

The Bahamas Is Waiting to Be Tasted

I flew into Nassau, capital of The Bahamas, the day ahead of a 16-day cruise. Having no interest in baking on beaches or losing money in any of the enticing casinos, I decided instead to select a tour to teach me something about the country I was visiting ... however briefly.



That's why I found myself following in the footsteps of local guide, Alanna Rogers, on a Tru Bahamian Food Tour with the descriptive name, Bites of Nassau Food Tasting and Cultural Walking Tour. The stated goal of our three-hour culinary adventure is to connect some of the country's annual three million visitors with authentic local foods, the stories and traditions behind these foods, and the Bahamian entrepreneurs who prepare and preserve them.

Alanna Rogers is the enthusiastic driving force behind **Tru Bahamian Food Tours** (trubahamianfoodtours.com), launched in January 2013 with herself and three other guides leading the packed itinerary that Alanna declares will leave participants of all ages "entertained, educated and well fed." A true Bahamian herself and a very well travelled one, she balances an equal passion for authentic food experiences with a hearty dose of Bahamian history, architecture and culture. Helping the city's small-scale entrepreneurs to benefit from tourism is a significant part of her mission.



As reflected in our tour's restaurant mix, I was surprised to discover how multi-cultural historic Nassau is, underscoring the fact that all Bahamians today are descendants of immigrants. For example, Jamaican immigration became prominent in the 1920s, with most Jamaicans coming from Cuba or the construction camps of the Panama Canal Zone. Today they form a 12,000-strong sub-culture, sharing much in common with Bahamian culture. We received a warm welcome at the Jamaican Bahamian family-owned Pepper Pot Grill and Juice Bar featuring classic Jamaican dishes like Jerk Chicken, rice and peas, fried plantains and fresh fruit punch.

Another fascinating piece of immigrant history intertwined with Nassau's cultural cuisine can be found at the Athena Café, the island's oldest Greek restaurant and a venerable Nassau landmark. It is proudly run by the Mousis family with a classic Greek menu. What is the Greek heritage connection with the Bahamas? In the 1860s, expert Greek sponge divers arrived in The Bahamas to begin an industry that lasted into the early 20th century and, for a time, was the biggest revenue earner in the country. At its peak, millions of pounds of live sponges were harvested annually. Staying on after the demise of the natural sponge industry, Greek Bahamians remain a dynamic element of The Bahamas today.



For each tour itinerary, Alanna and other guides select a variety of cuisine experiences from which they hope to achieve a balance of down home comfort food dishes in cosy nooks around the back streets of old Nassau and some sweet, sour and downright HOT surprises with a Bahamian flavour. Take Pure Caribbean, a local tea merchant specializing in herbal bush teas, jams, spices and exotic pepper sauces sourced only from Bahamian artisans. Or the Tortuga Rum Cake Company, Nassau's premier rum cake bake shop where sampling six cake flavours, each laced with a different rum, is a matter of detecting subtle differences.

But our visit to the five-star boutique Graycliff Hotel, still imbued with the gracious colonial lifestyle of times past, elevated our tasting ritual to new heights. Home to the chocolate-making operations of award-winning chef, Erika Dupree Davis, we were first presented with a feast for the eyes ... exquisite swirls and sculptured shapes in white or dark chocolate feature guava, key lime, goat pepper and mango ... and then encouraged to sample what was almost too beautiful to eat.



The price of a three- to 3.5-hour culinary walking tour is US\$69.00 (\$49.00 for participants 12 and under), with advance tour bookings usually made online. Allowing a maximum of 12 people per tour, all ages and fitness levels are welcome, except that this tour is not wheelchair-friendly. Total walking distance covered is 1.3 miles or 2.2 kilometers ... bring your comfortable walking shoes and an adventurous appetite!

The Bahamas is a popular departure point for cruise ships that explore the Caribbean or sail south to traverse the Panama Canal. Like me, the vast majority of cruisers arrive in Nassau a day or more in advance of their sailing, making it a special treat to learn about the islands' colourful, multi-layered history and local cuisine before slipping back into the international menus that define most cruise ship dining experiences.

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