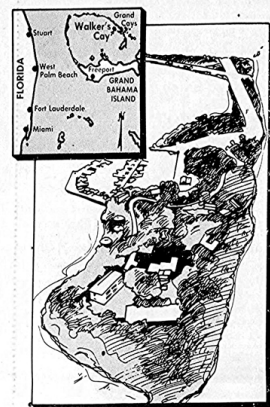




Dive instructors Barry Albury (right), Cheryl Kirz enjoy a laugh during conch cleaning



The Island

Walker's Cay (left), at the northern edge of the Bahama bank, lies just 110 miles northeast of Palm Beach. The island is accessible by the 2600-foot paved airstrip at the northern end of it or the seaplane ramp, which is in the middle of the island near the 75-slip marina. On the southern end of Walker's is a hotel and restaurant. Deep blue water lies only 2 miles from the island, where baits such as skinned ballyhoo and swimming mullet (below) are trotted for marlin, tuna and other species.



Photos by Greg Forrer and Pete Ebel

Natives, Visitors Willing Victims Of Cay Rapture

By Greg Forrer

WALKER'S CAY. Bahamas — White mangrove trees — fringe the island, they leave almost all-silver green. Sprawling banyans, their fibrous roots dangling like many suspended ropes, catch a visitor's eye as he walks from point to point on the fahfah island known as Walker's Cay.

The Strangler Fig, with its broad, deep-green leaves, and the almost Ming-like lamaris, noted for its shiny copper-hued bark, dot the landscape.

Birds chirp, sea gulls swoop overhead and hummingbirds flit from flowers at dawn and dusk. Ring-tailed lizards scurry about under foot.

"Walker's Cay," said assistant general manager Henry Ferguson, "is a place where one could come to read a book... or write a book."

The island, hotel and marina truly provide a place where one can get lost in thought, one in which an artist would be inspired to create. It is an atmosphere where one becomes a willing victim of a sort of rapture.

It is the dream of my life, living on an island," said Cheryl Kirz, dive shop director on the island. "I was raised in Indiana and most recently worked in Atlanta so I know what that life is about. Let me tell you, the place is priceless."

Although there is decidedly a price to pay if you do not live or work on the Bahamian island resort, it is, to those who try it and return again and again, a debt worth carrying.

"Most of our customers, perhaps 95 percent, are return customers," Ferguson said. "It's what all the Bahamians used to be like at one time. No big casinos, no cars, none of the big apartment buildings you can see anywhere. Life is calm, relaxed. We want to keep that standard."

It is a way of life all too rare. At almost any spot on the island you can hear breakers rolling over coral reefs, then the resulting soft waves lapping gently against the coral head on which the establishment is built.

"Many people come here because the fishing is so good," said Bahamian guide Andy Hield, who directed a pair of visitors in a fine catch of grouper and yellowtail snapper recently. "But many come just to beach it."

Many others travel to scuba dive or snorkel in the pristine waters. Like Walker's itself, life under water is a learning experience.

Once you come eye to eye with a grouper, realize it knows little fear and will just about eat from your hand if you have a chunk of conch for it, the idea of fishing for it, driving a hook into its mouth, becomes distasteful.

It is the Bahamian rapture. It is why the 26-year-old Kirz is there. It is why her assistant, 26-year-old Bahamian Barry Albury, stays.

It is very much the reason most of the Bahamians stay, work the life of the sea, a life of boats.

"I went away to the states for a while some years back," Hield said. "But I came back. It is a good life, a life in which I am glad to raise my son (14-year-old Terry)."

Hield, an experienced fishing guide, will soon begin teaching his son the ways of his trade. His gold-capped teeth sparkle in the bright sun like the many similarly-hued coral heads strewn about the waters. He is quiet, but his look is that of a man knowledgeable on the sea.

"I learned fishing at an early age," Hield said. "There is not a lot to do except fish."

For a young Bahamian, especially in the 1930s when Hield was born, this is true. But there is much evidence of a new breed of Bahamian, one at peace with the life their country provides them but with a desire to share their wealth with those would partake and enjoy of it.

Albury is an example. He excelled diving when at an early age and now is working to achieve his goal — becoming an advanced diving instructor as is Kirz. To this end, he was selected by the Walker's

management to fly to Atlanta for study. There he met Kirz and after the blond worked it so she could get away to Walker's, the two have formed a fine team.

This is the way of the Bahamians. "It's hard to get a job here," Kirz said. "Basically, they try to fill all the jobs with Bahamians. You've really got to prove you've got some service they want."

Overseeing the dive shop and Albury until he reaches status as a top notch instructor is her service. At that time, she will no longer be head instructor as such, but more Albury's advisor.

"When they asked me if I wanted the job it was like a dream," Albury said. "I used to work at staff like fixing boats. The only way I met people was if they asked me for a tube of glue or something. Since I started working, teaching people to dive and taking them to see the world under water, I've met more people than at any other time of my life."

Kirz smiles as Albury reveals in talk of his job while basking in the warm sun of his country. She would like to think she has had a hand in not only Albury's diving proficiency, but his manner with people.

While all the Bahamians on the island are willing to smile and say hello to strangers, Albury's social life is a personality emerging. If he continues at his present pace, no doubt he will be a dynamic force in the Walker's Cay scheme.

"I'd like to think I had a part in that," Kirz says. "I've met a lot of people in a delectable meal of dried lobster Bahamian, conch fritters, fried imported 'trollies' and island drinks."

She is a strong woman, a strong swimmer. Yet her way with the sea is smooth. Her teaching technique is warm. After listening to her speak about the ocean, one is convinced this is a human in love with what she is doing.

It would seem hard to be otherwise in such an atmosphere. Yet there was a time in the not too distant past when Bahamians and those living in the area were not so hospitable.

"Bahamians are a friendly people at heart," Ferguson said. "It was always that way until we had political problems. Then, with all that, that friendly attitude sort of broke away for a while. Now things are back in order, we're back on the right foot. You have to be stabilized otherwise nothing is possible."

Stability. It is something one can find when getting away to such a place. There are no phones in the rooms — if you want to speak to someone, the island is just more than a mile long — walk. There is no television — if you want a situation comedy, you must be one of the players. For drama, it is the same. One learns to work with the island, with nature, not against it.

"How am I going to get up tomorrow morning without any wakeup call," a guest inquired of Kirz after a walk in the balmy night air.

"Well, some people have an alarm clock, but there's always that," she said while pointing to the window looking out — as does almost any available window — on the vast beauty of the Bahamian waters.

"What do you mean?" the guest said.

"The day will awaken you. That's how I do it," Kirz said.

And sure enough, the guest was up and about without any rousing — shortly after six in the morning.

Visitors, whether they fish, dive or simply take in the soul-soothing, mind-clearing atmosphere that pervades the island, usually do not want to waste time.

"You can sleep any time," said a Miami surgeon visiting Walker's with his wife for a second wedding anniversary. "When you're there, you want to be doing something even if it's just looking and thinking."

Thoughts. Talk. Noise. If it's cheap. Rather, to those who wish it so, it is of an inestimable value.

The Water

Small sharks (above) cruising the flats near Walker's Cay provide excellent sport for flyfishermen and light-tackle anglers. The Sea Lion Marina (right) can handle 75 boats with 6-foot draft at low tide and 9 feet at high tide.

