



DAY TRIP

PIGS IN PARADISE

Flying pigs are overrated. In the Bahamas, they swim.



Top and above left: Palm-covered cays and crystalline waters are the Exumas' stock in trade. Above right: Wilbur gets wet. Opposite: The author, star-struck.

LOOK TO THE RIGHT!" YELLS our captain, and a dozen heads swivel simultaneously starboard. On an islet, four shapes — and enthusiastic snorts and grunts — are emerging from the brush, and we squint into the sun to make out stumpy legs and four pairs of large, leaflike ears. Trotting purposefully across the ruffle of golden sand, the animals pick up speed and launch themselves wantonly into the surf. Here, in the middle of the Caribbean Sea, we are being ambushed by an armada of feverishly paddling pigs.

We are in the Exuma Cays, a 365-island chain within the Bahamas' archipelago that is famous among snorkelers, divers and fishermen for leagues of clear aquamarine water. Capt. Ray Lightbourn, a stocky Bahamian with a kind, sun-beaten face, leads our group on a daylong excursion through the 120-mile-long necklace. Less than halfway through the cruise, we already know it's one we will never forget.

In the couple of hours since leaving the marina at Barraterre on Great Exuma, we'd sailed under a sapphire sky painted with cirrus streaks, passing one gemlike cay after another. Some were rocky protrusions with a patchwork of bushes, a few were carpeted with groves of leaning coconut palms, some appeared uninhabited, and others were punctuated with palatial beachfront homes. At our first stop, Ray had plunged into the blue to retrieve a couple of giant starfish for us to examine — fluorescent-orange, 14-inch-wide specimens that were startlingly heavy. Then we'd disembarked on a pristine sandbar in the middle of nowhere and realized our *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit-issue fantasies on a ribbon of soft white sand. Ray's son, Justin, deftly peeled a fresh pineapple and served it to us on the rippled shore, and at that moment I was completely convinced that life couldn't get any sweeter. But now, there are pigs swimming toward us.

Ask 10 people how the paddling porkers found themselves on Big Major Cay and you'll get 10 different answers. Common theories are that they're shipwrecked cargo from a supply boat or brave escapees from a neighboring islet. Cynics suggest that a nearby resort might

have something to do with their sudden appearance roughly a dozen years ago, but those claims are unsubstantiated. Today the growing colony (approximately 20 pigs and piglets at last count) relies on the largesse of visiting boaters, devouring the food they bring and drinking from a freshwater pond in the island's interior.

Answering the siren call of the motor's hum, the pigs circle the stern, where Justin has ripped open a package of hot dogs (turkey, he assures me with a twinkle in his eye) and is inserting them into buns — what, no ketchup? — before tossing them toward the greedy group. This close I notice that they're not the pink piggies of children's books. In reality, the other white meat is hairy, ranges in color from off-white to black and is considerably larger — and more fearsome — than I expected; the adults probably tip the scales at 150 pounds.

Nevertheless, a few of us dive in to experience the Exumas' own Bay of Pigs. After all, when are we ever again going to have the opportunity — or inclination



— to swim with swine? Holding two buns overhead, I slip into the water, and before I'm even waist deep, a determined oinker starts making his way toward me. He's an intimidating sight as he holds his large twitching snout aloft, snorting loudly as he approaches. In an instant he snatches the bounty from my hand, and as he kicks closer to make sure I'm not withholding any more treats, a rock-hard trotter painfully connects with my foot.

For more Exumas photos and trip tools, log on to caribbeantravelmag.com/article/top5exumas.

"Be careful; they'll eat anything and everything — including fingers," Ray warns, and indeed, the pigs are unwaveringly focused on their foraging. A couple of overzealous ones even try to clamber into the boat, which prompts Ray to tell us about the time he witnessed a pig put his front legs on the side of a rubber dinghy and flip it, capsizing its startled passengers, cameras and all.

The pigs make no pretense about wanting to frolic with the humans; they're clearly in it for the food, voraciously gobbling up all the frankfurters in alarmingly short order. And as soon as the last sausage has been scarfed and the final bun devoured, they're hot to trot, turning tail faster than you can say "Oscar Mayer."

— SARAH GREAVES-GABBADON

Swim with pigs on Island Routes' 007 Thunderball Tour for \$375 per person, including a visit to Thunderball Grotto, seen in the James Bond movie Thunderball, and lunch on Royal Plantation Island. 877-768-8370; islandroutes.com

Cruise the Caribbean In Style.



Reserve a stateroom for two and island hop throughout the Caribbean.

7 nights, All-Inclusive, as low as
\$1,498/person*





Take a Guided Tour at
FestivaSailingVacations.com



Festiva Sailing
VACATIONS
866-575-3951

*Price based dbl. occupancy for select sailing dates.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: SARAH GREAVES-GABBADON; REAGAN JOHNSON (2); OPPOSITE: H. LIU