

Big Hopes At Small Hope

Story by Margaria Fichtner / Photography by Joe Elbert

Sometimes by midday the air hangs so still and heavy here that even walking ceases to be an involuntary act. You must lead with a shoulder and push your way along as if you were wading through a field of invisible wheat. And a shameless harlot kind of air it is, too, clinging to the body like damp sheets and giving a sheen to air conditioning-acclimated skin.

This is the season when the cicadas emerge yawning from their long hibernation and begin their molt. This year's colony has settled comfortably as squatters in the pine trees, and the males, with nothing else to do, have begun to shrill, drumming the membranes on the sides of their

abdomens to produce a rasp that assaults the senses like an eight year old with a new violin.

Anything else that moves at all does so with effort.

In a wooden shed that's been erected maybe 200 feet from some of the bluest ocean water under heaven, Merton Thompson and Glen White stretch a length of nurse-white pure cotton fabric along a wooden frame and tack it down so tight you could bounce a quarter off it.

Then, dipping brushes into two little electric cauldrons of steamy liquid wax, they begin to paint.

Merton outlines a flat, obtuse fish, his round fish eye beaming an expression of clearly benign dis-

interest, while next to him, from two concentric circles, Glen produces a turtle, dorsal view.

They work freehand, without fraidy-cat preliminary pencil sketches, their strokes loose, bold and freewheeling, and as the wax cools and hardens dirty-white on one patch of fabric, they move on to another.

Finally, the initial waxing completed, Merton signs the piece of fabric which will, by next week, be a wall hanging. In a careful, cursive grade school script, he spells out one word: Androsia.

Here in Small Hope Bay, a Gauguin-peaceful bowl of water five miles from Fresh Creek on the eastern side of Andros Island,

Above: Dick and Rosi Birch gather with their entire staff on the beach at Small Hope Bay, Andros Island. Helped by the islanders, Dick took seven years to build the remote resort that has become a favorite with get-away-from-it-all aficionados, including Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau. Dick's second wife, Rosi, now employs the islanders to produce colorful batiks in a tiny wooden factory. At left are seen some of the workers wearing their own creations, and Mrs. Lynden Pindling (bottom right), wife of the Bahamian Prime Minister, who frequently wears Birch batiks

a whirlwind of an American named Rosi Birch and a handful of native Bahamians are practicing the art of batik, a method of adding design to fabric that's as ancient as its originators, the Egyptians.

In the Malayan language, the word batik means wax painting. Traditionally, the fabric artist first traces his designs in wax with an instrument called a tjanting. When the wax is dry and stiff and cracking, the fabric is dipped in dye. The ornamented parts of the cloth, protected by the wax, resist the dye and stand out against the colored background when the dye is removed by boiling the material.

At Androsia, ancient methods

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blend with modern technology. The fabrics are hand-dyed in cast-off bathtubs, hung on clothesline to dry and washed over and over again by hand until they're colorfast. But when it's time to get rid of the wax, the batches of material are flown to Nassau and sent

off to the dry cleaners.

In a good week, the Androsia workshop produces up to 800 yards of batik fabric in earth-sea-sky designs and colors that are flamboyant and full-bodied, both shocking and satisfying to the eye.

And although Rosi Birch insists, "You can't talk about color. You have to see it," you can come close enough if you talk about An-

droasia colors in terms of that particular, nearly iridescent chartrreuse of the soft feathers covering a parrot's breast. Or that rosy pink that's so intense you can warm your hands over it. Or that orange that's more vibrant than anything you'd ever see on a tree. Or that kind of blue you'd see below you from 1,500 feet up over the Caribbean in a four-seater

plane. If you dared to look.

It is color that reaches out and hits you like a punch in the mouth. You love it, or you hate it. If you love it well enough, you want to wear it.

In the 1960s, South Florida's Lilly Pulitzer executed a fashion master stroke by devising a little Key West-flavored hand-printed shift that, multiplied, became the popular casual-hours uniform for a whole generation of upper middle-class American women.

Like Pulitzer, Birch insists "my fashions are really just a vehicle for my fabrics. I'm not in the fad fashion business any more than I'm interested in beauty contests."

So the clothes Androsia's seamstresses turn out, and which are sold to tourists in Bahamas boutiques for from \$12 to around \$60, tend to be easy-going shirts, skirts, dresses, caftans, halters and hats, all as simply constructed as a cloud and as easy on the body as wearing nothing at all.

There are, oddly enough, two Andros Islands worth mentioning.

The first, the most northerly of the Aegean Cyclades, is 25 miles long and notable chiefly for its gem of a ruined Bacchus temple and the fact that in 480 it supplied ships to Xerxes.

The other is this one.

Andros Island, Bahamas, is a 90-mile-long archipelago intersected by narrow channels. The largest link in the Bahamas chain, it is separated from New Providence 20 miles to the east by the 6,000 foot-deep eerie strip of water known as the Tongue of the Ocean.

Named for Sir Edmund Andros, Britain's colonial governor in North America in the 1600s, Andros is a land where white goats nibble quietly at roadside bushes on Calabash Bay; where nobody thought much about building roads or even cared much that there weren't any until a native son named Lynden Pindling got himself elected Prime Minister; where Chickcharnies, the little three-toed, red-eyed resident goblins once put a curse on Neville Chamberlain because he cut down their pine trees; where the ground is so hard that when someone dies, you don't dig him a grave in the ground, you dynamite one; and where people who were born here or have lived here a long time talk in lullabies.

Fielding, in its latest guide to the Caribbean and the Bahamas, calls Andros "a waterlogged, dull area." Fielding is wrong.

As far back as anyone can remember, the navigation charts have listed this part of Andros Island as Small Hope Bay or, now-rejected, Hard Bargain Bay.

Straight out that way, right about where you see the little islands and then straight down, lies the third largest barrier reef in the world. Water all around here swarms with queen angel fish, parrot fish, yellowtail, grunt, red snapper, gray snappers, blue tang, fairy bassoleet, some little nameless things a quarter of an inch long and one 30-pound grouper that's been hanging around the neighborhood so long he's family.

As such things go, Small Hope is a warm, clear and placid bay that drowns in morning like an old cow and changes tides with reluctance and a nearly audible flop.

In the spring of 1960 Dick Birch, a native Canadian with the beard and crinkly eyes of a movie actor playing a settler in the Australian Outback, left his wife Joan and three children at home, flew down alone to Andros and climbed up into a casuarina tree and sat staring at the 15 acres of beach and pine forest he'd bought three years before.

"Basically, what I wanted was to live a life where there was a nice balance between physical and mental effort," says the former World War II paratrooper, former junior executive, former small businessman, former engineering student. "My requirements were that the place be undeveloped, that it have good diving and that it be relatively easy to get to."

Birch had learned to skin dive in Canada and foresaw that the sport "would become one of the biggest in the world. Ten years later I knew I was right."

Seven days later, Birch finally shinned down from the tree, his brain reeling with plans. He would build a tropical scuba diving equivalent of a northern ski lodge, a rustic resort that wouldn't be right for everyone and wouldn't have to be.

With native workmen and using native stone and planks of native Androsian pine mahogany that's rock-heavy with resin and durable as a truth, he built for seven years.

Gradually the buildings began to stretch along the beach in a row: a communal dining room, game room-library lounge with a large fireplace for brandy on stormy evenings; the cabins, side by side like toy soldiers on the march, their doors and front windows facing the sea and the rising sun; a diving pier and, down a rocky path to surf's edge, a solarium.

And the guests arrived. There were Pierre Trudeau from Canada and a fellow who builds roads in Saudi Arabia. Eventually, Ros Kurth, the doctor's daughter from Milwaukee who by the age of 30

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had become a sleek upper class housewife and mother of four, visited Small Hope Bay while schooner-cruising the Caribbean with her family.

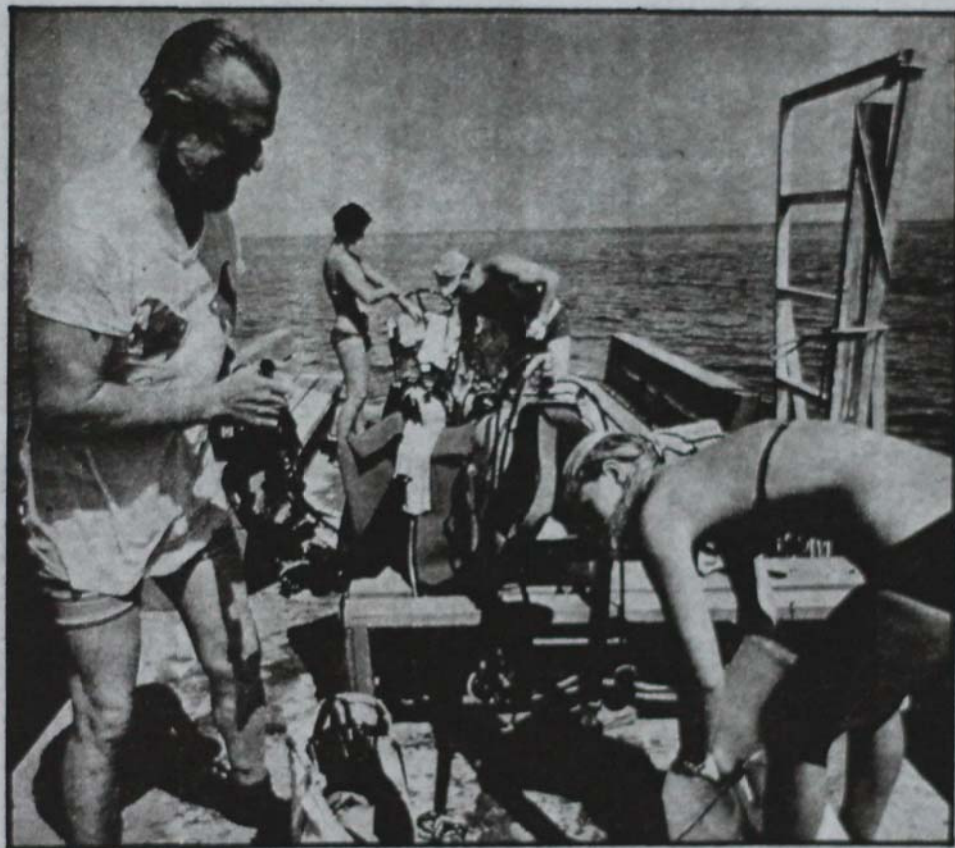
"After that and halfway through the cruise I left the boat and the marriage. The children and I were looking for someplace to come back to, and we came back here."

Now 40, Rosi Birch says, "Change is the only immutable law of life. We decided to embrace change." And if you come to Small Hope Bay Lodge, where the decor wall hangings, drapes, bedspreads are courtesy of Androsia you may by chance make your reservations in Nassau at the lodge's booking office which is run by Dick Birch's former wife, Joan Hanna. "My wife-in-law," says Rosi Birch.

"As a group of people we have decided that the assumption would be love rather than hatred," she says.

So if you come to Small Hope you will be expected to take it for granted:

That there is no air conditioning in any of the guest rooms and that the Birches, who live in the last apartment, don't have it either.



While Rosi tends to the batik factory, Dick and his daughter prepare to go scuba-diving in the spectacular waters of the Bahama Reef

That the resort's sole telephone was only installed in June, 17 years after Dick Birch climbed down out of the casuarina tree and that Dick In The Tree is the event by which all passages of time are measured.

That if you find a pile of used

dog bones littering your cabin doorway, they are the personal and private property of one Tasha, a roly-poly near-blind canine of indeterminate lineage and intelligence but superior pleasantness.

That you will probably not ever

get cherries jubilee for dessert, but the vegetables for the luncheon salad were grown in the Small Hope garden and the johnny cake is manna.

That in a pen downwind down the beach live Jack, a 400-pound black hog, his mate Jill and their three offspring. Jack is famous in the Bahamas for the time, liberally comforted on beer and dressed in batik, he was hauled by boat across to Nassau to appear at an Androsia luncheon fashion show.

That if Rosi Birch's four children (Heidi, Krista, Scott and Tophur Kurth) and Dick Birch's two (Jeff and Margo. The older Birch daughter, Janet Bain, was killed in an automobile accident on Andros in December) are home from school you will hear vague references to someplace called the Hotel Carlyle. It's the large beach house at the opposite end of the resort from the Androsia workshop, and all the children live there. "It's called the Carlyle," says Rosi Birch, "because in all the Grade B movies I ever saw, someone was always jumping into a taxi and shouting, 'Take me to the Hotel Carlyle.'"

And that, as Dick Birch says, "Life is the presentation of alternatives, none of which is completely satisfactory."

Except this one.

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