

Junkanoo parade, Nassau

PICTURE: Shutterstock/Montez Kerr



People power

As the Bahamas' People to People cultural exchange programme marks its 50th anniversary, **Vivienne Dovi** finds out how it can enrich a winter stay

before I landed in the Bahamas, I was excited to revel in the clichés: becoming a beach bum with a backdrop of white sand and glassy waters, sipping a Bahama Mama cocktail and munching a conch fritter or two. But I also wanted to delve deeper into island life.

That led me to the People to People programme, a cultural exchange initiative that connects visitors with Bahamian locals, known as ambassadors, offering a personal lens on the country.

Travellers fill out a simple form covering details about their trip and their interests – anything from fishing to fashion – and the Bahamas Ministry of Tourism pairs them with a local volunteer. Solo travellers, groups and families are all welcome.

The initiative began in 1975 and was created with the aim of helping ease visitors into Bahamian culture, as well as encouraging authentic interaction. It started in Nassau and expanded to Grand Bahama a year later, and since then has grown into a nationwide programme with more than 800 certified ambassadors across 10 islands. In 2024 alone, more than 10,000 visitors took part. A virtual arm was launched during the Covid pandemic, with small-group sessions such as cocktail making and cooking classes keeping the spirit of exchange alive.

A WARM WELCOME

I visited two islands, Nassau and Exuma, which both participate in the programme. In Exuma, there are 40 ambassadors who host visitors in cultural, culinary and nature-based experiences: fish fries with live music, picnics on secluded beaches or seeing iguanas basking in the sun on nearby cays.

“The initiative began in 1975 and was created with the aim of helping ease visitors into Bahamian culture, as well as encouraging interaction

My journey began in Nassau over cocktails and seafood chowder at Wild Thyme Restaurant with lifelong residents Rhondi Treco, assistant manager of the People to People programme, and Quinn Munnings, who leads the performing arts and modern languages departments at a local high school. They welcomed me with warmth and stories about the Bahamas, their community and what drew them to the programme.

“I signed up in 2012,” Quinn explained between courses. “I love the Bahamas and wanted people ➤

DESTINATIONS

WINTER SUN | THE BAHAMAS



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Allen Cay rock iguana in Exuma; the colourful buildings along Nassau's waterfront; Quinn Munnings; Rhondi Treco

PICTURES: Shutterstock/Brookgardener, GagliardiPhotography; Bahamas Ministry of Tourism



3 MUST-TRY EXPERIENCES

🌴 Enjoy conch salad and a fish fry on the local favourite Arawak Cay strip in Nassau, at its liveliest on Sunday evenings.

🌴 Take a Pirate Jeep Tour or explore the Caves in Nassau, then enjoy upscale dining at Marcus at Baha Mar.

🌴 In Exuma, see the famous swimming pigs and take a water taxi to Chat 'N' Chill Beach Bar or Coconut Club.



to have more than just a beach holiday. I also get to meet people from all over the globe, so it's an experience I have not regretted."

Rhondi's motivation runs in the family. "My family have always been hosts in some form: through the church, community or politics. Being an ambassador comes naturally to me. There's nowhere else with this mix of beauty, vibrancy and genuine hospitality. Visitors often feel more like friends or family than tourists."

JOY OF JUNKANOO

The next day, Rhondi took me to one of the shacks scattered across Nassau where the elaborate costumes for Junkanoo, the Bahamas' biggest cultural parade, are made. Junkanoo is a symbol of resilience as much as a celebration.

"It began during the era of slavery in the Bahamas," she explained. "Enslaved Africans were given three days off at Christmas – one of the few breaks they had all year – and used that time to honour their heritage through homemade costumes, dancing to drums and

There's nowhere else with this mix of beauty, vibrancy and genuine hospitality

African traditions they had been forced to hide. Now it's a national competition with a major following; it's basically like our Super Bowl."

Though the next parade was six months away, the shack was buzzing. Men worked over foam frames and chicken wire, glue guns in hand, carefully attaching feathers, crepe paper and jewels. Rhondi has been involved in Junkanoo since she was five. "It's a 365-day-a-year job," she said. "No one's paid. It's a labour of love. The cost to create a costume can run into thousands of dollars. We work in sweltering heat and poor lighting. I've left the shack with glue gun burns, but it's worth it."

SCHOOL'S OUT

Next up was an end-of-year teachers' party at Quinn's school. "I thought it'd be an opportunity for you to meet professional Bahamians

and see a different side of the country," she said.

What I expected to be a modest occasion turned out to be a lively hall party. We were welcomed with freshly fried cod fritters, the drinks flowed and the DJ quickly got everyone on their feet.

"A lot of us teach by day and run businesses after school," Quinn told me. "These hardworking individuals are the backbone of our country and continue to push our cultural legacy."

I would never have stumbled across these experiences on my own. I wasn't just observing Bahamian culture – people invited me to take part. Conversations were easy and open as we swapped stories about carnival traditions across the Caribbean, shared histories and everyday life. I spoke about my Nigerian background and British upbringing, while they shared what it means to be Bahamian.

It became the highlight of my time in the Bahamas and a reminder that travel is always made richer by the experiences we don't expect – and whenever I return to Nassau, I'll already have friends waiting. **TW**

BOOK IT

Inspiring Travel offers seven nights at Rosewood Baha Mar in Nassau from £2,979 per person based on two adults sharing a double room on a room-only basis for travel September-November. Price includes BA flights from Heathrow and private transfers. inspiringtravel.co.uk

Caribtours offers a seven-night stay at Warwick Paradise Island in Nassau from £2,625 per person all-inclusive, based on two adults sharing an island-view double room. Price includes BA flights from Heathrow on November 11 and an Exuma excursion to see iguanas at Allen Cay. caribtours.co.uk

British Airways flies from Heathrow to Nassau daily, with prices starting from £736 return per person, including fees and taxes.

Bahamasair, the national airline, operates daily 45-minute flights between Nassau and Exuma. ba.com/nassau; bahamasair.com