

Cricket in The Bahamas

My daughter got married in The Bahamas in 2006.

Soon after we'd arrived on Paradise Island, we spotted an advert in the 'What's On' free paper for a restaurant and purveyor of European beers and lagers which doubled as a cricket club. The following Saturday, three of us searched downtown Nassau on the neighbouring island of New Providence for the appropriate battered grey bus which dropped us below a hillside fort built to defend New Providence from the French. Here, next to the clear deep blue waters off Nassau, sits The Haynes Oval where sixteen teams take turns to play on one strip of artificial turf. The sight screen at the fort end is a massive twelve foot square of breeze block and cement in front of which a Harrier jet wouldn't have looked out of place. Games are scheduled every Saturday and Sunday, beginning at midday. The league website says the season runs from March to November.

If the fort is long stop to the right hander, the pavilion is at midwicket and the scoreboard is at third man. Teams strip on tiered seating in the shadow of two large trees. There are dressing rooms, not much used. At close of play the players gather on the ground floor patio in front of the pavilion, often staying in their kit or changing in full view. Everyone wore whites and had several bats and small bags for boots and clothing and pads to protect legs, arms, chest, thighs and anywhere else that might get hit. Helmets as well, but rarely worn. The cricket coffins were upright much like a golf bag.

The pavilion, run by Connie, a black Bahamian, and Chris, from Essex via the USA, is a colonial treat, dominated by a deep second storey covered verandah, said to easily accommodate forty diners. Like the 'dressing trees' it stayed in shadow throughout the afternoon. It backed onto the bar where the air-conditioning was turned up high and the blinds were turned down low; a dark cool room to watch American football, baseball, soccer and cricket from around the world. Football and rugby shirts, mostly from England, were pinned to the eaves whilst the walls were covered with black and white Bahamian cricket photographs.

Diners must share the verandah with a dozen local senior cricket stalwarts who make sure of a seat by arriving before a ball is bowled or a meal is served. The main man is the scorer. Not for him the precise brace of finely-pointed HB's topped off with erasers. He had enough colours, spilling from his pencil case across the table, to cover every conceivable cricketing event. He also had a handbell, a relic of a 1950's primary school playground, which he rang five minutes before start of play. His cronies sat either side and behind, constantly talking in creole. Except when we asked a question, when they replied in perfect American English.

The game was to be forty-five overs apiece. Both teams started with eight men, the rest arriving piecemeal within an hour and a half. Batsmen marked their guards with a piece of chalk stored behind the stumps. The bowling was mostly fast medium, pitching just inside the batsman's half. There were lots of wides (in one game wides were the second highest score). The occasional half volley was greedily hoiked or sweetly driven. The ground fielding was enthusiastic rather than skillful and every dropped catch and error was greeted by hoots and cheers from the batting 'tree'. The fielders also shouted, admonished and encouraged, jumping up and down or running or doing something, so the only time the ground was quiet was when the bowlers ran in. Mid to late afternoon, the noise levels increased further when the younger supporters arrived. These kids were always on the move - on the verandah, in the bar, on the patio or under the 'trees' - producing a continuous babble of creole.

Drinks breaks were taken every fifteen overs. No tea-lady or an unemployed batsman with a few jugs of orange juice here. Everyone walked off, umpires as well, for ten minutes shade under the 'trees'. The scorer had to give his bell a decent pull to get the teams back playing.

The highlight was fourth man in, second innings. A dwarf rasta. Not much taller than his bat. Dreads in a ponytail to his waist and a bright red building-site crash hat. The standard delivery was thus either pulled away to midwicket or awarded a no-ball on the above shoulder height rule. His kit didn't fit and he was always on his knees, adjusting something, refixing a pad or his gloves. The batting 'tree' loved him and was rowdy to say the least whilst he was at the crease, hugely disappointed when he eventually missed a straight one.

The scoreboard did not tick over. Every five overs or so, a member of the batting side had to leave his pals and rum under his 'tree', collect the numbers and cover the seventy-five yards between pavilion and scoreboard. Because of this delay, the team batting second didn't realise they'd overhauled the opposition's total. The scorer had a way of letting them know, helped by the traditional hand signals for a declaration.

Then surprise, a not uncommon cloudburst. Our last view of The Haynes Oval was from the plush seats of a long black limo, hastily hired in the pouring rain.

What has cricket got to do with a wedding? Well, the players are often young people. There is selection and preparation. The older generations look on. The participants then dress up in formal clothes and come together for a ritual at a specific place. A party usually follows. Whilst the bride and groom spend the rest of their life together, the competing cricket teams separate, to meet and do it all again in the near future. Well that's the theory.

