \$17.50 a night per person on the beach side for a large room with two beds and a fully equipped bathroom.

The dining room, with its corner bar, serves meals at regular hours. The local fish and lobster is fine. The fruit and vegetables are often canned and the coffee is powdered, because everything must be imported here.

A smaller, older hotel called the Congo Beach Hotel, about a mile down the beach, charges about \$10 a person per night for a room and a bathroom down the hall (\$20 per person including breakfast and dinner). There is no running hot water there but the staff will gladly fill a tub for you. The owners, Mr. and Mrs. Isaac Davis, are said to be good hosts and to serve one of the better dinner tables on the island.

But all of these are statistics and a visit to South Andros is a people experience. The island is about 45 miles wide and 104 miles long, with tiny fishing villages around its edges. The road starts at Driggs Hill to the north, where Captain Johnson's 360-horsepower boat takes cargo and passengers regularly on the six-hour trip across open water to Nassau for about \$14 one-way.

THE ROAD SOUTH runs past Congo Town, near the airport, and Kemp's Bay, where the mailbox comes in once a week, to Mars Bay

on the other end of the island. Brightly painted pink and green and blue buildings are scattered among the small houses and the endless number of small bars.

The largest settlement is at High Rock, where a pink elementary school sits high and cool on a hill of coral rock. One of the island's famous "blue holes" is downhill behind the school.

A blue hole, apparently, is a bottomless small lake that rises and lowers with the tide, with the water from the sea flowing through some deep unknown hole into coral reef.

Tuesday morning, when the mailbox arrives from Nassau, everyone gathers dockside at Kemp's Bay. Four white-robed Catholic nuns from a local school make white patches among the colorful clothes of local people, all of them waiting for the supplies they ordered.

If you are beginning to yawn by now, this is not the vacation for you. You can take a small boat out to fish or play on the sea, scuba dive or even do some deep-sea diving off the island, but you probably won't find a local guide to show you where to dive unless you look pretty hard.

The conch shells that cost good money in Nassau or the U.S. are scattered on the beach, usually chipped but still lovely, along with sand dollars and other small treasures.

For information on South Andros, contact the Bahamas Island Tourist Office, 875 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago, Ill. 60611, or call toll-free 1-800-621-6860.

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