

An aerial photograph of the Bahamas archipelago, showing a long chain of islands stretching from the top center towards the bottom right. The water is a vibrant turquoise, with varying depths and textures indicating shallow reefs and sandy bottoms. The islands are small and densely vegetated with green trees. The sky is a clear, deep blue.

The Bahamas

Read that headline again. The “s” is emphasized for a reason. Because these could be the most traveled and least understood islands in the world. Take Nassau, for example. It isn’t even an island; it’s a *city* on New Providence Island. And for this story it’s a launching pad to islands most travelers have never really known. Islands known as the Bahamas.

Story by **Jad Davenport**

JUAN CARLOS MUÑOZ ROBREDO/AGE FOTOSTOCK

Just 35 miles southeast of Nassau is the start of the 130-mile-long Exumas chain.

Exumas

IT'S THE BAHAMAS TRIP I HAD IN MIND ALL ALONG. Body surfing Cable Beach. Playing with Lady Luck in the casinos on Paradise Island. Tipping back Pusser's rum punches with the cruise-ship crowd. I'd come to believe that Nassau, a city only the size of a township in Kansas, is the Bahamas.

But then one afternoon by the pool I idly flip through the unread section of my guidebook. I knew there were 700 islands beyond Nassau and its island home of New Providence — little sand spits and atolls that are thought to be unreachable, leaving visitors to sit and read about them. Call it the pull of Nassau's gravity. One page in the book proclaims that the Exumas has the world's most beautiful beach.

I also see this: Flights leave Nassau daily.

The next morning I check out of my hotel and board a southbound plane to find this beach.

It becomes clear during my flight that I'll need help. The Exumas are 360 islands covering an area 130 miles long, so before I land on Great Exuma, the largest island in the Exumas chain, I've flown over hundreds of sandy islets and palm-tufted cays. All beautiful.

When we do land, I stop for a cold Coke at Kermit's Airport Lounge, and meet its namesake. He's bringing in a bag of sweet Exuma onions from his garden, and he smiles when I tell him I'm on a hunt for the best beach in the Exumas.

"They're all beautiful," he says.

"Yeah, but what's the ultimate A+ beach?" I ask.

Kermit wipes sweat from his cheek. He pauses for a moment and seems to study the gentle sway of the casuarina trees. "I'll give you the best beach in all the Bahamas. But today it will be a C beach."

"C like average?"

He wrinkles his eyebrows. "No, child. C like the shape," and he creates the letter with his rough hand.

The word "Bahamas" means "shallow seas," and the definition is a perfect fit here. "You can walk out to the horizon and you'll be in waist-deep water," says Kermit. "The best beach changes hour to hour, depending on the wind and tides. Today, go to the Tropic of Cancer beach. Sit in the sea like we do and the tide will wash your worries out to sea."

Just as Kermit said, it's a straight 30-minute drive to an unmarked road 2 miles south of the hill. I haven't been this alone in a week. Coral sand pops under my tires as I pull into an empty parking lot.



The world's most beautiful beach is somewhere in the Exumas, as are the best conch fritters. Both subjects are debated among the local people.

Just beyond a low screen of casuarinas the sky and sea open up before me in a dazzling sweep of white sand and water.

Back in Nassau this beach would be hemmed in by megaresorts and sun worshippers. But apart from a solitary frigatebird cruising the thermals, I'm completely alone. It's a precious sort of privacy that two days ago I didn't associate with the Bahamas. I slowly wade into the 82-degree water that's so blue and so still the horizon in front of me is only a suggestion.

But my book says there's something big out there. **NEXT: THE BAHAMAS HAS A MOUNTAIN TO CLIMB.**

The Bahamas Out Islands



ONLY HERE

The question of how many beaches are in the Exumas is literally impossible to answer — they come and go with tides. One of the few bridges in the Bahamas is single-lane span that connects Great Exuma to Little Exuma. By the way, you can bypass Nassau and fly directly to Great Exuma from Atlanta, Miami, Fort Lauderdale or Toronto.

THE NEXT ISLAND OUT

A mile off the Great Exuma shore by boat is the strip of sand called Stocking Island. Accessed by boat, it has a few small resorts but reports only 10 full-time residents. Fly another 48 miles southeast from Nassau and you're on Long Island, home to the deepest blue hole in the world (Dean's) and sea cliffs that bring some travelers to claim the island is the most picturesque in the entire Bahamas group.

CEDRIC ANGELES/INTERSECTION PHOTOS



Sandbar off Musha Cay, 100 miles south of Nassau.

Cat Island

THE NEXT ISLAND OUT FROM GREAT EXUMA IS ONLY 40 miles away. Word is it's one of the most mysterious places in all of the Bahamas. It would be an easy flight from here, except that a direct route isn't possible. I have to fly back to the hub of Nassau (it's that gravity thing again) to catch the biweekly flight to Cat Island, which becomes a 130-mile ride. The yo-yo travel deters most travelers from exploring, but I have to see this mountain.

Long and thin, with a population smaller than that of a Vermont liberal-arts college (about 1,600), Cat is a carousel of small fishing villages and farming communities. It's all tucked between the sea and a range of rolling green hills, one of them allegedly the tallest peak in the nation of the Bahamas. My guidebook gives me a name — Mount Alvernia — but only a rough location. Eyeballing the landscape gives me no clue, as there aren't any rock faces or jagged points reaching for the clouds.

With no road signs pointing the way, I cruise into The Bight, the island's main village, and ask a group of school kids for directions. The eldest girl in the group steps forward and speaks up. I can tell right away she's been educated about her homeland.

"Mount Alvernia? It's our country's highest mountain," she says, "208 feet tall."

I do the math in my head. I think the Atlantis Resort back on Nassau might be taller than that.

The girl tells me the story of Father Jerome, a



Pamela Poitier (below), daughter of actor Sidney Poitier, lives on the island of castle ruins, hermits and the highest perspective in all of the Bahamas.

Catholic monk who built a rambling hermitage on top of the mountain. He designed it as a scale model of St. Francis' famous Tuscan retreat in Al Verna. "The hill used to be called Como Hill, but after he built his home there, everyone called it Mount Alvernia."

She points me in the right direction, and a few minutes later I'm at the end of a dusty one-track road, just half a mile from town. There's no telling how long it's been since anyone else has been on the trail. It's rocky and overgrown with dry bushes that claw at my legs. Lizards scamper out of the way.

I never even take a water break because it takes me all of three minutes to climb to the top of Mount Alvernia, a personal mountain-climbing record for this Colorado boy. Up here I walk around Father Jerome's hermitage, which stands gray and weathered against the sky, and find his crypt, which is tucked into the side of the hill.

This view, by Bahamian standards, is grand, a sweeping 360 degrees of the long thin boot of Cat Island kicking out into Exuma Sound. The Bahamas, a geologist once told me, are really the relics of an ancient mountain range. All around this island are submarine canyons as deep as 10,000 feet. So I'm really standing on top of a 10,206-foot mountain.

Mount Alvernia is pretty rugged for the Bahamas. But I've got a page folded over in my guidebook that marks a less-traversed and more rugged wilderness.

NEXT: THE BAHAMAS' LAST TRUE FRONTIER



JAD DAVENPORT

Mount Alvernia Hermitage at the top of Como Hill.



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There are barely 10 people per square mile on Cat Island, and they are among the most resourceful folks anywhere. Visitors will make friends forever by leaving behind saws, wood blocks and fishing line. The islanders use those objects (plus tin washtubs and goatskin) to play a type of music that originated here: rake and scrape.

THE NEXT ISLAND OUT
Farther east of Cat Island (about an hour flight from Nassau) is San Salvador Island, allegedly the first landmass that Columbus saw on his maiden voyage to the New World (there's even an underwater monument to mark where the *Pinta* may have dropped anchor). Columbus and crew were fortunate to skirt around the shallows that have taken down dozens of ships since then. On the island's interior, a body of water called Great Lake stretches about 10 miles, most of San Salvador's length.



Rental cottage at Kamalame Cay off Andros

JAD DAVENPORT

THE BAHAMAS



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It is the largest island in the Bahamas and, get this, the fifth largest in the entire Caribbean. But it's known more for wetlands and blue holes (178 of the underwater caves are found on the island) than for development or tourism. Offshore, a drop of nearly 6,000 feet and an enormous barrier reef separate Andros from Nassau.

THE NEXT ISLANDS OUT

About 20 miles off the northern tip of Andros is the start of the Berry Islands. Most of the 30-some cays are vacant. But overall the Berry Islands probably draw as many people as Andros does or more, because included in the group are private islands for Norwegian (Great Stirrup Cay) and Royal Caribbean (Coco Cay) cruise lines. It's also said that the Berry Islands have more millionaires per square inch than any place in the world.

Andros

TO REACH THIS WILD SPOT IN THE CHAIN, OF COURSE, I have to fly back to Nassau again. And then I brace for it: an 11-minute flight from the cosmopolitan chaos to the tangled swamp of Andros, an island larger than all the other Bahamas combined. That it's so big, so accessible and yet so wild is one of the great oddities of these islands (it's also home base to the world's third-longest reef).

The puzzle pieces come together when Peter Douglas, a naturalist and local guide, picks me up at the airport and drives me into Central Andros National Park. He says some of the endless forest almost came down a number of years ago.

"There were these investors who had their own ideas on what to do with Andros," he says as we pass through small clapboard villages. "They wanted to mine and quarry the limestone to make flooring for houses in Florida. They also wanted to cut down the Andros pines to make nice pieces of furniture. All this pressure was on. At the same time our minister of the fisheries was about to license Taiwanese to do longline fishing. It would have changed everything."

But the locals banded together and became home-grown conservationists. They created the national park. The development plan, in a sense, worked in reverse. Today the island remains much as it always has, with barely 10,000 islanders and more than 2,300 square miles of wilderness.

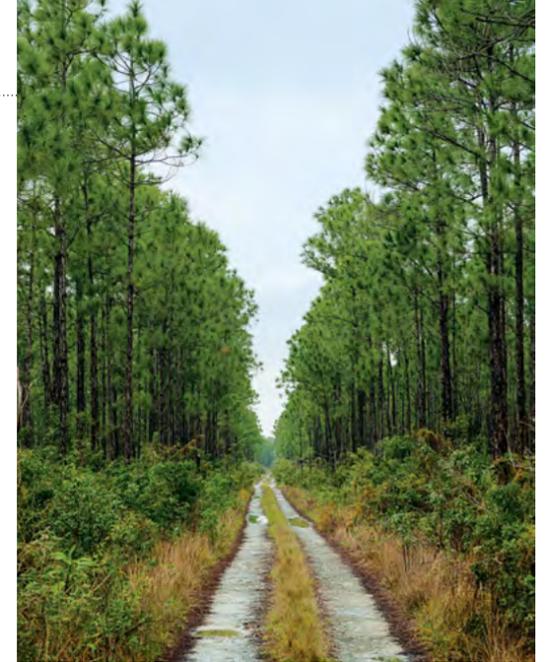
"Is there a traffic light anywhere?" I ask as we rattle down the arrow-straight Queen's Highway.

"They put one in up north," Peter says. "But it just confused people and caused too many accidents. They had to take it out."

The smell of low tide mingles with ash when Peter parks at a trail head near the end of an abandoned logging road. "Could be old-timers trying to smoke land crabs out of their burrows," Peter says as we set out hiking down a faint trail. "Or it could be forest fires."

I try to wrap my head around an island so wild that forest fires could burn and nobody would know it, probably not until the smoke wafts over to Nassau.

The sun is high but we're lost in shade as we hike through the palmettos and pines. Peter points out bushes used for medicine, reminding me of other out islands I've read about during my flights back and forth to Nassau. Islands like the Abacos, where fathers and sons build wooden boats without tape



After multiple flights back and forth to Nassau, the author landed on the most remote Bahamian discovery, practically next door to where he started.

measures. Or Long Island, home to the deepest known blue hole on Earth. There's Conception, which requires a floatplane to what has been called "the end of the world." And that's the wonderful part of the Bahamas. They go on and on, and they only end when and where you want them to.

For now I'm happy to be on this island, this page, free of the gravity that a few days ago held me in that city on New Providence Island. I follow closely behind Peter as he winds his way deeper into a forest. [EASIEST ISLAND GETAWAYS: islands.com](http://islands.com)