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The Flip Side of the Bahamas

By DENNY LEE

TO find [Tippy's](#), a beachside bistro on the string bean-shaped island of Eleuthera, zigzag across a minefield of potholes called Queen's Highway, loop past the eerie remains of an abandoned Club Med, and then ask the guy standing in the road for directions. He may very well be David Barlyn, the bistro's gregarious owner. Don't let his T-shirt and flip-flops fool you. Or, for that matter, the rickety shack with wooden benches. This is not some down-at-the-heels fish fry, but the epicenter of the island's emerging social whirl.

"Not to name drop," Mr. Barlyn said, "but the people who purchased homes up the road include Leon Levy, who started the Oppenheimer Fund; Luci Baines Johnson, the daughter of President Lyndon Baines Johnson; and the granddaughter of Lord Mountbatten," the last viceroy of [India](#).

"It's people with that kind of stature," he said. "Patti LaBelle and Lenny Kravitz are also here."

On first blush, it doesn't quite make sense. There are no private golf courses on the island, no five-star hotels, not even a boutique for shopping. But walk into Tippy's and onto its lopsided deck, and the allure becomes self-evident: white sandy beaches that stretch as far as the eye can see, unblemished by condos, hotels or even footprints.

"I've built hotels all over the [Caribbean](#), and this is one of the most beautiful beaches out there," Mr. Barlyn added. "It's an untold hidden gem."

But that's about to change. This 110-mile-long Bahamian fishing island, with its spectacular barrier reefs and lazy pace, is being groomed as the next big thing. Continental Airlines recently added new nonstop flights from [Miami](#) and Fort Lauderdale. (It takes just over an hour.) And all across the island, luxury hotels are going up.

Cotton Bay, a sprawling resort now being built, will include a 73-room Starwood hotel, expected to open as early as the end of this year. A Club Med is scheduled to be torn down this spring and replaced by French Leave, a 270-acre resort with a marina, boutique hotel and oceanfront homes. Another marina is being readied at Cape Eleuthera, on the island's southern tip, as part of a 63-home development. And an underwater hotel has been proposed by Poseidon Undersea Resorts, with capsulelike bungalows offering views of the coral reefs.

What's happening on Eleuthera is also taking place on Bimini, the Abacos and the other, lesser-known islands of the [Bahamas](#). Until recently, going to the Bahamas meant the casinos of Freeport, the tourist hustle of Nassau or the [Las Vegas](#)-style resorts of Paradise Island. Never mind that the Bahamas is an archipelago as long as Florida. The 30 or so other inhabited islands are so off the tourist radar that they are simply lumped together with the 700 uninhabited islands as the Out Islands.

But now the Out Islands are in.

Virgin beachfronts are being sold and developed. No-frills bungalows are being razed for condos. And new resorts are appearing up and down the archipelago, seeking to bring the sophistication of Caribbean destinations like [Anguilla](#) and [Turks and Caicos](#) to the backwaters of the Bahamas.

In the Abacos, where sailing lodges were once the rule, the Abaco Club on Winding Bay — built by Peter de Savary, the British shipping magnate turned private club owner — now offers stylish cabanas for \$1,000 a night, along with an 18-hole golf course, 2.3 miles of beach and a members-only clubhouse. On Andros, the largest of the Bahamian islands, Tiamo Resorts carved out a 125-acre eco hot spot with solar-powered bungalows surrounded by coconut palms and coral reefs. Celebrities like Johnny Depp and Nicholas Cage have reportedly been snapping up private islands in the Exumas for \$3 million and more.

For most upscale travelers, however, the Out Islands hit the radar when a [Four Seasons](#) opened on Great Exuma Island two years ago, raising the area's profile and luxury quotient by several notches. Now big name hoteliers like Amanresorts, Conrad Hotels and Starwood's Luxury Collection are following suit. "It's wonderfully underdeveloped," said Tony Lariño, a senior vice president of international development for Starwood. "As I look around the Caribbean, this really is a blank canvas that's on the verge of being discovered."

And nowhere is this buzz louder than on Eleuthera, where the pace of development has been so anemic that the island's only traffic light, knocked out by Hurricane Andrew in 1992, has yet to be repaired. Not that there is much traffic: on any given day, you can drive for 30 minutes along its crumbling roads and not pass a single car.

For the rocker Lenny Kravitz, that's precisely the appeal. "I bring one pair of pants, a couple of T-shirts and no shoes," said Mr. Kravitz, who visits several times a year, or whenever his touring schedule allows. He has a 20-foot-by-20-foot "shack" near the northern village of Gregory Town, as well as an Airstream trailer parked on a private beach. "I'm not quote-unquote Lenny Kravitz here. I'm just Lenny."

Likewise, Patti LaBelle is just Patti. "All I do is stay in the kitchen and cook," said Ms. LaBelle, the singer and cookbook author, who has an all-white cottage facing the ocean. "I don't go there to party."

Good thing, too, since there isn't much to do. Except for the half-dozen hotels clustered around Governor's Harbour, its shabby capital, the island has almost no organized tourist facilities. Shopping means going to the market behind the Shell gas station. Lunch is served at your hotel and few places else. And night life is nonexistent, unless you're willing to drive 45 minutes to Elvina's, a dive bar decorated with rusty license plates in Gregory Town.

But for everything that Eleuthera lacks, there is a beach with your name on it. Gaulding Cay Beach is so shallow that you can walk out 150 feet and still be waist-high in water. Club Med Beach is arguably the most beautiful, with pink-hued sands hemmed by crystal-blue water. Surfer's Beach is for wave riders, but there are also beaches for snorkelers, swimmers and shell collectors.

Best of all, you can have one all to yourself. Around midafternoon on New Year's Eve, when nearly all the island's rooms were booked, not a single soul could be spotted on Ten Bay Beach, about six miles south of Governor's Harbour, despite a brilliant sunshine and near perfect temperatures. The only sign of civilization was a small fishing boat, bobbing in the distance like a wine cork. And the only sound came from a warm breeze, tickling a grove of coconut palms and casuarina pines.

CONTRAST that with Nassau or Paradise Island the following afternoon, when it was nearly impossible to find a spit of sand without roaring Jet Skis, wailing kids or live reggae.

So why is Eleuthera only now being discovered? The island did experience fleeting glamour as early as the 1940's, when British royalty flocked to Windermere Island, a gated islet a few yards off the Atlantic Coast. (Much to the horror of its blue-blooded residents, a very pregnant Princess Diana was photographed here, in her bathing suit, by the paparazzi in the 1980's.)

A number of wealthy Americans also landed, including the founder of Pan Am, Juan Trippe, who built the Cotton Bay Club in southern Eleuthera as a private playground for his family and friends.

"It was the Davos of the Americas," recalled Franklyn R. Wilson, chairman of Arawak Homes, one of the largest home builders in the Bahamas, and chairman of the new Cotton Bay. Club Med arrived in the late 1970's, and had a deal with American Airlines to fly as many as 600 guests a week to its all-inclusive resort.

But one by one, everything closed, first because of political uncertainty that lingered after the Bahamas gained independence from the British in 1973, and then by attrition, as Mr. Trippe's jet-setting generation passed away. When Club Med shut its resort in 1999, after being battered by Hurricane Floyd, it was as if Eleuthera fell off the map.

Tourists disappeared. Locals fled to Nassau for work. And the Cotton Bay fairways, once the envy of the golfing world, were allowed to decay. With its hollowed-out clubhouse and fallow greens, the course today looks like an overgrown parking lot, a sad reminder of a glorious past.

The singular exception was Harbour Island, a three-mile-long strip of watermelon-pink sand off Eleuthera's northern coast. In the last decade, its remote shores (reachable only by water taxi) have drawn the likes of Elle Macpherson, Diane von Furstenberg and other bold-faced names, prompting more than one magazine to call the tiny island the new St. Barts.

The label stuck and its outsized reputation is now spilling over to the "mainland" of Eleuthera — in part because Harbour Island is becoming too crowded. In just the last several months, two boutique properties have drawn attention: the Cove, a stylish 26-room resort, reopened after an extensive renovation, with thatched umbrellas, hammocks and beach-access Wi-Fi; and Pineapple Fields, a condo-hotel, opened across the road from Tippy's, with 12 suites, a pool and 80 acres to grow into.

On New Year's Eve, a stylish international crowd gathered at Tippy's, drinking champagne and snacking on lobster pizzas. As fireworks streaked across the starry sky, Tim Crutchley, 44, an advertising executive from Liverpool, [England](#), took to the streets and began dancing to the Bahamian beats of Junkanoo. It was his first visit to the island, and he was sold. "Have you ever seen anything so authentic?" he asked. "Other places can be so plastic."

But the island's infrastructure has seen major upgrades. Power outages, which used to occur three times a week, have been reduced to monthly. Cellphone towers now dot the flat landscape. And much of the island has been wired for broadband.

The rapid development of Eleuthera has left some residents uneasy, despite assurances from developers that they will preserve the island's character. "As you can see, everything is quite natural," said Wim Steenbakkers, the managing director of Cotton Bay, during a recent tour of the 1,500-acre property. Narrow paths were cleared and concrete pilings sprouted from the sand, but the vegetation otherwise remained intact. "We're blending everything into the environment, rather than bulldozing it."

Longtime visitors, however, are not convinced, and are worried that the new resorts will sap the island of its rustic and backward feel. They point to Great Exuma, about 70 miles south of Eleuthera, where the arrival of the Four Seasons has effectively cleaved the island in two.

To the south is George Town, a scrappy seaside resort with a straw market, an active wharf and several country-style inns, all within an easy stroll. On a recent Tuesday, there was an inviting hubbub on the streets, as natives went about their business, tourists eased into the local rhythm and expatriates minded their errands.

To the north is Emerald Bay, a 470-acre planned community that has its own water treatment plant, dormitory complex and security force. In addition to the Four Seasons, where standard rooms start at \$495 a night, there is a [Greg Norman](#) golf course surrounded by houses selling for \$4 million to \$11 million. a casino under way and a marina with " megaslip" timeshares that sell for \$1.5 million each. It felt like any golf and beach resort: manicured, tranquil and sheltered.

"The quality is outrageously beautiful," said Ken Joos, the resort manager at a subdivision called Grand Isle Villas, where town houses come in only two flavors: Bahia Mar or Lucayan. "Everything is high-end and sophisticated."

But not to folks like Nancy Bottomley, an American expatriate who is beginning to feel like a stranger in her adopted land. "Four Seasons has rearranged the social structure of the island," said Ms. Bottomley, who runs the Regatta Point, a cozy but hardly fancy six-suite guesthouse near George Town. "We've always had wealthy people, but they came here to enjoy the simple life."

"Now I have to tell people not to expect Godiva chocolates on their pillows," Ms. Bottomley added, as she steered her flimsy flat boat past a sailboat regatta. "This is not a five-star island."

Maybe not at the moment, but that is the direction that Exuma and many of the other Out Islands are heading toward. Besides the Four Seasons, there is Musha Cay, a private island that rents for \$24,750 a day. The price includes a staff of 30, five villas and your signature in a guest book already signed by Steve Martin, Robin Williams and other celebrities. And Amanresorts may be coming soon. The [Singapore](#)-based company is looking to build one of its serenely chic resorts on Norman's Cay, a secluded island on the north end of the Exuma chain.

But for now, at least, the Out Islands are a throwback to a more innocent time, a place where everyone hitchhikes, nobody complains that the bakery opens late, and schoolchildren run up to complete strangers, just to say hello.

So what if the kitchen takes 40 minutes to prepare a sandwich. Or that the puddle jumper is delayed. Or that the gas station closed at 11 a.m. — the locals will happily loan you some gas.

"You're not treated like a tourist here," said Ann Cutbill Lenane, 43, a real estate agent from [New York City](#) who recently traded her weekend place in [East Hampton](#) for a five-bedroom house on Eleuthera. She, too, was at Tippy's, in a white tank top and flip-flops. "On many islands, you feel like you have to be invited. But this place is so instantly welcoming. I want growth, but I hope that doesn't change."

Beyond Nassau, a Different World

GETTING THERE

From [New York City](#), you can fly to Nassau International Airport and connect to the Out Islands through several domestic carriers, including Bahamasair, 800-222-4262, [www.bahamasair.com](#), and Southern Air Charter, (242) 377-2014, [www.southernaircharter.com](#). Flights from Kennedy Airport to Nassau start at about \$300 on JetBlue ([www.jetblue.com](#)); connecting Bahamasair flights are about \$120 to Eleuthera (Governor's Harbour Airport) and about \$166 to the Exumas (George Town Airport).

Another option is to fly through Fort Lauderdale or [Miami](#). Fares from [Newark](#) to Eleuthera via Fort Lauderdale start at about \$580 on Continental Airlines ([www.continental.com](#)). Fares from Kennedy Airport to the Exumas via Miami start at about \$470 on American Airlines ([www.aa.com](#)).

[Bahamas](#) Ferries has high-speed service to the Out Islands; [www.bahamasferries.com](#). The trip between Nassau and Governor's Harbour takes two hours; about \$100 round trip.

GETTING AROUND

The area code for the Bahamas is 242; no need to dial 011 from the [United States](#). Car rentals, about \$70 a day, can be arranged through your hotel.

WHERE TO STAY

All prices are for the winter high season and do not include tax.

For the moment, the best places to stay on Eleuthera are the Cove, 800-552-5960, outside Gregory Town, [www.thecoveeleuthera.com](#) (garden view rooms from \$195), and **Pineapple Fields**, 877-677-9539, south of Governor's Harbour, [www.pineapplefields.com](#) (one-bedroom suites from \$195). The **Rainbow Inn**, 800-688-0047, 15 miles north of Governor's Harbour, [www.rainbowinn.com](#), is popular with bonefish anglers, with rooms from \$140.

On Great Exuma Island, the venerable but aging **Club Peace and Plenty**, 800-525-2210, [www.peaceandplenty.com](#), has poolside rooms starting at \$170. For larger apartment-style suites, **Regatta Point**, 888-720-0011, [www.regattapointbahamas.com](#), starts at \$172. Both are in George Town, within walking distance of restaurants, bars and diving outfitters. At the luxury end, the **Four Seasons Resort Great Exuma at Emerald Bay**, 242-336-6800, [www.fourseasons.com](#), has rooms from \$495.

In the Abacos, the **Abaco Club on Winding Bay**, 888-303-2765, [www.theabacoclub.com](#), has 20 luxury cabanas with bamboo flooring and plasma screen TV's for \$1,000 a night.

WHERE TO EAT AND DRINK

Tippy's, at Pineapple Fields, 242-332-3331, [www.pineapplefields.com/restaurant.html](#), serves Bahamian cuisine with a Continental twist, like conch bruschetta and seafood pizza. Dinner for two with wine runs about \$80. The Seaside Bar and Restaurant at the Rainbow Inn, 800-688-0047, serves more traditional fare, like conch chowder and fried grouper fingers. A meal for two with wine runs about \$70. Elvina's, 242-335-5032, a dark bar in Gregory Town, is decorated with old surfboards and license plates, and is the island's closest thing to a nightclub.

Great Exuma Island offers more dining options, ranging from \$5 fish sandwiches at the **Old Navy Base** fish fry, to \$20 lobster and conch burgers at **Ting'm**, a new lunch spot at the Four Seasons. In between are places like the Palm Bay Beach Club, 888-396-0606, www.palmbaybeachclub.com, with a casual restaurant, where dinner for two with wine runs about \$70.

There are several pubs in George Town, including the bar at the **Two Turtles Inn**, 242-336-2545. A Kalik beer goes for \$4.

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