

It has been called the “Fishing Capital of the World” and served as muse for Ernest Hemingway’s *The Old Man and the Sea*. Now there’s a mega-resort and casino, a sprawling marina and increased flights from the U.S.

# CAN BIMINI SURVIVE A MODERN MAKEOVER?

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Resorts World Bimini includes a Hilton hotel, a 10,000-square-foot casino and the largest marina in the Bahamas.

**A** SILVER-HAIRED MAN ENTERS THE BAR AT THE BIMINI BIG GAME CLUB RESORT & MARINA AND STOPS IN THE MIDDLE OF THE ROOM, SCANNING IT FROM WALL TO WALL. "I HAVEN'T SEEN THIS PLACE IN 20 YEARS," HE TELLS THE BARTENDER. "KALIK AND A RUM NEAT, PLEASE."

It's my first morning in this Bahamian outpost 50 miles east of Miami, and Marvin is interrupting my seafood omelet. "Flew here thousands of times," he goes on, referring to his days as a Caribbean pilot. "I hear the island has changed quite a bit," I say.

Marvin rolls his eyes and takes a swig of his beer.

"Oh yeah. More cars. People dress nicer too. It's like South Beach swam to Bimini."

Marvin doesn't know it, but his words are the bait that brought me here. Bimini — close to the U.S. but off the grid in character — has been an idyllic retreat for a certain type of tourist for decades. With vibrant mangroves and an abundant reef system, it's been hailed as an aquatic Eden by divers and fishermen. Rogue travelers cherish its funky shops and the warm island community.

But a recent surge in development, spurred by Malaysian casino-giant the Genting Group and its \$600 million Resorts World Bimini, is luring a different kind of visitor. Mega-yatchers are flocking to its marina — the largest in the Bahamas at 280 slips — and hotshot gamblers to its casino, the first in the world to have panoramic water views.

Since 2013, most visitors hopped the Bimini SuperFast, a high-speed ferry billed as "the fastest cruise ship in the Americas." At the beginning of this year, however, operations ceased as daily flights were added from Miami and Fort Lauderdale. Genting plans to launch "a more efficient ferry operation" come spring of this year.

The influx of tourists from both air and sea — upward of 150,000 visitors are expected in 2016 — has locals concerned about an environmental fiasco to an island

that measures a mere 9 square miles.

"Bimini isn't Nassau," Marvin tells me.

But the local newspaper states otherwise. "Shaq Attack: Basketball great brings star power to Bimini," the headline crows in a breathless story about a celebrity event at Resorts World Bimini.

I've yet to see what's out there, but I'm certain of one thing: If Shaquille O'Neal is here, Bimini is definitely getting bigger.

**WHITE-PAINTED TOMBSTONES CROWD** the oceanside cemetery. I'm standing at the southern tip of Alice Town, the capital of North Bimini — the most populous of Bimini's two main isles.

I note the last names of the departed. There's very little variance. Saunders. Cash. Cash. Saunders. The last of which rings a bell. I'm meeting with an Ashley Saunders that afternoon; he's the owner of the Dolphin House, a quirky guesthouse and museum in town.

On a small, quiet side street, I find the brightly tiled building. "You lookin' for a tour, man?" a dreadlocked man calls out.

"Only if you're Ashley," I reply.

"That's me."

I mention the cemetery's residents.

"Those are my relatives," the 70-year-old historian and retired high-school teacher says. "We were the first ones here 200 years ago. It was the Indians, then us." Ashley recalls the days when Bimini had no electricity or running water. "Now we got people from all over the world."

The island's population is around 3,000 and growing. Not an alarming figure, but on a sliver of sand that's already congested — and thinner than a football field in certain spots — each additional footprint can be felt.

**GET HERE**

Daily flights from Fort Lauderdale to Bimini on Cape Air and Silver Airways start at \$250 round trip. Cape Air also offers seaplane flights from Fort Lauderdale and Watson Island, Miami, from \$380 round trip.



**STAY HERE**

The Bimini Big Game Club Resort & Marina in Alice Town opened in 1936 and was a former Hemingway hangout. It features 51 recently renovated rooms and suites, as well as a new pool, restored docks, a restaurant and a dive shop. Rooms from \$150 per night, suites from \$315 per night; [biggameclubbimini.com](http://biggameclubbimini.com)

**WHEN TO GO**

Year-round, but be mindful of hurricane season, June to November.



**BEFORE BIMINI HAD SPRING BREAKERS AND A 24-HOUR RUNWAY, VIEWS LIKE THIS WERE THE MAIN DRAW. FISHING AS WELL.**

So when asked about the development, Ashley is predictably skeptical.

“Biminities won’t work there, man,” he says of Resorts World Bimini. “There’s more money in one day of lobster fishin’ than being a busboy at a hotel.” A day on the boat might be more lucrative, but Melissa Rieder, public relations manager for Resorts World Bimini, tells me that 31 percent of their employees are from Bimini — nearly 10 percent of the island’s population.

**RESORTS WORLD BIMINI OWNS HALF** of the developed land on North Bimini — roughly 2.2 miles. Alice Town, Bailey Town and Porgy Bay, where residents live and work, take up the same amount of land. To reach the resort from my hotel in the capital, I hop on a beach cruiser and cycle seven minutes down “The King’s Highway” — as golf carts, the main mode of transportation, zip by — to the island’s other end.

Entering the property is a return to the 21st century. The cadence of a rustic fishing village is erased by the blare of a pool party. Modest tropical digs are swapped for villas the color of Easter eggs. There’s a Hilton hotel, a 10,000-square-foot casino and row upon row of construction trailers.

ZACH STOWALL (2)

It was only in 2014 that a 1,000-foot pier was built for the SuperFast ship. The dredging infuriated activists over damaged marine habitat and the mess of mud that distorted the clear flats. The pier cuts through an area where most of North Bimini’s remaining coral reefs sit.

Whether or not a new ferry arrives in the near future, it might not matter. Grant Johnson, a biologist who has done environmental research in Bimini for 14 years, notes the damage to its ecology is irreversible. “The SuperFast cruise is a gigantic red flag in the face of everyone who promotes mega-development in the Bahamas Out Islands,” he says.

Development has also impacted fish populations. Johnson says the removal of mangroves along the western shore of the North Sound lagoon has resulted in 52 to 67 percent declines in mojarra, soles, barracuda and silversides. (The latter are a crucial food source for sharks and other species.) He adds that sea grass has decreased by more than 50 percent; the plants are an important habitat for both the endangered green sea turtle and the economic-staple queen conch.

And the Genting Group is just getting started. Revised plans call for the lengthening of South Bimini’s airport runway to 9,000 feet, along with a 200-room hotel and a water-taxi terminal to shuttle guests straight to the resort.

“Resorts World will avoid a three-minute ride to the existing water-taxi dock just to keep guests away from Biminities and their businesses,” notes the Bimini Blue Coalition, an anonymous committee of activists and council members. The group insists they’re not anti-development but in favor of responsible growth.

Resorts World has spearheaded several cleanup campaigns, but Johnson says the water visibility has already declined. “Bimini was known as having some of the clearest waters in the world. That can’t be said anymore.”

**A FIVE-MINUTE BOAT RIDE ACROSS THE** bay are the mangroves. My guide is Ansil Saunders, 83, a renowned fisherman and

perhaps the island’s most famous resident, having been a fishing guide to the likes of Richard Nixon and Martin Luther King Jr. “Tomorrow it’s the U.S. ambassador,” he says.

Our boat arrives at the “Holy Grounds” — the exact spot he took MLK in 1968. It was in Ansil’s boat that Dr. King wrote his own eulogy. Today, a bronzed statue commemorates the moment.

We step out of the boat and onto a viewing deck. The sun is high, the sky is blue and the mangroves appear to have no end.

Before Bimini had spring breakers and a 24-hour runway, views like this were the

main draw. Fishing as well.

“How’s the catch these days?” I ask. “The fish went to deeper water when the resort dug the canals, but they’re still here,” Ansil says.

He points to a red mangrove and gives me a science lesson.

“Fish come from the Gulf of Mexico to spawn and nest right here. We need these roots. They fight off hurricanes too.” “Are they healthy?” I ask.

Ansil pauses and does a double take of a plant nearest us.

“I don’t know.” ●

**RISKY BUSINESS: THREE TOURIST MECCAS ON THE BRINK**



**MACAU**

Despite 18 consecutive months of revenue decline, the Chinese haven of gambling continues to double down. Development is underway for Cotai 2.0, Macau’s second version of the Las Vegas Strip that will take its hotel-room total from 28,000 today to 42,000 by 2018. With 30 million annual visitors — in a location one-sixth the size of Washington D.C. — one of the most densely populated places on Earth increasingly suffers from water and air pollution.

**CAPE VERDE**

Located off northwest Africa, this archipelago is a choice spot for Europeans seeking sun and surf. It’s also home to the world’s third-largest rookery for loggerhead turtles. Their nesting grounds on the west coast of Sal, Cape Verde’s most developed isle, decreased from 40 percent in 2013 to 10 percent last year. Pollution, increased tourism and construction of a breakwater structure to give visitors ideal swimming conditions have further endangered the reptile.

**BALI**

The Indonesian island is under serious threat from its estimated 12 million annual visitors. With resources being rerouted to hotels and restaurants, 50 percent of Balinese — over 1.7 million people — have lost access to water. Rice fields are disappearing at a rate of around 2,500 acres each year as farmers capitalize on sky-high real-estate prices. Bali’s pile of trash — generated by the influx of tourists — is so high that it’s even garnered a nickname: Mount Rubbish.