

Island Adventures

Exploring *the* Exumas

An unparalleled boating utopia that offers it all: picture-perfect anchorages and placid footprint-free cays, characterful beach bars and memorable Bahamian eateries, and a kaleidoscope of saltwater adventures that will recharge and inspire.

Shroud Cay

You could spend weeks boating from one Exumas cay to the next and not set foot on them all, so we recommend adopting the relaxed pace of Bahamian life and starting first with some of the most celebrated destinations – many of which are listed here. For orientation's sake, the Exumas island chain is divided into three regions: **Great Exuma**, the largest of the cays by far, and host to both the international airport and the capital of

Georgetown; **Little Exuma** to the south, a 12-square-mile long islet connected to Great Exuma via a small, one-lane bridge; and the Exuma Cays, the remaining hundreds of mostly uninhabited and private islands that spread out over 120 miles. Many of the unnamed cays and coves belong to the Exuma National Land and Sea Park, a marine reserve created in 1958 that protects one of the largest barrier reefs in the world.



SEA ADVENTURES GALORE

Watersport enthusiasts of all kinds will no doubt be awestruck by the dreamlike oceanscapes that the Exumas offer above and below the sea. For starters, you can jump across the tropics latitude line on **Little Exuma's** Tropic of Cancer Beach; the stretch of dove-white sand and calm cerulean waters makes it a haven for those interested in paddling to nearby islands. **Staniel Cay** features one of the most accessible plane wreck dive sites in the world and is a great stopping point before boating over to the **Thunderball Grotto**, an incredible underwater cave system made famous in a James Bond film. The Mystery Cave on **Stocking Island** is another underwater gem for snorkelers and divers. While you're in the area, try to spot some Stromatolites near the Stocking Island beach dunes- they're some of the oldest fossils on the planet!

If you've always wanted to swim alongside sharks, venture to **Compass Cay**, where welcoming nurse sharks greet bathers in shallow marina waters. Or, to admire the Exuma's celebrity swimming pigs, head to Pig Beach on the tiny island of **Big Major Cay**.

Allen's Cay is another wildlife viewing treasure, featuring endangered rock iguanas - some as large as 24 pounds - that are only found in the Exumas. For boaters cruising the northernmost Exuma waters of the esteemed Land and Sea Park marine reserve, **Shroud Cay** is an isolated islet where visitors often catch sight of sea turtles in its tidal mangroves. **O'Brien's Cay**, also in the park, features "The Aquarium," a shoal reef that teems with a rainbow of fish and coral species.

Fishermen, too, will rejoice in the Exumas, whose waters teem with wahoo, barracuda, tuna, snapper, grouper and bonefish, amongst many others. Be aware that a permit is often required and many species are catch-and-release, and all fishing, conching and shelling is strictly prohibited in the Land and Sea Park.



Top: Visit with Allen Cays' endangered rock iguanas, Middle: Swim with the pigs on Big Major Cays' pig beach. Bottom: Allied Marines', John Burkard lounging with a nurse shark near Compass Cay



A FEAST FROM LAND AND SEA

Exumian food is a mouth-watering fusion of fresh seafood and traditional Bahamian dishes. Visitors will have an array of quality options at their disposal; a good bet is to ask a local what their go-to spot is! One tried-and-true favorite is the string of colorful beachfront cottages known as **The Fish Fry** on Great Exuma, which are known for their barbeque and made-to-order fish fry. They're a late-night staple, especially on weekends when the music amps up and everyone starts to mingle. On Little Exuma, the ambient, open-air grill **Santanna's** (below) is just steps from Tropic of Cancer Beach, and serves authentic seafood dishes topped with some of the tastiest sauces on the islands. And for table-made conch salad, fire-roasted conch burgers, or to experience a Bahamian Sunday pig roast, head to the **Chat 'N' Chill** beach bar (left) on Stocking Island, a legendary spot that attracts an animated mix of yachters and locals. Don't be surprised if you end up dancing next to a beach bonfire. Be sure to put your feet in white-sand beach at **Nipper's Beach Bar & Grill** on Great Guana Cay. Swim by the third-largest coral reef in the world or grab a "Chicken in Da Bag".



Top left: Chat 'N' Chill beach bar on Stocking Island. Bottom left: Nippers Beach Bar & Grill, Great Guana Cay. Bottom right: Santanna's on Tropic of Cancer Beach.

Boaters that find themselves on Staniel Cay, on the other hand, will feel right at home dining at The Captain's Lounge at the **Staniel Cay Yacht Club**, which has been serving salty dogs and yachtsmen since the 1950s. The club also has a Sea Level restaurant, which offers two reservation-only, candlelit dining hours with a three-course menu. If it's exclusivity you're after, **Macduff's**, the only restaurant on remote Norman Cay, is a must for anyone craving conch fritters or a specialty grouper dish in the northernmost waters of the Exumas.



MARINAS, MOORINGS & LUXURY ON LAND

Whether you desire an upscale marina or a quiet mooring field, you'll have no trouble finding safe a haven to suit your style while logging sea miles in the Exumas. **The Emerald Bay Marina** offers convenience and class on Great Exuma, with over a hundred slips within the Sandals Resort complex. **Norman's Cay Marina**, to the northern end of the island chain, is popular with superyachts because of its depth and large slips, as is the **Highborne Cay Marina**, which also accommodates boats big and small, in a naturally sheltered harbor. For those in search of quainter docks, try the **Compass Cay Marina**, which tops out at 16 slips. And then there's the famed **Staniel Cay Yacht Club**, loyally frequented by seasoned seamen and one of the Exumas' oldest quays. It has a reputation for fantastic amenities and a spirited bar, and if you crave a night off the water, book a SCYC resort suite, and admire your yacht from land.

Staniel Cay Yacht Club, bahamas.com

If tying up to a mooring is more your speed, **The Exuma Cays Land & Sea Park** offers seven different mooring fields for nearly 100 boats in an awe-inspiring backdrop, and many captains will agree they're some of the finest in the Exumas. **The Staniel Cay Yacht Club**, **Little Farmer's Cay Yacht Club**, and the **St Francis Marina** on Great Exuma also offer secure mooring options. For captains dropping anchor, check nautical charts and boating directories for safe anchorages.

If you're looking to pamper yourself on land for some nights –or aren't exploring Exuma by boat– there are plenty of lavish hotels and private-island resorts to cater to every desire. Great Exuma's **Grand Isle Resort** and **Sandals Emerald Bay** are two revered choices that offer an all-inclusive island experience. Or cruise over to the Fowl Cay Resort and indulge in a deluxe villa stay, or a beachfront bungalow at the **Kahari Resort** on Stocking Island. For fishermen craving a homier, hobby-centered stay, try a locally-owned fishing lodge that offers guided excursions.

GETTING TO THE EXUMAS

Most flights arrive in Great Exuma at the GTT international airport. If you plan on chartering a vessel upon arrival to the Exumas, consider a first-class charter or private seaplane flight; the airlines usually offer a boat tender transport to your yacht or hotel, and get you on the water in a breeze. There is also a ferry service from Nassau, for travelers already in the Bahamas. Anyone arriving by personal boat, on the other hand, should be aware of all Bahamian Customs and Immigration regulations, and arrange cruising permits and visas if necessary.

