

PHOTO BY FOREST JOHNSON

Bimini Big Game Club

THE BIRTH OF A LEGEND

The reopening this past summer of the Bimini Big Game Club signaled the return not just of a hotel on the island, but a provider, a friend and a historic landmark.

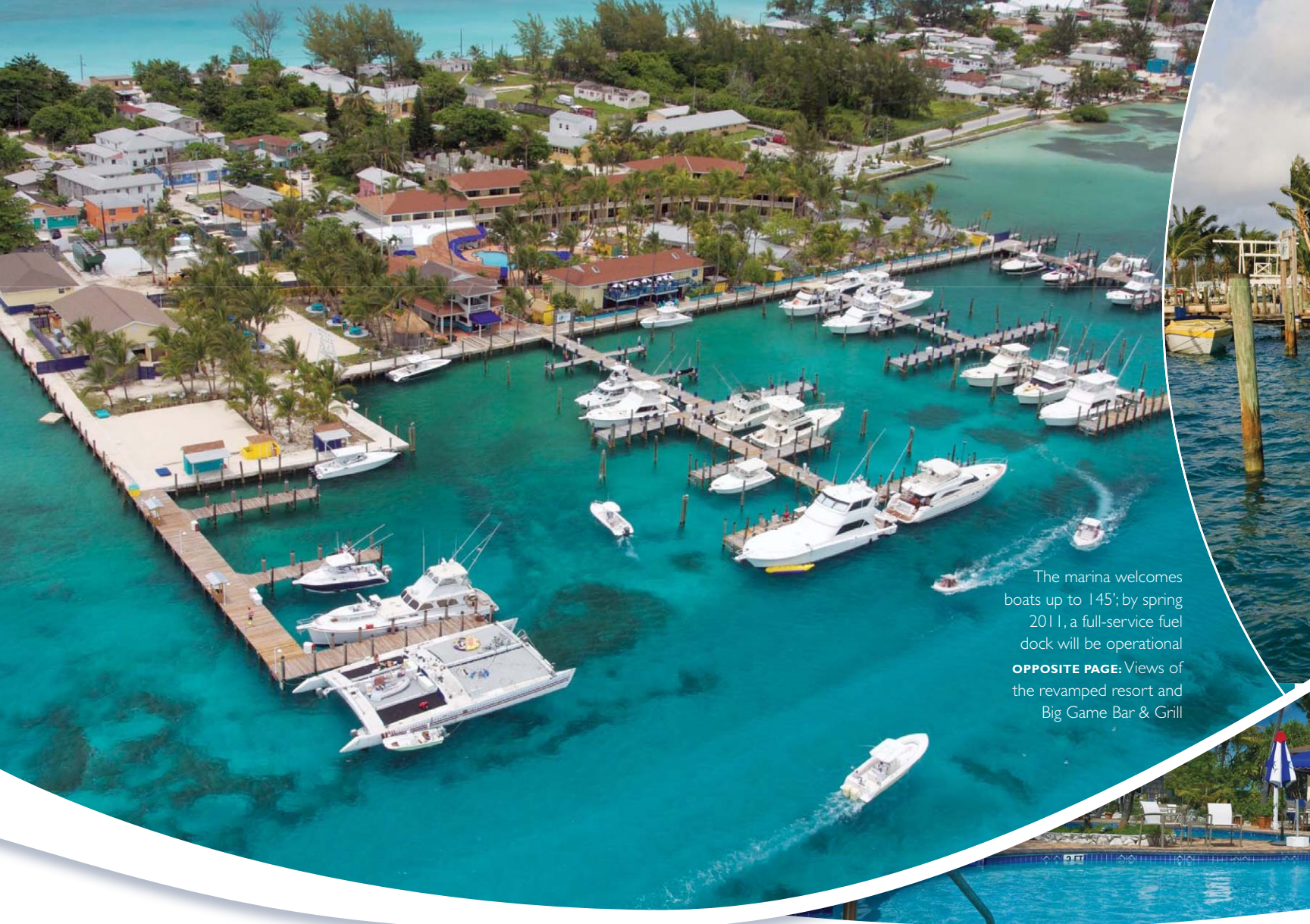
“The Big Game is an institution, an icon,” visitor Larry Solas said one breezy afternoon in July. “Anyone who knows Bimini, knows the Big Game.”

Solas had sailed his boat over from Miami and was now standing in the upstairs Bimini Big Game Bar and Grill. Open sliding glass doors overlooked the pool on one side, the marina on the other. “Remember Gary Hart and *Monkey Business*?” asked Solas, referring to the yacht that, literally, sank the Colorado senator’s presidential campaign. “That was right here, at the end of the dock.”

Guy Harvey paintings of fish filled one wall—the Bimini Big Game Club is now a Guy Harvey Outpost Resort & Marina—while an adjacent wall displayed old black-and-white photographs. The large one in the center showed a mustachioed Ernest Hemingway.

“He liked the island because he could come here, be isolated, and do what he loved—fish,” said John Hemingway. “For fishing, you can’t do better than Bimini. This is where they all run.” John was seated in front of a large plate of cracked conch. He had flown down from Montreal for the public Grand Opening, which—fittingly—had been planned to coincide with the 111th anniversary of his grandfather’s birth. Halfway through his lunch, John got up to greet

STORY Thomas Swick



The marina welcomes boats up to 145'; by spring 2011, a full-service fuel dock will be operational

OPPOSITE PAGE: Views of the revamped resort and Big Game Bar & Grill

his cousin Anne, who had come over from Miami with her family for the event. The daughter of Ernest's brother Leicester, she had the *con gusto* Hemingway smile—as recognizable and as American as the Kennedy smile.

After lunch a small group headed to the historical museum in Alice Town. One wall was covered with black-and-white photographs, a kind of Who's Who of Bimini. Pointing to a picture of Capt. Bob Smith, John said, "My father used to fish with him. He'd say, 'Anyone who doesn't catch a fish goes overboard. Anyone who catches a fish goes overboard.'"

Photos of more luminaries filled more walls: Neville Stuart on opening day of the Bimini Big Game Fishing Club in 1947; Mi-

chael Lerner, a founder of the International Game Fish Association, who started a marine laboratory on the island; Ernest Hemingway, with a caption underneath for the uninitiated: "Hall of Fame Member. Outstanding angler. Landed Bimini's first unmutated tuna in 1935. Through his writing, he portrayed Bimini as a fishing destination."

A tablet carried a list of movies filmed on the island. Among them was "The Silence of the Lambs." It was the last scene, John had told me at lunch, when Hannibal Lecter makes a suggestive phone call. Hemingway. Hart. Hannibal. And now Harvey. A 4-H club of notable visitors.

Standing at the bar of The Anchorage next door, Mark Ellert looked out the window at the ocean. "Everybody's first impression

when they come here," said the president of Guy Harvey Outpost Resorts, "is that aquamarine water after the deep blue. That's the genesis of the two colors in our logo." Then he paraphrased a line from Hemingway's "To Have and Have Not": "Don't let anyone tell you there's not a lot of water between here and Cuba."

"That's what we have to do at the club," he reflected. "Resurrect that spirit."

The Bimini Big Game Club looks like the spruced-up mid-century motel it is, though one that has been turned into an open-air gallery. Almost every available outside wall is fitted with a large Guy Harvey painting of fish. The lobby is a modest, low-ceilinged affair with a Guy Harvey rug on the floor, a Guy Harvey painting behind the reception desk



and Guy Harvey pillows on the two couches. Almost lost amid all the color, framed and hanging on a side wall, are three typewritten letters between Hemingway and Lerner.

The pillared breezeway beneath the restaurant wears a fresh coat of blue and aquamarine paint, and the requisite Guy Harvey paintings on the walls. The blue-and-white umbrellas around the pool carry, on the white sections, a Guy Harvey drawing of Hemingway's "The Old Man and the Sea."

The rooms have a kind of spare, hard-edged coziness. The concrete floor with an organic surface has a cooling quality, and the white concrete block wall behind the beds is softened by blue canvas with white rigging between the posts (giving your bed the look of a catamaran designed by Picasso). The floor

of the shower is a mosaic of slightly raised pebbles of various sizes, which not only give you traction but subtly massage your feet as you sing and soap up. "Historically," Guy Harvey said one afternoon in the breezeway, "this has been a masculine place. They've made it to appeal to everyone."

The renovation—which cost about \$3.5 million—began only in March, after the place had been closed a year and a half. Eight-five percent of the work was done by locals. "Some worked six to seven weeks without a day off," said hotel manager Christopher Pollock.

The club hopes to attract a wide range of guests. Deep-sea fishing, of course, will always be a draw, but Pollock noted that Bimini also offers good backcountry fishing, as

LOCATION: Alice Town
(North Bimini's Southern Tip)

MARINA FACILITIES: 75 slips

REGULAR ROOMS: 35

PENTHOUSE SUITES: 4

COTTAGE ROOMS: 12

RESTAURANT:
Bimini Big Game Bar & Grill

RESERVATION: 1-800-867-4764

WEBSITE: biggameclubbimini.com



Mark Ellert, Guy Harvey and Charles Forman inaugurated the new Big Game Club this past summer; improved amenities, a touch of out-island adventure and original Guy Harvey art work renewed the Big Game Club resort, founded in 1936



well as diving and opportunities to swim with dolphins. The island's location is another plus.

"Remoteness has to be part of the attraction," Harvey said, explaining how he had chosen the Big Game Club for his first foray into the lodging business. He had been looking for a place that fit into an expedition idea, the feeling that you're at an outpost.

The club has established a partnership with the Bimini Biological Field Station, which conducts research on sharks. This coincides with its interest in the environment, which is indistinguishable from its commitment to the community. Introducing recycling on the island—which Pollock said they hope to do—is just as important as creating jobs.

On the evening of July 21, tourism officials, members of the media and friends of the Big Game Club gathered for a ribbon-cutting ceremony at the entrance to the marina.

David Johnson, deputy director general of the Bahamas Ministry of Tourism, noted that the rebirth of the club had already galvanized the island. Standing in the crowd, Vicki Brown said: "It's so wonderful for me to see Bimini revived." Her father-in-law had owned the Compleat Angler, the famous watering hole, hotel and repository of memorabilia that burned down in 2006. She said she hoped that it might also be resurrected.

After dinner upstairs in the restaurant, Mark Ellert reiterated his dedication to the environment and the community, stressing that it is about more than just running a nice hotel. "Everybody," he said, "can offer a good bedroom." Guy Harvey stood up and proposed a toast: "One thing brought Ernest Hemingway and myself here, and that was the fish. Here's to the fish!"

Everyone drank to the fish.

Then a large cake was carried in from the kitchen. It was followed by a parade of staff waving sparklers and singing "Happy Birthday" in a lilting, calypso rhythm. After the last "to you" they shouted with conviction: "The Big Game is on!"

Papa's cake, appropriately, was laced with rum. ■