

Go the whole hog and swim with pigs in The Bahamas

By Angelina Villa-Clark

THE Bahamas is often referred to as the 'Vegas of the Caribbean' thanks to its collection of luxury resorts and casinos. But across its islands you'll also find a rich line-up of authentic experiences.

There's no better way to understand a culture than by sampling local cooking – and Ronale Pierce, known as Captain Ron, a guide with the Bites Of Nassau food tour, can take you to haunts dotted around the capital.

The three-hour culinary tour includes pitstops at the Graycliff Chocolatier to sample truffles made with mango and coconut, and the Athena Cafe, a tiny restaurant above a jewellery shop, for a bowl of conch chowder.

It also stops at the Bahamian Cookin' Restaurant on Parliament Street – the oldest restaurant in Nassau, having opened in 1986. It is opposite the nation's Senate building that's painted in a jaunty, candy-pink hue.

For the art lovers, head along West Street, pretty with its canopy of rainbow-coloured umbrellas, and you'll come to the National Art Gallery Of The Bahamas (NAGB). But for a more immersive take on the art scene, a stay at Rosewood Baha Mar will see you surrounded by 150 pieces of local art.

John Cox, the former head curator at the NAGB, has spearheaded a new gallery at the hotel. Free for guests to enter, it represents some of the most talented artists in The Bahamas today – from evocative portraits by Darchell Henderson to the stylistic paintings of the female figure by June Collie.

With some 700 islands making up the Bahamian archipelago (just 30 are inhabited), there are plenty to explore – from Bimini, Ernest Hemingway's favourite, to Inagua, the southernmost island in the region, home to 80,000 flamingoes.

A two-hour boat ride south of Nassau are the Exumas, a chain of 365 islands and cays known

for their azure waters and pink-sand beaches. At the uninhabited Big Major Cay you can even swim with pigs who trot into the water from the beach.

Nearby, at Stocking Island, you'll be surrounded by playful stingrays. The island's only building is the Chat 'N' Chill beach bar, where you can try a Baha Mama (rum punch) as reggae bounces out of its speakers.

Back on New Providence, the main island, Atlantis Bahamas is perhaps the region's most famous place to stay.

Having celebrated its 25th anniversary last year, the megaresort is known for its pink towers, casino and 21 restaurants.

It has also been at the forefront of conservation in the region with eco-initiatives such as the coral gene bank, which aims to help the prevention of declining coral populations.

Guests can join conservation projects and take day trips to visit the lesser-known islands, home to an abundance of rare animals and marine life – so you can dive into a side of The Bahamas that you might never have known existed.

● **Rooms at Rosewood Baha Mar from £675 per night** (rosewoodhotels.com). **The Royal at Atlantis Paradise Island costs from £238 per night**, (atlantisbahamas.com). **The Bites of Nassau tour from about £63** (trubahamianfoodtours.com). **Visit the Exumas with Powerboat Adventures, about £218 per adult** (powerboatadventures.com). **More at bahamas.com.**



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