



A real life soap opera on the blue waters of paradise

The story of Dick and Rosie and Duke and Joan is like *Dynasty* without the villains. It boasts four generations of characters, myriad marriages, an impossibly sunny divorce, and three happy business yarns. Moreover, the adventures of Dick and Rosie and Duke and Joan have mostly occurred on a palm-fringed beach so beautiful the thought of leaving it hurts your heart. This soap opera began 27 years ago, when Dick Birch abandoned Canada for a chance to build cabins on the beach you'd never want to leave.

He was a young businessman from Toronto. He had a pretty wife, three kiddies, and no doubt that if he continued to be a good boy he'd have a comfy life. He'd married Joan, a Manitoban, in 1949, and risen fast in the Ford motor company. "If you'd met him," Joan explains, "you'd know why he was so good at sales. He's really a super guy, really a wonderful guy." (She left him 19 years ago.) With his brother Jack, Dick also got into the men's clothing business. They owned John Birch, the Man's Shop, in Hamilton, Ont., and it made money. "But Dick was doing a lot of thinking," Joan recalls. "He didn't want to spend the rest of his life telling people their shirts had to match their socks, or whatever?"

Dick and Joan sometimes snorkelled in the Muskoka resort district of Ontario but then, during a family vacation in Florida, they discovered the magic of scuba-diving in sub-tropical waters. "We could really see down there," Joan recalls. "For the first time, we could see so much. We got really turned on, and Dick kept thinking, *Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could find a place for whole families to go diving?*"

Dick's mother Dorothy, and his brother Jack, joined him and Joan in the search for a divers' paradise, and in 1959 they found it. It was just a strip of sand, where stubby sea grape flourished and young coconut palms swayed in the trade winds. It lay on the east coast of Andros, the biggest and least known of the Bahamian islands, and also one of the most sparsely settled. As Paul Wade wrote in *Gourmet Magazine*, "The eastern shore, thanks to the third-longest barrier reef in the world, is protected by a peaceful lagoon. One-hundred-and-forty-two miles of underwater fantasy are situated there for the explorer, who soon feels just like Jacques Cousteau."

By diving raft, the reef is only minutes offshore, and beyond it lie the seductions of the Tongue of the Ocean. To experience the Tongue, divers go down The Wall, a

sheer face of the reef that plummets 6,000 feet to the ocean floor. It would be here that Dick Birch, ex-haberdasher and car salesman, would one day set a world's depth record in scuba diving, plunging more than 400 feet in the ever-darkening blue; and it would be here, on other days, that he'd teach the likes of Pierre Trudeau how to dive. ("I no longer teach anyone but prime ministers," he jokes.)

Long before that, however, various Birches had bought the beach where the palms swayed. The Birches were all-out plungers, a classic example of not doing things by halves. "We wrote to all our friends and relatives," Joan recalls, "and we asked them if they'd like to invest down here in the sort of cottages you'd find at a Canadian lodge. We said we'd move here with our family, and run the place. . . . We formed Small Hope Bay Development Ltd., and we sold shares. . . . Jack (Birch) stayed behind for a year, and he sold the clothing store."

Joan solved the problem of her children's schooling with a characteristic display of energy — by going back to school herself, getting her teaching certificate in Hamilton, then landing a job as the first white schoolmarm at Calabash Bay, Andros Island. In a one-room schoolhouse, she taught not only her own youngsters but all the local black kids as well. Meanwhile, Dick has been building the first diving resort in the Bahamas. He used Andros pine, coral stone that he blasted loose with dynamite, an old rowboat that he installed as a bar in the main lodge, whatever local workmen he could round up, lots of ingenuity and his own bare hands.

Small Hope Bay Lodge opened for business at Christmas 1960, its first guests arriving by boat. Dick kept building cabins until a row of 20 stretched right down the southern end of the beach. Joan continued to teach school, but she also took reservations at the lodge. Jack helped run the place, too. They were all divers. Audrey, Jack's wife, ran the kitchen. Dorothy, mother of Dick and Jack, was there in the winter (and, indeed, she was there just last February, crowding 87 in Cabin One). Joan's mother installed drapes in the cabins, shopped in Miami for the lodge. (She's also in her mid-80s, and joins Joan in the Bahamas each winter.)

But changes shook paradise. Jack died at Small Hope Bay, and the family buried him at sea. Joan Birch, approaching 40, fell in love with LeRoy (Duke) Hannah, a black musician. A huge yacht dropped

anchor off the lodge. Tom and Rosie Kurth of Milwaukee were sailing around the world with their children. Rosie came ashore, fell in love with Dick Birch, left Tom for him. At the wedding of Joan Birch and Duke Hannah in 1967, the best man was Dick Birch. Rosie was there, too, but obviously not as the maid of honor, and I am making none of this up.

The three children of Dick and Joan all got married at the lodge and they, and each of their spouses, have all helped to run the place. So, indeed, have Rosie's four children. So has Peter, the Bahamian whom Dick and Rosie adopted, and Peter's wife, Gabrielle. It was Gabrielle, carrying baby Cara on her hip, who beamed, "Welcome to Small Hope Bay," after a rickety, brown Dodge had dumped me at the lodge. It had been Alex Blackwell — husband of Margot, the daughter of Dick and Joan, the stepdaughter of Rosie — who'd flown me from New Providence Island over to Andros Island in the lodge's little Grumman. It was Scott — son of Rosie, stepson of Dick — who gave me my first diving lesson. It was Jeff — son of Dick and Joan, stepson of Rosie — who offered to show me around Androsia. It's a batik factory, a bustling cottage industry that flogs women's fashions in the priciest Nassau hotels. Rosie founded it, Jeff helps run it, and over on New Providence Island, there's a woman who always wears Androsia while running the Bahamian eatery that she and her second husband have made famous.

The woman is Joan, wife of Duke, ex-wife of Dick. The eatery is Traveller's Rest, and under her management it has delighted the likes of The Rolling Stones, Arthur Hailey, Burgess Meredith, Donald Sutherland and Larry Hagman. Each Sunday afternoon, at the invitation of Duke Hannah, Bahamian bands gather at Traveller's Rest for jam sessions that, as the saying goes, "really make you shake your leg." Joan still takes reservations for the diving lodge she left almost 20 years ago, and it's hard to get away from Small Hope Bay without having someone tell you how crazy you'd be to go to Nassau without dining at her restaurant.

She's 59 now, a petite, quick, charming woman with a husky voice that seems to have survived a lot of Rothmans. Listening to her, I couldn't help thinking that, once in a while, a corny ad slogan perfectly suits someone's life. For Dick and Rosie and Duke and Joan, "It's Better in the Bahamas." No doubt about it. It really is. ☐