

photos by MICKY JONES

Bright lights in a rainbow of colors brighten up the nighttime along Cable Beach at the Crystal Palace Resort in Nassau, Bahamas.

# A 'gem' of a place

## Sun worshippers discover Crystal Palace

By Iris Sanderson Jones  
contributing travel editor

When I want to clarify something, I often explain it to an extraterrestrial who knows nothing about Planet Earth and needs to be told everything. I started doing this long before E.T., so my alien is a little guy who sits on my shoulder. I call him The Martian.

I did that this morning when I sat in my sunburn around one of the pools at the Crystal Palace Resort in Nassau, Bahamas.

Last time I was on Cable Beach where there were a few five- and six-story hotels scattered along a wide strip of sand. Now we have a "mega-resort" rising in pink and purple buildings, with 1,500 rooms full of people coveting in the sea, in the pools and especially in the casino. There are only narrow strips of golden sands left.

"What's going on here?" my Martian said.

He had never heard of a Caribbean beach resort, but he knew about seasons, so I didn't have to explain summer and winter and the tilting of the earth toward the sun. He quickly understood why people who live amid winter snow can be attracted to a warm Caribbean Sea where sun, sea and sand are served up year-round.

"The leisure rich had this place to themselves until cheap air travel allowed middle-class folks like me to jet down here for a week's debauchery," I said.

"You mean that people who live in hot places are more sinful than those who live in cold places," the Martian said.

"No, it just seems that way to those of us who must shovel our driveways before getting on a plane to the tropics."

ONE REASON is that sin is as-

sociated with guilt, and those of us stretched out on beach chairs beneath glossy green palm trees feel twinges of guilt when we think of the poor slob back home who are stuck in snow and ice. But most of us are only here for three days, so the guilt doesn't last long.

Nassau is only one of 700 islands in the Bahamas. If you fly in at night, lights are scattered against the dark sea like a handful of jewels flung across black velvet. Ponce de Leon didn't see it from that height when he sailed these waters in search of the fountain of youth in the 16th century, but he might think he'd found it if he was here now, looking at all the skin spread out to cook in the sun and

the kids of various ages zooming down the great coiled slide into the pool.

I couldn't explain some of this scene to either the Ponce or the Martian — parasails making red and white circles against the blue sky, cruise ships on the horizon, four young men being towed on a banana boat, jet skiers, young bikini-clad women on a windsurfer, the two couples boiling away in the whirlpool, or the reason that young and old, long-haired, bald and grey, bake like that in the hot island sun.

Ponce de Leon was a Spanish explorer. What would he know about the desperation of people who live in snow country?

This stretch of Nassau is called Cable Beach because a transcontinental hookup was completed when a telegraph cable was laid here in 1892. The beach was an uninhabited crescent of glorious sand, crisscrossed here and there by the flower gardens of British colonials.

The rich and famous joined the exclusive Balmoral Beach Club, now the Royal Bahamian Hotel, in the 1940s, so the sand was full of whispered stories about the Duke and Duchess of Windsor, Richard Nixon, and the Beatles, all of whom passed this way when the rich and the infamous were getting frostbite.

CABLE BEACH was aging in the sun when package tours brought plane loads of travelers to Nassau, many to the high-rise hotels and casino of Paradise Island, across a toll bridge from downtown Nassau.

"Is that what they used to call Hog Island?" the Martian asked. You never know what extraterrestrials will come up with.

Tourists learn as little as possible about the world in which they travel, but thousands of Americans soon learned that the Bahamas was settled as a British Crown Colony, that a lot of Loyalists fled the American Revolution to settle here, that it became an independent member of the British Commonwealth in 1973.

They learn this while touring the forts, where shots were seldom fired, the English gardens, the Queen's Staircase, Parliament Square, the Changing of the Guard at Government House and the famous straw market. Tourists carry straw home on their heads and carry all those other souvenirs in the straw suitcases crammed into overhead bins aboard homebound airplanes.

Cable Beach slept in the sun until the government hotel corporation committed \$120 million to rejuvenate the area in the 1980s, building the \$100 million Cable Beach Hotel and Casino as centerpiece and restoring other hotels nearby.

Enter a Texan called Trammel Crowe who managed all these accommodations through Wyndham Hotels and an Israeli-born American called Ted Aaronsen who founded the Carnival fun ships and wanted to get into the casino business. Carnival managed the Cable Beach Casino and eventually began building the mega-resort now spread in high-rise splendor behind what's left of Cable Beach.

Phase One opened when the casino was revamped and the Casino Towers hotel built above it in late 1988. Phase two was completed when Prime Minister Sir Lynden Pindling the ribbon at the grand opening of the four Crystal Palace towers in January.

Paint the whole sprawl pink and purple to tie together the old Cable Beach Hotel, now Riviera Tower, the Casino, the Casino Towers and the four new towers: edge the balconies with a pallet of colors, set it against the white sand and the emerald sea and you've got a Las Vegas style hotel/casino wrapped in sea, sun and sand.

"Why do they call Cable Beach the Bahamian Riviera?" the Martian wants to know. I can't explain everything, pal. Ask the Public Relations Department.

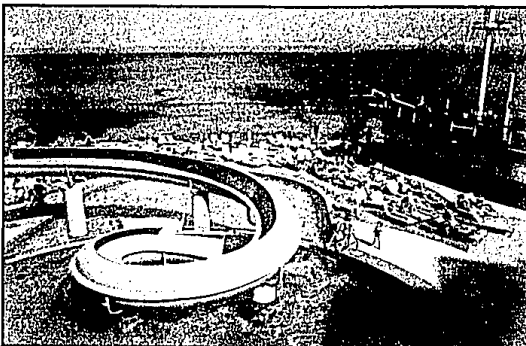


A glass roof lets diners enjoy the bright tropical sky in the Crystal Cafe.



Enjoying the amenities of the Crystal Palace are Christina Stanaj (from left), Linda Stanaj and Cheryl Genson, all of Farmington Hills.

One of the best ways to get into the pool at Carnival's Crystal Palace Resort in Nassau, Bahamas, is on the spiral slide.



MICKY JONES

## How to get to 'Palace'

By Iris Sanderson Jones  
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Carnival Air Lines is carrying hundreds of vacationers on Thursdays and Sundays to Nassau, where they spend three, four or seven days at Carnival's Crystal Palace Resort and Casino, which had its final grand opening in January.

Early birds got a \$299 unadvertised special covering air fare and accommodations. Rates from Detroit through Feb. 11 are \$479 for three days, \$569 for four days and \$829 for a week. Add \$30 through April 29.

Ask a travel agent about low summer rates. Also check tour companies like Key Tours, Travel Charter and Apple for packages. Prices vary widely on this one; the rates I quote are directly from Carnival. Call toll-free, 800-222-7466.

Those rates will get you and your luggage there on Carnival Air Lines and get you a room in either the older Riviera Towers, formerly Cable Beach Hotel, or one of the four new Crystal Palace Towers. Most of the new Tower rooms have ocean views, but be sure you get what you pay for because a few have only a peek from a back balcony.

MOST PEOPLE buy these packages. I met one woman who paid rack rates, which range from \$175 for a standard room to \$550 for one of the famous theme suites and \$25,000 for a suite called Galactic Fantasy. (No, that isn't a misprint. And it's per night.)

The major costs on this trip are for food. The Crystal Palace offers a wide variety of restaurants, upscale and down, very good food, but they are all expensive. If you plan to eat most meals at the resort, consider buying a meal plan.

The gourmet plan, \$156 for breakfast and dinner for three days, covers anything on the menu and includes the meal at the Palace Theater dinner show. Another plan, for \$108, has limitations on your order and doesn't cover all restaurants.

Be prepared to pay a 15 percent gratuity and 8 percent tax on the menu price of everything you order on these plans. That's 23 percent on your bill when you check out.

If you expect to buy many meals outside the resort, skip the meal plans, eat lightly for breakfast and lunch and take the 75-cent city bus from outside the hotel to downtown Nassau. Taxi the same distance for \$15 to \$20.

Restaurants near the Crystal Towers are mostly in other hotels. The Traveler's Rest about four miles away on West Bay is popular.

THE YOUNG people who work in the Crystal Palace find low-priced meals at the Poop Deck or the Ivory Coast, both just east of the mainland end of the Paradise Island bridge downtown, the Three Queens on Wulff Road, all specialize in Bahamian food.

The least expensive is The Shoal on Ponceana Drive — locals call the area "over the hill."

There is a very popular disco called Fanta-2 just off the casino in the Crystal Palace. You can dance downstairs or watch from upstairs. There is an \$8 cover charge, but one free admission is included in most tour packages.

Other Nassau clubs include Club Waterloo, which features a local band called High Voltage, which plays reggae and popular music. There is a \$15 cover charge that includes two drinks; Thursday is Ladies Night. A similar place, the Ritz, is on East Bay. The Club Mystique offers disco in the Cable Beach Inn half a mile west of the Crystal Palace.

## Trio finds plenty to do at resort

By Iris Sanderson Jones  
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Cheryl Genson and her friends Christina and Linda Stanaj, all of Farmington Hills, recently spent three days at Carnival's Crystal Palace in Nassau.

Chris and Cheryl are both 18, Linda is 19, all three graduated from Farmington High School and currently study at Oakland Community College.

The girls traveled as a group with their parents and other family members but spent most of their time on their own after they got there. They thought it was a great experience, but more expensive than they anticipated to do the things they wanted to do, even though air fare, accommodations and most meals were covered by their parents.

"We met lots of people, on the beach, in the casino, in the disco, and downtown in the music clubs," Cheryl said. "No trouble at all meeting either Bahamians or tourists. We would spend the day on the beach or in the pool, and of course, that didn't cost anything unless we ordered hamburgers by the pool or did one of the optional activities."

They all had their hair braided by a local lady on the beach — \$2 a braid. They tried the jet skis at \$25 for 15 minutes, although the promoters sometimes would take a lower fee at the end of the day when business was slow.

FIVE MINUTES on the banana boat costs \$5. Snorkeling is \$5 an hour, windsurfing \$12 for the first half hour, parasailing a minimum of \$30.

The parents paid for the Boozie Cruise, \$28 per person for four hours on a glass bottom party boat, with snorkeling, snacks and all the rum punch you can drink.

"There is no minimum drinking age in Nassau," Christina said. That means that the girls could order drinks on the cruise, in the clubs or in casino, where drinks are free to gamblers.

THE CRYSTAL Palace Casino has a very friendly ambience, helpful and courteous staff, so most people feel comfortable there. Carnival puts all its staff through special training, and it shows in many places, like the casino and in the slow-but-friendly service in the Crystal Cafe. The training still has a long way to go in some areas of the resort, especially at the front desk and in the Sea Side Buffet.

Overall, I would agree with the three Farmington girls that this is a good vacation for anyone who enjoys a sun-sea-sand resort, sunning or cavorting on the beach or around the pool, playing in the casino or disco at night. Smart travelers learn how to do it without blowing their budget.