



TAKE THE *slow* BOAT

The Bahamas' mailboats provide an affordable way for travellers to explore the archipelago's Out Islands, as well as being the country's economic lifeblood. They don't always stick to a timetable, but these boats offer the chance to rub shoulders with A-listers and follow in the footsteps of Christopher Columbus

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHS: Mark Stratton



Captain's log? Or diary of a castaway? I'm not sure which yet. First entry: It's early morning and I cast an anxious eye out to sea, scanning for the *Sherice M* mailboat. My plan is to island-hop around the Bahamas using its network of mailboats, but I've been warned they don't always stick to schedules. If the *Sherice M* doesn't turn up, I'll be marooned on the Bimini islands. I'm exaggerating the castaway bit because Florida is actually only three hours from Bimini by boat. Robinson Crusoe could doggy-paddle that. Bimini is also handily served by Resort World Bimini's new casino ship, which runs regular services from Miami to the company's upscale island resort. And anyway, there are worse places in the world to be marooned than on a beach-fringed coral atoll eating conch salad and watching the sun go down.

On the morning of the mailboat's 'scheduled' arrival I walk into town for breakfast. DJ Hype, Bimini's maestro of the decks, pulls up in his car and asks if I'd like a lift. He drives me to his favourite bakery, A Taste of Heaven. One customer inside suggests I try a two-dollar plate of tuna grits. Another disagrees. "He ain't going to want our shit; he's going to want his eggs, bacon, and toast," he chirps.

The tuna-grits are delicious. I sit on a sea wall eating them and watch a royal-blue speck on an even bluer horizon morph into the *Sherice M*. She's one of 15 Bahamian government-subsidised mailboats that deliver weekly mail and cargo to the 'Out Islands' — those furthest from Nassau. Mailboats are the economic lifeblood of the Bahamas' 700 islands and cays, servicing isolated communities too small to receive airfreight. Passenger tickets are cheap and comfort is minimal but, with few other ways to island-hop through the archipelago other than rented yachts, the mailboats' offered me a freewheeling way to seek an authentic Bahamian experience in an affordable fashion.

On Bimini wharf, the *Sherice M* disgorges her cargo of essentials for island living using her onboard crane: fresh vegetables, tinned foods, cartons of beer, several refrigerators to put them in, plus a Portaloo somebody is probably desperate for. "Tickets are \$65 to Nassau, be here 4pm sharp," says the ship's purser.

To Nassau

We leave at 5.30pm after a minor kerfuffle over some missing hot dogs, allowing me 14 hours to relax, chat to fellow passengers, and watch Florida's distant artificial illumination being superseded by an eruption of stars. Captain

Sean Munroe invites me to the bridge. He explains most mailboat services are family-run affairs. "The mailboats are as much about family tradition and providing a service to local island communities as economics," he says.

At sunrise, New Providence Island, home to Nassau, appears on the horizon; yet its faraway profile seems oddly mountainous. "That ain't no mountain, man," says a crewman. "That's Atlantis." I haven't drifted into mythology — Atlantis turns out to be a skyscraper-tall theme park resort that towers over Nassau's Potter's Cay docks just as the original Colossus did over Rhodes.

We chug past Atlantis into Nassau, a compact waterfront city full of chunky British Georgian architecture. Its waterfront wharf is overshadowed by several behemoth cruise-liners spilling passengers ashore to buy duty-free and get cussed at by a guy dressed as a pirate outside a themed museum. Potter's Cay proves an earthier experience. Cargo ebbs and flows, sailors drink beer at seven in the morning, fishermen untangle nets, and the cheapest lobster I've ever eaten barbecue enticingly on grills. All the mailboats depart from here for an archipelago of adventurous opportunities.

Initially, I fancy the Bahamas' southernmost outpost, Inagua, despite warnings the island's mosquitos organise themselves into death-squads. "The *Lady D* mailboat goes there," explains Craig Curtis, assistant dockmaster. "She leaves Tuesdays, although sometimes Wednesdays or Thursdays, and occasionally weekends." This is my first discovery. Forget schedules and look for mailboats loading-up ready to depart. Most leave Mondays and Tuesdays.

Celebrity cays

Paradise beckons. Loaded with cargo, the *Grandmaster* mailboat leaves for her weekly Tuesday voyage to George Town. This 1980s-built small ship traverses the Exumas' pearly string of 365 reef-fringed coral cays — many owned by A-listers and the super-rich, who've created their own fantasy islands with ostentatious villas and helipads. The Exumas are a quintessentially Bahamian montage of cerulean-blue skies, warm turquoise seas and creamy white sands.

The one drawback is that most of this mailboat voyage is at night. Yet I savour the atmospheric 12-hour journey south, sleeping on deck cooled by delicious sea breezes and watching the shadowy outlines of Exumas' cays slip past like motionless whales glistening under the moonlight.

Grandmaster's owner, Lennie Brozozog, says the mailboats ran monthly when he first went to sea in the 1950s, with one boat serving all the Southern Bahamas. By the 1960s, the service had become weekly, as the government began to subsidise regular services. Brozozog — like all the captains I speak with — possesses an admirable sense of duty. "We try to keep costs down to help islanders who don't have the money of those ➤



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Previous page from left: Ship's wheel; Spanish Wells harbour.

Clockwise from top left: The swimming pigs of Staniel Cay; Bimini

in Nassau," he says. "If an old lady wants to send a small parcel but doesn't have money, I'm not going to charge her."

George Town sits at the southern end of the Exumas, so after the *Grandmaster* docks I backtrack, joining local tour company Four C's Adventures for a fast-paced speedboat tour up the Exumas to see what I'd missed overnight.

The tour guide, Andrew, goes into star-spangled overdrive. "That's Children's Bay Cay," he begins. "Jessica Tandy used to own that... you know her? *Driving Miss Daisy*?"

"There's Nicholas Cage's boat, and there's David Copperfield's island — Musha Cay. You can rent it for \$40,000 per night. Oprah stayed there. Oh look... there's David now on his launch, wave hello everybody..."

"There's Nicholas Cage's boat, and there's David Copperfield's island — Musha Cay. You can rent it for \$40,000 per night. Oprah stayed there. Oh look... there's David now on his launch, wave hello everybody..." And so on. We haven't even reached Johnny Depp's Little Hall Pond Cay and I'm already wishing I had a few million in the bank.

But the day's true celebrities prove to be the local wildlife, which provides enough footage for a lifetime of viral internet clips. First up is Pipe Cay, where paddling pigs swim out from the beach to be fed by passing boats. Then, at Leaf Cay, giant iguanas hot-foot it over sand dunes to be handfed fruit by us. On Compass Cay, I wade into the water with nurse sharks whose sandpaper hide grazes my legs as they thrash around for the fishy treats being thrown to them. Owner of Compass Cay jetty, Tucker Rolle, leans back in his chair, raking in the dollars visitors pay to see his sharks. This all began, he explains, when he rescued two sharks who'd become trapped in a fishing net. Those sharks told their pals. Now dozens of tourist boats arrive daily, and I imagine Rolle may be grossing more than *Jaws* ever made.

Party island

The reason mailboats depart Nassau early in the week and return by Friday, one captain tells me, is because the crews like to party in Nassau on weekends, mostly around Arawak Cay, where revellers quaff cocktails like the rum-laced Sky Juice and enjoy seafront seafood. Twenty dollars (£12) buys a red snapper barbecued in a plantain, with sweet potato and pepper sauce.

Yet I'm on an island-hopping roll, so I board a local weekend ferry heading three hours east to tiny Harbour Island in the Eleuthera chain, famed for its Pink Sand Beach and being a playground of the rich. This island has the prettiest seafront imaginable. Set amid exuberant foliage and coconut trees, Dunmore Town's pink, lime-green, blue and lemon-coloured wooden cottages were built late in the

18th century by loyalists to the British crown fleeing the American Revolution. They brought their slaves with them; consequently, modern Bahamians' still bear those former slavers' surnames, names like Miller or Rolle.

There's also an often-told anecdote about 'Briland', as locals call Harbour Island: "Bill Gates walks into a real estate office to enquire about a \$10m (£6m) property," says Lea Percentie, already laughing. "He has on shorts and sneakers, so the estate agent tells him he might not be able to afford the property he's looking at." Now he's almost crying.

Percentie's family run Tingum Village, a homely \$100 (£61) a night guesthouse set in a tropical garden. "We've got billionaires and rock stars on this island; for stories about them, ask Hitler," he advises. His brother, aka Hitler, runs the Vic-Hum Club — a nightclub whose interior walls are plastered in licence plates and LP record-album covers. I find Hitler at the bar beside the world's largest coconut (33 inches in diameter). "Hitler?" I ask. "Yeah, that's me but I'm a nice guy really. People call me that because I like to get things done," he clarifies.

He enjoys spilling the beans on celebs who've frequented his grungy establishment. "Lenny Kravitz is a regular here... Colin Farrell too. Oh, and Naomi's here all the time. You know Perry Mason? Starred in *Ironside*? I took a photo of him here once but gave it to some chick. She never gave it back." He trails off, as if considering where the photo might be now. The party crowd won't hit his nightclub until around 2am.

Perhaps most Brilanders are sleeping it off next morning, because when I paddle my way along several gorgeous miles of pink feldspar-saturated sands, I have one of the Caribbean's most vaunted beaches to myself.

Caucasian island

My next voyage sees me pass from hedonism to holiness as I travel to the mainly Caucasian island of Spanish Wells in northern Eleuthera. It's Sunday on this tiny island, just a mile-and-a-half long, and strong winds bend the palm trees and rattle the riggings of the crawfishing fleet, which are the only things moving.

Spanish Wells' blue-eyed, blond-haired, Bible-loving gentlefolk are sheltering inside their modest bungalows, laid out in a grid that's reminiscent of US suburbia. Walking its deserted streets in search of somewhere to eat, I finally find the Anchorage Café open. I enter to ear-splittingly loud Christian hymns.

The Spanish Wells Museum is shut next morning, so I'm advised to speak to Raymond Pinder, who's something of a local historian, as well as being the island's crawfishing kingpin. When I track him down he's tallying up how many lobsters need to be processed the following day: 10,000 — enough bisque to fill a lake.

Raymond's a fascinating man. He tells me the Puritan Eleutheran Adventurers who came here via Bermuda in the late 1640s were fleeing persecution by Charles I's Royalist forces. ➤



Clockwise from top left: Aboard a mailboat; Long Island mailboat *Spirit* is loaded up; Max's Conch Bar, Long Island; swimming with dolphins, Grand Bahama

He's traced his own ancestry back to Scotland. "We were sad when the Bahamas lowered the Union Jack with independence in 1974 but it's worked out well for us," Raymond says. This is an understatement — Spanish Wells' community is reputedly the richest in the Bahamas, supplying 80% of the nation's crawfish.

He looks a little uncomfortable when I ask how the island has remained, umm, so white. Raymond says it's because when slavery was abolished all the slaves were let go. Wasn't that 200 years ago? "Look, we've always been a Christian community of churchgoers who look after each other," he adds. "Our men go out fishing three to four weeks at a time. It's a hard life but our youngsters are following in our footsteps. We're simple people."

This blue hole is unsettlingly beautiful; an unblinking eyeball with a bright-blue cornea and black pupil disappearing into unquantifiable darkness

To Long Island

I had wanted to head to San Salvador Island, where Christopher Columbus first

rolled up his nether-hoses and waded ashore in 1492. But this comes to nothing, because its mailboat postpones sailing due to rough seas. Instead, I find the *Island Link* loading up for Long Island, which lies 190 miles south on the Tropic of Cancer. I buy my ticket on the spot and board.

Island Link is a sleek-looking catamaran. She takes a slow, 20-hour voyage over shallow submerged sandbanks to avoid rough seas. The seabed is sometimes just a few feet beneath the keel; its every contour revealed. I watch a turtle flap by. Better entertainment than the DVDs playing inside the communal area. My \$60 (£36) ticket even includes breakfast — tuna grits. Just as well I like them.

Long Island boasts 80 intoxicating miles of heavenly sandy beaches and mangrove flats, plus a dock at Simms Wharf, where an enthusiastic gathering waits for the mailboat's arrival. The first character I notice is a wiry Rastafarian whose dreadlocks touch the ground. He's pedalling around on a pink girl's bicycle that's way too small for him. "That's Gangsta Purple," says one of four fellow passengers. "Local police forcibly cut his dreads every month because they say they're a health hazard. Drives him crazy."

I enjoy a full day exploring Long Island's contrasting coastlines. Aquamarine Atlantic rollers batter its windward shoreline, while its leeward coast is a turquoise millpond. I hike to the island's northern cape where the two coasts converge at a windswept monument marking Columbus's 15th-century passage. Without irony the monument remembers the 'happy' and 'original' inhabitants of Long



Island: the Lucayan Indians. 'Happy' might be stretching it. Within a few generations of Columbus's arrival, imported diseases and enslavement had hastened their disappearance from the Bahamas. Later, I visit the labyrinthine Hamilton's Cave, which has unearthed remains of these Amerindian cave-dwellers that date back to AD500.

Meanwhile, at Dean's Blue Hole, freedivers practise for an international competition. At 663ft, this blue hole is the mouth to the world's deepest vertical submarine cave. More than 1,000 blue holes penetrate the limestone and this one is unsettlingly beautiful; an unblinking eyeball with a bright-blue cornea and black pupil disappearing into unquantifiable darkness.

Robert Coakley, a dive-instructor, tells me three freedivers have perished here in recent times. "It's a real scary place," he says. "At 100ft, you lose buoyancy and start sinking. I found the tail fin of the last freediver who went missing and was never found again."

Final log

Arriving from Potter's Cay aboard *Fiesta*, a large container mailboat, my Bahamian adventure is metaphorically shipwrecked in Freeport, on Grand Bahama island. This wild island is a pine-forest-fresh delight where I spend time kayaking through mangrove creeks in Lucayan National Park and swimming with dolphins.

This was my final entry in the diary of a mailboat traveller amid the most turquoise seas on earth. ►

From top: Potter's Cay mailboat, *Current Pride*; mailboat *Sherice M* approaching Chub Cay



ESSENTIALS

Bahamas

GETTING THERE

Virgin Atlantic operates daily flights between Heathrow and Miami. British Airways and American Airlines fly direct to Nassau. *virgin-atlantic.com ba.com aa.com*
Average flight time: 9h30m.

GETTING AROUND

Resorts World Bimini runs a sea service from Miami to Bimini that takes three hours. Tickets from £60. All mailboats depart from Potter's Cay in Nassau for the Out Islands on Mondays or Tuesdays (usually). There are no schedules, so either contact the dockmaster's office (T: 00 242 393 1064) or speak with the sea captains directly (the writer paid £35-48 per voyage). Most mailboats return quickly to Nassau, giving little time to sightsee, so for longer stays consider

internal flights via Bahamasair (*bahamasair.com*). For local ferry services, visit *bahamasferries.com*

WHEN TO GO

Any time outside hurricane season (April to early November) is ideal for mailboat-hopping. Prices peak during the mid-December-April high season.

NEED TO KNOW

Currency: US dollar (\$). £1 = \$1.63.
International dial code: 00 242.
Time: GMT -5.

ACCOMMODATION

Resorts World Bimini (Bimini). *rwbinini.com*
 Towne Hotel (Nassau). *townehotel.com*
 Tingum Village (Harbour Island). *tingumvillage.com*

Vacation Time Inn (Spanish Wells). *spanishwells harboursiderentals.com*
 Long Island Breeze Resort & Yacht Club (Long Island). *longislandbreezeresort.com*
 Mount Pleasant Hotel (George Town). T: 00 242 336 2960.
 Viva Wyndham Fortuna Beach (Grand Bahama). *wyndham.com*

LOCAL TOURS

Four C's Adventures. *exumawatertours.com*
 Grand Bahama Nature Tours. *grandbahamanaturetours.com*
 Underwater Explorers Society. *unexo.com*

MORE INFO

bahamas.co.uk
Lonely Planet The Bahamas. RRP: £12.99. □