

TRAVEL

Edited by Stephen McCarty
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sera

You never know what delights await in this paradise in the Bahamas, writes **Jane Wooldridge**

I've been in town less than an hour and just about everyone at the pool bar at the Club Peace & Plenty hotel knows my story.

"Oh, you're that writer who's come to town," says a local estate agent, who is lessening the disappointment of a soured deal with an afternoon cocktail.

The hotel manager settles in for a chat and a beer, then is edged out by the owner of a local kayaking outfitter and a would-be developer from Denver, all looking to tell their story. Leron Rolle, the long-time barman and "doctor of fine arts of libation", keeps everybody happy.

Eventually the light wanes – and with it the afternoon crowd. A new group gathers in the hotel's 18th-century slave kitchen-turned-indoor bar where Glen Munroe – part-time firefighter, barman and father of 11 children – keeps track of the tabs.

In the Exumas, that's the way of things. Been in town an hour? You're practically a local. After all, only about 3,600 people live on its 365 cays, with about 32,000 visitors last year. The capital has no traffic lights and received its first ATM a couple of years ago. Although a

hospital is on the way, your best bet for an X-ray these days is at the local vet's.

But like so many neighbouring isles of the Bahamas, the Exumas are a place in transition, gingerly steering a future between the economic benefits of new hotels and second-home communities and the traditional charms of an island.

West of the airport, on Emerald Bay, the gracious and breezy Four Seasons Resort, which opened in late 2003, represents the future. There are 15 hectares of luxury facilities: comfortable rooms, gourmet dining, cocktails served on the beach, an 18-hole Greg Norman golf course, a casino, a 9,750-square-metre spa and fitness centre and tennis courts. For Bahamians, it means 566 jobs.

Celebrities have already found the islands. Last summer, illusionist David Copperfield bought Musha Cay, the private island where celebrities Faith Hill,

Detours: Magical history tour

Japan may seem like a strange location for a museum dedicated to the life and work of John Lennon, but remember that line: "Imagine there's no countries..." And although the Beatles made only one short visit to Japan, Beatlemania persists here.

The John Lennon Museum, in Saitama prefecture, Tokyo, was opened by his widow, Yoko Ono, on October 9, 2000 – the 60th anniversary of his birth. It's the only Lennon museum to be formally approved by Yoko, and most of the 130 or so items on display were lent by her.

The visit starts with a short biographical film. When your tour group enters the cinema, head for the back row for English-translation earphones (although from August the movie will have English subtitles).

The displays are arranged chronologically into nine zones, which chart the key periods of his life. The exhibits include extensive memorabilia such as musical

instruments, clothing, hand-written lyric sheets and other personal belongings. His life story is told through narratives, photos and quotations – the latter from a variety of people who played a part in Lennon's life.

Three of the zones stand out from the rest. Rock 'n' Roll, the second zone, takes you into one of the most energetic and important periods of Lennon's development, and includes a great display of old photos, guitars, posters and mementos that reflect the hard-edged style of the early days in Liverpool and Hamburg.

The Imagine zone also stands out. The final zone, House Husband, with its white-wood panelling, piano and other items, recreates the feeling of Lennon's New York apartment, and provides an insight into the musician as a family man.

The walk through Lennon's life ends at a wall that displays, in Japanese minimalist style, the date of his death.

Good as all this is, you may find



yourself wondering what hasn't been included. Lennon was married twice and had two sons. Much is made of Ono and Sean, but there's little material about his first wife, Cynthia, or their son, Julian – perhaps not surprising, given Ono's involvement with the museum. Cynthia and Julian appear in just one photograph, with a Japanese caption. (Although the museum's narratives are in Japanese and English, most of the smaller information boards and photo captions are in Japanese only.)

The John Lennon Museum is 25km from central Tokyo, but just three minutes' walk from the Saitama Shin Toshin Railway Station. Getting there entails a 30-minute journey on the JR Keihin Tohoku, Utsunomiya or Takasaki lines. Admission is 1,500 yen for adults (HK\$95), 1,000 yen for students and 500 yen for schoolchildren. It's open from Wednesday to Monday, 11am to 6pm. For more information go to www.taisei.co.jp/museum.

Mark Andrews



The John Lennon Museum in Tokyo tells his life story in nine sections

Big deal

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Aero International is selling a two-night package to Pusan in South Korea starting at HK\$2,550 per person, twin share. Accommodation at this price is at the Busan Tourist Hotel (www.pusanhotel.co.kr), or you can stay at the Novotel

(www.novotelbusan.com) for HK\$2,750; the Lotte Hotel (www.lottehotel.co.kr) for HK\$2,950; the Westin Chosun (www.westin.com) for HK\$2,990; or the Paradise Hotel (www.paradisehotel.co.kr) for HK\$3,250. Round-trip, economy-class flights with

Dragonair are included in these prices, which are available until the end of September (with a HK\$100 per person surcharge from July 13 to August 29). For inquiries and reservations contact Aero International on 2545 6669, or go to www.aerohk.com.



Tim McGraw and Robin Williams have holidayed. After filming in the area for *Pirates of the Caribbean*, Johnny Depp bought his own cay.

It's no surprise that land prices have rocketed – from a few hundred thousand US dollars for a beachfront home five years ago to more than US\$2.5 million.

But there are restrictions. All development must be low-rise, and a tourism spokesman says the government is sensitive to the environment and local culture. Most of the island land is protected, held in common by descendants of slaves, and can't be sold. Village children still attend whitewashed schools that look more like churches.

For now, the Exumas are still a boaters' haven where you can cosy up to locals at a beach bar or wander for miles without seeing a soul. On the island of Staniel Cay, new homes have sprung up and others are being planned. But the ambience remains laid-back, the allures lo-tech: spectacular snorkelling, untouched beaches that are home to marine iguanas and swimming wild pigs, and cold beers at the friendly Staniel Cay Yacht Club.

At the Chat 'n' Chill



Life moves at a slow pace for about 3,600 locals who live on the 365 cays that form the Exumas in the Bahamas. Photos: Corbis

beach bar just across the bay from George Town, beach bar owner K.B. Bowe says his bathrooms are always clean because "it's women who make the decisions" and dirty bathrooms translate into a quick exit.

The Chat 'n' Chill is the day-time favourite of everybody, from rich yachters who come in winter to Sunday morning worshippers who pray under the trees and the Sunday afternoon beer-and-pig crowd. On a hot afternoon, the shallow water

is filled with families, couples and anglers hoisting a brew. And although you've just arrived, everybody knows your name.

Getting there
American Airlines (www.aa.com) flies from Hong Kong to George Town, Great Exuma, via New York and Miami. Go to www.myoutislands.com or www.bahamas.com.

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