

Cat & San Salvador Islands



Many Bahamians love these two islands because they represent a way of life that has existed in the Bahamas for hundreds of years. However, don't expect island idylls; these impoverished islands are different to other Family Islands. Their economic and cultural isolation is most apparent in Cat's decaying churches which would be kept pristine on most Family Islands regardless of the local economy's state.

Cat Island is barely touched by tourism, despite superb diving off the south shore where a 12-mile front contains a wealth of caves and coral canyons to explore. Climb the rock staircase hewn into the side of Como Hill by Father Jerome, the architect hermit, to see the little stone church that he built, and a spiritually reviving 360-degree view.

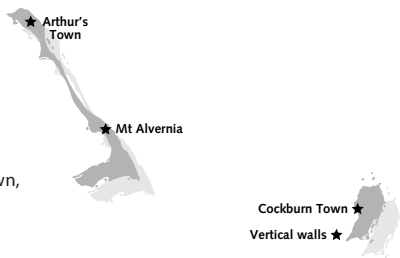
The boyhood home of Academy Award-winning actor Sir Sidney Poitier, Cat is also renowned for the continuing practice of obeah (a form of African-based ritual magic). San Salvadorians also still utilize bush medicine that derives from the first African slaves brought to the region.

'San Sal' is one of the best wall-dive destinations in the world. There are more than 40 dive sites within 30 minutes of shore, and more near Rum Cay and Conception Island. The island's waters are known for visibility up to 200ft; on special days it can exceed a miraculous 250ft!

The biggest event of the year is the Cat Island Regatta held on Emancipation Day (the first Monday in August). Scores of Cat Islanders return from afar, and sailboat races, dominoes tournaments and great rake 'n' scrape bands fill the island with a rare sense of fun.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Chat with islanders in Arthur's Town about Bahamian history and **obeah** (p212) in Cat Island and San Salvador
- Take a **guided walk** (p218) to learn about San Salvador's old plantations and bush medicine
- Experience a Cat Island sunrise, and the humbling work of Father Jerome's **Mt Alvernia Hermitage** (p210)
- Dive the pristine waters and numerous wall-dive sites of San Salvador (p217)
- Kick up your heels on a Friday night at the **Harlem Square Club** (p218) in Cockburn Town, San Salvador



■ TELEPHONE CODE: 242 ■ POPULATION: 2576 ■ AREA: 119 SQ MILES

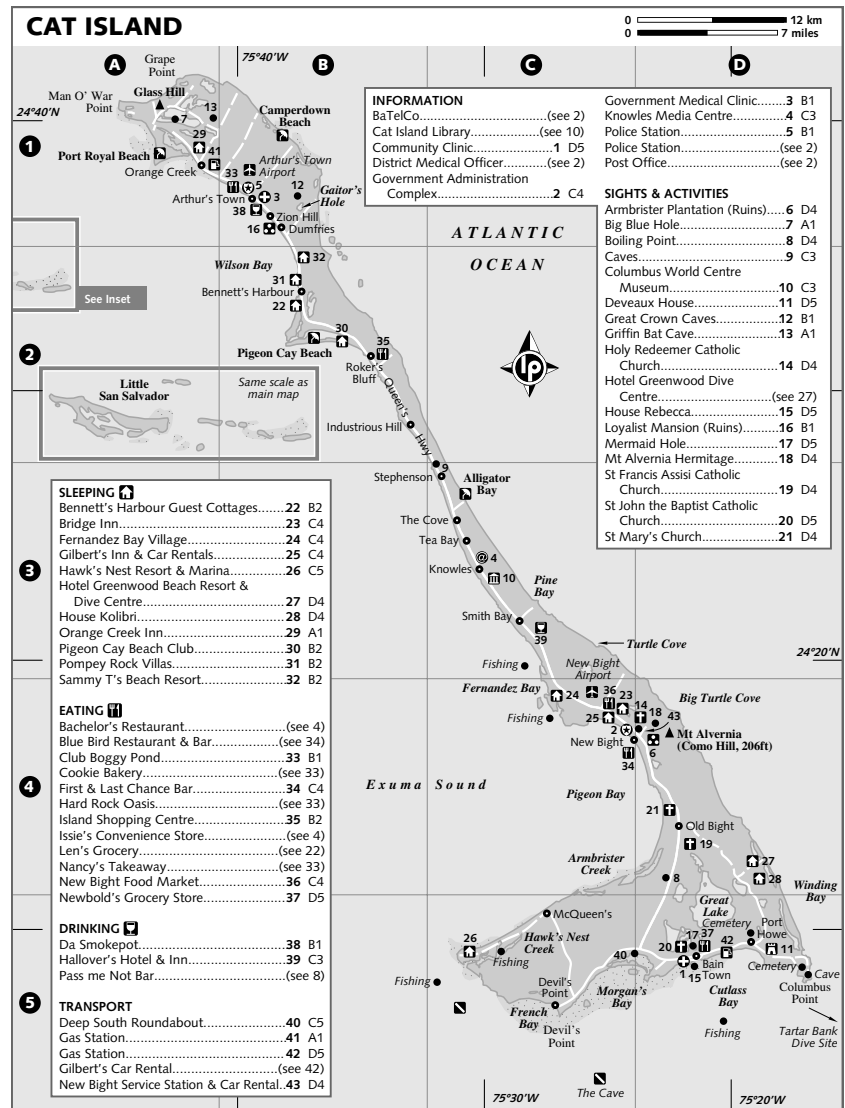
CAT ISLAND

pop 1548

Here beats the heart of the traditional African-Bahamian culture. This 48 sq miles of remote island, south of Eleuthera and 130 miles southeast of Nassau, is an interesting

place to visit, but one that you have to dig deep to discover. There is no tourism infrastructure that hands the island's history and culture to you on a plate; non-Bahamian visitors are rare, and those who come here go to several diving resorts on the south coast.

A single road, Queen's Hwy, runs down the west shore, lined by plantation ruins



and ramshackle settlements where unemployment is rife, and goats wander amid fallen stone walls. Despite this, Cat Island is blessed with rolling hills and crowned by Como Hill (206ft) and its atmospheric hermitage, while the Atlantic or 'north' shore is crowned with miles of blush-colored beaches and dramatic cliffs.

Caves, blue holes, and freshwater lakes dot the island, known for a species of freshwater turtle or 'Peters,' which tragically are still eaten even though they are endangered. Also found here are harmless snakes, giant land crabs and bat-sized monarch moths (known locally as wealth-enhancing 'money bats').

The wall-diving accessed from the southwest coast is exceptional and there is some great hiking along old logging and plantation trails.

History

Following the American Revolution, Loyalists arrived with many African slaves and established around 40 cotton and cattle estates. Many homes still retain traditional African ovens for baking bread and tea-cakes, while the African culture of bush medicine and obeah are still powerful influences. Some of the islanders are said to be skilled witches, always happy to prescribe a homemade cure.

Since emancipation, things in a material sense haven't changed much for most of the population. Many depend upon selling their few tomatoes, onions, and pineapples (planted in limestone pot holes, where nutritious soils are aided by guano or bat excrement, gathered from caves for fertilizer) and on small stipends from the National Insurance Board.

Dangers & Annoyances

Many stretches of the roads are riddled with pot holes which can be a nasty surprise when driving. Some rental cars may be a little unreliable. There are no banks on Cat Island, and a limited choice of shops.

Getting There & Around

Most visitors fly into one of the two airports on Cat Island, while others arrive by mail boat. Taxis do meet the flights, but you will need a car to get around, so it's best to pre-book a rental car from the airport. Lodgings also provide free airport transfers.

SOUTH CAT ISLAND New Bight

New Bight extends north to the tiny settlement of Smith Bay, where there's a **bat cave** amid the bush. A goat track leads from Smith Bay to **Pine Bay**, a good surf beach. Adventurous spirits can hike to **Turtle Cove**, a splendid cove on the Atlantic shore where marine turtles sometimes hang out.

New Bight originated as a free-slave settlement named Freetown. Much of the surrounding land has belonged to the Armbrister family since 1780.

There are several beautiful casuarina-lined beaches, including **Fernandez Bay**.

The **District Medical Officer** (☎ 242-342-3026) and **police** (☎ 242-342-3039) sit in the government administrative complex.

Father Jerome's **Mt Alvernia Hermitage** is a tiny blanched-stone church with a Gothic-style bell tower, small chapel, tiny cloister, and guest cell on Como Hill. Reached by a rock staircase on the hillside, the views from here are wonderful. A rough track to the hermitage, begins immediately south of the Government Administrative Complex on Queen's Hwy, north of the ruins of the old **Armbrister Plantation**.

The biggest happening of the year is August's **Cat Island Regatta**. Cat Islanders from far and wide head back to the island for the homemade sailboat races and land-based fun of Emancipation Day, while the four-day **Annual Rake 'n' Scrape Music Festival** in June is organized by Sidney Poitier's daughter, Pamela.

ACTIVITIES

There are several superb dive and snorkel sites down south at Morgan's Bay and Hawk's Nest Bay (p213) and . Dry Head, in shallow water close to shore here, also has prolific marine life.

Favored bonefishing spots include the flats of Joe's Sound Creek, a 20-minute boat ride south of Fernandez Bay, and Pigeon Creek, a 20-minute ride to the north.

Top Cat's Fishing Service (☎ 242-342-7003; Devil's Point) will tailor-make trips for you, priced accordingly.

Fernandez Bay Village (☎ 242-342-3043; www.fernandezbayvillage.com; Fernandez Bay) will arrange bonefishing (half-/full-day \$195/280), bottom fishing (half-/full-day \$250/400) and a short day fishing trip for children (\$150).

FATHER JEROME *Christopher P Baker*

John Hawes – hermit and humanitarian – was born in England in 1876 to an upper-middle-class family. He was a visionary, prize-winning architect before entering theological college in 1901, preparing to become an Anglican minister.

Once ordained, he vowed to emulate the life of St Francis of Assisi and lived briefly as a tramp. In 1908 he came to the Bahamas and traveled around the islands to rebuild churches that had been destroyed by a hurricane, utilizing thick stone and Roman arches. Hawes offended local sensibilities, however, while preaching on Harbour Island. He asked the congregation why the Whites were sitting at the front and the Blacks at the back, when all men are created equal. 'The congregation nearly fainted with shock and I was rushed out of the church as quickly as possible,' Hawes recorded.

Between bouts of preaching, the eccentric Englishman worked as a mule driver in Canada, a fox terrier breeder, a cow puncher, and a sailor. In 1911 he converted to Catholicism and studied for the priesthood in Rome before moving to Australia to serve as a bush priest during the gold rush.

In 1939 Hawes came to Cat Island to live as a hermit and began work on his hermitage atop Como Hill, renamed Mt Alvernia after the site in Tuscany where St Francis received the wounds of the cross. Meanwhile, he lived in a cave amid snakes, tarantulas and crabs, and took unto himself the name Father Jerome.

He built four churches on Cat Island, as well as a medical clinic, convent, monastery, technical school, and other projects throughout the Bahamas, all featuring his trademark medievalist architectural motif, made of quarried rock.

Undoubtedly, locals regarded him as a saintly figure. Many climbed the monastery steps to ask for money 'in a state verging on destitution,' and none was denied. Locals of all denominations attended his sermons, although apparently he converted only five people to Catholicism.

He died in 1956 and was buried, as per his request, barefoot and without a casket in the cave that had once been his home.

You can also buy masks and snorkels here, while complimentary fins are leant to guests. A 13ft Boston Whaler can be hired at an hourly rate of \$45.

SLEEPING & EATING

Gilbert's Inn & Car Rentals (☎ 242-342-3011; New Bight; s/d \$80/95; ☎ ☒ ☒) This two-story motel opposite the New Bight Food Market is very popular, so book ahead. Each spotless room has a bed with mirrored headboard (quite unnerving in the morning), good bathroom and TV. Car rentals are also possible.

Bridge Inn (☎ 242-342-3013; www.catislandbridgeinn.com; r \$88; ☎ ☒ ☒) The gloomy rooms at this inn, just down the road from Gilbert's, are in need of maintenance and upgrading. Nevertheless, attractive native-stone walls and lofty wooden ceilings keep rooms cool, and come with a TV. A restaurant and bar serves Bahamian food and has a rocking jukebox.

Fernandez Bay Village (☎ 242-342-3043; www.fernandezbayvillage.com; Fernandez Bay; r \$230; ☎ ☒)

This quiet and attractive resort has fabulous beachside stone and timber rooms, with private open-air bathrooms overlooked by the sun and stars. An alfresco thatched bar and dining tables have a wonderful ocean backdrop and the offshore reefs are perfect for easy snorkeling. It offers free use of kayaks and canoes, while bicycles can be rented for \$10 daily.

The **Blue Bird Restaurant & Bar** (☎ 242-342-3095), on Queen's Hwy near the Government administration complex, serves local fare, with mains from \$8.

You can buy groceries from **Fernandez Bay Village** (☎ 242-342-3043) and at the well-stocked **New Bight Food Market** (☎ 242-342-3011).

The **Blue Restaurant & Bar** (☎ 242-342-3095) is a good place to play pool while the **First & Last Chance Bar** is known for its lively games of dominoes.

The modern **Hallover's Inn** has a pleasant bar with TV and pool table. The **Bridge Inn** sometimes hosts a local rake 'n' scrape band (percussion music made with household objects).

GETTING THERE & AWAY**Air**

Please refer to p288 for information on international flights to the Bahamas.

Cat Island is served by two airports, **Arthur's Town Airport** (ATC; ☎ 242-354-2046), close to Arthur's Town, and **New Bight Airport** (TBI; ☎ 242-342-2016) at New Bight.

The following airlines fly between the Biminis and other Bahamian islands:

Bahamasair (UP; www.bahamasair.com) Freeport (☎ 242-352-8341); Nassau (☎ 242-377-5505) Hubs Freeport and Nassau.

Cat Island Air (☎ 242-377-3318; fax 242-377-3723) Hub Nassau.

Southern Air (☎ 242-367-2498; www.southernair.charter.com) Hub Nassau; has flights from Deadman's Cay to Long Island.

Flights from Nassau to Cat Island (\$75 one-way) operate twice weekly.

Boat

For mail boat information call the **Dockmaster's Office** (☎ 242-394-1237; Nassau) or check the **Bahamas Ministry of Tourism** (☎ 242-302-2034; www.bahamas.com) for updated information.

MV Lady Rosalind (\$45 one-way, 14 hrs) mail boat departs Nassau for Bennett's Harbour and Orange Creek on Thursday, returning on Saturday.

MV The Sea Hauler (\$45 one-way, 12 hrs) mail boat departs Nassau for Smith Bay, Old Bight and New Bight on Tuesday, returning on Monday.

Marina

Many yachties hoist up in Fernandez Bay for food and water stores. Private boaters should check in with **Customs** (☎ 242-342-2016; fax 242-342-2041) in New Bight.

Hawk's Nest Resort & Marina (p214) has full service facilities, 28 slips, air-conditioned fish-cleaning sheds, accommodations and a private air-strip.

GETTING AROUND

Taxis do meet flights. Try **D&L Taxi Service** (☎ 242-354-5088; Wilson Bay). Your hotel will arrange a free airport pickup with advance notice. Car rental hire is about \$90 per day. Insurance is not available.

Gilbert's Inn & Car Rental (☎ 242-342-3011; New Bight)

New Bight Service Station & Car Rental (☎ 242-342-3014)

Fernandez Bay Village (small boats per hr \$45; captained larger boats per hr \$90)

Old Bight

This slightly down-at-the-heels settlement straggles along the road for several miles. Plantation ruins lie to its east, shaded by trees festooned with Spanish moss.

Sitting on top of a little ridge beside the road is **St Francis Assisi Catholic Church**, a Father Jerome legacy. It has a Gothic facade topped by a cross and an engraving of St Francis with a flock of birds. Its interior has frescoes and sculptures. Mrs Burrows, across the road, has the key.

OBEAH *Christopher P Baker*

Obeah is the practice of interacting with the spirit world. Part folklore, superstition, and magic ritual, it is deeply imbedded in the national psyche. Obeah (the word is Ashanti, from West Africa) was prohibited and severely suppressed by the Caribbean's colonial authorities.

The practice of obeah has diminished but still coexists alongside Christianity. Some faithful operate as 'balmists' who enact revenge or ensure successful romances. Firm believers sometimes heal, fall sick, or even die due to their faith in the power of obeah.

'Fixing' meanwhile is the deployment of a spell to protect property; it also means casting a spell or preventing a casting on or by other people. Many fixers ascribe their powers to God and place their 'fix' through directions 'derived' from the Bible.

Those trees with bottles dangling from them are not bearing strange tropical fruit – the bottles are spells to protect against thieves. Also stay clear of graveyards, which are littered with bottles for the spirits of the dead, who otherwise would bother the living for rum, according to local beliefs. Many houses, especially those north of New Bight, are also topped by spindles (like lightning rods) to ward off evil spirits.

On Cat Island the center of obeah is the Bight; on New Providence, it's the working-class area of Fox Hill, yet obeah is still legally banned, mostly due to pressure from the Baptist church.

Worth a visit, too, is **St Mary's Church**, fronted by an African flame tree. The church was a gift of the family of Blaney Balfour, the British governor who read the emancipation proclamation.

Armbrister Creek leads to a crystal-clear lake called 'Boiling Hole' that bubbles and churns under certain tidal conditions, fueling local fears that it is haunted by a monster. Baby sharks and rays can be seen cruising the sandy bottom. Birdlife also abounds in the mangrove estuary.

Don't ignore the wonderfully-named **Pass Me Not Bar** (☎ 242-342-4016; Queen's Hwy).

To explore the area, you can rent canoes at Fernandez Bay Village (p210).

Bain Town

The town lies along the shore south of the main road. There's a gas station east of town, halfway to Port Howe.

Look for **St John the Baptist Catholic Church**, another inspired Father Jerome creation, and **House Rebecca** built of local limestone and conch shells; owners Mr and Mrs Bain (☎ 242-342-5012) may invite you in to peek at the sitting room ceiling, made of 966 shells (they also offer accommodations).

Many believe that the 65ft-wide **Mermaid Hole** is inhabited by a mermaid. The lake is 10ft deep, but four holes in its bed lead into vast underwater chambers and passageways.

Newbold's Grocery Store lies just outside Bain Town.

Port Howe Area

The southeasternmost point of Cat Island, **Columbus Point**, lies 2 miles southeast of Port Howe at the south end of Churney Bay, but you will have to hike there from Port Howe. Cat Islanders cling to the belief – effectively debunked by recent evidence – that Columbus anchored here on October 12, 1492. Historians believe that 'Columba' (1495), the first Spanish settlement in the New World, was established to ship Lucayan Indians as slaves to Hispaniola.

Around 1670 a small group of English settlers arrived from Bermuda and established themselves here, earning a living as wreckers. Then, in 1783, 60 English Loyalists arrived here and established large nearby plantations.

Browse the **ruins** of some old fortresses and the **cemetery** on the west side of town.

The decrepit **Deveaux House** mansion was presented to Colonel Andrew Deveaux, who saved Nassau from Spanish occupation in 1783. Note the old slave quarters.

There's a **cave** worth exploring (it was once inhabited by Lucayan Indians, who left artifacts) and a **tidal geyser** in Churney Bay.

The diving off the south shore is superb; visit the **wall** which begins at 50ft and drops to 6000ft and **Tartar Bank**, covered by coral, sponges and sea fans. **Winding Bay** offers fabulous gorgonian and black coral.

Hotel Greenwood Beach Resort & Dive Centre offers one-/two-tank dives (\$60/80), night dives (\$65) and snorkeling (half-day \$25), and hires out snorkel gear for \$5.

There's good bonefishing in the bay off Port Howe, ask at the resort for recommended guides.

There's a **gas station** west of Port Howe, where you can rent a car from **Gilbert's Car Rental** in this area.

SLEEPING & EATING

Hotel Greenwood Beach Resort (☎ 242-342-3053; www.greenwoodbeachresort.com; Port Howe; Ⓟ ☎) This isolated but affable resort lies on an 8-mile stretch of pink-sand beach. A bit tatty around the edges, it's great for families and divers, but not for those seeking a pristine idyll. Pleasant, light rooms are not screened (bring the mosquito spray), and facilities include a TV, lounge-cum-dining-room and bar (serving European and Bahamian fare) and dive shop. Kayaks and bicycles are complimentary for guests.

House Kolibri (☎/fax 242-342-305; Port Howe; weekly \$1500; Ⓟ ☎) This spacious three-bed house sits on a hill looking towards the ocean. Simple rooms are tiled and airy, although the furnishings are basic and pretty sparse.

Morgan's Bay to Hawk's Nest Creek

A badly potholed road leads west from the Deep South Roundabout, heading to **Devil's Point**, near **McQueen's** (founded in the 18th century by a Scottish loyalist, Alexander McQueen) and **Hawk's Nest**, a 15-mile drive from Deep South Roundabout.

There are several superb dive and snorkel sites locally including **Morgan's Bay**. **Dry Head**, close to shore has one of the healthiest and most-populated shallow reefs in the Bahamas. **Devil's Point** has large formations of elkhorn and staghorn, tube sponges, and

brain coral, while the flats and inland tidal creeks at Hawk's Nest are crowded with bonefish.

Hawk's Nest Resort & Marina (☎ 242-342-7050; VHF Channel 16; www.hawks-nest.com; s/d \$130/145; 📍 📞 📺 📺) This is a friendly and pristine resort, marina and dive operation. Spotless, cheerful and comfortable rooms all offer ocean views and patios. A bar and restaurant offers a range of pleasing dishes. Billiards, darts and movies occupy barflies, while ocean-side hammocks and the glorious beach keep everyone happy.

A private 1380yd hard-surface airstrip with tie-downs, deep-water marina with full services and some good packages make this a great option.

Contact the resort for tailor-made boating, fishing and diving trips; a top-notch small diving operation offers one-/two-tank dives (\$60/80) and PADI Divemaster qualifications (\$700), and hires snorkel (\$5) and diving (\$30) gear.

NORTH CAT ISLAND

The further north you explore, the more obvious is the poverty. Villages contain little more than dilapidated houses, shacks and hurricane-damaged buildings. Trees lie where they fell.

Knowles to Industrious Hill

Tumbledown slave-era homes dot the west shore and little boats lie upturned beneath spread-fingered palms.

Knowles, 8 miles north of New Bight, is the first of a half-dozen small settlements. There is the tiny **Columbus World Centre Museum** which tells the island history, **Holy Redeemer Catholic Church** and the **Cat Island Library**. The **Knowles Media Center** (☎ 242-342-6031) has Internet access, while **Bachelor's Restaurant** (☎ 242-342-6014; Knowles) is good for snacks.

The scenery is splendid at **Tea Bay** and the **Cove**. Endemic freshwater turtles inhabit the inland lakes and ponds, and there's a picturesque beach at **Alligator Bay**.

Issie's Convenient Store (☎ 242-342-6016) sells groceries.

Roker's Bluff

Also known as 'Zanicle,' Roker's Bluff was founded by Scottish settlers and many locals have Scottish surnames. A dirt road leads a mile northwest to beautiful **Pigeon Cay Beach**.

Pigeon Cay Beach Club (☎ 242-354-5084; www.pigeoncay-bahamas.com; r \$140; 📍 📞 📺 📺) Overlooking the beach, these self-contained charming cabanas have comfortable, colorful furnishings. An adjacent beach bar and barbecue is perfect for sunset dining. The club runs island tours (\$60 to \$100), fishing trips (half-day \$250), rents Hobicats (small boats) and dinghies (full-day \$25). There are also snorkel gear, kayaks, bicycles and canoes for hire.

The **Island Shopping Centre** sells groceries and produce.

Bennett's Harbour

The settlement sprawls beneath blazing-colored flame trees that continue down to a picturesque sheltered **cove**, once favored by pirates and salt traders.

Little San Salvador island has a lagoon, placid iguanas and plenty of seabirds.

Sammy T's Beach Resort (☎ 242-354-6010; sammytbahamas@direcway.com; r \$225; 📍 📞 📺 📺) This classy, intimate resort has charming small cabanas with upmarket Caribbean furnishings and Bahamian artworks. Enjoy walk-off-the beach snorkeling, a beachside bar and seafood dishes. There are complimentary bicycles, kayaks and shuffle-boards.

Bennett's Harbour Guest Cottages (US ☎ 813-932-1152; per week \$800; 📍 📞 📺) Ask locally about renting these attractive and affordable cottages made from coral limestone, stone and hardwood (retrieved from a sunken galleon). Cottages include romantic **Wilson Bay** which sits on a rock ledge overlooking the sea; perfect for those seeking a secluded hideaway. A van can be rented and boats are available.

Also recommended are the rooms at **Pompey Rock Villas** (☎ 242-354-6003; r \$85; 📍 📞 📺) overlooking the shore.

You can buy foodstuffs at **Len's Grocery**. See the Getting There & Away p212 for travel information.

Dumfries

Named by Scottish loyalist settlers, Dumfries sits on a salt lake separated from the sea by a drinking bar. A mile-long track leads from here to **Great Crown Caves**, a vast cave system, and a **loyalist mansion**, surrounded by stately silk cotton trees.

Gaitor's Hole is reached by a rough mile-long track running east from Dumfries. It

BEASTS IN THE BLUE HOLES *Christopher P Baker*

Many of Cat Island's saltwater blue holes are thought to be the home of awesome beasts, including an island equivalent of the Loch Ness Monster.

The monster of Big Blue Hole, just off Dickies Rd near Orange Creek, is said to have an appetite for horses. Hence some horses that die on Cat Island are tipped into the lake! (Objects are sucked out of blue holes by strong tidal flows through subterranean passages that link the holes to the sea). And though freshwater lakes are less feared, at least one – Mermaid Hole (p213) – is said to be the home of a mermaid; another has a no less seductive merman.

Although Cat Island fishermen will readily travel many miles offshore, some of these same men cannot, supposedly, be induced to travel even 50ft on these lakes.

is often a deep purple color, due to a dense bacterial population. Local folklore has a young island girl disappearing while visiting the hole to do laundry. Apparently she later reappeared; blissful and pregnant. Her father and brother in reprise, killed the hole's resident; the purported father. The girl later gave birth to a baby merman.

Arthur's Town

The island's second-largest settlement centers on Symonette Sq. The prim **St Andrews Anglican Church** (1870s) and other historic buildings project a faded grandeur.

The hamlet's claim to fame is that it was the boyhood home of Academy Award winner Sir Sidney Poitier.

There's a **Government Medical Clinic** (☎ 242-354-4050) and **police** (☎ 242-354-2046) here.

Arthur's Town hosts a **heritage festival** during the first weekend in May.

Cookie Bakery sells breads, pineapple and coconut tarts, plus burgers, fish and chips, and other snacks. For lunch and dinner also try **Nancy's Takeaway** (☎ 242-354-2024), **Da Smokepot** (☎ 242-354-2077) and **Hard Rock Oasis** (☎ 242-342-7050), while **Club Boggy Pond** (☎ 242-354-2215) has a pool table and TV.

Arthur's Town has a small airport. See Getting There & Away p212 for travel information.

Orange Creek

There's good bonefishing in the mouth of Orange Creek, where it spills onto a beach. Call **Willard Cleare** (☎ 242-354-4143), local bonefishing guide.

The turquoise waters offshore are superb snorkeling sites, with exquisite fan-coral formations.

From the head of Orange Creek, a trail leads west half a mile to the popular **Port**

Royal Beach. Another leads north past **Oyster Lake** (good for spotting ducks and cormorants) and east to **Man O' War Point Beach**, also perfect for snorkeling.

A third track leads east from the head of Orange Creek to **Glass Hill** (162ft), where you'll have beautiful views.

Dickie's Rd runs east to **Griffin Bat Cave**; once home to slaves who built walls and windows into the entrance and to a series of blue holes.

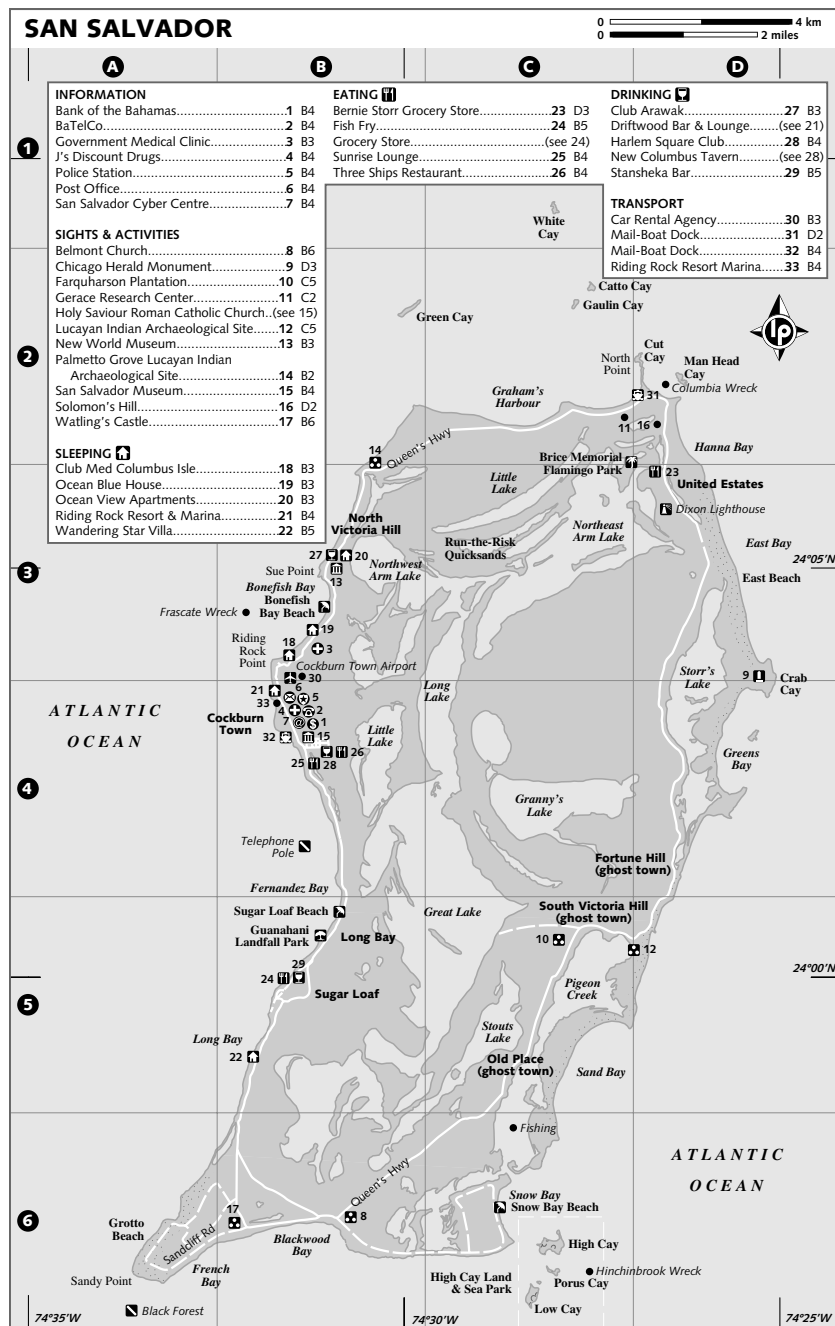
Orange Creek Inn (☎ 242-354-4110; orangecreekinn@yahoo.com; r without/with air-con \$70/80; 📍 📞 📺) Sitting above the creek and a good grocery store, this inn has spacious and well-maintained rooms. They are modestly furnished and a bit stuffy; some have kitchenettes and air-con. There's also a TV lounge and a laundry. You can hire cars here and there's a gas station in town.

SAN SALVADOR

pop 1028

Tiny San Salvador (nicknamed 'San Sal'), 200 miles southeast of Nassau, is the nation's outermost island. This 12-mile speck is ringed by superb reefs, and over 40 dive sites lie within 30 minutes of the shore, with even more near Rum Cay and Conception Island. Divers rejoice in the crystalline water that gives visibility over an amazing 200ft, while 30 miles of gorgeous beaches are wonderful for walks and playing in the shallows.

Acres of mangroves and saltwater lakes give rise to some inaccessible areas inland that attract wildlife, mosquitos (unfortunately), and birds. It's a 1½-hour drive, or five-hour bicycle ride to circumnavigate the island along Queen's Hwy, which takes in Cockburn Town (p217) and United Estates



(p219); the main villages. Decaying, abandoned settlements illustrate the economic hardships of inhabiting these islands.

San Sal offers excellent bird watching. Ospreys or 'chicken hawks' are everywhere. The cays off the north shore are favored by boobies and other seabirds. Egrets and herons pick for food in the brine pools. Besides diving and bird-watching, there's not much to do.

Rum Cay (p220), a small isle with beautiful beaches, lies 25 miles to San Salvador's southwest, while uninhabited Conception Island (p220) is a protected park northwest of Rum Cay.

History

San Salvador, meaning 'holy savior,' was bestowed by Christopher Columbus on the first land he sighted in 1492. There is little evidence to support the entrenched claim that Columbus first landed here, a fact accepted as religiously as was the belief Columbus set out to disprove, that the earth was flat.

Recent discoveries of Spanish artifacts are said to support the landfall claim, effectively debunked by *National Geographic* in 1986 which convincingly concluded that Columbus first landed at Samana Cay. However, in 1989 yachtsman Robin Knox-Johnson retraced Columbus' route using 15th-century instruments and ended up at...San Salvador. Take your pick!

Dangers & Annoyances

Industrial strength bug spray is in order at dusk and dawn, and a warning: beaches are infested with *no see 'ums*, the vicious sand flies so tiny that you never see them, but with appetites that would embarrass a fast-food chain. Try the mariners' solution; Avon Skin So Soft.

Also be careful if you explore the brush areas. There are quick sands as well as poisonwood and manchineel trees.

Getting There & Around

Most visitors fly into Cockburn Town Airport, a spit away from the town itself, while others arrive by mail boat. There are taxis, but you may avail yourself of airport transfers courtesy of your lodgings. Those planning to explore the island should collect a rental car at the airport.

COCKBURN TOWN

San Sal's major settlement and administrative center, midway down the west coast, is a motley affair comprising two parallel roads crisscrossed by five narrow lanes. Tumbledown stone cottages and clapboard shacks in faded pastels mingle with new, often stylish houses squatting in unkempt yards picked at by goats and cockerels.

A 12ft plastic iguana guards the entrance to town where locals gather under the 'Lazy Tree,' a gnarled almond tree whose shade is preferred for taking it easy.

Information

Bank of the Bahamas (☎ 242-331-2237;

☎ 9am-3pm Fri)

BaTelCo (☎ 242-331-2571)

Government Medical Clinic (☎ 242-331-2105;

☎ 9am-5:30pm Mon-Fri)

J's Discount Drugs (☎ 242-331-2570)

Police (☎ 242-331-2010) Also the island's emergency number.

Post office (☎ 242-331-2232)

San Salvador Cyber Centre (☎ 242-331-2925)

Sights & Activities

The small **San Salvador Museum**, housed in the old jail, has displays of Lucayan Indian remains and Columbus' conquest of the New World. Note the ceramic mural of Columbus. Ask for a key from the BaTelCo office.

The pretty pink **Holy Saviour Roman Catholic Church** (1992) was established by the Catholic Archdiocese of Nassau.

San Salvador has really fantastic diving; some of the best in the Bahamas. There are more than 20 miles of vertical walls, which begin as little as 40ft below the surface.

Try some of these dive sites; **Frascate**, a 261ft-long ship sunk in 1902 lies just 20ft down. Also **Rum Cay Wall**, which drops from 40ft to eternity. Nearby are remains of the **HMS Conqueror**, a 19th-century British steam-powered battleship. **Telephone Pole**, begins at 45ft. At 100ft a wall decorated with large purple sponges and plate coral is also attractive to large pelagics.

Snorkel sites include **Flower Gardens**, where scattered coral heads feature caves for exploring, and **Natural Bridges**, where a reef formation has natural arches. There's also **Sandy Point**, one of the best sites, and **Staghorn Reef**, where you'll find star and staghorn corals aplenty, as well as heaps of other marine life.

Riding Rock Resort & Marina (below) offer one-, two- and three-tank dives (\$50/70/90), a special deal of 18 dives in six days (\$360) and snorkeling (\$20). This very well-reputed outfit is popular with divers.

Island Venture Fishing Charters (☎ 242-331-2306) run a deep-sea fishing trips (half-/full-day \$500/800) for a maximum of four people.

Tours

Both lodgings listed below also offer tours, but head for Lagoon Tours first – they focus on the island’s environment and beauty, and they seem to really know their stuff.

Lagoon Tours (☎ 242-359-4520; www.lagoontoursbahamas.com) runs guided walks and combined hiking and kayaking tours with informed and enthusiastic guides. Try the fascinating trip that takes in bush-medicine plants, an old plantation and lake-kayaking (\$70), a bird-watching leisure hike through Watling’s Castle to spot thrush, warblers, osprey and herons (prices upon application), and lagoon tours (\$80) with a peaceful boat-ride along beaches to beautiful lagoons and a visit to the iguanas of Low Cay.

Riding Rock Resort & Marina (below) offer excursions to the Exumas and the Low and High Cays to see iguanas and osprey.

Sleeping & Eating

Riding Rock Resort & Marina (☎ 242-331-2631; www.ridingrock.com; Cockburn Town; standard/ocean-view \$114/140; ☎ ☒ ☑ ☒ ☒) This friendly and modern resort is loved by divers, and is very popular; book ahead! Sparkling white rooms with tiled floors are spotlessly clean and have either beach or poolside views. There’s a nearby beach, tennis court, convivial beachside bar and restaurant serving scrumptious Bahamian and US cuisine (advise ahead if you’re vegetarian). Diving trips and tours are on offer, as are rental cars (\$85) and bicycles (half-/full-day \$6.50/10).

Wandering Star Villa (per week \$990; ☎ ☒ ☒) Ask locally about renting this two-bedroom informal blue bungalow which sits right on the beach and sleeps four. It’s pet-friendly and comes with all mod-cons (including music and bicycles); a real home away from home.

Club Med Columbus Isle (☎ 242-331-2000; www.come2clubmed.com/columbus_isle.htm; r per week \$1665; ☎ ☒ ☑ ☒ ☒) This huge beachside resort is definitely geared towards French guests who want to party. The low-slung resort

displays exotic antique art and units have custom-fashioned furniture and mod-cons. Tennis courts, a fitness center, water sports and other recreational activities including diving trips are on offer, and there’s much lively nocturnal entertainment.

Three Ships Restaurant (☎ 242-331-2787; mains \$10-18; ☒ ☒ breakfast, lunch & dinner, closed Sun) This clean and tidy place serves boil’ fish and grits for breakfast, along with meat and fish burgers.

Sunrise Lounge (Queen’s Hwy) This place south of town also serves meat and fish burgers and fried chicken, as does the **Friday Fish Fry** (☎ 242-331-2051) at Long Bay and **New Columbus Tavern** (☎ 242-331-2788).

For nightlife, head to the **Driftwood Bar & Lounge** (located at Riding Rock Resort, left), exhibiting driftwood autographed by visitors from the ’50s. Now visitors leave behind business cards and T-shirts. Another fave is the **Harlem Square Club** (☎ 242-331-2777), which serves traditional food, has rap and dance nights on weekends, and lots of clattering dominoes during the day.

Buy groceries at **Bernie Storr Grocery Store** (☎ 242-331-2512; United Estates).

Getting There & Away

AIR

See p288 for information on international flights to the Bahamas.

San Salvador is served by **Cockburn Town Airport** (ZSA; ☎ 242-331-2919), adjacent to town.

The following airlines fly between the Biminis and other Bahamian islands.

Bahamasair (UP; www.bahamasair.com) Freeport (☎ 242-352-8341); Nassau (☎ 242-377-5505) Hubs Freeport and Nassau.

Cat Island Air (☎ 242-377-3318; fax 242-377-3723); Hub Nassau.

Southern Air (☎ 242-367-2498; www.southernaircharter.com) Hub Nassau.

Flights from Nassau to San Salvador Island (\$80, one-way) operates three times a week.

BOAT

Call the **Dockmaster’s Office** (☎ 242-394-1237, Nassau) and check the **Bahamas Ministry of Tourism** (☎ 242-302-2034; www.bahamas.com) for the latest schedules and prices.

MV Lady Francis (\$45, 18 hours) mail boat departs Nassau for San Salvador and Rum Cay on Tuesday, returning on Sunday.

Marina

Boaters and pilots arriving from abroad must clear **Immigration** (☎ 242-331-2100) in Cockburn Town.

Riding Rock Resort & Marina (opposite) has 11 busy slips and facilities; book ahead.

Getting Around

Riding Rock Resort & Marina (opposite) provides complimentary transport to and from the airport for its guests, while Club Med Columbus Isle (opposite) charge \$10.

Cars can be hired for about \$80 per day, and the rental agencies are based in Cockburn Town. Riding Rock Resort & Marina hires bicycles for \$6.50/10 per day and cars for \$85 per day. For cars, also try **C&S Car Rental** (☎ 242-331-2714) and **D&W Rent-a-Car** (☎ 242-331-2184).

For taxi services, try **Livingstone Williams Taxis** (☎ 242-331-2025).

NORTHWEST COAST

The **Gerace Research Center** (☎ 242-331-2520; www.geraceresearchcenter.com; Graham’s Harbour) primarily hosts scientific conferences and field courses for student groups. Scientists also run a coral reef monitoring project. Visitors are welcome.

Checkout the public and fab **Bonefish Bay Beach**, via North Victoria Hill, and the tiny **New World Museum**, displaying Lucayan Indian artifacts.

Graham’s Harbour is good for swimming. A **Columbus Day Homecoming** and party is traditionally held here on Discovery Day (October 12) along with the annual **Columbus Bay Regatta**. The **Columbia**, wrecked in 1980, lies off North Point.

Elderhostel (US ☎ 877-426-8056; www.elderhostel.org) offers 12-day springtime geographical study trips of San Salvador for lively folks over 60 years old. Check with the organization for rates.

Earthwatch (US ☎ 978-461-0081; www.earthwatch.org) houses volunteers for its program to preserve San Sal’s reef at the Gerace Research Center. It needs volunteer divers. You’ll snorkel four or five hours daily and make observations about coral health. It has three trips annually (from \$1895).

Cliff Fernandez (☎ 242-331-2676; ☒ ☒) rents out three modern air-con cottages. Or you can rent the three-bedroom **Ocean Blue House** (☎ /fax 242-331-2306; sansal.house@wanadoo.fr;

r per day/week \$190/1170; ☎ ☒ ☒ ☒) on a rocky perch about a mile north of Club Med. The house has an exquisitely decorated lounge with cathedral ceiling, a vast porch and a 19ft fishing boat (Floyd, the skipper, can take you fishing or lobstering).

Club Arawak, next to the New World Museum, serves the usual fried chicken and fish dishes and does double duty as the local nightspot.

NORTHEAST COAST

The east shore is lined with lonesome beaches, including the rosy-pink 5-mile-long **East Beach**.

In **United Estates** (locally called ‘U-E’), look for the blue house, **Solomon’s Hill**, decorated with dozens of plastic buoys.

U-E is pinned by the magnificent old **Dixon Lighthouse** (☒ ☒ 9am-noon & 2-5pm). From the balcony, there is a fabulous panoramic view of the entire island.

The weather-worn **Chicago Herald Monument** to Columbus stands at the south end of East Bay.

SOUTHEAST COAST

This area was once the center of cotton and citrus plantations. The most notable ruins are **Farquharson Plantation** (1820s).

Pigeon Creek is an 8-mile-long ecological treasure (baby sharks swim here) that opens to the ocean at **Snow Bay**. There’s an unmarked **Lucayan Indian archaeological site** at the northern end of Pigeon Creek.

Don’t miss breathtakingly beautiful **Snow Bay Beach** where you can be alone with the gentle lapping of the waves and the cry of sea birds. The road runs inland from the shore for most of the way, passing a series of smelly salt lakes.

High Cay Land & Sea Park protects High Cay, Porus Cay and Low Cay, which are important nesting sites for ospreys, boobies and other seabirds. Endangered iguanas also cling to Low Cay. The reefs have claimed several ships, notably the **Hinchinbrook** (1913), a wreck that is much favored by scuba divers.

SOUTHWEST COAST

Fernandez Bay and Long Bay are lined by beautiful **Sugar Loaf Beach** while the peninsula’s leeward shore is fringed by beautiful **Grotto Beach** and several caves.

Founded by a Loyalist settler, and named for the pirate; **Watling's Castle** ruins sit atop a hill with good sea views.

There's a **grocery store** and the **Stansheka Bar** (Queen's Hwy) in Sugar Loaf, half a mile south of Guanahani Landfall Park.

RUM CAY

This 10-mile-long isle is lined by stunning beaches and the entire isle is fringed with coral. The **HMS Conqueror** (1861), a 101-gun British man o' war, sank in 30ft of water off Signal Point.

The only settlement is **Port Nelson**. The rest of the isle is a virtual wilderness of rolling hills browsed by feral cattle and donkeys.

There's a **post office**, **police station** (☎ 242-331-2807) and **BaTelCo office** (☎ 242-331-2871) in Port Nelson. For lodgings call Constable Ted Bain and Hermie at **Ocean View Restaurant** (☎ 242-331-2818), which is recommended for basic Bahamian fare. Call ahead on VHF Channel 16 for dinner reservations.

Two Sisters Take-A-Way sells fresh bread and chicken, and there's **Last Chance Convenience Store** (☎ 242-331-2806; King St). There is also **police** and **BaTelCo office** (☎ 242-331-2871).

See p218 for details of mail-boat stops at the cay.

CONCEPTION ISLAND

This 3-mile-long, uninhabited, speck on the map is rimmed with reefs. It is approximately 25 miles southeast of Cat Island and it's protected as the **Conception Island National Park** by the Bahamas National Trust (p74).

The island is an important nesting site for endangered green turtles as well as migratory seabirds, particularly boobies, which give their name to **Booby Cay**, east of the island.

Divers who enjoy deep dives will enjoy ferreting around the Black Forest Wreck spotting turtles, hammerhead sharks and eagle rays.