

# An island a day in the Exuma Cays



**The Exuma Cays are a crayon box full of various shades of blue.**



**An islet off Fowl Cay, where you can stay in a villa with stocked pantries, bicycles, and watersports gear.**

**By Gina DeCaprio Vercesi | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT**

Cerulean blue, I thought, though some people would probably say turquoise. Or maybe aquamarine. The sun emerged from behind the wispiest of clouds and I squinted, blinded by its brilliance, at the endless stretch of clear Caribbean Sea. Definitely aquamarine.

From my vantage point on a far-flung sandbar in the Bahamian out islands of the Exuma Cays, I found myself thinking of the big boxes of 64 Crayolas I loved as a kid.

My favorite thing to do when I got a new box was to dump them all out onto the rug, careful not to damage their perfect, sharp-flat tips, and arrange them into a rainbow. Now, gazing toward watery horizon, I discovered I couldn't pinpoint one constant shade in the sea's ever-shifting azure palette. The sand proved far less of a challenge. That was simply white.

An island a day keeps the doctor away, and an ideal spot for a dose of tropical bliss is the Exumas. Home to 365 islets and cays surrounded by crystalline blue-green waters, the 120-mile archipelago — 176-square miles of which has been designated protected marine park — remains one of the Caribbean's most pristine destinations. Here are seven choice stops within year's worth of dreamy tropical havens.

### **Staniel Cay**

Exuma Cays' adventures begin in Staniel Cay, the hub, if you can call it that, of the out islands. All activity on the island centers around the Staniel Cay Yacht Club, and town consists of a handful of spots along the road to the south — the Pink Pearl Grocer, Taste and Sea Café, Mount Olive Baptist Church. Get itinerary tips from the boating crowd over a Goombay Smash at the Yacht Club's bar before taking to the sea or explore the island by golf cart — two secluded beaches, Hoi Tai and Pirate, offer calm waters and lots of privacy.

### **Thunderball Grotto**

Named for the 1965 Bond film, Thunderball Grotto, a large chamber in the middle of a rocky islet, offers some of the best snorkeling in the Exuma Cays. Swim through the cave's entrance at low tide to enter a light filled cavern — sun streams through a circular opening in the top of the cave and illuminates the natural fishbowl below the surface. A psychedelic array of marine life — parrotfish, yellowtail snapper, blue tang — call the coral-studded chamber home.

### **Big Major Cay**

Though the Exumas swimming pigs may be Insta-famous among the millennial set, these adorable porcine paddlers still merit a visit. The semi-feral pigs and piglets have inhabited Big Major's since the early 1990s and enjoy edible handouts, swimming out to approaching boats with open mouths and upturned snouts. Feeding them vegetable scraps and fresh water is permitted, but do so off-shore — several of the pigs died last spring after consuming too much sand when eating food tourists had tossed onto the beach.

### **Bitter Guana Cay**

Dramatic coral cliffs and a postcard-perfect beach greet boaters at Bitter Guana Cay, where the word breathtaking isn't hyperbole. Float in the clear, aqua waters or swim ashore to rendezvous with the resident critters — a colony of critically endangered Northern Bahamian Rock Iguanas roams the cay, dragging their tails across the beach to create a tangle of lines that resemble Japanese sand art.

### **Compass Cay**

One of the only other places in the Exuma Cays with some action, Compass Cay is home to four rental cottages, a family of docile nurse sharks, and a marina that serves cheeseburgers in paradise — really. Feeling adventurous? Take a dip with the catfish-like creatures, which swirl around the seafloor, or stroke their sandpapery backs from the comfort of the dock. Later, motor over to the island's north end and hike to Rachel's Bubble Bath, a natural Jacuzzi fed by ocean surf.

### **Osprey Cay**

Find castaway bliss on this remote spit nestled in the Exuma Cays Land and Sea Park. The spot is especially sublime at low tide when a pristine sandbar extends for a half-mile into the Caribbean and crystalline waters stretch endlessly into the distance. A picnic table and some lounge chairs beneath the palms make a perfect picnic spot, where signs encourage visitors to respect the islet's natural beauty. Case in point, though pretty conch shells abound, fight the urge to collect souvenirs — the park has been a designated “no-take zone” since 1958.

### **Sea Aquarium**

Slip over the side of the boat into a coral garden a short motor from Osprey Cay. Aptly called the Sea Aquarium, this natural dive wall harbors a kaleidoscope of marine life including spiny lobsters, hawksbill turtles, and an array of vibrant fish. The rocky wall can be found on O'Brien Cay, a small islet near the entrance to the Land and Sea Park. Nearby, a buoy marks the spot where a sunken plane lies on the ocean's floor.

### **Getting there**

The extra effort required to get to the Exuma Cays is rewarded with total seclusion. Watermakers Air flies twice daily from Fort Lauderdale to Staniel Cay — the short customs stop on Andros is a breeze compared to Nassau's rigamarole.

[www.watermakersair.com](http://www.watermakersair.com)

## **STAY**

### **Fowl Cay**

The ultimate digs for multigenerational family travel, a girlfriends' getaway, or a romantic escape, Fowl Cay offers a bespoke, all-inclusive experience in one of six beachy villas complete with stocked pantries, bicycles, all watersports and gear, and personal skiffs. Rendezvous with other guests over pre-dinner cocktails in Hill House, the private island's main building. The kitchen will also pack delicious lunches to take on daily adventures. [www.fowlcay.com](http://www.fowlcay.com)

### **Staniel Cay Yacht Club**

To be in the center of the action, put down roots in one of 14 bungalows that dot the Yacht Club's shoreline. The club also offers a package that includes three meals a day, snorkeling gear, and use of a skiff. [www.stanielcay.com](http://www.stanielcay.com)

### **Staniel Cay Chamberlain Cottages**

Just down the road from Staniel Cay Yacht Club, these bright cottages overlook the sea and offer couples and families comfortable accommodations at an equally comfortable price. [www.stanielcaychamberlaincottages.com](http://www.stanielcaychamberlaincottages.com)

### **Explore**

It's easy to live out Jimmy Buffet-style expat fantasies zipping through cays in your own little boat — Fowl Cay offers guests simple boating lessons and the Navionics app, which can be used without data, is invaluable. Less-intrepid travelers can book a guide — Dreko Chamberlain, whose family owns Chamberlain Cottages, is one of the best.

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