



The Cays to the BAHAMAS' HEART

Pass through or stay awhile in the northern Exumas.

By Matt A. Claiborne



*The swimming pigs of
Staniel Cay, Exuma*



Above: Moorings at Warderick Wells. Below: The three islands surrounding Allen Cay are home to protected rock iguanas.

The Exumas are a bucket list destination for many boaters. They're a hop, skip, and a jump away from Florida: A hop across the Gulf Stream, a skip across the Great Bahama Bank, and a jump south of Nassau. Then, you've arrived in the northern Exumas, a wonderland of aquamarine palettes and dazzling white sandbars. You know you've made it when you can clearly see orange starfish on the seafloor a dozen feet below your keel.

Every island chain likes to bill itself as the capital of island hopping, but the Exuma Cays typify the term perfectly. The islands are small but varied, pretty pearls strung southeastward toward Great Exuma. Many are undeveloped, some are private estates, and others host exclusive resorts. On one side, deep, blue water has world-class fishing; on the other, shallow and protected water offers smooth passages on most days. One of the joys of Exuma cruising is picking which mood you're in: Exuma Sound blue or Bahama Banks green. Here's your guide to the northern Exumas, islands some people pass by but are worth savoring.

Set Course for the Northern Exumas

Most folks headed for the Exumas depart South Florida on a rhumb line toward Bimini. It's a natural first stop and a good place to check in with Customs and Immigration. But if you have good weather, it's possible to clear in later at Morgan's Bluff on Andros or Nassau on New Providence Island. You must check in before getting to the Exumas, where there's no official port of entry. (Chub Cay in the Berry Islands was a popular spot for checking in but has recently become private and no longer welcomes non-members.)

Most boats leave New Providence and make their first Exumas landfall some 30 miles later near Allen or Highbourne Cays. This course takes you on the well-charted routes around the Yellow and White Banks. The banks are shallow areas dotted with coral heads, so skippers must use visual navigation to avoid them. These routes are well-traveled, and boaters are safe if they stick

to them. The paths headed northeast toward Eleuthera are trickier.

Of course, the banks aren't the only way to approach the Exumas. Some boats arrive after a day-hop from Eleuthera. Anytime you're running between Exuma Sound and the banks, use caution transiting the cuts. Many are deep and navigable, but tidal currents and opposing wind or swell can turn any of them into a dangerous "rage." Avoiding times of wind against current ensures safe, smooth passage between the islands. Exuma tide predictions are based on the Nassau station, but some apps now give estimates for Ship Channel and Warderick Wells. Tides are typically three feet or less, and slack current usually corresponds with high or low water.

Island Hopping: The Exuma Pastime

The first island of note in the Exumas is Ship Channel Cay. Tour boats out of Nassau bring guests here to swim with the pigs, feed the stingrays, or see the sharks. Most boaters head for scenic Allen Cay instead, where three islands surround a lovely anchorage. Just watch your swing, lest you wake up hard aground! The islands are



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The wreckage of a WWII-era plane on Norman's Cay

uninhabited unless you count the resident population of protected rock iguanas.

It's at Allen Cay where many cruisers get their first taste of anchoring in the Exumas. The narrow anchorage has strong reversing currents. Holding is good if you stick to the sandy areas. It's a great place to try your skills setting a Bahamian mooring: Two anchors, both set off the bow, allow the boat to swing with the wind or current but still keep you aligned in a narrow creek. This technique also keeps both anchors set securely through each tide change.

Next is Highbourne Cay, which has a small store, marina, restaurant, and villas. The island is a gem, whether you're stopping for fuel and supplies or simply want to enjoy a fine dinner and stroll around the beautiful island. Southward, a handful of rocky islets and sandbars lie around Lobster, Long, and Saddle Cays. Many islands in the Exumas are private, so check your chart and avoid landing dinghies in front of houses.

You won't want to miss Norman's Cay, once the island lair of drug kingpin Carlos Lehder. It now hosts a small community of homes, an airstrip, rental villas, and a brand-new marina. The beach seems to go on forever, and there are countless snorkeling and diving options. Right in the island's lagoon is the wreckage of a C-46, a World War II-era cargo plane—a favorite snorkel spot in the area. Across the channel, Wax Cay hosts an exclusive resort.

After Wax Cay Cut, you enter another special place: the Exuma Cays Land and Sea Park. A stop at Shroud Cay is unbeatable, with its winding, turtle-filled mangrove creeks and stunning beaches. The park continues south, with Hawksbill Cay followed by the park headquarters at Warderick Wells.


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Throw Out the Hook in Exuma

Marinas in Highbourne and Norman's Cays welcome boaters arriving in the Exumas. Both facilities are on beautiful islands with dining options, sandy beaches, and some land exploring. Villa rentals offer you a chance to get off the boat for a spell.

Many cruisers opt to start anchoring when they reach the Exumas; there are no marinas after Norman's until you reach Compass or Staniel Cays, about 30 miles southeast. Anchoring allows you to tuck into sandy coves where you'll feel like you've made some fine choices in your life. The prevailing easterlies mean that sandy patches along the islands' west shores make good anchoring. Just be careful because winter northers can bring squalls and clocking winds, with lots of fetch over the shallow banks. Finding a spot with adequate protection can be challenging. Currents race through the little cuts between islands, making that two-anchor Bahamian mooring necessary in some tight areas.

Well-maintained moorings are available inside the Land and Sea Park around Shroud, Hawksbill, Warderick Wells, and Cambridge Cays. There is also a




Mangrove creeks wind through Shroud Cay.

modest fee for anchoring anywhere in the park. Mooring and anchoring fees vary depending on vessel length and are payable via the park's website.

Cruising the northern Exumas means a boating adventure across some of the prettiest water on earth. Some boaters fly through the area, setting their courses for their favorite hangouts: Staniel Cay, Black Point, or George Town. But for those who choose to slow down and enjoy the scenery, these islands offer plenty of fun and adventure along the way. 🌊

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