

Turks & Caicos celebrates “Little Miss Middle Caicos” beauty

By: Brittany Somerset

TURKS & CAICOS - The largest island in the Turks & Caicos series of 8 inhabited islands is Middle Caicos. Although Middle Caicos is approximately 48 square miles, it is actually the least populated island. Due to all the recent off-island migration, the current average population of Middle Caicos, or “Middle” as it is referred to by TC Islanders, is only 180 people.

Middle Caicos is situated halfway between Puerto Rico and Florida, 90 miles north of the Dominican Republic and east of the Bahamas.

The annual celebration on Middle Caicos is called MC Expo. This provincial party boasts a “Little Miss Middle Caicos” beauty pageant, local foods and bands, dancing, a regatta and various forms of entertainment. MC Expo is a time when all the people from Middle Caicos who have moved to Providenciales, or “Provo” return to Middle Caicos to celebrate down-home style.

MC Expo was sponsored by the government, the tourist board, and the Honorable Jeffrey Hall, Minister of Parliament. O’Brien was the host of this year’s MC Expo. The Board of Committees, who were the main organizers of the event, was comprised of Shirlene Robinson, Jennifer Harvey, Krystal Landy, Sabrina Kneat, Bryan Syrus, Clyde Hall and Mackline Robinson.

I flew Turks & Caicos Airlines in a tiny 19-seater Cessna from Provo to North Caicos. The flight took only 15 minutes. The passing view from the air of the uninhabited salt cays vaguely reminded me of flying over the Peruvian desert’s Nasca lines. After touching down in North Caicos, I was picked up by Cardinal Arthur, seemingly the island’s only chauffeur, and driven on the new causeway that was recently built to connect North Caicos to Middle Caicos. Before this year, you could only get back and forth between North and Middle Caicos by flying, or taking a ferryboat, between the two islands. The ferry used to be the only way that high school students from Middle Caicos could get to Raymond Gardiner High School in North Caicos.

The new road is a hot topic of conversation here. It is referred to by locals as “The Lifeline of the Islands,” although technically it isn’t finished yet. The barely traveled, un-paved causeway looks as pristine as a main road possibly could, and is surrounded on either side by beautiful sea. The world’s first attractive causeway has a dusty pale road, and is flanked by two-foot high rock piles on either side to keep erosion at bay.

I stayed at Blue Horizons, which is primarily the only rental property on the island of Middle Caicos. The cottages are situated on gorgeous Munjadin Harbor. Blue Horizons is operated by kind and friendly former owners-turned managers, husband-and-wife team, Mike and Mickey Witts. They bought the property in 1981, and recently sold it to an Englishman, but still manage the property while in the transitional phase of finding new management. They are currently looking for a Belonger couple to

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take over their jobs managing the property. The name Blue Horizons is descriptive of the one- and two-bedroom cottages that are set far apart from each other, on acres of lush green foliage, for maximum privacy. Beautiful white rock and coral inlaid footpaths lead to tiny private beachfront caves. So much privacy is ensured, I didn't encounter a single soul on this beach, and actually stripped naked and went skinny-dipping for the first time in my life. I was completely convinced there wasn't a person in sight. The experience was beyond lovely, a beach lover's paradise.



As I frolicked in the crystal clear, turquoise water and allowed the frothy tide to carry me out to sea and mash me back to shore, I couldn't help laughing out loud. After about half an hour of the perfect beach experience, I lay on a towel in what I deemed my private cave and read one of the books I picked up from the bookshelf in my Blue Horizon cottage. "I could live here" I thought to myself (so long as I never left the property, that is).

The only downside to visiting this tropical paradise were the all-pervasive biting insects. I had asked Mike at Blue Horizons, in advance of my arrival, if I needed to bring long pants to protect myself against the mosquitoes and he told me, "No," that I'd "Be fine as it wasn't mosquito season." Well it may not have been mosquito season, but it was definitely no-see-um, chigger, sand fly, flea and tick season. As soon as the sun went down, I was bitten so many times I looked like I had chicken pox. I had to borrow a pair of jeans from Angie Toussaint from WIV, who is several sizes bigger than I am. I didn't have a belt, so I wound up rolling my pants down at the waist several times over, so they would stay on my hips. By the end of my stay in Middle, I began to get used to smelling like a strong pharmaceutical combination of Deep Woods Off, Avon Skin So Soft, and Just For Kids Insect Bite Cream. Luckily, all the cottages at Blue Horizons had mesh screens surrounding the decks for protection against the army of various annoying insects.

Later that evening, the WIV TV crew, who were also lodging at Blue Horizons, rolled up to MC Expo. MC Expo was hosted at the community center, Conch Bar, an outdoor venue that hosted the Miss Middle Caicos pageant. The party actually had your next-door-neighbor's back yard summer barbeque vibe to it, but with a beauty pageant of the local neighborhood children as the participants.

The five contestants were sponsored by local businesses. They were posed questions like any other pageant, however the questions centered around the issues directly pertaining to the Turks and Caicos islands, such as, "What is your opinion of the new causeway that the Hon. Mr. Jeffrey Hall has commissioned?"

Contestant Miss Patrina Missick answered, "Without change there can be no growth. The causeway is a good investment. The overall improvement in business caused by the connection between Middle and North Caicos will quickly outweigh the cost of building it. It is an investment into our people's future. It further strengthens and fosters unity between the people of both islands." I thought this was an articulate answer for a 15-year-old.

The winner of the pageant, Miss Teen MC Expo, was 16-year-old Miss Havana Handfield, who was sponsored by Arthur's Discount. First runner-up was 15-year-old Miss Patrina Missick, who was sponsored by Club Sodax. Second runner-up was 16-year-old Sabrina Lightbourne, who was

sponsored by Tropical Construction.



Miss Patrina Missick

Beauty pageants have come under fire and taken a nosedive in popularity in the United States in the wake of little beauty queen JonBenet Ramsey's murder. JonBenet, the poster child for the creepy sexualization of children competing in pageants, has left a bitter taste in the mouths of people who previously viewed pageants as a fun, entertaining way for young children to build confidence. Some pageant critics would say it is the hallmark of failed mothers, pushing children beyond their limits, and living their own dream of being a beauty queen vicariously through their children. In Turks and Caicos, pageants are a way of life and take place at every major celebratory event. Seeing the girls, whose faces were fixed with nervous forced smiles throughout the evening, turn to lip biting and downcast eyes while they fought back tears caused by their disappointment at not winning first place, was heart wrenching. I wanted to hug each and every one of them and tell them they were all winners, simply for having the courage to participate.

The three communities on Middle Caicos are Conch Bar, Lorimers, and Bambarra. The settlement of Bambarra was established on the north shore of Middle Caicos in 1842 by survivors of the shipwreck of the Gambia, a Spanish slaver bound for Cuba. "Bambarra" refers to the Bambera people who lived on the shores of the Niger River in West Africa. The Second day of MC expo was celebrated on Bambara Beach, AKA Expo Village. I spent the day at Bambara Beach in the company of my special little friends, the children of the Minister of Parliament, the Honorable Mr. Jeffrey Hall. We walked along the beach and picked up shells, examined baby crabs, relaxed in the shade, and sat on the soft nettles that blanket the beachfront while we enjoyed good music, nice vibes delicious food and good company. Several people drove in from North Caicos on the new causeway, while others flew in from Provo. It was a lovely outdoor day.

In the evening there was a regatta. Headly Forbes was the 1st place winner of the boat race. His first place prize was \$2500. Dennis Been won the 2nd place prize of \$1000, and Marcus Forbes won the 3rd place prize of \$500.

In the evening, the party relocated back to the community center for a dance party. The music the DJ played ranged from the dancehall vibes of my favorite three artists, Buju, Bounty and Beenie, to the playful sounds of calypso and soca. I enjoyed a foxtrot with a local named Lex. I also danced with O'Brien and my journalist colleague, WIV cameraman Jean Sagess. The party wore on until nearly 4am. As the night wore on, I was definitely, to use a Middle colloquialism, "carrying on bad."

The following morning, Ms. Jennifer Harvey of the event committee arranged for a tiny, four-seater chartered plane to carry the journalists from Middle back to Providenciales. As much as I was happy to return to the land of modern conveniences, I was sad to leave such a gorgeous, albeit bug-infested, paradise. I look forward to next year's MC Expo, although I will definitely wear jeans and a long sleeved shirt.

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