

# The Exumas

These islands are made for those who love nothing better than taking a boat off into the unknown, splashing in tranquil aquamarine waters or strolling across powder-soft beaches.

The Exumas comprises 365 islands: some of the cays are tiny dots, some are barren, and others luscious and fertile. Most are uninhabited – apart from sunbathing iguanas – but they all have glittering white sands and small harbors of emerald-green water.

This 100-mile-long necklace headed by Great Exuma and Little Exuma starts 40 miles southeast of Nassau. George Town is the chain's main town, on Great Exuma's Elizabeth Harbour. The small center is also a yachter's haven, and one of the Bahamas' main hubs for chartering boats for island-hopping. Jackie Onassis was once a regular, and the New England yachting crowd still has a penchant for the Exumas, especially for the annual Family Island Regatta.

Elegant Stocking Island has fine beaches and tranquil lagoons, shelters George Town from the Atlantic and is a beach-lounger's paradise. Those who want to follow in the fins of Jacques Cousteau can revel in the fish that flicker past pristine reefs, wrecks and blue holes, especially in the Exuma Cays Land & Sea Park, which protects birds, marine life and the endemic iguanas. Kayakers love these waters shared with dolphins, sharks and the occasional whale.

The vast flats west and south of the Exumas are bonefish habitat supreme, and great fishing lodges and friendly operators can be found in George and Rolle Towns.

## HIGHLIGHTS

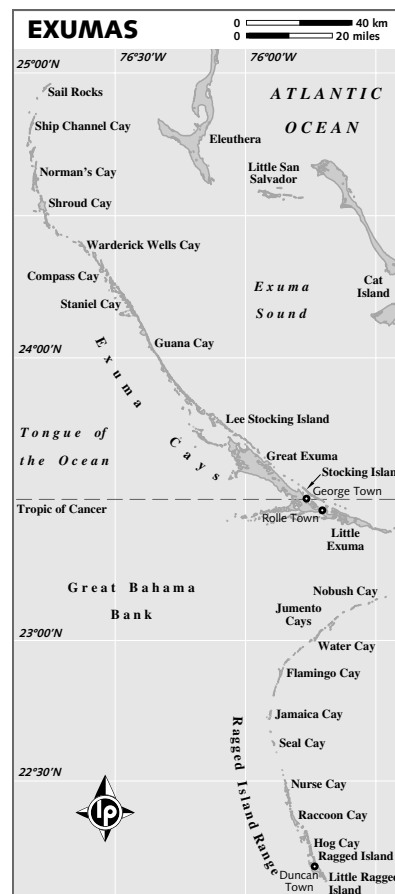
- Splashing around in the jeweled waters of the **Exuma Cays Land & Sea Park** (p204), great for kayaking, sunning and snorkeling
- Hightailing it to the billowing sails and noisy exuberance of George Town's **Family Island Regatta** (p197), where boats and spirits fly
- Hitching a ride to **Stocking Island** (p200) to sip a mango daiquiri in the warm shallows of an emerald bay
- Picnicking and splashing around in the sea with the friendly **swimming pigs of Major Cay** (p206)
- Hiring a **houseboat** (p198) and mooring in beautiful lagoons and off deserted beaches for blissful peace and seclusion



■ TELEPHONE CODE: 242

■ POPULATION: 3539

■ AREA: 121 SQ MILES



## History

During the 17th century, many residents of New Providence settled Great Exuma to escape ruthless buccaneers, and made a living as salt rakers.

Following the American Revolution, Loyalists under Lord Denys Rolle arrived with 140 slaves aboard a ship named the *Peace & Plenty*. Granted 7000 acres on which to plant cotton, Rolle's plantations blossomed until the chenille bug chewed through the cotton crop. The salt industry also evaporated, done in by more profitable operations on neighboring islands. In 1834, the year of emancipation, most Whites uprooted and left, while the newly freed slaves stayed and took over Rolle's land.

It was common back then for slaves to adopt the name of their master. Today every second person is a Rolle (locals, however, have a good grip on who their blood relatives are), and since the 1890s every Rolle has been permitted to build and farm on common land. Rolleville and Rolle Town, the two most important historic settlements on Great Exuma, are certainly worth a look. Although now claimed by bush, there are decrepit forts and ruined plantations lying scattered around in between the farming and fishing villages.

## Getting There & Away

Most travelers to Exuma fly into the small Exuma International Airport, 6 miles north of George Town, or take the twice-weekly fast ferry from Nassau. Day trips to the cays from Nassau on super-zippy powerboats are also very popular. Expensive private boat charters and cheaper but slow mail boats round out the options.

The **Ettienne & Cephas** (from \$50 for shorter trips, round-trip \$140, 21hrs) mail boat departs Nassau on Tuesday for Staniel Cay, Farmer's Cay, Black Point, Little Farmer's Cay and Barreterre. Contact the **Dockmaster's Office** (☎ 242-393-1064) at Potter's Cay in Nassau for further details.

## Getting Around

You'll need your own transport if you want to explore the islands outside George Town's immediate vicinity; rental agencies can be found at the airport. Affordable and more upmarket boats are also available for hire in George Town.

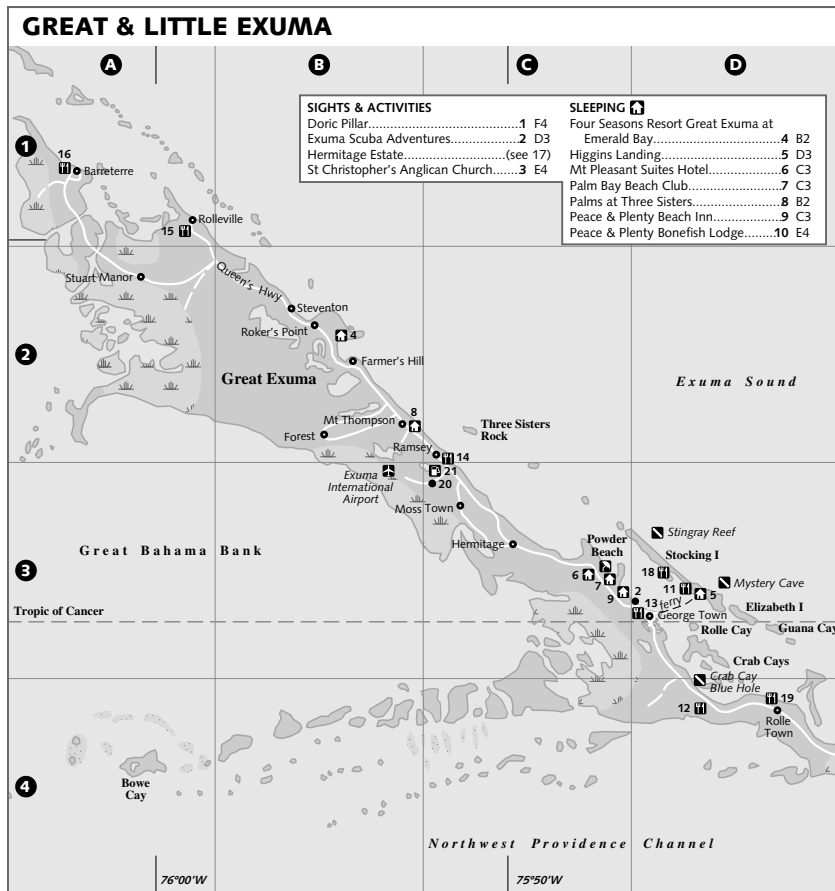
## GREAT EXUMA

The main island in the chain, Great Exuma is the starting point for most people exploring the islands, and where boaters and yachties will call in for their supplies or to pick up mail.

## GEORGE TOWN

pop 1071

George Town feels less like a convivial town in which to stay for a while, and more like a place to stock up on supplies, which is exactly what most visitors do, before heading off to explore the hundreds of gorgeous



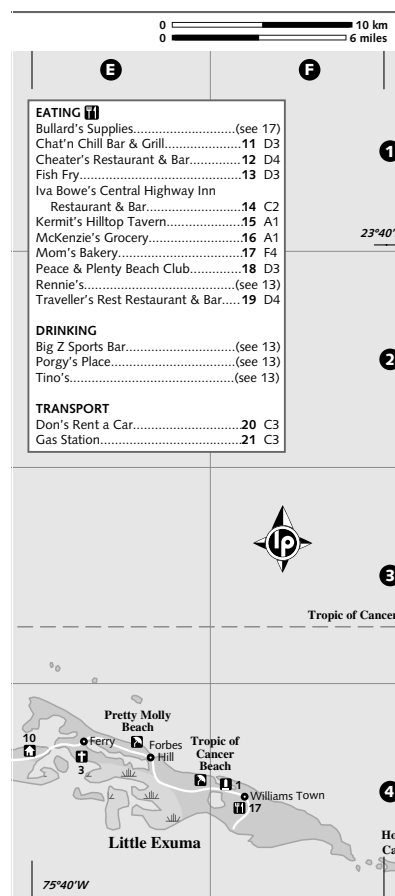
cays and islands that make up this island chain. Queen's Hwy circles through town in one direction, leading past the shores of Lake Victoria and along the elegant length of Stocking Island, and into a clivage of a few stores, bank, cafés and dwellings that comprise George Town's small, dusty center.

Government Wharf is the focal point of most action, where townsfolk gather when the mail boat calls, fisherfolk return with their glistening catch and a myriad of visitors' boats are always on the move.

A night or two here will introduce you to some friendly locals, who will eagerly describe the amazing caverns and blue holes in the surrounding waters, as well as ensure

that you cross the Tropic of Cancer, which runs through town. The event of the year is April's Family Island Regatta, considered one of the Bahamas' best. Hundreds of islanders still make the annual pilgrimage to George Town's Elizabeth Harbour for this event, for which boatbuilders proudly ship in their handmade dinghies from other islands aboard the mail boats. During the regatta, the town is transformed into an outdoor party venue.

Victoria Lake is connected to Elizabeth Harbour by a 50yd-long channel. In the 1800s the British Navy used Elizabeth Harbour and Lake Victoria for refitting warships. The US Navy also had a small base here during WWII.



## Information

The **Bahamas Ministry of Tourism** (☎ 242-336-2430; www.bahamas.com; Queen's Hwy) sits above Sam Grey's business on Queen's Hwy.

**Scotiabank** (☎ 242-336-2651; Queen's Hwy) is the town's one bank.

For all shopping needs and some good quality fruit and veg, head for the multifaceted **Exuma Markets** (☎ 242-336-2033; fax 242-336-2645; Queen's Hwy, George Town), which also has a fax and phone message service, and acts as an informal 'mail restante.'

**Exuma Web Cafe** (☎ 242-336-2562; Queen's Hwy, George Town; ☎ 8am-7:30pm Mon-Sat, 4:30-7:30pm Sun) charges around \$10/18 per half-hour/hour.

The **post office** (☎ 242-347-3546; Queen's Hwy) is based at the big pink Government Ad-

ministration Building, along with the **police** (☎ 242-336-2666, 919; Queen's Hwy). There is also a **Government Medical Clinic** (☎ 242-336-2088; Queen's Hwy).

## Sights

A few buildings are of interest. **St Andrew's Anglican Church** (1802) gleams white on a hill above Lake Victoria, and opens for Sunday services (it's well worth the stroll to peek at the gravestones out back).

The pink and white neoclassical **Government Administration Building** (☎ 242-336-2600; Queen's Hwy; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri) accommodates everything: the post office, police station, customs and immigration, Ministry of Education, magistrates' court and jail.

**Regatta Park** is a scruffy piece of land in the center of George Town that fills with market stalls and partygoers during the annual regatta. The rest of the year, the park is home to a beaten-up old boat, *The Patsy*, which last raced in 1953.

The **Straw Market** (☎ 9am-5pm) sits on the edge of Regatta Park and sells a small range of straw bags and hats, some T-shirts and beachwear.

## Activities

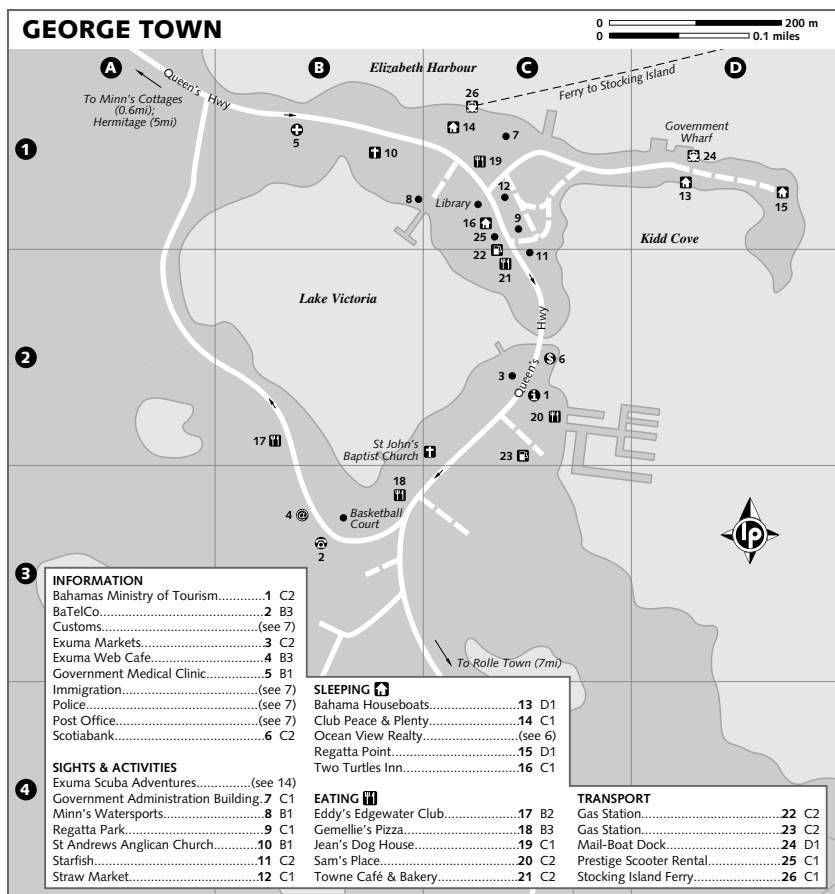
This is an excellent area for all water sports, especially boating of any kind, even for amateurs. Don't forget you can hire boats for exploring the wonderful Exuma Cays Land & Sea Park, see p200 for details.

## DIVING & SNORKELING

The Exumas are replete with some fantastic snorkel and dive sites, including spectacular blue holes and caves, many of which have safety lines. Jacques Cousteau loved these sites, so it is a fair bet that you will too!

For great snorkel sites head for the schools of small and vibrant fish around **Bird Cay**; the odd-shaped **Duck Cay North**; **Duck Cay South**, a tiered reef that looks like an underwater wedding cake; and the shallow reefs of the **Three Sisters**.

**Harbour Buoy Portside** is a very active reef with lots of marine life, as is **Jolly Hall**, a favored latched for grunts and yellowtail snapper. **Loaded Barrel Reef** has plenty of fish species inhabiting its wide seabeds, as well as staghorn coral. **Harbour Buoy Starboard** is home to large brain corals, as are the shallow reefs of **Liz Lee Shoals**.



There are some fabulous dive sites, and one of the easiest is **Stingray Reef** (Map pp194–5), where shallow waters are full of snapper, angelfish, grunts and stingrays.

Experienced daredevils may wish to try the **Angelfish Blue Hole**, a vertical shaft which starts at 30ft below the surface and falls to 90ft before leveling into a network of caves full of soft sponges and schooling angelfish. Another deep orifice, **Crab Cay Blue Hole** (Map pp194–5) is a 40ft-wide crevasse up to 90ft deep, with archways inhabited by lobsters, snappers and stingrays.

South of Stocking Island, access to Mystery Cave (p200) begins at 15ft below the surface and drops to 100ft, and is another one for the experienced.

You can either go it alone, or take kayaking and snorkeling trips with guides. For off-island adventure ideas and rates, contact **Captain Steven Cole** (☎ 242-554-2768) directly or through Minns Water Sports (p200).

**Exuma Scuba Adventures** (☎ 242-336-2893; www.dive-exuma.com; Club Peace & Plenty, Queen's Hwy) offer two-tank dives (\$75), one-tank night dives (\$60) and three-tank dives including lunch on a deserted cay (\$150). Snorkeling trips start at \$25/10 per adult/child and gear-hire is also available (\$25). An all-day snorkel trip with lunch on a deserted cay is \$90.

**Peace & Plenty Beach Club** (☎ 242-336-2551; www.peaceandplenty.com; Stocking Island) will rent snorkel gear (\$15 per day) and sailboards (\$15/30 per half-day/day) to day-trippers.

## KAYAKING

**Starfish** (☎ 242-336-3033; www.kayakbahamas.com; Queen's Hwy, George Town) present a variety of activities, including four-hour guided kayak trips (\$60), Castaway Getaways trips (\$125), which drop you off at a suitably remote spot with a two-person kayak, and three-hour guided Eco Boat tours (adult/child \$55/44). Adventure packages start from \$299 for three days, and include lodgings, kayak/bicycle hire, airport transfers and island tours. Kayaks can be hired for \$40 per day, snorkel gear is \$15 per day and camping gear (without sleeping bags) is \$60 per day. Weekly rates are available on all rentals.

## BONEFISHING & SPORTFISHING

There are some excellent bonefishing guides in the area, who can be contacted via the Bahamas Ministry of Tourism (p195), with average rates of about \$300 per half-day or \$400 to \$500 per day. **Cooper's Charter Service** (☎ 242-336-2711) and the Peace & Plenty Bonefish Lodge (p202), around 3 miles south of Rolle Town, are renowned for their great guides. **Bandits Bonefishing Lodge & Pirate's Den** (☎ 242-358-8062; info@banditsbonefishing.com) offers angling (\$400 per day) and has accommodation/fishing packages including 3 nights/2 days of fishing for \$1450.

## BIRD-WATCHING

It is not only the marine parks that are fabulous for living creatures. Bird-fanciers

will jump for joy (quietly!) on the following islands that contain national bird reserves: Big Galliot, Channel and Flat Cays, Big and Little Darby Islands, and Guana, Goat, Betty, Pigeon, Cistern, Leaf, Harvey and Rocks Cays.

## Tours

For an introduction to local plants and herbs, along with information on their uses, join up with **Bush Medicine Tours** (☎ 242-345-7044; prices upon booking, from around \$35). You'll learn about remedies for all sorts of ailments, from burns to menstrual cramps and even infertility.

## Festivals & Events

For information on the following festivals and other events contact the helpful staff of the Bahamas Ministry of Tourism (p195). **Family Island Regatta** During the last week of April, visiting yachts congregate for this annual regatta in Elizabeth Harbour (see the boxed text, below). The premier regatta in the Bahamian islands, it's a general excuse for the hoi polloi to hobnob with the social elite, downing copious amounts of rum and beer and cheering on the sailboats whizzing along in the harbor.

**Annual Bahamas Bonefish Bonanza** One of the Bahamas' prime fishing tourneys, held in George Town in October.

**Junkanoo** Traditionally starts at 3am on December 26 (Boxing Day). The colorful and noisy festival builds beneath the stars as islanders take to the streets for an outpouring of bonhomie and carnalite.

## FAMILY ISLAND REGATTA

The wildly festive, four-day Family Island Regatta has been held every April since 1953. The party really gets going the week before the regatta, when breweries and rum companies sponsor a host of daft and fun events as a buildup to the main event.

Around 50 Bahamian sailing vessels, all locally made and crewed, race in Elizabeth Harbour, and everyone within miles – landlubbers, yachties and far-flung Bahamians – arrives to cheer on the sloops. The boats race along with their tall sails billowing, spilling the odd drunken crew member as they go. For the islands' boatbuilders, it is a chance to see their lovingly-built vessels prove their master's craft.

Races are divided into five classes, including a junior class for youngsters. A hallmark of the races is the 'pry', a long wooden plank jutting from the side of each dinghy and sloop. The crew – often as many as six or seven people – put their weight on it to keep the boat balanced as it zips along, typically in a stiff 30-knot breeze. Knowledge of the winds, currents and boat-handling is essential to winning.

The celebrated regatta is also an excuse for a party; sound systems are tweaked up and accompanied by a colorful and raucous Junkanoo band, while stalls sell cracked conch and fried chicken. Everyone chatters while they sip their favorite brew in the sunshine. The dancing starts as dusk falls, and the night's festivities begin...

## Sleeping

Accommodation can be overpriced here. For good value your best bet is self-contained units or suites that start at around \$130 per night. Check ahead, a few places ask up to \$30 per day on top of the nightly rate for a variety of things such as cleaning.

The **Bahamas Ministry of Tourism** (www.bahamas.com) can help with details on guesthouses around the Exumas, or contact **Ocean View Realty** (☎/fax 242-336-2443; Queen's Hwy).

Reserve lodgings well in advance at regatta time, as chances for last-minute accommodations are nil.

**Bahama Houseboats** (☎ 242-336-2628; www.bahamahouseboats.com; George Town; ☎) Sleeping under the stars while moored on an uninhabited cay and surrounded by emerald seas; now that is a dream! Good little kitchens, as well as roof sundecks and comfortable furnishings make this a thoroughly enjoyable getaway-from-it-all option. Bathrooms have showers and flushing toilets, and there is also air-con and a fridge, microwave, toaster, coffee machine and barbecue. The boats come fully equipped with all linen and kitchenware. All you need to provide is food and your beverage of choice. This dream is an affordable reality, with 35ft one-bed houseboats (sleeping up to six people on convertible furniture) hiring at \$315/1895 per night/week, and 43ft two-bed houseboats for \$430/2600 per night/week. Rates drop outside of peak months.

**Two Turtles Inn** (☎ 242-336-2545, www.exumabahamas.com/twoturtles.html; George Town; r \$115; ☎ ☎) This renovated stone-and-timber lodge has 14 spacious and modern-style rooms with tiled floors, satellite TV and fresh furnishings. Some units come with small kitchenettes. A small on-site restaurant and patio-bar serves daily specials such as aromatic goat curry. Boats, scooters and dive equipment can also be hired through their offices.

**Minns Cottages** (☎/fax 242-336-2033/2645; Queen's Hwy; r \$135; ☎ ☎) Book ahead for these pristine, fully equipped and tasteful units just north of George Town. There are spacious modern rooms and facilities including an enclosed patio facing the sea (albeit from across the main road). The kitchens have coffee-makers, microwaves, ovens and fridges. The water is the only drawback, with a sulphuric smell and taste that declares its ecologically sound origins a little too brutally.

**Regatta Point** (☎ 242-336-2206; www.regattapointbahamas.com; Regatta Point; d \$148; ☎ ☎ ☎) The fabulous 360-degree sea views are well matched by spacious and classy waterfront units and apartments housed in an old plantation-style building. Boats can also be hired here (\$80 per day).

**Club Peace & Plenty** (☎ 242-336-2551; www.peaceandplenty.com; Elizabeth Harbour; r \$160; ☎ ☎ ☎) The rooms at this small hotel are modern if a little small and boxy. However, they are also cheerful and include a TV and balcony, and face either the small oval-shaped pool or Stocking Island. The staff are very friendly and helpful, and offer scuba diving and fishing by arrangement; snorkel gear and sailboards can be rented from Peace & Plenty Beach Club on Stocking Island.

## Eating & Drinking

**Jean's Dog House** (mains \$3-6; ☎ breakfast & lunch) A local institution, Jean serves great breakfast sandwiches, hotdogs and burgers from a converted school bus that parks at the town end of schoolhouse hill on weekdays.

**Sam's Place** (☎ 242-336-2579; upstairs at the Government Wharf; mains \$5-9; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) A steady stream of people go up and down these stairs all day long. This is the best takeout in town, serving breakfast dishes, burgers, chicken and salads. The hot sandwiches are a meal in themselves; the tuna and cheese is yummy and filling.

**Towne Café & Bakery** (☎ 242-336-2194; Queen's Hwy, George Town; mains \$5-9; ☎ breakfast & lunch, closed Tue & Sun) This is the place for a Bahamian breakfast of boil' fish with onions and hot peppers, tuna-fish salad, or chicken souse with grits or mildly spiced johnnycake. Daily lunch specials include a great fried snapper.

**Eddy's Edgewater Club** (☎ 242-336-2050; Queen's Hwy; mains \$8-15; ☎ lunch & dinner) On the south side of Lake Victoria, this friendly and informal restaurant and bar is known for the splendid Bahamian fare, such as steamed chicken, sautéed liver and onions, and a worthy pea soup with dumplings. Don't miss the rake 'n' scrape band, it pulls 'em in and every one works up a sweat on the dance floor. Live music is normally on Saturday and Monday, although the bar is open nightly.

**Gemellies Pizza** (☎ 242-336-3023; mains \$8-15; Queen's Hwy, George Town; ☎ dinner) For those crying for some relief from fried fish and chicken dishes, obtain a takeout pizza here!

Mind you, they also serve, yup, fried fish and chicken.

**Two Turtles Inn restaurant** (☎ 242-336-2545, www.exumabahamas.com/twoturtles.html; George Town; mains \$10-18; ☎ lunch & dinner) The air-con restaurant at Two Turtles Inn (opposite) is normally open for lunch and dinner daily; but call ahead, it does depend upon who's around. Schoolchildren get their hot lunches from here. This place is also hopping during the regatta frivolities.

**Club Peace & Plenty** (☎ 242-336-2551; www.peaceandplenty.com; Elizabeth Harbour; mains \$12-30; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Breakfasts are good value and tasty while lunch and dinner are also popular, if not as good value. The menu includes dishes such as blackened mahimahi and baked chicken. Weekends in the tourist seasons bring live music and fun at the bar.

A choice of groceries and household goods can be found at the Exuma Markets (p195) in the town center, which opens daily from 8am to 5pm. The Fish Fry area (see p201), just north of George Town has great heaps of little eateries and is worth a visit.

## Getting There & Away

**AIR**  
Exuma International Airport is based at Moss Town, 6 miles north of George Town. For international flights to the Exumas and the Bahamas, please refer to p288.

These Bahamian airlines both fly between Nassau and Exuma International Airport.

**Bahamasair** (UP; Exuma International Airport ☎ 242-345-0035, Nassau ☎ 242-377-5505; www.bahamasair.com; hub Nassau) Flies between Nassau and George Town twice daily (\$80 one-way).

**Southern Air** (Nassau ☎ 242-377-2014; www.southernaircharter.com; hub Nassau) Flies to Moss Town twice weekly from Nassau (\$70 one-way) and between the Exumas and Long Island.

Quoted rates fares are one-way.

| Route  | Price | Frequency |
|--|-------|-----------|
| Exumas International Airport – Nassau                    | \$80  | 3 daily   |
| Exumas International Airport – Deadmans Cay, Long Island | \$60  | 2 weekly  |

## BOAT

If traveling in your own boat, George Town is the official port of entry to the Exumas.

You'll need to call ahead to arrange clearance with **Customs** (☎ 242-345-0071) and **Immigration** (☎ 242-345-2569), both in the Government Administration Building on Queen's Hwy. You will also require a special sailing license for traveling around the islands.

## Ferry

**Bahamas Ferries** (☎ 242-323-2166; www.bahamasferries.com) travel every Monday and Wednesday from Nassau to George Town (adult/child \$90/50 one-way, 11 hours).

## Mail Boat

Call the **Dockmaster's Office** (☎ 242-393-1064) at Potter's Cay in Nassau to confirm schedules, and for more contact and fare details.

**Grand Master** (☎ 242-393-1064) Departs Nassau for George Town (one-way \$45/22.50 per adult/child, 12 hours) at 2pm Tuesday.

**Sea Link** (☎ 242-393-7457) Departs Nassau for George Town (one-way \$50/30 per adult/child, 10 hours) at 7pm on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday.

## Day Trips from Nassau

The following trips depart from Nassau, and are very popular:

**Powerboat Adventures** (☎ 242-393-7116; www.powerboatadventures.com; Nassau, New Providence; adult/child \$190/130) offers a thrilling ride from Nassau as a powerboat zips you to Allan's Cays for snorkeling, then on to Ship Channel Cay for a nature hike and barbecue lunch on the beach.

**Island World Adventures** (☎ 242-363-3333; www.islandworldadventures.com; Nassau, New Providence; adult/child \$175/120) offers daylong excursions on a high-powered speedboat from Paradise Island to Saddleback Cay's wonderful snorkeling and seven private beaches. Trips include lunch, an open bar, snorkeling gear and a stop at Leaf Cay.

## Getting Around

Taxis await the arrival of flights and charge \$28 to George Town. Two good car-rental agencies are also based at the airport.

## BICYCLE, MOTORCYCLE & CAR HIRE

You will need your own transport if you want to explore the island outside George Town's immediate vicinity.

**Don's Rent A Car** (☎ 242-345-0112; Exuma International Airport; ☎ 7am-5pm Mon-Sun) rents excellent air-con vehicles from \$65 per day.

**Uptown Rent-a-Car** (☎ 242-336-2822; uptownrent@hotmail.com; George Town) has cars to rent from around \$70 per day.

**Prestige Scooter Rental** (☎ 242-357-0066; Queen's Hwy, George Town) rents scooters from about \$50 per day.

Starfish (p197) has bicycles for hire (\$20/25 per half-day/day, inclusive of locks and helmets).

## BOAT

To explore around the cays and Exuma Cays Land & Sea Park, you will need a boat of some kind. Some lodgings provide boats for hire, but the rates offered by **Minns Water Sports** (☎ 242-336-3483; info@mwsboats.com; George Town) are especially good. It rents out boats from \$45/70 per half-day/day, but the rates are reduced for bookings over three days. The boats vary in size from 15ft to 22ft, and cash deposits are required.

## BUS

Buses depart from and return to George Town daily via Emerald Bay (\$3) and Rolleville (\$5). Ask at the Bahamas Ministry of Tourism for a bus schedule.

## FERRY

Ferries to Stocking Island depart the dock at **Club Peace & Plenty** (☎ 242-393-1064; round-trip \$8, free for guests) at 10:30am and 1:30pm.

## TAXI

**Luther Rolle Taxis** (☎ 242-345-5003) and **Leslie Dames** (☎ 242-357-0015) both run taxi services around the island.

## STOCKING ISLAND & ROLLE CAY

Stocking Island is a 600-acre, pencil-thin island lined with beaches, about a mile offshore. It's rimmed by talcum-powder fine beaches and makes a fabulous day trip from George Town.

The best snorkel spots are located at the cuts between Stocking Island and Elizabeth Island and between Elizabeth Island and Guana Cay.

Rolle Cay is a smidgen-size isle midway between George Town and Stocking Island.

**Mystery Cave** is a 400ft-deep blue hole on the Atlantic side and is said to be one of the few living intertidal stromatolite reefs in the world (the other major one is near Perth, Australia); a living fossil – dating back 3½

million years. Highborne Cay stromatolites are now being researched (see p203).

Peace & Plenty Beach Club (see below) will rent snorkel gear (\$15 per day) and sailboards (\$15/30 per half-day/day) to day-trippers as well as small sailboats and paddleboats (\$25 per half-day).

The environmentally friendly **Higgins' Landing** (☎ 242-336-2460; www.higginslanding.com; Stocking Island; r\$550; ☒ ☑) is the only accommodation on Stocking Island. Solar-powered and hand-somely appointed cottages have comfortable furnishings and an informal ambience. Stepped down a small outcrop overlooking the sea, each cottage has a wide balcony and fantastic views. A bar and restaurant on the grounds stocks books and games. Rates include breakfast and dinner, transfers and water sports.

A spirited and affable outdoor bar, **Chat n Chill Bar & Grill** (☎ 242-336-2800; Stocking Island; mains \$6-11; ☒ lunch & dinner) sits on the island's main beach and right at the water's edge, with customers' small boats and kayaks lined up alongside, their version of the pub 'car park.' The bar specialize in yummy mango, strawberry and banana daiquiris and really tasty grilled food. Chat n Chill's Sunday pig roast (\$15) is one of the social highlights in George Town; call for pick up from Club Peace & Plenty dock, and rejoice in the perfect beach bar!

A talented cook has been making world-famous burgers for decades at **Peace & Plenty Beach Club** (☎ 242-336-2551; Stocking Island; mains \$6-12; ☒ lunch) that both locals and traveling yachties return for again and again.

There are no roads on the island and access is by boat. Ferries to Stocking Island depart from the Club Peace & Plenty dock (☎ 242-393-1064; round-trip \$8, free for guests; ☒ 10:30am & 1:30pm) on Elizabeth Harbour.

## NORTH OF GEORGE TOWN

Queen's Hwy runs north of George Town through a string of small settlements with prim homes painted in Caribbean pastels and shaded by palms. Most are associated with plantation estates that now lie in ruins. Beautiful beaches line the shore.

A mile offshore opposite Mt Thompson sits **Three Sisters Rock**, a trio of craggy boulders rising from the sea. They're supposedly named for three sisters who each drowned

herself here for the shame of bearing a child out of wedlock.

The historic settlement of **Rolleville**, 28 miles north of George Town, sits atop a hill at the northern end of Great Exuma. It's a poor village with many meager shacks and former slave homes, most in tumbledown condition, but it's brightened in late spring and early summer by African Flame Trees. The hamlet is the site of the Rolleville Regatta, held the first Monday in August. Several locals still make boats.

## Sleeping

**Palms at Three Sisters** (☎ 242-358-4040, 800-688-4752; fax 242-358-4043; Mt Thompson; r\$100; ☒ ☒ ☒) This motel-style accommodations is a tad weary, but looks over a deserted, palm-lined beach in Mt Thompson. It has 12 large, air-con beachfront rooms and two cottages, all modestly but nicely furnished, with patios or balconies and satellite TV.

**Mount Pleasant Suites Hotel** (☎ 242-336-2690; fax 242-336-2964; Hooper's Bay; s/d \$85/100; ☒ ☒ ☒) These pristine and comfortably furnished units are excellent value, but lie 3 miles out of George Town, and there are no adjacent facilities. However, the units' balconies or patios overlook that glorious sea, and it is a 5-minute walk to the beach. A fully equipped kitchen, and satellite TV make this a popular holiday option. Book ahead by fax or writing to: PO Box EX-29019, George Town, Exumas.

**Peace & Plenty Beach Inn** (☎ 242-336-2250; www.peaceandplenty.com; George Town; r\$170; ☒ ☒ ☒ ☒) The rooms here are decidedly upmarket from those at its sibling, Club Peace & Plenty. The fresh and airy decor includes Italian tile floors, comfortable furniture and a private balcony in each room. An on-site bar hangs dreamily over the water, while its adjacent popular restaurant serves Bahamian and continental dishes (mains \$18 to \$35). Some water sports available for guests include scuba diving, snorkeling and Sunfish sailing. It's 1.5 miles from George Town.

**Palm Bay Beach Club** (☎ 242-336-2787; www.palmbaybeachclub.com; Queen's Hwy; r\$170; ☒ ☒ ☒ ☒) This intimate place sits on a small beach and offers some fun at the weekends.

**Four Seasons Resort Great Exuma at Emerald Bay** (☎ 242-336-6989; www.emeraldbayresort.com; Queen's Hwy, Roker's Point; r \$400-550; ☒ ☒ ☒ ☒) This exclusive resort is a little iso-

lated, but centers on a championship golf course designed by Greg Norman, and a dedicated kids' facility and pool will give mom and dad some long-desired peace. The resort complex features vacation town-house rentals and beachfront villas, all in plantation-style architecture, plus gourmet restaurants, a health and fitness club, and a full-service marina. A great beach, two oceanside pools and complimentary snorkeling, sailing, kayaking and sailboarding should keep everyone happy.

## Eating & Drinking

There are a few bars up this way that serve food.

**Iva Bowe's Central Highway Inn Restaurant & Bar** (☎ 242-345-7014; Queen's Hwy, Ramsey; mains \$8-25; ☒ lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) Iva and her sons also run the adjacent gas station, but Iva is rightly more famous for her Bahamian seafood and shrimp dishes. Breakfast may also be available, depending on who is around.

**Kermit's Hilltop Tavern** (☎ 242-345-6006; Queen's Hwy, Rolleville; mains \$8-25; ☒ lunch & dinner) This lively and popular bar has been going since the 1950s and is beloved of locals seeking good, authentic Bahamian dishes, carried mutton and fresh vegetables. Reservations are required for dinner. A seat at one of the rooftop tables with a marvelous view makes it well worth the drive. The tavern has open-air dancing and live music on weekends.

The **Fish Fry** area, down from Peace & Plenty Beach Inn, has a plethora of great little outdoor bars and takeouts housed in multicolored wooden huts that open at sunset and weekends until late. **Rennie's** (☎ 5336 2300; ☒ breakfast, lunch & dinner) makes wonderful banana, potato and corn bread, while **Porgy's Place** has a wide wooden deck perfect for sipping your sundowner beer. **Tino's** pulsates to the gentle rhythm of reggae and is a popular hangout of the local lads, while the **Big Z Sports Bar** has a lively mixed crowd and turns the reggae up a notch on a Friday night.

You can buy goods at **McKenzie's** grocery store in Barreterre.

Check in at Palm Bay Beach Club (see left) for some fun and music at the weekends.

## Getting There & Around

There's a gas station opposite Iva Bowe's Central Hwy Inn (above) near Ramsey.

**Ettienne & Cephas** (around \$50 for shorter trips, round-trip \$140; 21hrs) mail boat departs Nassau on Tuesday for Staniel Cay, Farmer's Cay, Black Point, Little Farmer's Cay and Barreterre.

**Kermit Rolle** (☎ 242-345-6006) of Rolleville offers taxi tours.

Check with the **Bahamas Ministry of Tourism** (☎ 242-336-2430, www.bahamas.com; Queen's Hwy, George Town) for private minibuses.

## SOUTH OF GEORGE TOWN

Follow the scenic views along Queen's Hwy until you reach **Rolle Town** (population 280). Despite its ramshackle appearance, the village, which produces fruit and vegetable crops (including onions, mangoes and bananas), is worth a stop to buy some fresh fruit as well as to see the fabulous view from its hillside setting.

Many of the decrepit sun-bleached pastel buildings and clapboard shacks date back over a century and have withstood storms and hurricanes. Goats graze freely and chickens roam with their broods in neat little fluffy lines alongside the road.

Try not to miss visiting a very evocative piece of local history at the Rolle Town Tombs. Here lie a few solitary 18th-century tombstones, one of which is shaped like a double bed with headboard and footboard and dated 1792. The plaque notes that the 26-year-old wife of a Scottish overseer, Captain Alexander McKay, slumbers there with her infant child. The poor man died the following year, said to be from a broken heart.

The Peace & Plenty Bonefish Lodge (below) is a well-known boy's club and carries a high reputation as one of the best fishing lodges in the Bahamas. It charges from \$400 to \$500 per day with boat, guide and tackle for two. The hotel has an intensive seven-day 'bonefish school' package each April and November, with 16 hours of instruction over four days. It's billed as 'the ultimate fly-fishing school challenge.'

## Sleeping & Eating

**Peace & Plenty Bonefish Lodge** (☎ 242-345-5555; www.ppbonefishlodge.net; Queen's Hwy; d \$252; mains \$20-35; P ☒ ☒) Around 3 miles south of Rolle Town, this small attractive lodge overlooks the sea and a small beach. It is comfortable, friendly and beloved of fishing fans. A great bar is garnished with a rogue's gallery of

photos from successful fishing trips, while the restaurant will serve your catch, as well as seafood and steaks for dinner.

**Cheaters Restaurant & Bar** (☎ 242-336-2535; Queen's Hwy, South George Town; mains \$8-25; ☒ lunch & dinner Wed-Sat) Local fare served at this simple eatery draws a friendly Bahamian crowd. The air-con room is shady and refreshing, and the simple decor is a little sparse, but clean and certainly adequate for the yummy sides of peas and rice, coleslaw and macaroni (which alone makes it worth the trip). The bar livens up at night, but be warned: it is a fair drive from most lodgings.

**Traveller's Rest Restaurant & Bar** (Queen's Hwy, Rolle Town) This place is also popular. It has a pool table, satellite TV, and music and dancing.

## LITTLE EXUMA

Little Exuma lies only around 10 miles from the Exuma International Airport, and is separated from the main isle by a 200yd bight; a bridge fills the gap.

A number of ongoing developments for private beachside dwellings have yet to encroach completely over some lovely beaches. A nice day can be spent here relaxing on the white sands and paddling around in the perfectly clear water.

Pretty Molly Beach is one of the loveliest beaches on the island, despite the sorrowful origin of its name – a slave killed herself one day by simply walking into the waves off this beach. The stark beauty of these shores is a fitting monument to her spirit, which is said to still walk alongside these waters.

## FERRY TO WILLIAMS TOWN

Ferry is a small hillside settlement that lies immediately across the bridge from Great Exuma. A highlight is **St Christopher's Anglican Church**, a whitewashed chapel festooned with a bougainvillea bower. Supposedly it's the smallest church in the Bahamas.

Forbes Hill, 12 miles southeast of George Town, has a 100yd-wide scimitar of pure white sand with turquoise shallows cusped by tiny headlands. Idyllic! Two miles south of Forbes Hill a side road leads east to **Tropic of Cancer Beach**, another true stunner that runs south, unblemished, for several miles.

The southernmost settlement is **Williams Town** (population 300), populated predom-

inantly by Kelsalls, descended from or named for the foremost Loyalist family that founded the settlement. The Kelsalls established a cotton plantation and sold salt drawn from nearby salt ponds. The brush-entangled ruins of the plantation home – **Hermitage Estate** – still stand amid pinkish brine ponds.

You can see locals dressing their fresh catch of fish and conch at the rickety wharf behind and just south of St Mary Magdalene's Church. North of town, on the bluff to the side of the road, you'll pass a tall **Doric pillar** transporting you (metaphorically) to ancient Greece. This column and a rusty cannon stand high above the rocky shore. The hulk of a ship lies dramatically on a white-sand beach fronting the village, within calling distance of the column meant to guide mariners.

**Mom's Bakery** in Williams Town is the place to stock up on rum cake, banana bread, coconut tarts and bread, while **Bullard's Supplies** is fine for basic groceries.

## EXUMA CAYS

The cays begin at the barren Sail Rocks, 40 miles southeast of New Providence. Though they may seem alike, each has its own quirky character. Many are privately owned.

The cays offer a variety of extraordinary pleasures and experiences. A highlight of any visit is a snorkel or dive trip into Staniel Cay's Thunderball Grotto.

These waters are acclaimed as the 'finest cruising grounds in the Western Hemisphere.' *The Exuma Guide: A Cruising Guide to the Exuma Cays* by Stephen Pavlidis is a must-read for sailors.

Along with day trips to several of the cays from Nassau (see p80), or kayak and snorkel trips from George Town (see p197), you can always hire your own boat. Ask the **Bahamas Ministry of Tourism** (☎ 242-336-2430; www.bahamas.com; Queen's Hwy, George Town) or see recommendations under Boat, p200.

For details of the mail boat that visits some of the cays in this area from Nassau, see p193.

## SHIP CHANNEL CAY & ALLAN'S CAYS

Long, narrow Ship Channel Cay is the northernmost cay after Sail Rocks, while

### BOWE CAY IS FOR HIRE!

Any Robinson Crusoes out there fancy some time-out? This 220-acre cay is 10 miles around, has a lagoon ringed by mangroves, as well as walking trails and miles of white sandy beaches. Company consists of some friendly goats and sun-baking iguanas. Contact owners via www.bowecay.com.

Allan's Cays, immediately south, comprise about a dozen cays popular with boaters and fisherfolk. One of the prettiest is Leaf Cay, with a splendid beach and an endemic subspecies of iguana, the yellowish 'Bahamian dragon.' It can be visited by day trip from Nassau.

Yachters will find an exceptionally good anchorage at Leaf Cay.

## HIGHBORNE CAY

This private cay, 2 miles south of Leaf Cay, is favored by yachies, who are permitted ashore if they are using the marina's facilities. The beach on the eastern side of the cay is one of the most beautiful in the Bahamas.

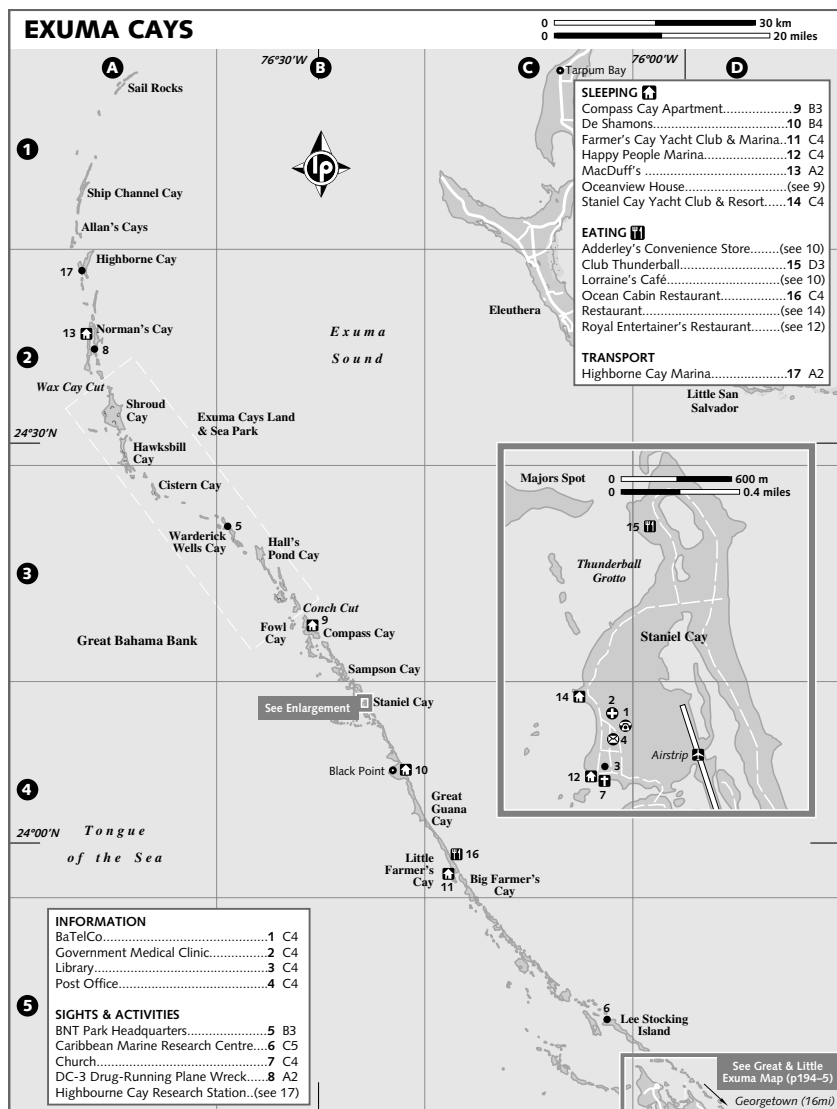
The **Highborne Cay Research Station** has recently been set up to research a year in the life of Bahamian stromatolites (living fossils) to see how they adapt to changing weather environments. For more information on stromatolites and Highborne Cay contact www.stromatolites.info.

The **Highborne Cay Marina** (☎ 242-355-1008; fax 242-355-1003, VHF channel 16; Nassau, New Providence) has a grocery store, pay phone and berths for yachts up to 130ft.

## NORMAN'S CAY

One look at the stunning beaches and you'll understand why 4-mile-long Norman's Cay was once an idyllic hideaway for the wintering wealthy, and then a less salubrious crowd (see the boxed text, p205). The bone-fishing here is said to be superb.

**MacDuff's** (☎ 242-357-8846; www.macduffs.com; r \$230; ☒ ☒) has four one-bedroom villas that will sleep 16 people in all. They are pleasantly decorated and come with an equipped kitchen. Water sports are offered, and food can be stocked by arrangement. The bar here is a popular lunch spot for yachties.



## EXUMA CAYS LAND & SEA PARK

The Bahamas has several jewels in its gorgeous turquoise crown, and this is one of them. An unspoiled underwater idyll teems with all sorts of fish and marine life that scarcely notice your presence as they dart through a labyrinth of vast caverns, down outer walls, through blue holes and along

miles of reef that include pillar corals, where groupers and turtles swan lazily about.

The first marine 'replenishment nursery' in the world, the park consists of 112,640 acres or 175 sq miles of protected islands and surrounding seas, and was created in 1958. All fishing and collecting is banned. No marine or plant life, whether dead or alive, may

be taken from here, including shells. Fish spawned in the park have now been proven to be breeding further afield and replenishing overfished areas, to everyone's delight.

The park runs 22 miles south from Wax Cay Cut (immediately south of Norman's Cay) to Conch Cut and Fowl Cay. It is 8 miles wide, extending 3½ miles east and west on each side of the islands. It has outstanding anchorages and even more outstanding dive sites.

On land, you may glimpse the Bahamian mockingbird, Bahamian bananaquit, or the rare red-legged thrush. Seabirds abound, including terns, waders, and the elegant, long-tailed tropicbird, which nests in high bluffs. Land animals include curly-tailed and blue-tailed lizards, plump iguanas and endangered hutias that look like oversized guinea pigs.

Uninhabited **Hawksbill Cay**, ringed by stunning beaches, has marked nature trails that lead to the ruins of an old Loyalist plantation. **Little Hawksbill Cay** is a major nesting site for ospreys. **Warderick Wells Cay**, which has 4 miles of nature trails, is said to be haunted by the tormented spirits from a slave ship. **Shroud Cay** has 'Driftwood Village,' an ever-expanding piece of flotsam folk art. And the **Rocky Dundas**, two rocks in Conch Cut, has a cave full of stalactites and stalagmites.

**Moriah Harbour Cay** sits between Great and Little Exuma, and is comprised of beaches, sand dunes, mangrove creeks and sea-grass beds. This is another park for hikers, and for lovers of feathered creatures. Resident bird species include nighthawks, ospreys, oystercatchers and terns.

With no commercial development, the main cays in the park's vicinity are perfect for camping. There are no facilities, however, and you will need to take all food and water with you. The **Bahamas National Trust** (BNT; ☎ 242-359-1821; www.thebahamasnationaltrust.org; Warderick Wells Cay; ☎ 9am-noon & 3-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat) has posted information leaflets on several cays; park access is free.

Apart from day tours to the park from Nassau or kayaking tours from George Town, your best bet is to hire a boat and camping gear from George Town and enjoy exploring this wonderful region in your own time. Otherwise access to the park is from Staniel Cay, where you might be able to hitch a ride with the park warden on his daily patrol. He monitors VHF channel 16 from the park headquarters at Warderick Wells Cay.

Boaters must anchor at Hog Cay at the south end of Warderick Wells Cay. Moorings cost from \$15 daily, depending on your vessel's length. Call 'Exuma Park' on VHF 16 at least 24 hours in advance to check availability.

## COMPASS & SAMPSON CAYS

These popular yachter's havens, south of the Exuma Cays Land & Sea Park, each boast a small harbor with a beach, beach-lined coves, and trails.

Two properties are up for rent, via an American-based website. **Compass Cay Apartment** (☎ US 540-721-9915; www.a1vacations.com; per week \$1000; ☎ ☎) has two bedrooms, while Oceanview House is a three-bedroom house (\$1750 per week). Both properties have a deck and complete kitchen.

## CARLOS LEHDER RIVAS

In the 1970s most of Norman's Cay was purchased by Carlos Lehder Rivas, a founding member of the Medellín Cartel, the infamous and violent Colombian drug-smugglers. Lehder was well known for idolizing Hitler and labeled his drug packages with swastikas.

When he arrived in the Bahamas, Lehder brought in armed thugs, drove out most of the residents, and turned the cay into a landing strip for illegal cargoes. Cocaine was smuggled from Colombia, through the Bahamas and into the USA. An NBC documentary apparently blew the lid in 1983 and the authorities stepped in.

Lehder was prosecuted for drug-trafficking in 1987-88. He was convicted and sentenced to life plus 135 years in prison. He later struck a deal to testify in the drug-trafficking trial of former Panamanian leader Manuel Noriega. Lehder's whereabouts are a USA government secret, but it is widely believed that he is now under the States' witness protection scheme.

A DC-3 drug-running plane still lies rusting in Norman Cay's shallow water, having missed the runway during the period of Lehder's residence in the Bahamas.

## STANIEL CAY

pop 76

This tiny cay is the most sophisticated and visited settlement in the Exuma Cays and the main base from which to visit the Exuma Cays Land & Sea Park. The small, attractive village has all the necessities – grocery stores, post office, church and library (1776) – and the cay is lined with some lovely tranquil beaches on which to relax. The bonefishing is also supposed to be grand.

There is a BaTelCo station and several phonecard booths, plus **St Luke's Clinic** (☎ 242-355-2010), staffed by a nurse.

The **New Year's Day Regatta**, always fun, is when locally built dinghies compete for prizes, and the town beach celebrates the return of many local people and yachties for the festivities. The **Annual Staniel Cay Bonefish Tournament** in August is another big event that brings home the locals and makes big fish quiver in dismay.

### Thunderball Grotto

This crystalline grotto, just northwest of the cay, is another Bahamian jewel. The exquisite cavern – lit by shafts of light pouring in from holes in the ceiling that sear through the water highlighting a myriad of darting fish – was named for the James Bond movie *Thunderball*, scenes from which were filmed here. So, too, were scenes from *Splash* and another 007 movie, *Never Say Never Again*. Although you swim in at low tide, the current is pretty strong – inexperienced swimmers may prefer to snorkel and swim elsewhere. Divers also love this spot.

### Sleeping & Eating

The cay has two waterfront hotels that play to the boating crowd. For fully furnished holiday rentals contact the American-based agency [www.alvacations.com](http://www.alvacations.com).

**Staniel Cay Yacht Club & Resort** (☎ 242-355-2024; [www.stanielcay.com](http://www.stanielcay.com); r per day/week \$148/945, mains \$12-25; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner; ☒ ☺ ☑ ☒) This is truly a place for lovers of perfect seafront views. Spacious verandas overlook the sea and create a feeling of total relaxation. There are cool and comfortable cottages (with kitchenettes) or suites (with kitchens) and great weekly rates. Use one of the resort's free Boston Whalers or Sunfish sailboats, take along the free scuba gear and go and visit gorgeous Major Cay. The restaurant here attracts the

yachting hoi polloi, and serves American- and Bahamian-style cuisine; book ahead. You can also order a boxed lunch for excursions (no pork sausages thank you).

**Happy People Marina** (☎ 242-355-2008; fax 242-355-2025; r \$90-200; mains \$10-28; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner; ☺) Has eight air-con rooms with ceiling fans and a decor of rainbow pastels. Upstairs rooms boast marvelous views and have private bathrooms; those downstairs share bathrooms. Singer Jimmy Buffett drops in on occasion to play the Marina's Royal Entertainer's Restaurant, named as one of his favorite bars. Reservations are needed for dinner when lobster is added to the Bahamian menu. There is also a pool table and music at weekends.

**Club Thunderball** (☎ 242-355-2012; mains \$10-20; ☺ lunch & dinner, closed Mon) This lively place is atop the bluff overlooking the Thunderball Grotto. It serves Bahamian food and has beach barbecues on Friday night (book a rib!), plus occasional pig roasts and a Super Bowl party in January. The club also features a pool table, satellite TV and dancing on weekends.

Several stores here sell groceries.

## GREAT GUANA CAY

The largest of the Exuma Cays, 12-mile-long Great Guana Cay, also has the cays' largest settlement, **Black Point** (population 253), and has a reputation for not being the friendliest place. Facilities include an airstrip, post office, BaTelCo station and **Government Medical Clinic** (☎ 242-355-0007). An Emancipation Day Regatta is held here each August.

**De Shamons** (☎ 242-355-3009; Black Point; r \$90) has four rooms with fridge over their restaurant. The restaurant specializes in freshly caught fish served in traditional Bahamian style. Ask about meals with bookings.

### HAVE YOU SEEN THE LITTLE PIGGIES?

Only a short boat trip away from Staniel Cay, tiny Major Cay is a great place for a day of snorkeling and sunning. Don't forget a picnic for yourself and the friendly porcine population to enjoy! Yes, that's right, Major Cay has some famous swimming pigs that like nothing better than a splash, pat and a peanut-butter sandwich.

## RAGGED ISLAND RANGE

Few visitors ever reach this crescent of a dozen or so isles and a score of small cays that lie about 25 miles south of Little Exuma. The chain begins with the Jumento Cays, arcs west and south for about 100 miles and ends with the largest isle, Ragged Island. During the 19th century the chains' flats were used for salt-crystal farming. Today they are virtually uninhabited.

Most of the cays here are windswept and barren, increasingly so to the south. The birdlife is varied and prolific. A lighthouse still stands on Flamingo Cay. Ragged Island has the only settlement, **Duncan Town** (population 70), where residents earn their living from fishing.

You will need to charter or hire your own boat to reach these islands. Ask the **Bahamas Ministry of Tourism** (☎ 242-336-2430; [www.bahamas.com](http://www.bahamas.com); Queen's Hwy, George Town) or see recommendations, p200.

**Lorraine's Café** (☎ 242-355-2201; ☺ breakfast) is recommended for inexpensive Bahamian fare and freshly baked bread and cookies. Call the day before to order breakfast.

**Adderley's Convenience Store** (☎ 242-358-8056; ☺ 7:30am-6pm) sells groceries.

## LITTLE FARMER'S CAY

This cay is simply a stone's throw away from the southwest tip of Great Guana. It

consists of a fairly small fishing village and bay. It hosts the annual **Farmer's Cay Festival & Regatta** in the first weekend of February as well as the spirited **Full Moon Beer Festival** in July.

**Farmer's Cay Yacht Club & Marina** (☎ /fax 242-355-4017; r \$90; ☺) has three smallish rooms with TV. A fairly basic **restaurant** (mains \$8-18; ☺ lunch & dinner) and bar also overlook the sea. Notice is needed for dinner.

**Ocean Cabin Restaurant** (☎ /fax 242-355-4006; mains \$5-20; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner), a small, friendly bar in the hamlet, serves up meals and beers, and has regular barbecues during the winter season. The owners also run two cosy rental cottages on Dabba Hill (prices start at \$130 per night).

**Etienne & Cephas** (around \$50 for shorter trips, round-trip \$140; 21hrs) mail boat departs Nassau on Tuesday for Staniel Cay, Farmer's Cay, Black Point, Little Farmer's Cay and Barreterre.

## LEE STOCKING ISLAND

About 5 miles north of Great Exuma, Lee Stocking has an airstrip and the **Caribbean Marine Research Centre** (☎ 242-345-6039; [www.perryinstitute.org](http://www.perryinstitute.org)) This 100-acre scientific research facility is funded by grants from the US National Oceanic & Atmospheric Administration with the aim of researching underwater ecosystems and learning how to ensure the vitality of the reefs and aquatic life. Visitors are welcomed with short tours.

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