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The Out Islands Beckon

Just beyond the familiar harbors of New Providence and Grand Bahama, more than 700 memorable islands wait to be explored.



Opposite: The bright shallows off Stocking Island in the Exuma archipelago offer plenty of great snorkeling and swimming. The harbor on Terre-de-Haute is a popular yachting and tourist destination. Above: Dawn falls on the overwater spa at Kamalame Cay Private Island Resort on Andros Island.

Cast off from the cruise-ship chaos and casino glitter of Nassau on New Providence Island and the retail therapy in Freeport, Grand Bahamas, and you'll discover that The Bahamas are far greater than the sum of their two most popular islands. In fact, this independent country has more than 700 individual islands strung like jewels along a nearly 500-mile-long archipelago running from the southeastern shores of Florida almost to the island of Hispaniola. Most visitors never make it beyond the gateway islands, but those who do are rewarded with a bygone Bahamas straight out of Winslow Homer watercolors.

The Bahamas government refers to the "other" Bahamian islands as the Family Islands. But to the local fishermen, farmers and artists who live there—and the cruisers who explore them—these frontier islands are proudly known as the "Out Islands."

While you might not find the modern comfort of big city marinas, what you will find is a virtually untouched and unexplored archipelago full of uninhabited islands tucked with hidden harbors, pristine beaches that beat

the Maldives, mysterious blue holes haunted by monsters, plantation ruins, and remote islands still under the spell of West African witchcraft.

ANDROS

Andros is not only one of the nearest Out Islands to Nassau—slightly less than 25 miles southwest of New Providence Island—but it's also the largest. At nearly 2,300 square miles, Andros is so big that you could comfortably fit the entire rest of the country inside it and still have room left over for Bermuda.

Cruisers often bypass this lightly inhabited island—fewer than 10,000 fishermen, spongers and farmers eke out a living off the eastern shore, while the west is a tangle of mangrove swamps—for the gentle lure of the more familiar Exumas farther south. But skip Andros and you're bypassing an extraordinary national treasure. Depending on who's doing the measuring, the Andros Barrier Reef might just be the silver medalist in the "Longest Barrier Reef in the

WORDS & PHOTOS BY JAD DAVENPORT



This page clockwise from bottom left: Time slows down among the Bahamian Out Islands where life still carries on at a pace Winslow Homer would have loved. A mother and daughter explore Kamalame Cay Private Island resort on Andros Island; From sea to supper in less than a minute, a local serves up fresh conch salad on Great Exuma Island; Outdoor dining beckons at Kamalame Cay Private Island Resort, a quiet, luxurious refuge on Andros Island just west of Nassau; Bonefish stalk the mangrove shallows of Andros Island. The healthy swamps are a natural nursery not just for gamefish, but also for turtles and coral species.

World” contest beating out the more well-known Meso-American Reef off Belize (various marine charts put Andros’ barrier reef length between 140 and 167 miles long). National Geographic explorer-in-residence Dr. Sylvia Earle says it’s her favorite dive spot and calls it the last great blue wilderness in the world.

At a time when nearly 60 percent of the world’s coral reefs are threatened by coastal development, overfishing and pollution, Andros is a lucky anomaly. The island has just a handful of fishing villages along the east coast, and there are no plans for rampant coastal development. The entire west coast of the island is composed of raw mangrove forests and tidal flats. Most of the interior of the island—a vast woodland of pine trees and palmettos—is a protected National Park and offshore fishing is carefully regulated. Because much of the reef sits on shelves 100 feet down, the reef has also seen far less hurricane and storm damage than shallower reefs.

Snorkelers and scuba divers love to explore the blue edge where the reef plunges in a sheer wall more than 6,000 feet into the Tongue of the Ocean, a dark trench separating Andros from Nassau. The trench is so deep divers often call it “the Grand Canyon of the Caribbean.”

There are plenty of small harbors for dropping anchor speckled along the coast, and the handful of marinas welcome visitors with sincere hospitality. The luxurious and family-run Kamalame Cay Resort and Spa is a favorite haunt of Hollywood glitterati and visiting cruisers, and offers an overwater spa and some of the best cuisine in the islands. Nearby is the Small Hope Bay Lodge, also family-run; it’s the most experienced diving lodge in The Bahamas. They also offer excellent blue hole exploration expeditions and bush medicine tours into the surrounding forests.



This page from left: A red hind hides behind a sea fan off Andros Island, home to the world's third-longest barrier reef; A monument on Long Island memorializes Christopher Columbus' journeys to the New World. Many locals claim his first landfall was right here; Protected from over-fishing, the Andros Barrier Reef boasts one of the most intact eco-systems in the entire Caribbean, and apex predators like these Caribbean reef sharks are plentiful.

THE EXUMAS

Dream about sailing in The Bahamas and the Exumas are what you dream of, an endless arc of over 300 islands—locals like to say there's one for every day of the year—almost all of them uninhabited except for iguanas and the famous swimming pigs.

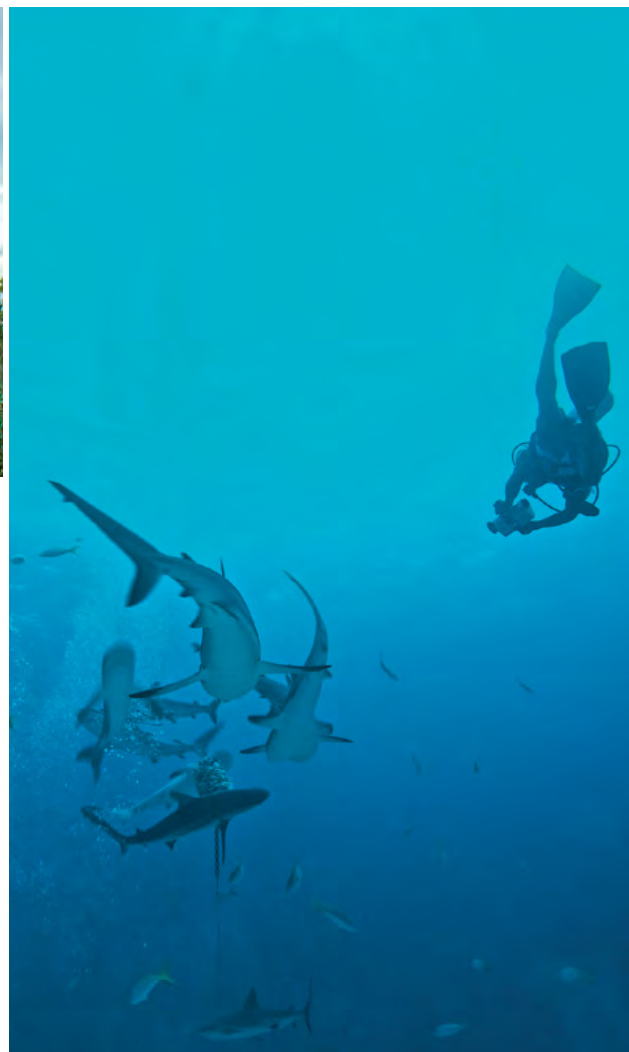
Take a few days to work your way south to Great Exuma where George Town, a sleepy colonial village, allows for reprovisioning. George Town is also the gateway to nearby Stocking Island and the Chat 'n Chill, a famous local beach bar where you can reconnect with other cruisers over a cold Kalik and a fresh bowl of conch salad—diced sweet Exuma onions and peppers with the freshest conch around from sea to table.

The Exumas are slowly waking up to luxury travel with the debut of the Emerald Isle Resort and its luxury marina and polished villas.

CAT ISLAND

Remote and mysterious, Cat Island juts like a pirate's boot into Exuma Sound 97 miles southeast of Nassau. The island was settled by a mix of freed slaves, loyalist boat builders, Confederate cotton barons, and British pirates. Unlike the rest of The Bahamas, which are pancake flat, Cat Island rises from the sea like a dragon's spine, boasting the highest hills in the country and the penultimate peak—the 206-foot-high Mount Alvernia.

Hawks Nest Marina at the far southern tip of the island welcomes cruisers—and has a small airport for private planes—and Fernandez Bay Village farther north has some of the prettiest and most protected anchorages on the sheltered



west side of the island. Fernandez Bay is a perfect half-moon of sand. The namesake resort offers a nice collection of coral stone cottages, great meals and occasionally, beach bonfires.

Explore the interior of the island and you'll discover a number of decaying cotton plantations—watch out for falling roof timbers. The ruins are a fittingly haunted backdrop for the island's infamy as a last bastion of Obeah, West African witchcraft that came with slavery. Islanders will tell you the old ways are long gone, but remnants are still around—keep an eye out in the forests for “witching trees” strung with rum bottles full of spiders and spells. Most of the activity centers in and around the village of Old Bight. The church-going locals are unlikely to discuss Obeah with outsiders, but spend some time on the island and you'll start to hear stories about the “men who come a-rushin,” more commonly known as zombies. If locals do share stories with you, treat the tales with the utmost respect as witchcraft is taken very seriously on the island.

Mt. Alvernia makes for a great hike—plan on about five minutes to reach the summit. On top are the fairytale ruins of a hermitage designed and built by Father Jerome whose



Everyday household items like these woven baskets on Cat Island make great souvenirs. A sandy path winds through Kamalame Cay Private Island Resort on Andros Island, a favorite haunt of celebrities wanting to escape the bustle of Nassau.

tomb is dug into the limestone slope. His other churches can be found scattered throughout the island. An even older reminder of the days gone by are the 18th-century ruins of the Derveaux Plantation down near Port Howe.

LONG ISLAND

Just 150 miles southeast of Nassau is Long Island, which also has its share of mysterious ruins and ghost stories. Most notable is the spooky Adderley Plantation just inland from Glinton Sound but completely lost in a tamarind forest. Other than the missing roof, the old manor is surprisingly intact. William Adderley was a British cotton farmer who took his slave, Teeny Woman, as his

mistress. His jealous wife retaliated by having affairs with local men. In a fit of rage, Adderley “ground him a butcher knife and cut his [own] throat spilling his blood onto the sea on the beach of the plantation.”

Locals claim Long Island was the third island sighted by Columbus in 1492, and there’s even a monument worth visiting in the far south.

Snorkelers and divers will want to visit Dean’s Blue Hole, the Mount Everest of blue holes. One of the most scenic blue holes in The Bahamas, it’s a sapphire pool tucked into a small, hidden harbor shielded from the Atlantic by limestone cliffs. Although unknown off the island, Dean’s

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Faith is strong among the Bahamian Out Islands, where the reclusive Father Jerome built numerous churches and cathedrals including the Holy Redeemer Catholic Church on Cat Island. Untouched by development, the 150-mile-plus Great Barrier Reef off Andros Island is plush with sea fans and soft corals.

Blue Hole is the deepest blue hole in the world at 663 feet. The hole and harbor are isolated so you'll most likely have them all to yourself.

CONCEPTION ISLAND

Cross over to Conception Island roughly halfway between Long and Cat islands, a gorgeous Bahamas National Land and Sea Park. The island is ringed by some of the prettiest beaches in The Bahamas and an important nesting area for sea turtles. The only visitors are the occasional dive boat from Long Island and rarely another sailboat. The mangrove interior of the island has some of the finest bonefishing in the world.

MARINAS

Great Exuma: Marina Emerald Bay, 242-336-6100, marinaemeraldbay.com

Cat Island: Hawk's Nest Resort & Marina, (242) 342-7050; hawks-nest.com

Long Island: Stella Maris Resort Club, (242) 338-2050; stellamarisresort.com

Andros Island: Kamalame Private Island Resort and Residences, (877) 768-9423; kamalame.com .



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