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BEACH READ

Though they've changed over the years—but only a little—the twin Bahamian sanctuaries of Harbour Island and Eleuthera are still perfect for going slow in high style

By Adam Sachs Photographs by Ana Lui





Riding in the surf on Harbour Island's Pink Sand Beach

Opposite page:
A residential street on Harbour Island



From left: The beach at Coral Sands Inn & Cottages on Harbour Island; King Surf Shack on Harbour Island; pineapple and strawberry sorbet with coconut cream at The Potlatch Club on Eleuthera; breakfast service at Coral Sands Inn & Cottages; King's Crown, a private estate rental on Harbour Island



et us now praise foraminifera.

Tiny maritime creatures, too simple to be classified as animals but absolutely alive, they grow protective shells like microscopic mollusks and attach themselves by the billions to coral reefs. They live and feed happily there until they die and the ocean pulverizes their shells to powder.

It's hard to pick out a single foraminifera on its own, but collectively these single-cell organisms, posthumously and in aggregate, form the key ingredient that makes low-lying outcroppings of carbonate rock in the archipelago of the Bahamas so alluringly special.

Shout out, specifically, to *homotrema rubrum*, the variety of foraminifera that produces a bright pigment





that turns its shell red. Happily, this is the kind that feeds out on Devil's Backbone (and the other coral reefs surrounding Harbour Island and its longer, lankier sibling, Eleuthera). When their shells are tumbled and pummeled by the waves and bleached in the sun, they leave a pink slurry that is circulated by the sea and deposited on shore, where it mixes with the typical flotsam of coral and quartz.

And that's how the powdery pink-sand beaches of Briland (as Harbour Island is locally known) get their color. How pink depends somewhat on the angle of the sun, the cycle of the tides (damp sand reflects deeper color), and how much you want to believe. But the pink is not a mirage. It's real. A pale peachy undertone that sometimes feels like a trick your sun-saturated eyes are playing on you.

This shade is part of what draws me—and every visitor—back here again, for the pleasure of lounging around and pondering the pinkness of the beach, with occasional breaks for doing not much else. And this shade is inextricable from the island's reputation as a dreamy little place of pastel cottages and picket fences, of buttercream churches and stone fences decorated with conch shells. Of bright explosions of Briland hibiscus and bougainvillea. Where there are few cars on the dainty, dusty lanes. A chummy, easygoing place, where everyone waves to one another from their golf cart and is heavily invested in the fiction that nothing ever changes.

When I first came to Harbour Island 22 years ago, I was struck by a sense of being at once nowhere and in exactly the right place. This time I was back with my family—to watch my kids play on the same beaches I'd first admired on that solo trip and to see whether the place could still pull off the trick of feeling undisturbed by development. I've returned a half-dozen times over the intervening years and am always happy to find the island's essential charms intact.

When I talked to people on that first visit, every conversation would inevitably drift back to the two most pressing questions of the day: *Could the island resist being ruined by its own success and retain the quaint charms of its distinctive and fiercely defended character?*

And: *Where was Mick Jagger?*

His Mickness was visiting on holiday and had been spotted everywhere—shopping at the Piggly Wiggly grocery store in Dunmore Town, having a drink at the bar at The Landing—but never, somehow, wherever you happened to be.

As to the first quandary, I noted then that Harbour Island reminded me in this way of Manhattan, that other island where space is also scarce, real estate is on everyone's mind, and all but the latest arrivals agree that things used to be better back when. And like Manhattan, Harbour Island doesn't always look like the postcards. There's the obvious wealth disparity. Neglected lots sit beside manicured gardens shielding beachside villas. There's an element of hardscrabble scruffiness reminding you this is a real island coterminous with the fantasy one. Overlapping realities seem to exist—at least for the visitor bumping down tiny Queen's Highway on a rented golf cart—in general harmony.



From left: A staffer at The Potlatch Club; Eleven Bahama House, a hotel on Harbour Island; the 75-foot lap pool at King's Crown; a microgreens salad freshly harvested from the garden at The Farm hotel on Eleuthera



There have been changes since that first visit. For instance, Queen Conch on Bay Street takes credit cards (and still reliably serves the island's best conch salad, chopped to order and spiced to taste).

Sip Sip, the beloved restaurant named after the local slang for gossip and known for its views and lobster quesadilla, closed a few years ago. But chef-owner Julie Lightbourn (who once gave my children T-shirts reading "Future Quesadilla" and "Little Island, Big Mouth") told me she is reopening soon at a new location at Romora Bay, a marina and resort on the bay side of the island.

There are more cars on the roads than there used to be. Anecdotally at least, it seems like fewer people wave when they pass one another. Which is a shame: Billionaires on golf carts socially pressured to smile and wave at everyone was one of the things I liked about the place.

My family and I were ensconced in an ocean-facing cottage at Coral Sands Inn & Cottages for a few sweet, languorous days. From our canopied bed we watched the coruscating light play across the rippling Atlantic. We wrapped ourselves in periwinkle-and-blush-striped bathrobes and ventured only as far as our deck's rattan loungers. To read but mostly to be dis-

tracted by the view: a green thicket of bay cedar and sea grape on the dunes giving way to a rose-tinted beach and, beyond, endless shifting blues of ocean and sky.

The air-conditioning was glacial, as was the pace of our days. I found a coffee-table book titled *The Shell: 500 Million Years of Inspired Design* that was just my speed. ("From the beginning of time, the shell and its animal builder have played an important role in the life of man.")

The charming resort was built in the late 1960s by Brett King (an actor who is said to have dated Elizabeth Taylor) and his wife, Sharon. It has just been thoughtfully overhauled by new owners. The renovation leans exuberantly into the island palette and its themes: painted grass cloth walls, straw-fringed table lamps and pendants made of white shells, coral-tinted soaking tubs, nautilus-shell-encrusted mirrors, and showers enveloped in turquoise tiles. It's a lot, but it works.

Of course we did venture out, if reluctantly. There was tennis to play (on the hotel's striking bubble-gum pink and azure blue courts), conch fritters to lunch on at the nearby Beach Bar, and a family of glossy black chickens who hopped onto our deck to say hello to.



Maybe the biggest change since I first started coming to Harbour Island is that, now, Eleuthera isn't just a stopover on your way in and out. In the 1970s Eleuthera was more of a swinging destination, with daily direct flights between New York and Rock Sound Airport thanks to Pan Am founder Juan Trippe, who happened to own several large pieces of the island. A Club Med opened in 1976 but closed after being damaged in 1999 by Hurricane Floyd, and international pleasure-seekers (and development investment) focused their attention on Eleuthera's smaller sibling. Now, however, people are coming back.

Whereas Harbour Island is compact and bustling, Eleuthera is spread out, varied, and a little wilder around the edges. At a 110 miles long by barely a mile and a half wide, it is a place where the power of the ocean is never far from mind or view. This is most dramatically felt where the snaking road that runs the length of the island narrows to a precarious single-lane bottleneck called Glass Window Bridge. On one side the dark Atlantic furiously lashes the limestone rock below; on the other is the placid turquoise bathwater calm of the Bight of Eleuthera.

We took the five-minute water taxi ride across to Three Mile Dock, on Eleuthera's northern end. Our driver was named Ricky Ricardo, and his boat was

called *Lucy*. Here we met Hans Febles, a soft-spoken Cuban Bahamian hotelier and developer who, with his business partner Bruce Loshusan, just reopened a remarkable property called The Potlatch Club.

As we drove past North Eleuthera Airport, where commercial flights from Miami and Nassau are often outnumbered by private jets, Febles noted dryly: "Sometimes you go by during the holidays and there's a billion dollars parked on the tarmac."

The Potlatch Club sits about midway down the island outside the village of Governor's Harbour. Originally opened in 1967 by a trio of socially connected American women, it was run for many years as a glamorous semiprivate getaway for the owners' wealthy friends and visiting celebrities. Greta Garbo slept there, as did a steady stream of well-heeled travelers lured by the powdery beaches and discreet luxury of the private cabanas—as well as the owners' generosity.

The old Potlatch was so clubby, as Febles tells it, the owners liked guests to feel as if they were in a private home—and often forgot to send them a bill. That largesse bankrupted the business. From the '80s on, the place was abandoned, its crumbling structures taken back by the jungle vegetation of this former pineapple plantation.

Meaning to build a hotel in an entirely different location, Febles and Loshusan stumbled on The Potlatch Club and fell under its spell. Their reclamation project—among the thousands of its plantings are hundreds of mature palms that Febles had ingeniously relocated to look as if they've always been here—took them 12 years. The result feels immaculate and serene, simultaneously timeless and fresh. With only 11 whitewashed suites, cabins, and villas spread out over a dozen verdant acres, its sense of calm and pampered privacy is complete.

There are other places on the island that, like The Potlatch Club, feel a little less tame than tidy, snug Harbour Island. Places like The Other Side and The Farm, two bucolic hotels owned by Ben Simmons and his wife, Charlie Phelan. The couple



Clockwise from below:
 Navigating Harbour
 Island in a golf cart,
 the preferred means of
 transportation; the tennis
 court at Coral Sands
 Inn & Cottages; a gardener
 with fresh eggs at The Farm
 hotel; a cottage at Coral
 Sands Inn & Cottages;
 a guest room at Coral
 Sands Inn & Cottages



grow food for the restaurants at The Farm and also run the wonderful Ocean View, across the bay on Harbour Island, which retains the air of bohemian chic of Ben's mother, Pip, who was the original spirit behind the hotel.

If at Coral Sands we'd practiced the art of doing nothing, at Potlatch we perfected it. From Pineapple House, the property's largest villa, a stone path led past our private pool to the sea. A pergola stood at the dunes, like a private doorway to the beautiful wide, empty beach. We spent much time under thatched beach umbrellas, contemplating the endless movement of the ocean that shaped this island from compounded shells, coral, and stone. Post-contemplation, we walked



up the beach to Tippy's, a painted blue shack with a fantastic bar and carved fish on the walls. We ate garlic shrimp and fried fish sandwiches, drank cold Kalik beers and fruit punch.

At Potlatch we wandered over to The Sandbar, an open-air pavilion with a high spire on the roof, slow-moving fans, and irresistible cocktails. In the clubhouse there was a grand piano, a fireplace, and the original black-and-white tile floor that survived during the property's dormancy. On the walls are mementos and photos of the great and good who have holed up here over the decades. Our Beatles-mad family was immediately drawn to a framed facsimile of Paul McCartney's handwritten lyrics to "Oh! Darling" in blue ink on Potlatch Club stationery. Paul and Linda sneaked away here for their honeymoon in March of 1969. Paul apparently found inspiration in the resort's luxurious quiet, also writing "She Came In Through the Bathroom Window."

You can find a photo online that Linda took during this trip: the camera aimed down toward the stony ocean floor, just two pairs of feet in the low surf, the gentlest hint of movement in the crystal-clear water. The calmness of doing nothing in a beautiful place, perfectly captured.



Our last night, back on Harbour Island, we met a friend for drinks at Briland Club, a still-developing 27-acre enclave with luxury rentals, residential estates, and a flashy new marina built to accommodate mega-yachts. In other words, exactly the kind of place that didn't exist when I first visited and the kind that worries some old-timers. My friend, who has long had a holiday house here, now offers her services as a kind of local fixer for designers and their wealthy clients. Business is good, she said. The budgets and the houses keep getting bigger.

Briland Club is polished in a way that feels, aesthetically at least, like a departure from the low-key genteel chic the island was once known for. But while we were sitting at Bar480 (named for the 480-volt hookups that can power the larger yachts the marina was built to attract) and enjoying very good martinis in the honeyed light of sunset over the bay, it was hard to feel anything but content. Times change. Vibes shift. The flow of money, like the ocean, reshapes whatever is in its path. But if you can get here, this is still such a lucky place to be. ●

EAT & SLEEP

HARBOUR ISLAND

The best places to stay include the rustic **Ocean View** (from \$465), right on the sand; the recently renovated **Rock House** (from \$495), with its private rental homes **King Surf Shack** and **King's Crown** (from \$5,000 and \$10,000, respectively); the adventure-oriented **Eleven Bahama House** (from \$480); **Coral Sands Inn & Cottages** (from \$750) for design-loving beach bums; and **The Landing** (from \$295), a historic boutique on the bay with a beloved restaurant. You can also visit the seaside **Da Vine Sushi & Wine Bar** for fresh fish in Dunmore

Town's beating heart. Briland Club has **Bar480** on the marina for yacht spotting; **Queen Conch** chops conch salad to order; and **Cocoa Coffee House** makes mean smoothies and brews. **Gusty's Bar** is more of a night-club, with a sand-covered dance floor.

ELEUTHERA

Solar-powered siblings **The Farm** (from \$350) and **The Other Side** (from \$550) are a smorgasbord of tents, shacks, and cottages; the former grows food for the latter's restaurant. **The Cove** (from \$795), which feels like a private island, emphasizes underwater activities; lush, laid-back **Potlatch Club** (from \$775), which just reopened after several decades, has the wonderful open-air **Sand Bar**.

For more food, easygoing **Daddy Joe's Restaurant & Bar**, right by the Glass Window Bridge, grills burgers and fish Bahamian style. In Alice Town there's more seafood at **The Front Porch** (order the fresh stone crab and lobster in some form).

Delish, a sports bar between Queen's Highway and the sea, is a great place for a beer, as is **Unca Gene's Restaurant & Bar**.