

and nonguests alike frequent the Blue Bar for its Caribbean fusion menu. The elegant informality of the place is deliberately and deceptively unassuming, in keeping with the island's vibe.

VISITOR INFO: www.myoutislands.com. **SIP:** Tel 242-333-3316. *Cost:* lunch \$40. **ROCK HOUSE HOTEL:** Tel 242-333-2053; www.rockhousebahamas.com. *Cost:* from \$300; dinner \$75. *When:* closed Aug–Oct. **THE**

LANDING: Tel 242-333-2707; www.harbourislandlanding.com. *Cost:* from \$250; dinner \$70. *When:* closed Sep–Oct. **PINK SANDS RESORT:** Tel 800-407-4776 or 242-333-2030; www.pinksandsresort.com. *Cost:* cottages from \$495 (off-peak), from \$750 (peak); dinner \$55. **BEST TIMES:** Nov–May for pleasant weather; Jul for Eleuthera Pineapple Festival; Oct for North Eleuthera/Harbour Island Sailing Regatta.

Swimming Pigs! Plus Spectacular Sailing and a Marine Preserve

THE EXUMA CAYS

The Bahamas

If you arrive in the Exumas by air, book a window seat. Swooping in over the 110-mile-long, spiny chain of 365 cays, which start about 30 miles southeast of Nassau, provides one of the most stunning sights in all of the Caribbean,

and a first glimpse of why these mostly undeveloped islands are often considered the crown jewels of the Bahamas. Like a sand painting rising out of the sea, elaborate channels and sandbars are surrounded by waters in every imaginable shade of blue.

While the Abacos (see p. 1059) are traditionally touted as the Caribbean's best sailing, many claim the Exuma chain steals the show. Its centerpiece is the Exuma Cays Land and Sea Park, a 176-square-mile, breathtakingly beautiful "no take" marine preserve where coral gardens flourish with conch, grouper, and lobster populations that are so abundant they're helping to repopulate the whole archipelago. Established in 1959 and accessible only by boat (your own or a tour company's), this is the oldest land and sea park on the planet. But while the land is pretty, providing habitat for turtles, iguanas, and birds, it is the sea that truly dazzles, offering some of the best sea kayaking, yachting, snorkeling, and diving in all the Bahamas.

The closest civilization is an hour away at Staniel Cay Yacht Club. It is a perfect home

base for access to the park and other attractions, like Thunderball (a beautiful marine cave excellent for snorkeling and named for the 1965 James Bond movie shot there), and friendly swimming pigs (they paddle out to greet boaters who often bring them food). It may sound swanky, but the yacht club is a congenial social center of just nine unpretentious cottages in fun colors right on the water, an 18-slip marina for boaters, and a small landing strip. It becomes the yachting world's preferred place to be during the New Year's Day Cruising Regatta.

Great Exuma Island anchors the southern end of the Exuma archipelago; George Town is its charming pink capital. The popular Augusta Bay Bahamas is a freshly updated property whose 16 spacious suites enjoy sweeping views of a perfect white beach. Check in and then check out the local Fish Fry, a collection of colorful beach shacks at the pier where everyone hangs out, playing cards and listening to music while dining on conch salad, fried fish, and just-caught lobster. Or join the models,

photographers, and sailors who make the short trip to nearby Stocking Island for its especially gorgeous beaches and the legendary Chat 'N' Chill, a beach bar known for its grilled conch burgers, barbecued ribs, and on Sundays, a rowdy pig roast with music.

VISITOR INFO: www.myoutislands.com.
EXUMA CAYS LAND & SEA PARK: www.exumapark.com.
STANIEL CAY YACHT CLUB: Tel 242-

355-2024 or in the U.S., 954-467-8920; www.stanielcay.com. **Cost:** from \$145 (off-peak), from \$210 (peak). **AUGUSTA BAY BAHAMAS:** Tel 242-336-2251; www.augustabaybahamas.com. **Cost:** from \$175 (off-peak), from \$225 (peak). **CHAT 'N' CHILL:** Tel 242-336-2700. **Cost:** dinner \$30, pig roast \$20. **BEST TIMES:** Dec–May for nicest weather; late Apr for Family Island Regatta in George Town.

Enchanting Creatures, Face-to-Face

DOLPHIN DIVE

Little Bahama Bank, The Bahamas

The Bahamas is a vast archipelago of 750 sun-soaked islands with 2,500 cays, stretching over 100,000 square miles of green and cobalt blue seas. It's so close (but with a faraway vibe) to Florida that many visitors launch

their island-hopping on private sailboats, yachts, or planes from there. How convenient, then, that one of the Bahamas' finest attractions—a weeklong encounter with wild dolphins, strictly on their terms—actually departs from Palm Beach.

A pod of wild spotted dolphins congregates regularly north of Grand Bahama Island in spring and summer to play and swim and interact with people; they come without the enticement of food or reward, apparently charmed by their human playmates. Captain Scott of Dream Team, who has spent over 30 years leading weeklong expeditions, is an honorary member of the pod. Upon hearing the sound of his 86-foot boat, the *Dolphin Dream*, the dolphins appear, riding the bow waves of the boat. The dolphins have learned it's "zoo time" and come to see who Scott has dropped into the crystal-clear waters. Baby dolphins play with these strange but harmless creatures while the mothers circle nearby, keeping a watchful eye. They may stay a few minutes or a few hours. You'll usually have one or two encounters a day (or perhaps at



Wild spotted dolphins have become habituated to sharing their waters with humans.

night) over the weeklong trip on the boat, which serves as a hotel for 8 to 12 passengers. The water over the Little Bahama Bank—shallow, calm, and with excellent visibility—is perfect for nondiving snorkelers and swimmers, who can enjoy themselves even after the dolphins slip away.

DREAM TEAM: Tel 888-277-8181 or 561-848-5375; www.dolphindreamteam.com. **COST:** weeklong trips from \$1,595 per person, based on 8 passengers, all-inclusive. **WHEN:** Apr–Aug.