

# Strange Harbour

Randolph Johnston holed up in an **Abaco Islands** cave to escape the modern world. His legacy lies in what he founded.

**I**N 1951, CANADIAN PROFESSOR Randolph Johnston left Toronto and what he called “the megamachine” of the Western world, sailed his schooner to the Out Islands of the Bahamas and, on a deserted beach, began a new life in a cave.

“What we have to find is a sympathetic physical environment — a good climate and a social milieu in which there will be the least possible interference with our individual lives,” he wrote in his diary. In finding it, he founded the quintessential island outpost of Little Harbour.

Like Randolph and his family (wife Margot and sons Bill, Denny and Pete), I’ve arrived at Little Harbour with no clear direction, just an idea that I’d like to meet a Johnston. After all, the family’s journey is utterly fascinating.

It was not easy. Upon reaching the Bahamas in their ship, *The Langosta*, Margot and the boys contracted polio. Running low on funds, they sailed around the islands before chancing upon an uninhabited harbor in the Abacos, complete with cave offering room for five. They had owls, bats and crabs for housemates, and the decor — gothic columns



Clockwise from top left: A welcome sign; the elusive Pete Johnston; Pete's Pub; home sweet cave.

navigation and daily survival. It was home-schooling, Swiss family Robinson-style.

On my arrival I easily find the now shrine-like cave, plus much more: Little Harbour has evolved into an eclectic colony of artists, musicians and sailors. The shore remains as Randolph described it then: “... a perfect semicircle of white beach gently lapped by water so clear you

walls (though there are rafters, hung with hundreds of T-shirts left by visitors over the years). I order a piña colada and inquire if the name on the sign is *that* Pete.

Yes, the waitress tells me, the pub is indeed owned by Pete Johnston, and if I’m looking for him, I should just take a walk. It’s five minutes from one end of Little Harbour to the other, I’m bound to bump into him. Hoping to improve my odds, I wander back out toward the gallery and foundry where he creates the bronze sculptures I see scattered around town.

The Johnston men built the original foundry out of scavenged shipwrecks. (Employing, perhaps, the techniques they learned in constructing a thatched house when Margot had enough of cave dwelling.) One day a yachtsman sailed in and commissioned a sculpture, launching the flourishing career Randolph had been unable to realize back in Canada. Using the 5,000-year-old “lost wax” casting method, Randolph became internationally famous.

## Head to Pete’s Pub first and immediately feel as if I’ve stumbled onto the set of Gilligan’s Island.

of stalagmites and dark lichen papered on the walls — was creepy by Margot’s standards, but the kids loved it. They lived on a diet of coconuts, fish, and sweet potatoes, generated their own electricity and collected drinking water in cisterns. Instead of the three “r”s, Randolph taught the boys construction, sailing,

cannot tell where dry sand stops and water begins.” Today that idyllic crescent fronts a dime-size settlement of colorful houses, a gallery, a foundry and a beach bar.

I head to the last first and immediately feel as if I’ve stumbled onto the set of *Gilligan’s Island*. Pete’s Pub is a typical boater’s watering hole, complete with salty old sailors, a sand floor and an absence of

His work sold at prestigious art galleries, and one piece, *St. Peter: Fisher of Men*, was even acquired by the Vatican.

Pete followed, loosely, in his father’s footsteps. After studying art in Europe, he returned to Little Harbour, casting sculptures of his own while adding the bar and gallery to the family compound. Now in his 60s, Pete is very much a local fixture. His pub is a popular gathering spot, especially on Sunday nights when the kitchen roasts a wild boar as Pete plays guitar, sings sea chanteys and tells stories.

Exploring the rooms of the gallery, I find original works by Randolph, Pete and his two sons, Greg and Tyler, as well as other Bahamian artists. Almost all the bronze sculptures are of sea life — from tiny seahorses just three inches high to 30-pound turtles, herons and mermaids. The “Under the Sea” theme is hardly surprising — the crystalline waters off Little Harbour are frequented by dolphins, huge sea turtles and stingrays.

Back outside, I continue my expedition along a wood-planked walkway, eyes peeled for a sighting of Pete. I don’t find him, but instead come across his bronze statues, shimmering in the sun in the most unexpected spots. One of them, standing alone near the sea, is of a life-size woman looking as if she just washed ashore. Seaweed sprouts out of places you’d expect to see hair, and vines entangle her body. As I admire her, I hear a man’s voice behind me. “Watch her carefully. Every year, her seaweed beard grows a quarter inch.”

I turn around to face a guy with sparkling eyes and a white beard. Everything about him says he belongs here, from his etched bronze face to his strong hands to his playful, easygoing smile. Is this Pete?

I ask his name. Sam, he tells me, his eyes twinkling like he’s telling me an old sailor’s story. I smile and we simply stand together, gazing out at the vast ocean as it gleams in the luminous light of the tropics. I steal another glance, keeping my suspicion to myself. I’d heard Pete likes to keep a low profile — what else would you expect from someone who grew up in a cave? But when I get back to my own megamachine and Google photos of Pete Johnston, I won’t be surprised to find Sam’s face staring back at me. — LAURIE GOUGH

