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SAND & CINEMA

The **Bahamas** has created yet another enticement for filmmakers: The inaugural **Bahamas International Film Festival, "Cinema in Paradise,"** is set to bow Dec. 9-12 in Nassau.

The festival will open with New Line's "After the Sunset" and will showcase 50 works including international feature films, shorts, documentaries and animation. Competition titles will vie for a Grand Jury Prize, and work by emerging artists will be considered for the Modern Maverick Award, to be presented by Roger Corman (who also will receive an award).

In addition to featuring overseas productions shot in the **Bahamas**, **BIFF** organizers plan to spotlight the nation's nascent industry by showing work from local filmmakers. Another key component will be educational: The festival will host seminars on acting, directing, screenwriting and film financing, targeted at Bahamians contemplating industry careers.

— Irene Lacher

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Behind-the-Scenes Bliss

By Irene Lacher

One of the best things about working in the **Bahamas** is not working in the **Bahamas**. **Tourism butters the Bahamas' bread**, so the country takes its fun very seriously, starting with its state-of-the-art hotel industry. In fact, the hotels are often willing to negotiate special rates for large groups on an extended stay. If not, the **Bahamas Film Commission** will step in for filmmakers looking for a warm bed and a reasonable tab.

Large resorts, such as the British Colonial Hilton Nassau, Wyndham Nassau Resort & Crystal Palace Casino and Atlantis Paradise Island Resort, are used to working with the film industry. For those with deep pockets (or great agents), Atlantis has the 10-room, \$25,000-a-night Bridge Suite, which stretches across two residential towers and offers a 360-degree view, butler service, baby grand piano, 22-carat gold chandelier and 2,500-square-foot entertainment center. On a less-grandiose (though still-opulent) scale, the One&Only Ocean Club, which hosted Pierce Brosnan and Salma Hayek during

New Line's "After the Sunset" shoot (set for release next month), offers three- and four-bedroom villas with a full-time minder dedicated to guarding guests' privacy.

The Atlantis, however, is in a class by itself as a hotel-cum-tourist destination. For cruise ships pulling into port, the monolithic, somewhat baroque structure commands the skyline. The hotel and casino boast the world's largest marine habitat outside of Mother Nature's — a 34-acre waterscape with 11 lagoons, 40 waterfalls, five freshwater swimming areas, two underwater grottos and 50,000 marine animals representing 200 species. Marine life also populate a 2.7 million-gallon underwater city called the Ruins Lagoon. In addition, guests can plunge down a water slide at a six-story Mayan temple. Meanwhile, the Dig is a re-creation of the legendary sunken city, featuring a warren of rooms and exhibits worthy of a Hollywood set designer.

More intrepid visitors can get up close and personal with the Bahamas' marine life. Thrill seekers can swim with sharks at designated areas developed by dive operators such as Nassau Scuba Centre and Stuart Cove's Dive Bahamas, which pioneered shark diving on the island. In a typical dive, an operator feeds sharks while guests watch. Divers also can don a steel chain-mail diving suit and feed the sharks themselves.

For those who prefer more tranquil encounters with Caribbean marine life, swimming with dolphins is an option. At Dolphin Encounters on Blue Lagoon Island, which boasts a few marine "actors" from the 1996 film "Flipper," one can play with dolphins while standing on a platform in waist-deep water.

For more conventional diving and snorkeling, there is Sea Gardens marine park, located off the eastern tip of Paradise Island, where beginners can safely swim with yellowtails, grunts and triggerfish without going too deep. More-experienced divers can search out blue holes, where the sun streams deep into the ocean in a perfect circle. One such spot is located 11 miles off the eastern end of New Providence and features white-sand banks, 35 feet below the surface.

Visitors also can experience the crystal waters by taking various ocean-going vessels, like the Seaworld Explorer, a semisubmarine that offers close-ups of the ecosystem at Sea Gardens. Do-it-yourselfers can pilot their own Scenic Underwater Bubble at Cove's Aqua Adventures — no diving or snorkeling experience necessary. Cove also offers "wall flying," in which experienced divers can ride underwater scooters at 2.5 knots.

For those who prefer to keep their heads above water, boat trips are available to outlying islands. Visitors can book Sea Island Adventures' Fiesta II for a cruise to a private beach on Rose Island, while Island World Adventures offers high-speed powerboat excursions to the Exuma Cays, located 40 miles southeast of Nassau.

Sea creatures aren't the only animals tourists can see. The Bahamas boasts several habitats for its national bird — the Caribbean flamingo. At the Rand Memorial Nature Center on Grand Bahama Island, flamingos abound throughout its 2,000-foot nature trail. And Inagua National Park in the southern Bahamas is the nesting ground for the islands' largest flamingo colony — 50,000 birds.

For dry-land pursuits, there are the requisite golf, spas and shopping. There are championship golf courses at the Radisson Cable Beach & Golf Resort and the One&Only, as well as a Joe Lee-designed 18-hole course at the South Ocean Golf and Beach Resort. The Atlantis recently opened its elaborate Mandara Spa, which features 24 treatment rooms, two tropical rain showers and a thalassotherapy pool heated to 100 degrees. The Ocean Club Spa offers treatments in eight Balinese-style villas, while Sandals Royal Bahamian Resort and Spa on Cable Beach offers couples massage.

Golf, spas and shopping may be the great triumvirate of vacation paradises, but not every place has a pirate past: The Bahamas certainly works its shiver-me-timbers history. History lovers can follow in the footsteps of gunrunners, French and Spanish invaders and bootleggers on Bay Street in downtown Nassau, a now-genteel shopping locale. Amid the perfumeries and camera shops are remnants of the past, such as Vendue House. Built in 1784 as a marketplace for slaves, it now is the Pompey Museum of Slavery and Emancipation.

When the sun goes down, there's a vast buffet of restaurants and bars, from high-end dining offered at the Atlantis' Bahamian Club to family-style restaurants like Bay Street's Conch Fritters, featuring — what else? — conch, the island's specialty. As part-time resident and Gold Rock Creek chief operating officer Paul Quigley says, there's only one thing to do in the Bahamas when the day is done: "I party."