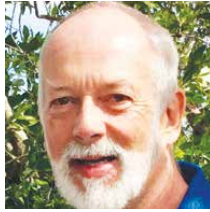


COLUMN

OH, THE PLACES WE'LL GO: Robbie's – an unusual, eclectic destination. And mind your fingers



By Paul Knowles

If I were to try to describe Robbie's of Islamorada in one or two words, I would give up. Because Robbie's is one of the most unusual, eclectic destinations anywhere, it's impossible to sum up with a single adjective.

At this popular spot in the Florida Keys, you can dine on pub food right by the docks or inside the Hungry Tarpon surrounded by hundreds of fluttering American one-dollar bills that adorn the ceiling, walls and occasional posts.

You can feed tarpon by hand, an activity more fraught with peril than you might expect given the number of people who eagerly hold out bait fish for these giant game fish to grab. From time to time, they also grab a hand – or forearm (they have very large mouths). No one has lost body parts that I know of, but I also know firsthand how poor tarpon are at discerning between bait fish and the skin on one's arm. It is, shall we say, an adventure.

And adventure is what Robbie's is all about – that and

perhaps beer and tacky tourist items. At this destination, right on the Overseas Highway, you can rent jet skis, kayaks and paddleboards. Robbie's is on Florida Bay on the Gulf of Mexico side of the Keys, but just on the other side of the Lignumvitae Channel Bridge – one of many that link the islands of the Keys – is the Atlantic Ocean.

That's where the newest Robbie's adventure will take you – the Transparensa glass-bottom boat.

The 46-foot Transparensa sails during the day, and also at night, to offer a unique view of the ocean floor lit by under-boat LED lights. The crew told us the creatures you see after dark are very different than those during the day. Apparently, they spoke the truth – we spotted sea turtles, nurse sharks, lobster, as well as yellow snapper and other fish.

The trip takes you to part of the coral reef that runs the length of the keys off the Atlantic Coast, so day trips are likely to treat those on the boat to the brightly coloured fish that populate the reefs but hide from predators at night.

Either option will be an intriguing experience, but one piece of advice: pray for a calm day or evening. Wind and waves can significantly lessen one's enjoyment of a glass-bottom boat, which rolls with the waves as it hovers over the sea bottom. This,

even though the Transparensa is fitted with state-of-the-art stability equipment.

If you want to get even more up close and personal with the denizens of the coral reefs, Robbie's offers snorkeling and "SNUBA" diving. The latter is a combination of snorkeling and SCUBA. Divers don't wear breathing equipment. Instead, they are connected to an air supply that remains in the boat. SNUBA divers can descend to about 20 feet below the surface.

Robbie's also has sunset cruises on a catamaran – a popular feature everywhere in the Keys – and eco-tours through the islands of Florida Bay, which borders on the southern end of the Everglades.

But come back to Robbie's on land for a moment. As well as the restaurant, there's a gift shop and other kiosks, a beach bar and about two dozen potential selfie spots where visitors pose with statues of pirates, giant replicas of tarpon, fluttering dollar bills or the ever-present pelicans, egrets and herons.

The pelicans, by the way, are eager to compete with the tarpon for the fish being offered by the would-be tarpon feeders. This inevitably leads to ambushes by the birds on the folks focused on the fish. All of this is genuine entertainment in its own right. I could watch this drama for hours.



Some of the guests on the glass-bottom boat tour. Photos by Paul Knowles

That's the thing about Robbie's. It's clearly a place that does not take itself very seriously, embraces its inner tackiness and welcomes all and sundry to do whatever they might enjoy doing on a given day.

By the way, there is a lot more to do in Islamorada in addition to the eclectic mix of activities at Robbie's. The Morada Way Arts and Culture District is worth an article of its own – so I will provide one to you a few weeks from now.

And as is true all the way down the Keys, from Key Largo to Key West, there are lots of places to stay. This time around, we booked into the

Hadley Resort and Marina and found it to be delightful. Our apartment had a balcony overlooking the resort's docks and beyond them, the Atlantic Ocean. There was a welcoming pool, free ice cream on offer all the time and a significant number of shy lizards roaming the property. It was a great place to stay, and I'd recommend it as your headquarters as you explore this fascinating part of the Florida Keys.

Paul Knowles is an author and travel writer, and President of the Travel Media Association of Canada. To contact Paul about travel, his books, or speaking engagements, email pknowles@golden.net.



The Hungry Tarpon restaurant at Robbie's of Islamorada.



Read for the attach of the tarpon!