

SWFL parent & child

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STOCKING STUFFERS

Kids will love a sock filled with these

WHAT KIDS SHOULD KNOW ABOUT

911

And how to teach them

WRAP YOUR FAMILY IN HOLIDAY CHEER

2,000 POUNDS OF GINGERBREAD

Even you will want to take a bite

- Meet kids who give back
- Get ideas for cool wrappings
- Make gifts in the kitchen
- Find fun holiday events



The swimming pigs of The Exumas paddle out into the water to greet boaters. Below, a boy snorkels at the Grand Isle Resort on Great Exuma. The Exumas area of the Bahamas is famous for its clear blue water.



PHOTO COURTESY OF GRAND ISLE RESORT

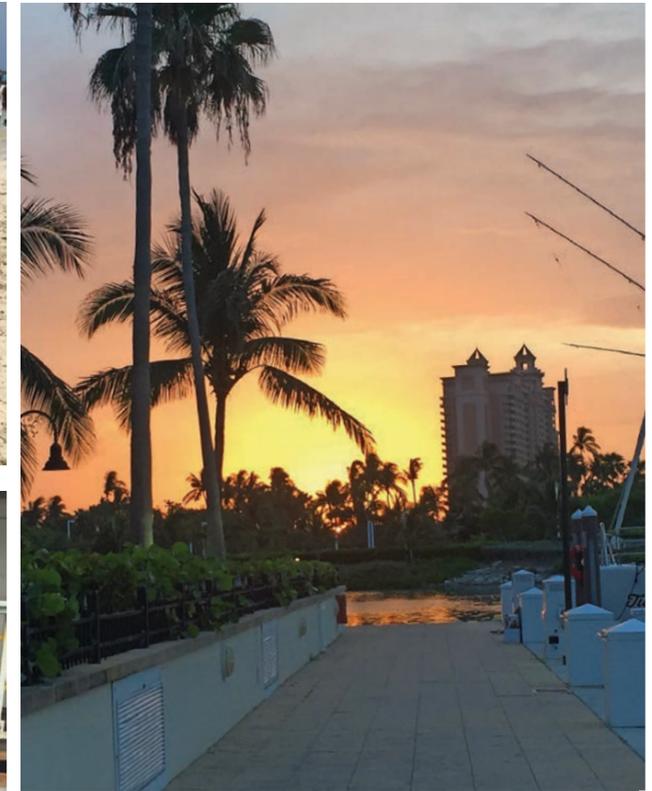
THE EXUMAS

The way the Bahamas was meant to be

These winter blues are welcome hues indeed: the ultra-sapphire blue waters of our neighboring Bahama Islands, particularly The Exumas. Many people think of the Bahamas as Nassau; however, there is much more to explore and see in this country that lies just 50 miles east of Florida. In fact, there are more than 700 islands in this chain covering more than 100,000 square miles of ocean, according to the Bahamas Ministry of Tourism. »»

STORY BY JENNIFER THOMAS





Top far left: One of the swimming pigs moves in for its close-up in this photo courtesy of Grand Isle Resort. The remaining photos are from the Garland family's trip to the Bahamas. The Fort Myers family traveled on their 39-foot Yellowfin, first to Bimini, then Nassau and finally Staniel Cay.

These islands boast the Tropic of Cancer Beach, named for the meridian line that crosses it; stromatolites, the oldest known macro-fossils on earth, at Stocking Island; and Moriah Harbour Cay National Park, a vital part of the ecosystem between Great and Little Exuma with sand dunes, beaches, mangroves and sea grass beds.

The Exumas are particularly beautiful, an archipelago of 365 cays and islands about 35 miles southeast of Nassau. Once called Yumey and Suma, today they're divided into three major areas: Great Exuma, Little Exuma and The Exuma Cays.

"Great Exuma and its cays are the most exotic of the Bahamas Out Islands, like a collection of precious gems, the islands are set in a sea of Technicolor blues bordered by ivory beaches," describes Sandra Grisham Clothier, general manager of Grand Isle Resort & Spa on Great Exuma. "Gentle winds help maintain a balmy

and warm tropical climate year-round, making Exuma an ideal vacation spot for any season. Summer temperatures range between 80 and 90 degrees, and winters in Exuma are mild with temperatures rarely dropping below 78 degrees. Great Exuma has always been the best kept secret of savvy tropical vacationers."

Grand Isle Resort is nestled on the crescent-shaped private beach of Emerald Bay, with 78 oceanfront villas. When staying at the resort, guests can partake in paddleboarding, golf, a treatment at the SeaStar Spa and island fare while dining poolside. "The open-air poolside Palapa Grill serves traditional Bahamian Caribbean jerk-style seafood, Bahamian barbecue and traditional simple American favorites," Sandra says. "Light fare and a full-service bar offers a variety of beverages, wine and signature tropical cocktails, such as our Exuma Blue, that are available poolside or on the beautiful beach."

Sandra has some must-do recommendations: "For those who are inclined to do more than relax on the beach, Great Exuma offers a variety of active pursuits: Fishing is a popular sport, or rent a boat and cruise to Elizabeth Harbor. Exploring deeper, dive blue holes or snorkel off the coast of Stocking Island to discover a wide variety of Technicolor sea life. Last but not least, take the Swimming with Pigs tour — a world famous bucket list item that is unforgettable."

"Domesticated" pigs live on Major's Spot Cay (it's unknown how they got there), and whenever a boat approaches, they swim out to it and expect to be fed.

Fort Myers residents Mandy Garland and Jana Bailey both traveled to Exuma this past summer with their families and experienced firsthand the magic of this destination, and of course, swimming with the pigs.

"We have traveled throughout most

of the Caribbean, Bahamas, Abaco and Eleuthera Islands. Staniel Cay in the Exuma Islands had been on my bucket list for a few years. We were always fascinated by stories and videos of the famous swimming pigs," Jana says. "To really enjoy the Exumas, you really need to take your boat or rent one there. It is a popular area for people traveling on mega yachts with small dinghies to take them up to the beaches and to visit the island with the swimming pigs."

There are several islands to experience, each with their own charm and attractions.

"Compass Cay is famous for nurse sharks that you can swim with," Jana says. "Farmer's Cay is famous for their sea turtles and sting rays that you can also feed and swim with, and Thunderball Grotto is a must see."

Thunderball Grotto, site of two James Bond movies, has a 40-foot jump through a cave.

For Mandy and her family, they ventured to the Bahamas from Fort Lauderdale via their own vessel and traveled first to Bimini, then to Nassau before heading to Staniel Cay.

"This was our first long boat trip on our 39-foot Yellowfin. We trailered our boat from Fort Myers to Fort Lauderdale," she says. "I would caution anyone who does boating in the Exumas to have up-to-date charts as there are many shallow areas and coral rock that can easily be missed and can sneak up on you in a hurry."

While in the Bahamas, Mandy and her family snorkeled, fished, swam with the pigs and even jumped off Thunderball Grotto. "However, my favorite activity was swimming with the turtles at Farmer's Cay," she adds.

Jana and her family opted to forgo the traditional resort experience during their family vacation in the Exumas this past summer.

"We chose to charter a private

yacht. It was an incredible experience. We felt like rock stars getting to stay aboard Temptation," Jana says. "Temptation can be chartered through Staniel Cay Yacht Club and comes with a captain and chef who cater to your every wish and more. Captain Joel was born and raised there in the Exumas, so his knowledge and expertise of the islands allowed us to get to experience all the little 'secret spots' that most people might miss."

The main attraction for the Exumas is the water.

"The waters around the Exuma Islands are like none other," Jana says. "There really is just no way to describe the beauty of the water. Way beyond any of the other islands we have ever traveled to."

Mandy, too, recalls the beauty of the Bahamas. "It seemed the further you went into the Exumas, the more clear the water got — as if it could actually get any clearer." **p&t**