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OCTOBER 1993

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Everything on the reef, the reef itself, is unaccountably strange, laughably improbable, a cloud-cuckoo-land come true.

the American Revolution, bringing few possessions other than their slaves. Now almost nine out of every ten Bahamians are black. Most live in Nassau, on the island of New Providence, a crowded city, dirty with car fumes, a mix of hucksterism, government, and Old World courtesies. (The *Nassau Guardian* has a regular feature called "Sweet News.") Except for the casinos and resorts, Nassau's buildings are boxy and human-size and close, with pretty pastel trim around white stucco. But the stucco steadily peels, the bright shutters lean a little, and the small vacant lots and alleys are filled with trash and bougainvillea and hibiscus. Mongrel dogs wander the unmarked streets, which wend and bump and glide into one another gracefully. In Nassau, at Christmastime, I saw blooming poinsettias as big as cars.

MOST VISITORS TO THE Bahamas stick close to the garish, self-contained resorts on New Providence and Grand Bahama. One group of hotels even offers its own airstrip, complete with customs official, to ease the stress of international travel. But some people come to the less-developed Family Islands for the sailing, the fishing, and the diving, and some come for the quiet. There's a lot of all these things. There were nine of us altogether: my husband Bob and me and our three children, and our friends Shirley and Jaime and their two children. Bob came for the bonefishing flats; the others for the sun and the surf. I was drawn to the long bank-barrier reef, which runs north and south a few miles into the Atlantic. Much of the fishing is outside the big, healthy reef, in the open ocean, where big groupers and game fish prowl. The reef has huge caverns, a long sandy plain on the fore reef, and multiple sand channels that make the reef breaks used by fishermen. Inside, in the shallow lagoons, are bonefishing flats, scale fish, and a lot of conch.

There is only one dive shop on Green Turtle, a little operation called Brendal's, and as soon as I could I signed on to its boat. Brendal Stevens, the only Bahamian dive shop owner in the Bahamas, is a rangy, lean, soot-black man of 44 with striking almond-shaped eyes and a little gray in his temples. He's confident and flirtatious, singing in a local club several evenings a week and diving a lot of the rest of the time. Brendal is one of those vigorous, muscular types I've always envied but never imitated. He chatted and joked with the five other divers and me all the long way out to the reef, unconcerned with the slipping and sliding of the boat from wave to wave. You can tell where the reef lies from miles away—it's where

the open ocean breaks over into surf in the middle of nowhere.

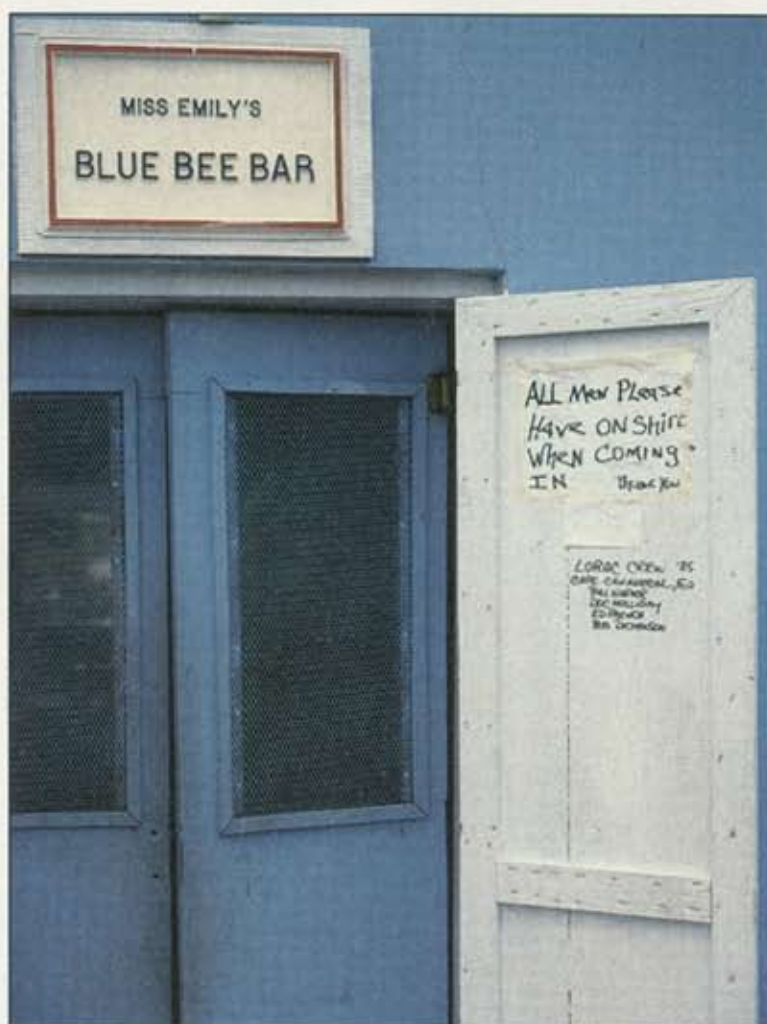
I am cursed with fears large and small. I've been diving for years, but I can still hit the water with a tiny bleep of panic, especially after a slow, bouncy boat ride out to sea. The abrupt transition from air to water changes everything in a moment, and it's best to jump in without intimations of disaster, without the secret terrors I get from choppy water. The Catacombs, south and east of Green Turtle Cay, Brendal's chosen dive site for the day, is a long, jumbled hill of hard and soft corals—the deliciously named reef-builders like boulder and brain and starlet, the wavering fronds like deadman's fingers. It drops to a sandy plain between 20 and 45 feet deep. As we descended slowly along its face, two spotted eagle rays flew languidly over the white sand, disappearing into the dark, vague distance. Around and through the massive tumble

of coral swam yellowtail snappers, parrot fish, and fairy basslets. Another diver touched me on the arm and pointed to a two-foot-long grouper resting on the bottom, surrounded by the mucousy debris of a conch meal. Then Brendal tapped me from behind, and when I turned around he handed me a porcupine fish, puffed up to the size of a cantaloupe. It was creamy white, covered with thick, short, white spines too big to hurt my bare hands. It had a delicate bee-stung mouth and liquid black eyes, and behind the eyes two pathetic little fins whirring helplessly. When I let it go it swam ploddingly away, deflating like a slowly leaking balloon.

NEATLY TACKED TO TELEPHONE poles in New Plymouth were posters saying CHRISTMAS EVE SOUSE 10-1 AND THEN LATER ON AGAIN. They seemed emblematic of the town—courteous, reserved, and maddeningly vague. A lot of the people who live here look

disconcertingly alike. The population of the Abacos has a higher proportion of whites than the rest of the Bahamas, almost all descended from a few original Loyalist families. They are either blond and blue-eyed or redheaded and freckled, and I would meet people and not be sure I hadn't met them already. The accent is confounding: one moment Scottish, then Cockney, then southern American or West Indian. A *v* becomes *w* and *t* turns to *sh*; an *h* is dropped here and added there. One has "two or shree tings" to do in town. If I went to Marsh Harbour, on Great Abaco, someone might say I'd "gone wisitin' to Mahsh Habah."

Souse is a soup, made variously with chicken or pig's feet or sheep's tongue, fatty and mild. We went to the Christmas Eve



The Blue Bee Goombay Smash record: 23 in a sitting



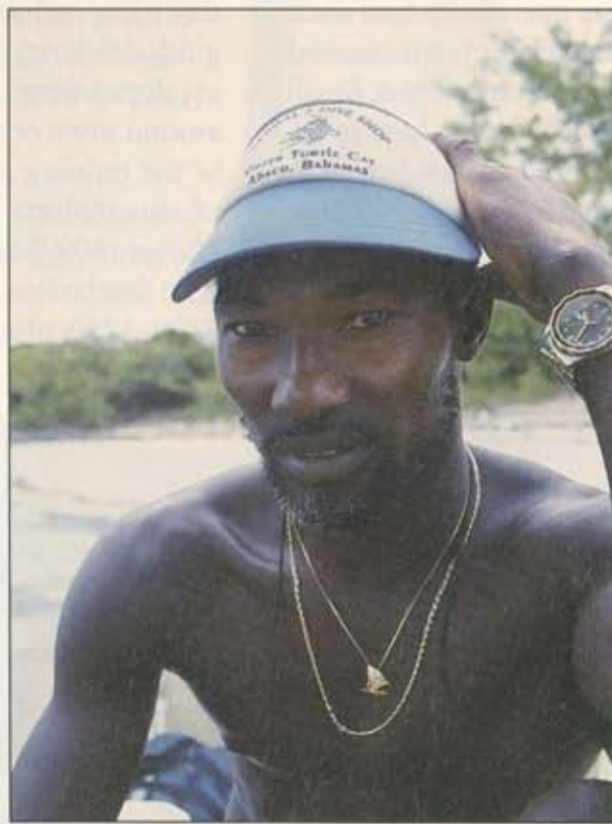
A delicate bee-stung mouth and liquid black eyes: face-to-face with a porcupine fish

Souse in the little park next to the basketball court and had bowls of souse and slices of johnnycake under the covetous stares of the town's mongrel dogs. Santa Claus came to the Souse, too, sweating in his red suit and fishing boots, giving gifts to every child. He had a vaguely familiar face. "Santa's going skin diving later," he told me.

In spite of its politically conservative history and the half-dozen churches along its narrow streets, New Plymouth is most famous for a bar—a bright blue tumble-down shack, across from the park, called the Blue Bee. Its owner, Miss Emily, is supposed to have invented the Goombay Smash, a delicious punch of coconut rum, pineapple juice, dark rum, and Miss Emily's "secret ingredient," which I suspect is a sledgehammer. Smashes are a real bargain on an island where a can of soup costs almost \$3. Unlike soup, they last for hours, sometimes days.

We tried to drink at the Blue Bee, the one guaranteed tourist mecca on Green Turtle, where little tour boats off the cruise ships figure an hour is plenty of time. But Miss Emily has retired and her daughter opens the bar only now and again, and after several days of trying I gave up on her and went next door to another tumbledown shack, this one bright yellow, called the Sea Garden Club, where the half-full jug of wine sits on the shelf next to the can of Raid.

The bartender at the Sea Garden used to be the local policeman, he told me one evening; when he retired, no one replaced



The indefatigable Brendal Stevens

and celebrated at Christmastime, the one break in their laborious lives. Over time Junkanoo took on an increasingly political, even satirical tone, with costumes and themes woven into the intense dance competitions; for a time the black dancers wore whiteface. There are two big dates for Junkanoo parades, which take place in the middle of the night: December 26 (Boxing Day) and January 1. Green Turtle holds a formal parade only on New Year's Day.

On Christmas Eve Jaime asked the waitress at a local café if he'd really heard drumming the night before. The waitress looked

him. "No problem," he said. "Don't need one here. I never did a lot."

What, I wondered, would he do with someone who just drank too much?

"If they lying down, no problem, maybe someone put them out under a tree—they won't freeze. If they just stumbling along, you know, I'd just give them another drink and then they'd stay in one place awhile."

Sometimes a drunk gets carried into the cemetery, which is what happened to the man who set the Blue Bee record for Goombay Smashes—23 in a sitting. The cemetery is neat, clean, and full of virtue; a gravestone for a man who died in 1849 reads, in part,

HE WAS A ZEALOUS ADVOCATE FOR, AND
THE UNCHANGING FRIEND OF
TEMPERANCE.

The Bahamas has one holiday all its own, called Junkanoo, after the dance that is its center. Junkanoo was invented by the slaves