Local Colors

THE BIGGEST RESORT IN THE BAHAMAS IS A MAJOR SHOWCASE OF THE ISLANDS’ ARTISTIC HERITAGE.

The first phase of Baha Mar (bahamar.com) resort destination opened in April 2017, stretching along two miles of coast west of downtown Nassau. Three hotels face the sea—a Grand Hyatt flanked by an SLS and a Rosewood—together offering 2,300 rooms. The 1,000-acre campus features palm-lined paths that wind past pools to the silky beach, a Jack Nicklaus Signature golf course, dozens of restaurants and bars, a strip of upscale retail outlets, and an enormous 100,000-square-foot casino and 200,000-square-foot conference center, both the largest in the Caribbean.

The multibillion-dollar project is one of the largest hospitality investments in the Western Hemisphere and will be one of the Bahamas’ largest employers, with a staff of more than 5,000 manning a business projected to generate 12 percent of the islands’ GDP within three years of being fully operational. Former Prime Minister Perry G. Christie has called Baha Mar “critical to the economic viability of our national economy.” Moreover, the resort is proving to be a major player in another component of Bahamian life: as one of the country’s most important art patrons.

Luxury brands tend to supplant local culture with their own style and ambiance, but Baha Mar’s owners, Hong Kong–based Chow Tai Fook Enterprises Ltd., are taking a different approach by blending Bahamian culture into the resort’s leisure and gaming mix. In addition to assembling a noteworthy collection of native art and commissioning new work by island artists, the resort is running a gallery with art-educational programs and displaying the largest-ever presentation of Bahamian art.

The art program, called The Current, is led by John Cox, former curator at the National Art Gallery of the Bahamas. Cox not only selects the more than 6,000 Bahamian works (unique and multiples) installed throughout the complex but operates the commercial gallery with changing exhibitions, residencies for local and international artists, an art library, art-making classes, lectures, and film screenings, all of which are open to guests, including children. The idea is to foster creative exchange between guests and the local arts community, but these activities also position Baha Mar as a juggernaut for the Bahamian visual culture. “We feel a responsibility to provide our guests access to Bahamian art and a glimpse into the everyday life of our artists,” says Baha Mar president Graeme Davis. “Working with John Cox and local artists is a way for us to honor the culture and recognize the exemplary work coming out of the Bahamas, while providing guests access to the top thinkers, artists, and visionaries here.”

—Jason Edward Kaufman