

# Paradise of Plenty

Exuma has so much to offer



Story and photos by  
Brian Irwin

**B**onefish “Slick” has knobby, weathered feet, heavily calloused from years of wading the shallow waters of the Exumas. He goes barefoot when stalking bonefish, one of the most prized game fish in the world, and our target this day as my fiancée Lori, Slick and myself crept quietly through the shin-deep water of Pipe Cay, casting to the lightning-fast fish. The hard sandy bottom was a perfect ivory, the water as clear as a pane of glass.

Pipe Cay is one of dozens of idyllic islands in the central Exuma chain, arguably the crown jewel of The Bahamas, especially for boaters. Starting just 35 miles southeast of the capital, Nassau, and stretching lazily for 130 over turquoise and powder blue waters, the thin band of shoals defines a sharp border between the Exuma Bank to the west and the mile-deep water to the east. Largely protected from rough water on its westward side, the string of islands is an explorers paradise, with scores of uninhabited islands, deserted beaches and unique features including swimming pigs not found elsewhere in The Bahamas or Caribbean.

The isles of the Exumas are among the Out Islands of The Bahamas, which sit just over an hour’s flight from southeast Florida. Unlike more developed urban cities like Freeport or Nassau, the Out Islands are thinly settled, largely attributable to their remoteness which in days of old made them accessible only by mailboat. Today, there are numerous direct flights from Ft. Lauderdale and Nassau. And while only a short distance from the bustling capital, this paradise has a wild feel. A sense of timelessness seeps from the colorful villages, adding to a laid back lifestyle that lives up to vacation brochures. Lumber for construction projects arrives on boats infrequently. There are few amenities other than world class beaches and comfortable accommodations in brightly colored cabanas amidst quiet streets. The only hint that time has not passed these islands by is surprisingly excellent telephone and internet service in most places. In essence, the chain is perfect, with 365 islands...one for each day of the year.

The most populated of the Exumas is Great Exuma, home of the capital of George Town. Population figures for the island chain vary widely ranging from 3,500 to 7,000 with as many as a half or a third of those on Great Exuma. However, the tiny spit of Staniel Cay in the dead-center of the chain anchored our foray into the Exumas. Most easily navigated by golf cart, the two-mile long island is striped by a gristly airstrip where daily charters, millionaires with pontoon-equipped seaplanes and small planes land, kill the props and downshift into a paradise fit for a movie star.

And indeed the Exumas are. James Bond's *Thunderball* was set near Staniel Cay, taking advantage of its incredible scenery. Johnny Depp and David Copperfield own private local islands. Other celebrities and members of royalty alike drift in and out of the islands on monster yachts, stopping to play and picnic on powdery sandbars rimmed with palm trees. Lori and I are far from either

of these social strata, and our ride around the chain was more humble but perfectly adequate: a 13' Boston Whaler, compliments of the Staniel Cay Yacht Club where we based our adventures.

The Yacht Club is a simple, yet classy establishment founded in 1956. Visitors come and go in golf carts and boats of all sizes, wandering in and out of the bar deemed one of the best by the Venerable Jimmy Buffet. The club is a pleasant vortex, the kind of place where guests mingle and discuss their discoveries of the day, creeping along at a speed of life that leaves worries behind. Pastel-colored cabanas rest on weathered pillars amidst jagged coral. Behind them is a courtyard with a small pool and lounge chairs. But most people spend little time poolside; the surrounding islands have too much to offer to allow to go unexplored.

The first day of our trip the water was calm. We glided over varying degrees of aqua making our way

north to Big Major Cay. Famous for its population, this deserted island has the most outgoing locals in the Exumas: a resident colony of wild pigs. Conditioned by years of generous visitors with leftover food, they've been fed so often that the purr of our approaching outboard motor rung the dinner bell and brought three pigs running into the water and swimming out to our boat. They ate whatever we threw to them, which included bread, fruit and ironically, bacon. And as soon as the food was gone, so were the boars.

Farther north sits Compass Cay, with a quiet marina at the head of a small harbor. We pulled up our boat beside luxury yachts and strolled to the store, nothing more than a tattered box adorned with wooden signs, hand painted with phrases like "What's the hurry? You're here now." On the dock a local fisherman cleaned four lobster the size of skateboards, throwing scraps into the water where they were slurped up by a half-dozen nurse sharks.

## Dive Paradise

### The Wet Side

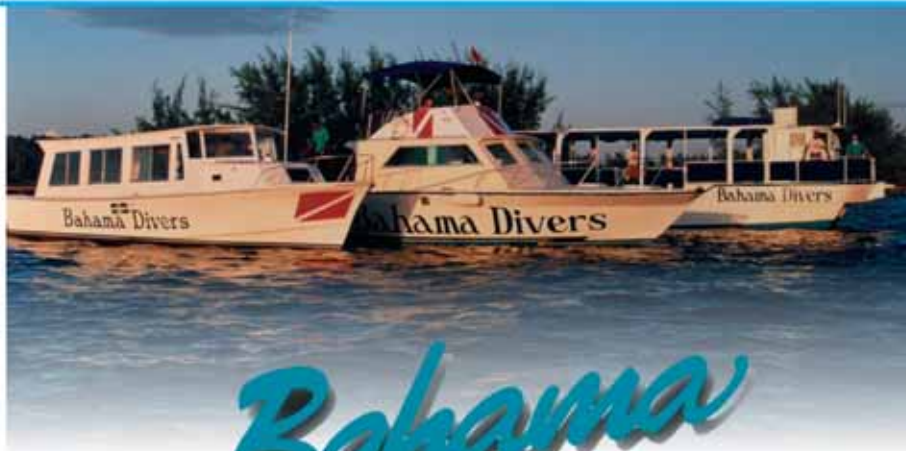
Two Tank Dive  
Daily

1/2 Day  
Snorkling Trips

Learn to Dive  
Lesson Daily

Free  
Transportation

Underwater  
Video of your  
Dive



### The Dry Side

Your #1  
Dive Shop  
in Nassau

US DIVERS  
SHERWOOD  
BAHAMA PRO

Full Swimming  
Line

Full Service  
on all Scuba  
Equipment

# Bahama DIVERS

CALL NOW

393 5644 - 393 1466

Located East of Paradise Island Bridge, in the Nassau Yacht Haven Marina  
PO Box SS 5004 Nassau, Bahamas



These “pet sharks” are docile and toothless, which seemed improbable, but proved to be true. We slid on our fins and masks and jumped in with the well-fed fish. Their five-foot long chocolate-colored bodies whirled around us, occasionally bumping against our legs with their coarse skin. Smaller fish, like Sargent Majors and Blue Runners trailed the sharks, gulping up their scraps, leaving the water bathtub clear.

Just around the corner from Staniel is Thunderball Grotto. An unassuming head of coral with a hollowed out center and subsequent cave is a snorkeler’s dream. At low tide we found our way through a barely submerged tunnel and surfaced in the belly of the island. A few holes in the 40’ high roof allow sunlight to slash the darkness of the cave, their borders adorned with hanging vines and seeping water. The grotto is home to a broad palate of tropical fish, octopus and eel, its water glowing an iridescent shade of blue.

Bitter Guana Cay is the next Cay south of Staniel. A short boat



ride lands you on a long beach that ends abruptly with a tower of coral at the island’s tip, weatherbeaten and jagged from relentless waves that curl around after pounding the eastern coastline. But here, on the westward face, the water was flat and azure. Lori and I walked the chalky beach, the sand as fine as confectioners sugar. Cactus plants and stunted shrubs capped the beach.

No people live on Bitter Guana. There’s not a single structure. But the tracks you leave on the beach will not be the only ones.

As we walked three large iguanas skittered out of the vegetation, clawing their way along the sand, dragging ropey tails behind them. They approached us with curiosity, but stopped short when they realized we were without food. They sat still,

*~ YOUR ABACO SPECIALISTS ~*

*Offering traditional island cottages, ocean and harbour front lots and luxury homes in South Abaco –  
In such places as Casuarina Point, Bahama Palm Shores, Schooner Bay and Long Beach.*

**ISLAND PROPERTIES BAHAMAS**

**JAMES & DONNA REES, BROKER, BRI**



[www.islandpropertiesbahamas.com](http://www.islandpropertiesbahamas.com) | [jamesordonna@gmail.com](mailto:jamesordonna@gmail.com) | 1.242.367.0737

with crumpled skin and crimson eyes, as we plucked rosy conch shells from the sand and watched the sun give way to gravity on the horizon.

Bonefish Slick, who elects not to use his given name (Oliver Monroe) is a quiet man. He's 50 years old and has been guiding bonefishermen since his teens. As we fished on the first of two days with him, he gathered live conch as we angled, throwing a few into the boat. When we returned to the Staniel

Cay Yacht Club—a place where a pullover tee-shirt with buttons could be considered overdressed—Slick disappeared only to return with a giant bowl of conch salad. It is little wonder that when people hear you are heading to The Bahamas, they beseech you with unabashed fervor to do three things—swim in the water, wear sunblock and eat conch salad. It's a concoction that resembles a citrusy salsa with tenderized chunks of meat, onions



peppers soaking in lime and orange juices. The name is a misnomer. It's not a salad. It's ceviche.

The next morning we waded the flats of Pipe Cay. A broad expanse of foot-deep water the size of three football fields stretched out in front of us. Slowly, we stalked schools of bonefish, walking among half-buried conch shells, hermit crabs and starfish. Slick said little, intensely searching for any sign of the elusive fish. The day was long, with the hot sun bearing down as we hooked, but lost a few bones. There was not another person in sight.

Suddenly we heard a forced whisper. "Bones, three-o'clock," Slick proclaimed, pointing his knobby finger toward a group of approaching bone fish. Their silver bodies were invisible, allowing them to be spotted only by the shadow that their cruising cast on the sandy ocean floor. I quickly peeled out fly line and cast ahead of the school. Simultaneously Lori shot her line to the side of the school. The fish shifted direction, floating over her line and mine. My rod twitched with the action of a nibbling bone for a second when Lori shouted out that she had a fish on.

I turned to watch her rod fling into a sharp bend. I felt an electrifying jolt on my rod as it sharply whipped forward. Line screamed from my reel as my fish did the same thing that Lori's did: shoot off toward the distant azure water of the Exuma Bank. It might have been saying goodbye, but whether it returns or not, we will. →

---

Brian Irwin is a freelance writer and photographer. He has been widely published in various newspapers and magazines. This was he and Lori's first trip to the Exumas. [www.brianirwinmedia.com](http://www.brianirwinmedia.com)

Low rates  
Pick-up & Drop-off  
Economy - Luxury  
Cars - Mini-Vans  
[www.Budget.com](http://www.Budget.com)  
[bracnas@batelnet.bs](mailto:bracnas@batelnet.bs)



**There's more to discover.**  
**FOR RESERVATIONS CALL:**  
Nassau International Airport 377-9000 or 377-7405/6  
Paradise Island 363-3095  
Administration 325-8154 Fax 323-7545