





PIGS IN PARADISE

The **BAHAMAS** is renowned for its natural beauty, but the unexpected inhabitants of one remote island manage to upstage their sunny surroundings.

BY HILLARY RICHARD / PHOTOGRAPHY BY ROBERTO MUÑOZ
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I SAILED AROUND A ROCKY CORNER OF BIG MAJOR CAY

and watched with anticipation. The sun-bleached rocks blended in with the white-sand beach. An overgrowth of deep-green palm trees and shrubbery was the only thing breaking up the beautiful blues of the Caribbean Sea and sky. Where were they?

I looked for any kind of movement on this windless day — a sway of palm trees, a kick of sand. The motor of our little Boston Whaler was the only thing interrupting the midmorning silence. I started to worry that they wouldn't know we were here. Were they asleep? Hadn't they heard us coming?

Suddenly, my husband pointed toward something on the island, about 30 feet away. It started with a fierce rustle in the shrubbery. Three giant bodies sprang from the brush and darted across the pristine crescent

beach with purpose. They trotted dutifully into the sea, submerging themselves up to their furry, floppy ears. Flashes of pink and tan broke up the bright-blue ocean. In a matter of seconds, I was only inches from three long snouts poking their way out of the water, snorting and breathing deeply.

The pigs had arrived. To underscore that point, a black-and-tan spotted sow stared straight into my eyes and let out a blood-curdling, ear-piercing squeal that almost knocked me overboard. My husband, who grew up near a farm, laughed when I asked him if that was normal. As we idled in a boat somewhere in the Caribbean Sea with pigs treading water around us, I realized how relative “normal” had become.

These are the swimming pigs of the

Exumas, a chain of remote islands in the Bahamas. Big Major is one of 365 cays in the Out Islands. Currently, about 40 residents call the island home — all of them pigs, save for the occasional rooster or lizard.

We were the only boat in the cove that day, and we had drawn all of the pigs' attention. They doggy-paddled around the boat, searching the perimeter for floating scraps. A spotted pig opened her large mouth and displayed her wild, decaying teeth. Another pig soon joined her off the starboard side, and they jostled each other under the water while their mouths gaped open, waiting for food.

We'd come prepared. A cook at the nearby Staniel Cay Yacht Club had assembled a cooler full of bread and vegetable breakfast leftovers for the pigs. With a laminated map



of the islands, a packed lunch, a container of scraps and a waterproof camera, we took to the seas in search of adventure. Only a few twists and turns from Thunderball Grotto and Staniel Cay, we had found it.

The pigs swim and pose for food, but this is only a formality. They expect — nay, demand — to be fed, and they aren't used to disappointment. When I took too long to open the cooler, the spotted sow hooked her front legs over the edge of our small boat and tried to push herself up. The boat lurched downward and rocked from the weight. I found the bread just in the nick of time — the second spotted pig, inspired by the first, had also gotten her leg over the same side of the boat.

I tossed bread crusts and leftover lettuce into their eager, giant mouths. I was close enough to see the pigs' sun-bleached eyelashes and speckled snouts. Their light ears were bright pink with sunburn and bug bites. These sweet creatures were domesticated livestock turned wild turned tame again. They backed away from the boat while they oinked and chewed, swimming in a circle before coming around for more. As the harsh sun beat down, we anchored the boat and jumped in. We were swimming

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with pigs in paradise, and it was surreal.

We had arrived on Staniel Cay from Great Exuma the day before by way of a tour boat that takes guests sightseeing. Andrew Clarke, the captain of our Four C's Adventures tour boat, grew up in the Exumas. He regaled us with stories of the islands — the celebrities, the film locations, the recent developments in tourism and, of course, the famous pigs.

When the large speedboat stopped in the deeper water near Big Major Cay, Clarke encouraged the more adventurous tourists to jump in for a closer look. Seeing pigs swim is a rare sight, but swimming freely with them in the ocean is a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

Last March, Clarke and his brother Stephen sailed to Big Major Cay to discover a troubling sight. The sows on the island had just given birth. The piglets rarely come onto the beach, but this time they had followed their mothers straight into the water once the boat arrived. The piglets couldn't swim.

"I told everybody, 'Get off the boat and grab a pig!'" Clarke recalled. The Clarkes and several lucky tourists jumped into the

chest-deep water and carried the piglets to shore, where they oinked and wriggled until their mothers came back.

The next day, when my husband and I jumped into the ocean, it was just us and three giant pigs. The tour boats generally arrive in the afternoon after picking up scraps from lunch at Staniel Cay Yacht Club. The tide was low that morning, so many of the private boats in the area were farther out in the sea. The crystal-clear water and bright sun gave us a perfect view of the cloven hooves sinking into sand in the shallows and gliding effortlessly through deeper waters.

The pigs swim with the natural grace of the fish and rays that inhabit these azure waters. They couldn't be farther from their farm-dwelling brethren, but they have adapted in a way that makes their surroundings seem completely normal. Their plump, balloon-like torsos bob just beneath the waves as their muscular legs propel and direct them. Their pink snouts, which never fully submerge, tilt out of the sea at perfect 45-degree angles, wiggling and angling at the scent of food. Exceptionally large on land, they're weightless in the water and can paddle out to boats with impressive speed. Water beads up



THIS LITTLE PIGGY: The island's four-legged inhabitants aren't shy about begging for food. Using their snouts as snorkels, they swim to and from the shore.

and rolls off of their thick, bristly hair. Their long, thick eyelashes whisk away drops of water that splash into their faces, and their curly tails lie almost flat on their backs, giving the comical appearance of a propeller.

As I swam, I watched their skinny legs cut through the water like flippers. They followed me for a while, eyeing the cooler on the boat every so often. The occasional stingray and colorful fish came by to investigate, but the pigs ignored them. After all, this happens all day, every day.

The swimming pigs are tolerant but not overly friendly. They enjoy the occasional back scratch, but their interest in humans lasts only as long as the food does. Once they were satisfied that I had given them everything, two of the three pigs paddled off to the beach. No longer weightless, they clumsily trudged around in the sand. The young pink boar heaved himself onto the beach to dry off. The spotted sow shook the water off like a dog and disappeared into the island's overgrowth, undoubtedly retiring to her shady, well-hidden den.

The pigs' origin is a mystery to most. Some say a shipping boat crashed offshore, forcing the pigs to swim to safety. Some say the government put them on the island. Most

say they just appeared. The Exumas have remained a remote, unexplored jewel of the Bahamas. Residents are so delighted to finally have a budding tourism industry that they don't dare question how or why an island of pigs became a tourist attraction, as long as it remains one. Divine intervention is as good a reason as any.

Extensive digging led me to Wayde Nixon, a Staniel Cay resident. He told me that he and his friend Don Rolle brought four "lady pigs" and one "man pig" from Nassau to Big Major Cay in 1992. The decline in agriculture in the Bahamas and the Gulf War concerned Nixon, whose father was a pig farmer in Nassau in the 1970s. Because the Bahamas received most of its food and livestock from the U.S., Nixon worried about the detrimental effects of a possible embargo. He and Rolle set up pens on the uninhabited island and would come feed the pigs mush each time a shipment arrived from Nassau.

Sailboats and motor yachts often anchored on the northwest side of Big Major Cay for the entire winter. Once the pigs had grown, they broke out of their pens and started roaming the island. The sounds and smells of people living on their boats enticed them to explore the northwest beach.

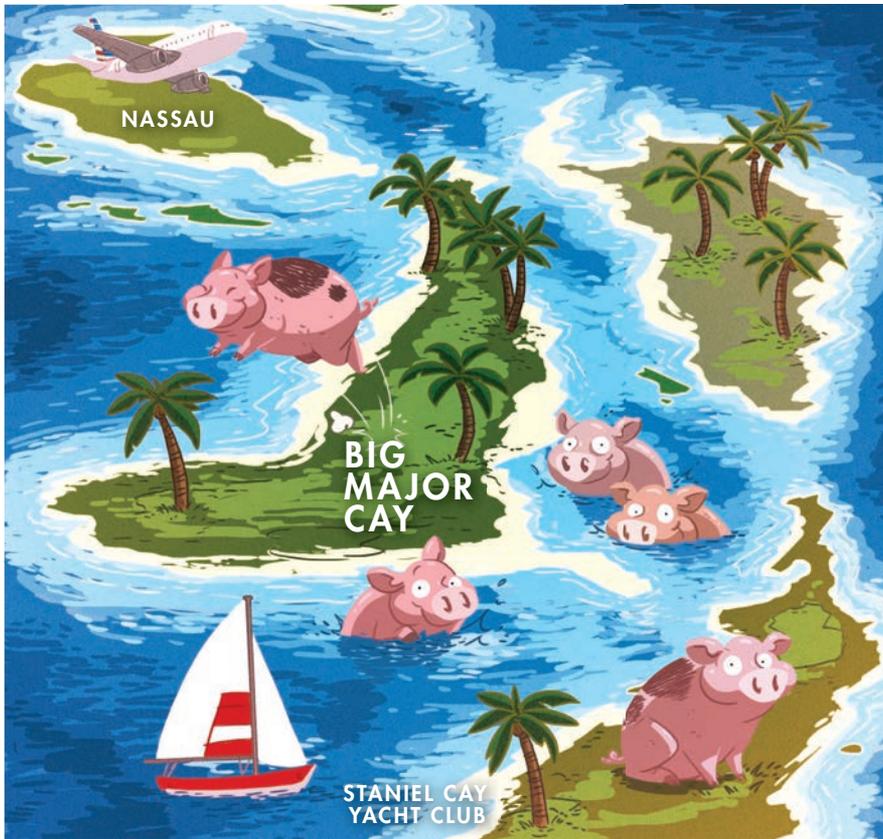


Over time, they figured out when Nixon would arrive with their food. Eventually, the pigs grew impatient and started swimming out to him. Other boats started to feed the swimming pigs. A strange routine developed on this inconspicuous island.

Word traveled fast. The Bahamas has international appeal, and soon people were coming from all over the world to see the swimming pigs.

"It was amazing, you know? We didn't know it was going to be a tourist attraction so much," Nixon says. "I'm happy that people can come and enjoy the swimming pigs. They don't have anywhere in the world like that, you know?"

If there was anyplace that could entice hoofed creatures to go for a swim, it would be the Exumas. The sun is strong, the atmosphere is relaxed and the scenery is unrivaled. Sparkling "Exuma blues" blanket



The swimming pigs often take center stage in conversation. They're **CELEBRITIES** in their own way.

both sides of the horizon, running the gamut from jade to bright turquoise. There are 365 cays — one for each day of the year, as they say — all pristine and many uninhabited.

The islands have a cult following within the entertainment industry. It all started with *Thunderball*, the 1965 James Bond movie that was filmed at Thunderball Grotto next to Big Major Cay. The islands have also provided a backdrop for the Pirates of the Caribbean franchise, the *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issue, numerous television shows and too many advertisements to count. Celebrities including David Copperfield, Johnny Depp and Nicolas Cage, as well as husband and wife Tim McGraw and Faith Hill, own entire cays. Every resident of the Exumas has at least one impressive celebrity story. Even so, the swimming pigs often take center stage in conversation. They're celebrities in their own way.

Despite the glitz and glamour they attract, these islands embody the benefits of the Bahamas in a virtually untouched atmosphere. The people are genuine, kind and welcoming. Golf carts outnumber cars on any island in the Exumas, and fish outnumber

tourists. It is, quite simply, paradise.

This tranquility extends to the wildlife as well. The sea creatures are uninhabited and abundant. You can feed almost anything somewhere in the Exumas, from the stingrays near Stocking Island to the sharks near Compass Cay. The pigs command a special kind of attention, however. Maybe it's the mystery of their arrival, or maybe it's the sheer spectacle of farm animals living a life most people can only dream of deep in the Bahamas.

We packed up our Boston Whaler that day and said goodbye to the remaining pig, who immediately disappeared into the dense, green island to avoid the midday sun. In a matter of minutes, all was as quiet and as unassuming as when we had arrived an hour earlier. A couple in a kayak paddled by and asked us if we had found anything worthwhile on this quiet island. If it weren't for the trails of hoofprints leading to and from the ocean, they never would have believed our answer. ❧

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A SWINE TIME

Everything you need to know before visiting the swimming pigs of the Exumas

THE PLAYERS

At the start, Big Major Cay's pig population consisted of four sows and one boar. Their names were Emily, Liza, Gussie, Spot and Big Boy. The pigs are in their seventh generation now, and these names have been handed down to the dominant five — the ones who will swim out to boats. While many more pigs roam this uninhabited island, it's rare for more than three or four females and a male to come out to boats. The current Big Boy, a pink boar, has been relegated to the beach. The sows have new piglets to take care of, and the dominant boars see him as a threat.

WHAT THE PIGS EAT AND DRINK

When they're not being fed scraps, the pigs dig around for roots and shoots from some of the island's native plants such as pigeon berries, as well as trees like silvertop, sea grape and buttonwood. Their favorite food is the wild cabbage that grows around Big Major Cay. The pigs get their water from a brackish pond in the middle of the island and from rainwater collections. They will drink bottled water from visitors when the mood strikes them.

Nixon discourages giving them other kinds of drinks. "We have people try to give them beer, and we tell them, 'Don't do that. Give them water if you want.' Mind you, they'll drink the beer — but I don't think it's good for them."

Pigs aren't known for being selective about their food, but visitors who bring their own scraps should stick to feeding them fruits, vegetables and breads. As is often the case with humans, just because the pigs will eat something doesn't mean it's healthy.

Staniel Cay Yacht Club is open to the public for lunch. (Dinner is at a set time and by reservation only.) The kitchen will provide takeout scraps for the pigs upon request. Ask at the bar.

HOW TO FEED THEM

The pigs assume everything given to them is food. For this reason, it's best to toss pieces of food near them. If it floats away, they will swim around to get it. Never try to feed the pigs by hand — they don't differentiate between fingers and food.

GETTING TO BIG MAJOR CAY

The Exumas have a relaxed island vibe that makes it seem like anything or nothing is possible, depending on the day. Exumas information is scarce on the Internet, but several tour companies or individual tour guides will bring you anywhere you want to go. Ask your hotel concierge or try one of these tour companies:

**Island Routes: Bahamas-Exumas
007 Thunderball Luxury Tour**
(877) 768-8370
www.islandroutes.com

Four C's Adventures
(954) 793-4329 (U.S.) or
(242) 355-5077 (Bahamas)
www.exumawatertours.com

WHERE TO STAY

Great Exuma has an airport and the most accommodations. Guests can book anything from a stand-alone guest house to a private villa to a luxury, all-inclusive resort. It is entirely possible to explore the cays on a tour from Great Exuma, but for those with their own boats or a desire to venture off the main island, Staniel Cay is a good base.

Sandals Emerald Bay
(888) 726-3257
www.sandals.com/main/emerald/em-home.cfm

Staniel Cay Yacht Club
(954) 467-6658 (U.S.) or
(242) 355-2024 (Bahamas)
www.stanielcay.com

Grand Isle Resort & Spa
(866) 380-5213
www.grandisleresort.com