



Welcome to paradise: The Bimini Big Game Club (photo by Pat Ford).

by John Bell

Bimini Beckons





In an archipelago of 700 islands sweeping across 500 miles of open ocean there lies a hard-scrabble coral rock formation a mere 50 miles due east of Miami. This is Bimini, whose cobalt blue and turquoise green waters are irresistible in visceral appeal to both the senses and soul.

On the gentle sea breeze, a siren's call whispers a beckoning: "Catch it and they will come." And come they have, and still do.

For generations of angling and diving enthusiasts, Bimini has been and remains the gateway to the Bahamas, a portal to adventure and experience perched at the edge of a sheer underwater cliff and the eastern edge of the mighty and mythical Gulf Stream.

Legendary angler and western novelist Zane Grey and his captain, Tommy Gifford, recluse billionaire Howard Hughes and retailing genius turned scientist/naturalist Michael Lerner heard the call.

Ernest Hemingway was an early apostle to the Bimini experience in the 1930s, where he drank, brawled and wrote his way through several fishing seasons, traveling back and forth between his home in Key West and

his beloved "Island in the Stream." His creative workshop was the Compleat Angler and his characterizations came from a world populated by giant blue marlin, bluefin tuna and schools of sharks almost too large to count. With his literary acclaim and sporting prowess, Hemingway, together with countless other kindred spirits, established Bimini as the Big Game Fishing Capital of the World—home today to some 50 world-record catches and counting.

THE ART OF FISHING AND CONSERVATION—THE NEW BIMINI

In 1985, a young marine scientist and self-taught artist depicted Hemingway's famous fishing story "The Old Man & The Sea" through a series of 44 original pen and ink drawings and displayed them at an exhibition in Jamaica. His love of the sea and depictions of the many creatures that populated it soon earned him a reputation as an artist, a place in the world of marine science and a pop culture brand—Guy Harvey.

The call of Bimini came to Dr. Harvey in 2010. It came on the winds that blew through the vacant and boarded up Bimini Big Game Club,

perhaps the most legendary offshore angling outpost of all time. Originally conceived in 1936 as a formal dining club for angling enthusiasts, and 10 years later evolving into a resort hideaway for the elite and powerful, the Big Game Club prospered through the years only to become a victim of mismanagement, neglect and finally a global recession. Shuttered in 2009, this legendary club sat waiting for someone who understood the history, allure and promise of this colorful out-island port of call. That someone was Guy, and his partners in Guy Harvey Outpost Resorts.

With an artist's vision to guide the team, and a confederation of supporters behind the Outpost effort, history was reawakened on July 21, 2010, the 75th anniversary of Hemingway's birth, with the reopening of the newly renovated Bimini Big Game Club, a Guy Harvey Outpost.

Though the Bimini of Hemingway, Grey and Lerner lives on as both legend and recorded history, today's Bimini exists in a more delicately balanced world where eco-systems and bio-diversity are considerations when promoting traditional pursuits such as fishing, diving and boating.



Tommy Sewell gets his hands on fly fishing guru Vaughn Cochran's sporty bone.

It's this awareness that shapes the sustainable tourism focus for Dr. Harvey's Outpost program, and stewardship of the Big Game Club and Bimini's cultural and environmental resources in particular.

"Our goal at Guy Harvey Outpost," Harvey began, "is to give individuals an opportunity to learn and expand their knowledge and awareness of how to conserve and enhance resources at a local and global level, all the while having fun with friends and family."

Soon the Big Game Club, through its affiliation with the Guy Harvey Research Institute at Nova Southeastern University, hopes to be holding course study work for budding marine biology students, while also holding group "adult education" type programs for individuals interested in studying marine life, including shark encounters, tagging and conservation.

This intermingling of guests and professionals—be they academicians, research professionals, scientists or credentialed authorities—creates an edutainment focus providing a broad-

er and more enlightened family experience.

BOATING, FISHING, DIVING AND GOOD OLD FASHIONED RELAXATION

Blue water angling, backcountry fly fishing and diving will always be the primary pursuits that drive business at the Bimini Big Game Club.

"Water sports are in our DNA," said Guy Harvey Outpost President Mark Ellert. "We're on the map because of those pursuits and we've worked hard over the last year to make them all available to our customers as top-of-class experiences."

Ellert and Outpost partners, who include Bill Shedd, president of AFTCO and Charles Forman, long-time friend and legal advisor to Guy, have assembled the "A" team to handle its various outdoor pursuits.

Captain Billy Black, legendary for his Walker's Cay angling exploits from 1977 to 2004, is running offshore charters in Bimini. Now at the helm of a classic 53-foot Rybovich sportfishing machine named El Viejo, Black is joined by noted

Carolina sportfishing captain Skipper Gentry and his 38-foot Carolina Gentleman.

In March, Bimini held a Junkanoo-style parade along King's Highway to celebrate the 40th anniversary of a still-standing record bonefish catch, a 16-pound, 3-ounce monster, caught just 300 yards from the Big Game Club.

In 1971 a Virginia Beach sportsman named Jerry Lavenstein and local Bimini bonefish guide Ansil Saunders headed out on the mud flats to cast their luck and hope for a trophy catch. On that day both men gained immortality.

Jump ahead to early 2011 and the Big Game Club has re-entered those same backcountry flats with the startup of Bonefish Bimini with fly fishing guru Vaughn Cochran at the helm. Ansil Saunders, who went on to guide for both presidents (Richard Nixon) and kings (as in Martin Luther), is among a group of elite guides available through Bonefish Bimini.

"This is among the most experienced and best group of backcountry fishing guides I've ever encountered," said Cochran, a Florida native and a highly

respected fly fishing expert in his own right, having first guided in the Florida Keys and then managed some of the legendary fishing lodges on the Caribbean and Central America, including Parismina Tarpon Rancho in Costa Rica and Turneffe Island Lodge in Belize.

For the scuba enthusiast, in the dive world there's only one god. Neal Watson, known fondly as the "Dive God" for his superhuman record-breaking scuba records, has returned to his favorite island home to oversee Neal Watson's Dive Bimini, a Guy Harvey Outpost Dive Center which operates out of the Big Game Club.

Having lived in Bimini for nearly a 10-year period, during which time he explored and discovered most of the island's present day dive sites, he and the Dive Bimini customers now enjoy exploring from the decks of *Bimini Blue*, the largest recreational dive boat in the Bahamas out islands, a glass-bottomed double-deck dive platform certified for 100 passengers.

"Bimini has no shortage of great dive sites: Reefs, Wrecks, Walls, Drift Dives, our famous Atlantis Road and a truly amazing Wild Dolphin Encounter - you name it," said Watson. "And did I mention, Shark Encounters," he asks with a grin.

The Bahamas is now one of the premier shark-watching destinations for divers, reeling in \$800 million over the past 20 years for the national economy. It's an industry Neal Watson helped create in the Bahamas, and defends today as president of the Bahamas Dive Association. It's also an experience that clearly ties into Dr. Harvey's passion for conservation, his pursuit of scientific knowledge and the adventure of discovery that defines an Outpost experience.

"What our customers experience and learn in their shark encounters is part of broader initiatives to preserve and protect these magnificent animals," said Watson.

Dr. Harvey has joined with growing ranks of individuals calling for strict regulations to protect and preserve sharks, including a ban on the commercial fishing of all sharks in The Bahamas.



Bimini Big Game Club's glass-bottomed double-deck dive boat is certified for 100 passengers.

"Many species of sharks are being driven to the brink of over-exploitation fueled mostly by the Far East's demand for shark fin soup," he said.

On South Bimini, guests can visit the world-famous Bimini Biological Station Shark Lab owned and operated by shark biologist Dr. Samuel Gruber. The "Shark Lab" offers internships to people interested in shark research and conservation.

To this end, Ellert said the Big Game has a "shark free" marina policy, and with Guy's research credentials this Bi-

mini Outpost will be hosting scientific meetings and symposiums among other gatherings, at the newly-completed Gulfstream Conference Center. Decorated with iconic murals by famed artist Phil Brinkman, artwork of contemporary marine artists, and of course, Guy himself, this facility adjoins the new Hemingway's Rum Bar and Social Lounge, created out of the club's historic bar room. Ellert said guestrooms and suites have been fully renovated, as with the new and expanded dining room overlooking the marina and pool. And



Area rug-sized stingrays are common sights while diving in Bimini.

G destinations

for the shopping addict, the club also features the Guy Harvey Outfitter Shop offering the best in sportswear, gifts and accessories.

IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD

For an après hours entertainment, Alice Town and environs never lack for fun once the sun goes down.

Try the End of the World Saloon, Sherry's Beach Bar or the High Roller, or stop by next door at the famous Anchorage, overlooking the Atlantic Ocean for a specialty sunset cocktail. For high-energy Bahamian calypso and a crowd that goes home when the sun comes up, give Big John's a try. For the more adventurous, ferry over to South Bimini and drop in at the Thirsty Turtle or the Sand Bar.

BY WATER

Located on the main navigation channel in Bimini Bay, The Big Game Club provides a 75-slip marina capable of accommodating boats up to 145 feet in length. A full-service fuel dock will be operational by Spring 2012.

Boaters crossing the stream to Bimini and The Big Game are asked to call the US Marina Reservations Office to arrange for slip accommodations and confirm other special requirements. To confirm, call 1-800-867-4764.

BY AIR

It's an international airport, but certainly not the standard fare. For scheduling flights, it's recommended to use the Outpost Travel Concierge service offered through the Club's reservation office. Bimini has scheduled air access by Gulfstream Airways, the code-sharing partner of Continental/United, IBC Airways, and Bimini Island Air. All offer daily service to/from Fort Lauderdale. Western Air services Bimini via Nassau with two flights daily. For North Florida residents AirGate Aviation has announced regular scheduled service to Bimini.

Remember to bring your passport and bring your sense of adventure. Bimini rarely disappoints those who are willing to join in the discovery.

www.biggameclubbimini.com **G**



Dr. Guy Harvey enjoying one of the finer things in life: fishing the beautiful waters off of Bimini.

