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BUDGET-BEATING BLISS

You don't need a fortune to enjoy the Bahamas — just follow our tantalising guide

by Judith Baker

THE pink sands and the glamorous resorts of the Bahamas (officially known as the Commonwealth of the Bahamas) attract Hollywood celebrities and all kinds of wealthy Americans, but don't let that put you off.

The Queen is still head of state and there are 16 main islands from which to choose. What's more, you don't have to spend a fortune. So here is our guide to the Bahamas on a budget...

STARRY-EYED

THE high-rise bling of the Atlantis development on Paradise Island with its casinos and luxury resorts is a favourite for a certain kind of moneyed crowd. Michael Jackson rented a suite in the Royal Towers here for \$25,000 a night.

But you can stay down the road for considerably less at the low-key Sunrise Beach Club, which shares Cabbage Beach with Atlantis.

DON'T MISS: Afternoon tea at Government House, Nassau, where the Duke and Duchess of Windsor once resided. It's part of the Bahamian People-to-People programme and is free.

DETAILS: Sunrise Beach Club has villas sleeping four people from £172 a night, with kitchen, private terrace, pool and garden (sunrisebeachclub.com).

LAIID-BACK BIMINI

YOU arrive on Bimini by fast ferry from Miami. But once there, the pace of life slows.

The Bimini Big Game Club, an island institution since the Thirties, still attracts fishermen and divers. Ansil Saunders, a boat-builder in his Eighties, will tell you about the time he took Martin Luther King out to fish.

DON'T MISS: Dolphin House, which pays homage to the local dolphins and uses materials that are washed up on Bimini.

DETAILS: Big Game Club rates from £139 per night for a room for two. The hotel has an on-site scuba centre and divers might encounter

hammerhead sharks and other marine life (biggameclubbimini.com).

PIGS MIGHT SWIM

THE Abacos, an archipelago to the north-east of Nassau, was settled by British colonists who remained loyal to the crown after the American War of Independence.

As a result, settlements such as Hope Town and New Plymouth look like New England towns. Green Turtle Cay is ideal for sailing, diving and spotting rays and even swimming pigs.

DON'T MISS: Hearing local bands, including the nationally famous Gully Roosters.

DETAILS: Bluff House is a 12-acre property with its own ferry dock and lively beach bar. A deluxe lower level suite is from £147 per night (bluffhouse.com).

KICK BACK

MANY of the cays in the island chain of The Exumas are private; one is the home of actor Johnny Depp.

At the other end of the scale, recently renovated Peace & Plenty is a colonial-style 32-room inn in George Town on Elizabeth Harbour. It has a fisherman's club-type atmosphere, and is popular with locals as well as tourists.

DON'T MISS: Guests have access to beautiful Stocking Island, just a short water-taxi ride away. At Chat 'N' Chill bar the motto is: 'No Shoes. Kick Back. Just Relax!' and visitors come

from all over for the fresh food on its grill.

DETAILS: Waterfront room £180 per night for two (peaceandplenty.com).

DIVE IN

LONG Island is famous for Dean's Blue Hole. At 663 ft below ground, it is the world's second deepest blue hole, where free-diving records are broken.

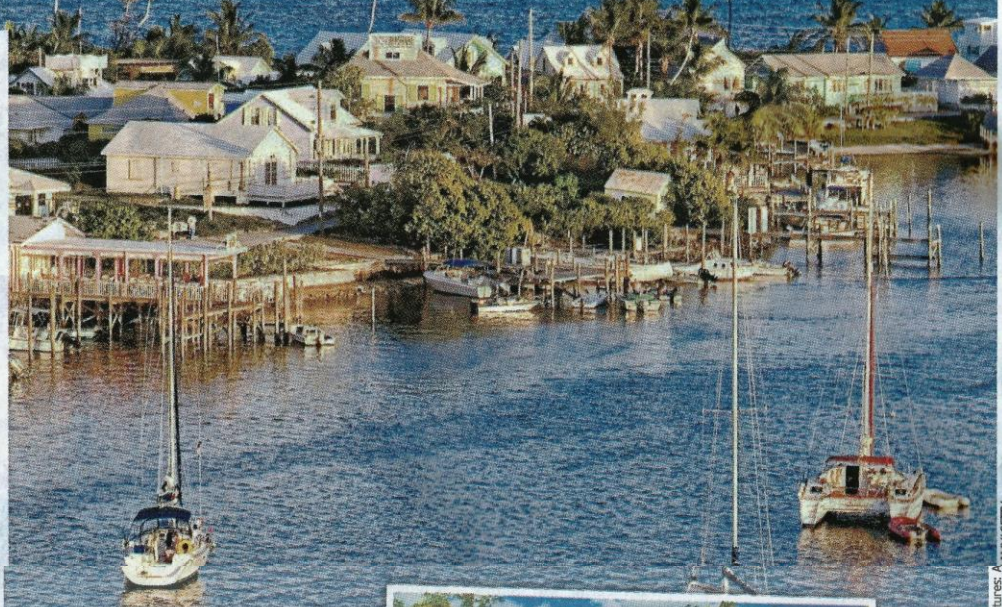
Gems at Paradise is a secluded resort on a private beach overlooking the harbour of Lochabar.

DON'T MISS: Eco-tours to Sandy Cay, where you feed the iguanas, explore starfish beds or spot dolphins. Columbus Harbour, a mile long shallow inner bay, is a mating ground for rays.

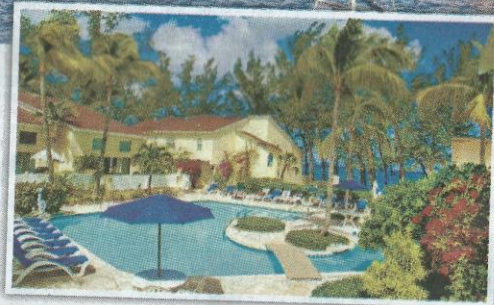
DETAILS: From £650 for two people for seven nights for a balcony room overlooking the beach (gemsatparadise.com).

BEACH SECLUSION

ENGLISH adventurers in search of religious freedom settled on Eleuthera 300



PICTURES: JAMIE GETTY



Seascape: Hope Town in Abacos. Inset, Sunrise Beach Club near Atlantis offers great value

years ago and gave the island its name, which means 'freedom' in Greek. It has ideal conditions for surfing on the Atlantic side and snorkelling on the other.

Take a water taxi to Harbour Island to visit Sip Sip, the local expression for 'gossip'; a great lunch stop.

DON'T MISS: In Palmetto Point, there is Governor's Harbour, the capital of Eleuthera. It has a festive fish fry every Friday night.

DETAILS: Unique Village offers both hotel rooms and self-catering apartments from £85 per night for a room for two with ocean views (uniquevillage.com).

TRAVEL FACTS

BRITISH Airways (ba.com) flies to Nassau from London Heathrow four times a week from £544 return. FRS ferry from Miami to Bimini (frs-caribbean.com) and trips between the islands (bahamasferries.com). Mail boats also offer cheap island travel (mailboatbahamas.com). More info at bahamas.com.



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