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Pink-sand island nation rolls out the red carpet

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How does one apologize to an entire nation?

I suppose I could take a few lessons from British Petroleum these days, but without their gigantic advertising budget, this column space will have to suffice for my changed opinion of the Bahamas.

I had occasion 10 years ago to spend time in Nassau en route to Havana, and three days on Harbor Island, and I hadn't a single good thing to say about the place in a decade.

The people were rude, intimidating and greedy. They added an 18 percent gratuity to everything they served and thus eliminated any incentive for prompt, courteous service.

A cab driver ripped us off by intentionally taking us on a circuitous route to a bar he recommended only because he received some type of kickback from the proprietors.

The Nassau hotel room was dirty and the sliding glass door to the patio did not lock, providing unfettered access to whomever availed themselves of our belongings while we were in the dreaded cab.

Fortunately, there was no cash or valuables in the room, and we escaped unscathed to the relative welcome of our Communist neighbors 90 miles away.

But it seems times have changed in the Bahamas, and change has been a good thing.

I've spent three of the past seven weekends in three different Bahamian settlements and have only wonderful memories of the people, the beaches and the hospitable island attitude.

In speaking to others about this turnaround, it seems I was not the only one to hold a negative opinion of the island nation. And I've learned that Nassau was not the only jagged rock on the smooth pink-sand country.

A decade ago, the Bahamian people often were openly hostile to visitors as they took their money, plus an 18 percent gratuity.

But times have changed, and I have to say, it really is "better in the Bahamas."

My education began in the North Eleuthera airport, where I rented a car from the charismatic "Fine Threads."

His real name is Frederick, but they're big on nicknames in the islands, and the name suited well the man in a double-breasted blazer and white hat.

He helped me track down my sick husband, who was suffering from pancreatitis in a government clinic, and reassured me that the island's single main road would be easy to navigate despite the left-side driving, which intimidated me.

Fine Threads used his cell phone to call the marina where Stan was staying, and we learned that an employee of Cape Eleuthera Resort and Marina had driven him to the doctor and then waited while they gave him IV fluids and eased his pain.

Fine Threads then called that woman's cell phone so the worried wife could speak with her husband, and arrange to simply meet him back at the marina that would be my weekend home aboard the 50-foot Hatteras Blue Heron.

I set off on the 110-mile trip down the length of Eleuthera without once forgetting to stay left.

I found my husband safely aboard the Blue Heron and thanked every staff member of the resort, who asked about him and wondered what else they could do to help.

We can't say enough nice things about Cape Eleuthera or its wonderful staff, whose mantra of "the guests come first" rang true in all they did.

A few weeks later, I was in Harbor Island for another stay aboard the Blue Heron at the Romora Bay Resort and Marina.

This time, the tiny island, with its confluence of golf carts, was warm and inviting. The 18th century buildings were well-preserved, and painted with inviting island colors. The food was wonderful and the people, again, were genuinely glad we were there. We shopped, laid on the beach, wandered the island, and ate plenty of fresh fish and conch salad.

The same was true last weekend at the Conch Inn in Marsh Harbor, where I spent Memorial Day with my husband.

We spent nearly an hour with "Showboat" George, who owns the conch salad stand next to the marina and is as fond of nicknames as Fine Threads.

George is trying to collect computers to give to the island's children, hoping to help further their education and keep them "off the wall," which is his term for the trouble that finds young people when they do nothing but sit around.

With a pile of conch shells on the landing next to him, there was no question about the salad's freshness, and the homemade pepper sauce that he added brought tears to my eyes that could only be cooled with a strong rum punch. George was a true ambassador for his country, and I'm glad I have a picture of him and his shack.

In thinking back, every person I met in three different settlements was a true ambassador for a country that has done a complete turnaround in the past decade or so.

They were happy to see us, and wanted to make our stay better. One woman opened the office after-hours so we could use the phone. "T," the dock master, stayed two hours late to help us with the dock lines after a quick trip on the Blue Heron.

Key West could learn a lot from our neighbors to the east. We'll never have the breathtaking beaches of the Bahamas, but we have plenty of other amenities, and plenty of people to acknowledge that tourism is our only industry. A smile goes a long way to make people happy -- and bring them back to our shores.

So to my new Bahamian friends, I say thanks for sharing your home, because for those three weekends, it truly was better in the Bahamas.

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