

Lagoon life

With new flights from Virgin Atlantic, the Bahamas has just become easier to reach. **Samantha Mayling** finds paradise a short hop from Nassau

LATEST RESTRICTIONS

The trip featured took place before the emergence of the Omicron variant and additional restrictions for travel to the Bahamas. In addition to a PCR test taken up to 72 hours before arrival, all visitors staying in the country for more than 48 hours must now take a rapid test after they arrive, regardless of their vaccination status. For more info, visit: bahamas.com/travelupdates

Our resort's 'ambassador', Kool Aid, hummed the *Jaws* theme tune as we donned snorkels and masks to glide into shark-infested waters. There were indeed several zebra sharks but we were completely relaxed as we floated above the laid-back sea life in the lagoons of Atlantis Paradise Island resort.

Diving masks made a welcome change to the anti-Covid face coverings I'd worn en route to a chilly Heathrow and then on a nine-hour flight to Nassau, on the gateway island of New Providence. It is, along with the other 700-odd islands that make

up the Bahamas, now more accessible thanks to new services from Virgin Atlantic, in addition to British Airways' flights.

Our experience in the warm December waters made an ideal start to our short, sun-drenched break, and our introduction to the destination came from Kool Aid (aka Dennis), the Atlantis Ambassador who was bubblier than a magnum of champagne.

He took us on a whistle-stop tour of Atlantis Paradise Island, a 3,800-room resort with five hotels, top restaurants, 10 pools, a lazy river and an Aquaventure water park. Christmas decorations reminded us it was the festive

P. GILL: Bahamas Ministry of Tourism/Andie Mayling

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ATLANTIS PARADISE ISLAND

Alongside his ambassador role, Kool Aid is a marine biologist and told us about the work of the resort's animal rescue team, helping protect sea life in the Caribbean.

One famous rescue was that of Manny T, a malnourished manatee, later returned to the sea after a three-month rehabilitation.

The Atlantis resort is home to the largest open-air marine habitat in the world, with 14 lagoons and more than 250 marine species. Guests can view the sea life through a series of walk-through tunnels. We found Nemo (aka clownfish) and spotted ethereal jellyfish, sinister conger eels and curious horseshoe crabs (which apparently have blue blood).

Our 'Snorkel the Ruins of Atlantis' experience got us even closer to the sharks, rays and thousands of tropical fish amid the manmade relics. Despite the *Jaws* jokes, it was very safe and even a bit tame if you're used to snorkelling in the sea. But for novices or people nervous about fish or snorkelling, it was a relaxing half-hour of gentle paddling, fish viewing and waving at other guests through glass panels.

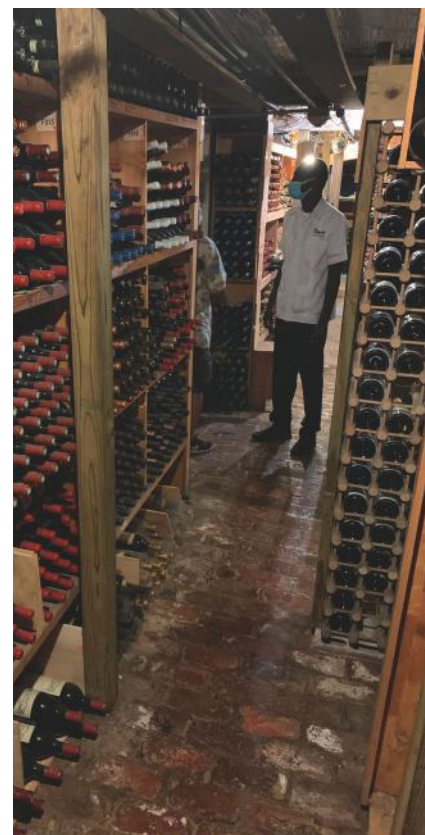


PICTURE: Shutterstock/Pala Damonte



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Some of the Bahamas' 2,400 cays; cellar at Graycliff; Samantha Mayling at Fort Montagu

PICTURES: Bahamas Ministry of Tourism; Samantha Mayling



season, despite wearing shorts and sandals, but queues in the Royal hotel for guests to take Covid-19 tests were less cheery reminders of home.

Testing procedures are something to watch out for in the Bahamas, and Virgin Atlantic is keen to make sure passengers are aware that no self-testing or home-test kits are accepted by the destination. Even vaccinated visitors arriving in the Bahamas must take a PCR test conducted by a medical practitioner (private drive-through tests or those done in pharmacies such as Boots are fine) before they fly. On-site testing at the hotel is certainly handy too – just one of the many helpful details that make this such a sought-after resort.

CELEBRITY MECCA

Atlantis Paradise Island has reportedly welcomed superstar guests such as Tiger Woods, P Diddy and Michael Jordan – and it's no surprise that well-heeled Americans flock to the Bahamas, as the capital, Nassau, is just 300 miles off the Florida coast.

Celebrities including Eddie Murphy and Johnny Depp (pretend pirate of the Caribbean) own islands near Nassau, which is connected to Paradise Island by a bridge named after Hollywood star Sidney Poitier, who spent part of his childhood in the Bahamas.

“The mansion was built by an original pirate of the Caribbean, and now boasts the world's third-largest wine collection

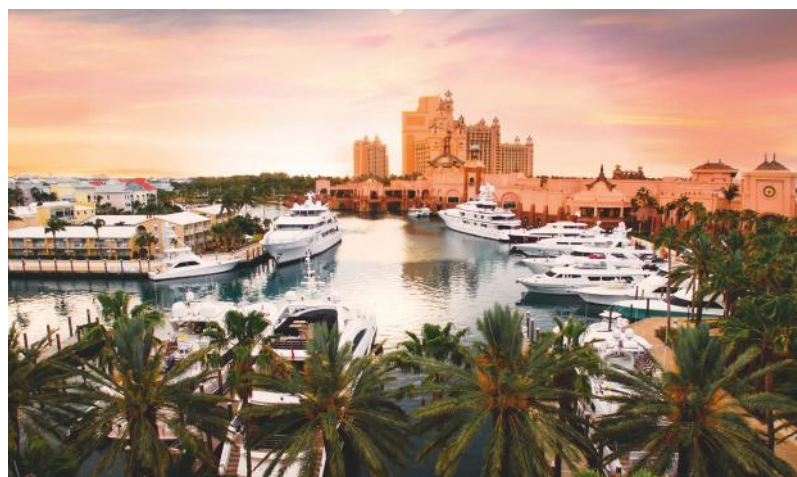
The country gained independence from the UK in 1973 and Brits are the third-largest market, after Americans and Canadians. As well as driving on the left, Britain has left a colonial legacy of forts, churches, a parliament, historic buildings and portraits of the Queen.

One such historic building is Graycliff in Nassau – famous for celebrity clients, from actors such as Nicolas Cage to musicians such as Jay-Z and Billy Joel. In the 20th century, regular visitors included the Duke and Duchess of Windsor and Sir Winston Churchill.

The mansion was built in 1740 by Captain John Howard Graysmith, an original pirate of the Caribbean. Now a boutique luxury hotel, Graycliff boasts the world's third-largest wine collection, with 270,000 bottles from 15 countries. It's also home to a cigar-making business and chocolatier – both of which ➤



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Grand Hyatt Baha Mar; Junkanoo festival; Atlantis Marina, Paradise Island; Pig Beach, Great Exuma PICTURES: Bahamas Ministry of Tourism; Tadeu Brunelli; Shutterstock/Paulharding00, Alexanderphoto7



offer visitor tours and experiences. We donned blue hairnets for our tour of the chocolate-making facility, but it was a small price to pay for the aromas and the chance to sample the sweet treats.

More evidence of the city's colonial past can be seen at Fort Montagu, built in 1741, and Fort Fincastle, constructed in the shape of a boat to confuse pirates out at sea. But as it was perched atop a hill, we wondered if pirates had to have been at the rum to be perplexed.

Naturally, rum is a key ingredient in local treats and we sampled some at the Bahamas Rum Cake Factory, before enjoying tots of the hard stuff at John Watling's Distillery, named after another pirate of the Caribbean, a 17th-century buccaneer. The estate featured in James Bond film *Casino Royale*, and its rum is matured in barrels from the Jack Daniel's distillery in the US.

HERITAGE AND HOLIDAYS

A more sober reminder of the islands' past is the Queen's Staircase, carved out of limestone in 1793-94 by enslaved people, and later named after Queen Victoria. Its lush, leafy canopy made for a relaxing, cool retreat from the midday sun but it was hard to imagine the conditions in which 66 rock steps were hewn by hand, to provide a route from Fort Fincastle to Nassau.

“Nassau is a vivid cocktail of Bahamian heritage and spirit, with a dash of Britishness, steeped in US-style hotel luxury

Another legacy of the slavery era is Junkanoo, a Bahamian national festival, which involves parades on special days such as Boxing Day, New Year's Day and Independence Day (July 10). Covid restrictions meant last year's festivities were cancelled, but chatting to locals, it was evident how important Junkanoo is to Bahamian culture, with rival groups planning their costumes many months ahead of each event.

We glimpsed the parade of dancers and musicians in colourful costumes and extravagant feathered head-dresses, accompanied by drumming and whistles, during our stay at the Grand Hyatt Baha Mar. Their exuberance made quite a contrast to the glitzy chandeliers and flashing lights of the slot machines at the resort's casino, the largest in the Caribbean. The performance encapsulated my experience of Nassau: a vivid cocktail of traditional Bahamian heritage and spirit, with a dash of Britishness, steeped in US-style hotel luxury.

And I haven't even mentioned swimming with pigs, the stars of the tourist board's marketing images. Timings didn't allow us a chance to see the porky personalities at Exuma Island, two hours away by boat, or a similar experience at Sandy Toes on Rose Island, a 25-minute boat ride from Nassau. No matter. That just gives me the perfect excuse to return. **TW**

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FOOD & DRINK



Foodies and connoisseurs are extremely well catered for in the Bahamas, with everything from street stalls selling conch shellfish to top-notch restaurants. Said to be an aphrodisiac, conch is found in stews, curries, salads, fritters and chowder.

Local tipples include Kalik beer and Sky Juice – a creamy cocktail of gin, coconut water and sweetened condensed milk – and John Watling's rum was widely available for even more cocktail concoctions.

The enormous buffet at the Mosaic restaurant in Atlantis hotel **The Cove** offered every breakfast option imaginable and then some – I indulged in sushi.

Our five-course lunch at **Graycliff** was a gourmet affair, with staff detailing flavours and nuances of each tittle as they poured glasses of various wines to accompany the fine cuisine.

More local seafood was on the menu at the new **Margaritaville Beach Resort Nassau**, along with margarita cocktails, naturally. The top suite is named after US singer Jimmy Buffett, best known for his song *Margaritaville*.

There were more cocktails – including bright red Bahama Mamas – at the **Baha Mar** mega-resort, which offers more than 20 eateries, from international restaurants to Airstream-style trailers on the beach and poolside shacks. Highlights included Katsuya by Starck for Japanese food, Shuang Ba for Chinese dishes and Costa for Mexican meals in cabanas overlooking pools of koi carp.



BOOK IT

Caribtours offers seven nights at The Cove Atlantis from £3,725 and seven nights at Grand Hyatt Baha Mar from £2,450. Both are on a room-only sharing basis and include flights with Virgin Atlantic, departing March 12, 2022. caribtours.co.uk

Virgin Atlantic flies from Heathrow to Nassau twice a week with return fares from £612, for selected departures in November 2022. virginatlantic.com

Alternatively, customers can book a twin-centre, combining a US holiday with a cruise from Miami on **Virgin Voyages' Scarlet Lady**, which visits Nassau. firstmates.com

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