

From James Bond to a smuggler's hangout, Bahamian chain has it all



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The Exumas, composed of 360 beautiful islands stretching 130 miles along the northeastern edge of the Grand Bahamas Bank, provide a rich and unique sand and sea vacation experience. And with only a handful of resorts and charter companies, it's mostly unspoiled islands and empty beaches.

My photographer and I recently sailed these wild, untamed islands and were treated to powdery white sand beaches, pastel blue-green waters, crystal-clear mangrove rivers, spectacular caves and, strangely enough, wild swimming pigs. We even snorkeled a downed cargo plane that once was part of huge cocaine-smuggling operations headed by drug lord Carlos Lehder (featured in the Johnny Depp movie "Blow").

One can sail most of these islands using the relatively safe and protected "inside" waterways, meaning on the bank side of the islands, where depths rarely exceed 25 feet. The difficulty is the water is so clear, you always feel as if you are about to run aground (a good reason to hire a skipper). You can sail on the outside of the bank, but the deeper water there can be a lot rougher. The good beaches and

anchorage are inside.

Our first stop on our trek north along the chain was Lee Stocking Island where we "climbed" Perry Hill. This "peak", while only 100 feet above sea level, is the highest point of the Exumas and actually provides some spectacular views. Lee Stocking also is home to an abandoned marine biology research station, the ruins of which one can easily spend a day exploring.

We visited nearby Leaf Cay, home to a colony of iguanas that waddled out to greet us as we pulled ashore with our dinghy (apparently boaters have been feeding these guys). These leathery reptiles can be a little creepy, especially en masse, but for the most part, they're harmless.

Boaters are not the only ones who have discovered these islands; iconic illusionist David Copperfield has been a presence in the Exumas since buying 11 islands just north of Lee Stocking. We thought about stopping at his resort on Musha Cay, but he rents only the whole island, not rooms or bungalows. At nearly \$40,000 a night, we decided to pass.

We did, however, enjoy anchoring off one of his islands, Rudder Cut Cay, where we found a unique sea cave that sheltered a little private beach. We also spent some time searching for an underwater sculpture of a mermaid and a Steinway concert grand piano that Copperfield placed here. Sadly, we had no luck finding it (our map was wrong), but we did see some amazing coral and marine life.

Farmers Cay, just north of the Copperfield compound, has a cute little town with 70 inhabitants, a small grocery store and a couple of restaurants. Near Farmers, on Great Guana Cay, is a beautiful deserted sandy beach that we had all to ourselves. About halfway down the beach is a well-marked trail that leads to an amazing hilltop cave, complete with stalactites, stalagmites and a little freshwater lake.

Our next port, Staniel Cay, is by far the most developed and popular spot in the Exumas. The main attraction is the hopping marina/bar/restaurant Staniel Cay Yacht Club, which attracts boaters of all shapes and sizes.

If you want to get a break from the crowds, nearby Thunderball Grotto is one of the best sea caves we explored in the region. Named after the 1965 James Bond movie that shot scenes in the cave, the coral and sea life there is amazing.

Neighboring Big Major Cay is where you'll find Exumas' famous swimming pigs. Like the iguanas on Leaf Cay, as you approach with your dinghy, this motley group of wild pigs comes onto the beach to look for handouts, and they don't stop on the water's edge. In fact, if you're not careful, they'll climb right into your boat.

One of the highlights of our sail was the Exuma Cays Land & Sea Park. Compass Cay, one of the islands in the park, has a wonderful hike along a mangrove river that takes you to Rachel's Bubble Bath. This crystal clear, natural pool is fed by ocean surf that crashes over a ragged reef barrier

separating the river from the sound. This creates a bubbly effect that resembles a Jacuzzi.

At Warderick Wells Cay, the park headquarters, there are a number of nice hiking trails with handy signs explaining the local flora and fauna. One of our favorite hikes was from Rendezvous Beach to the remains of an 18th century settlement of Americans who remained loyal to Britain. Here you'll find an extensive collection of stone foundations slowly being engulfed by the trees and vines. We also spotted a couple of hutia here — small, nearly extinct furry rodents that look like oversized guinea pigs.

Warderick Wells Cay also has some of the best snorkeling in the Exumas, mostly because the wildlife here is protected and therefore much more abundant. We saw an epic battle between two huge lobsters that were clawing their way over coral heads and beautifully colored coral fans (it must have been mating season).

Next in line, Shroud Cay, has an extensive and navigable (with a dinghy) mangrove river that cuts a circuitous path through the island from the bank to the sound, where it ends at a long white sand beach. Just above the beach is a small lookout that U.S. federal agents used in the early 1980s to spy on Lehder's activities on nearby Norman's Cay, which was the hub of his drug-smuggling operation. Just off of Norman's is where we visited Lehder's crashed plane, which sits in about 10 feet of water. Coral and colorful fish have taken over the plane, making it a wonderful place to snorkel.

If you don't know how to sail or don't have a friend who does, Navtours will provide a licensed skipper for an additional \$900 per week. This also takes away a lot of the stress associated with skippering your own boat. And these skippers know the waters well, so you won't miss a thing.

If you want to visit these islands sans sailboat, there are regular flights to Staniel Cay from Nassau (www.flamingoairbah.com). Staniel Cay has a good selection of accommodations and restaurants, and a number of companies offer boat excursions to some of the neighboring islands. You also can rent a boat in Staniel Cay and explore on your own. Boat rentals range from \$250 a day to \$1,000 per day depending on the size (www.stanielcayvacations.com).

Of all the places we have sailed, the Exumas offered an experience that was truly unique. Few places have so many beautiful beaches and unspoiled islands. And with beautiful caves to explore, a fantastic marine park, a downed drug plane and swimming pigs, there's pretty much something for everyone.

Michaela Urban and Eric Vohr have a travel website and blog at <http://www.travelintense.com>.

If you go

Navigating the islands

We chartered with Navtours, which has bases at both ends of the chain. You can start in Nassau in the north or Georgetown in the south. ([American Airlines](#) operates regular flights to both from Miami.)

Prices start at \$3,500 per week for a 39-foot monohull with three cabins (six people maximum). Carve that up among three couples and you have a reasonably priced, exotic vacation.

For provisions, loading up in Nassau is wiser and cheaper. Options along the way are few and pricey.

Eating there

On Staniel Cay, the Staniel Cay Yacht Club (954-467-6658 [U.S.] or 242-355-2024 [Bahamian], <http://www.stanielcay.com>) Call ahead for meals in the restaurant; they take walk-ins at the bar only. Taste & Sea Cafe, no website but great food, great prices and free Wi-Fi.

On Farmers Cay, the Ocean Cabin (242-355-4006, <http://www.oceancbn.com>). Nice atmosphere, friendly owner, call ahead.)

Bahamas tourism, 800-224-2627, <http://www.bahamas.com>

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