

# Bahamian rhapsody



As the Bahamas marks 50 years of independence, **Isobel Turner** heads to these sun-kissed isles to test two of the trade's top-selling resorts

**W**hen picturing a typical Bahamian scene, you might think of the island's famous turquoise waters shimmering in the Caribbean sun, or towering palm trees scattered on white sands. And you wouldn't be wrong – for visitors to the Bahamas, such scenes aren't hard to find.

But this year, there's something else defining the landscape. I notice the banners emblazoned with the Bahamian flag not long after I've stepped off the plane in Nassau, the country's capital, before spotting the blue and gold bunting that adorns streets, buildings and even roundabouts across the city – all in celebration of the Bahamas' 50th year of independence.

#### SUN-SOAKED GETAWAY

Since the nation gained statehood in 1973, it has become one of the most popular Caribbean destinations for a sun-soaked

getaway. There's a lot of investment going on too. Nassau's cruise port has recently undergone a \$300 million renovation, helping the Bahamas achieve its best tourism year yet – eight million visitors are expected by the end of 2023. The cruise port isn't the only thing in Nassau that's had a facelift, either. The British Colonial Hotel, built in 1900, is set to reopen before the end of the year after closing in February 2022. Nassau's oldest hotel will retain some of its period features, including marble floors and a grand staircase.

British Colonial will join the impressive roster of hotels in Nassau, set on New Providence island and home to the country's largest airport as well as more than 70% of its population. Connected to the capital by a short road bridge is the aptly named Paradise Island, home to another clutch of luxurious hotels set on a series of immaculate sandy beaches. No wonder ➤

# DESTINATIONS

## WINTER SUN | THE BAHAMAS



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Grand Hyatt Baha Mar; Baha Bay's The River and Stingray Cove

PICTURES: Jerry Balderas; Nassau Paradise Island Promotion Board

it's the place many international travellers make a beeline for – of the 7.2 million people who travelled to the Bahamas in 2019, 76% visited Paradise Island. I stayed at two of the area's top-rated hotels to see if the island lived up to its name.

### GRAND HYATT BAHA MAR

**Water wonderland:** Wandering through the grounds of Baha Mar, I need to use both hands to count the number of pristine pools, as there are sprawling lagoons, swim-up bars and secluded cove-style pools. But if you're thinking that pools are the only attraction for water babies here, you'd be mistaken – at the foot of the resort, on a private 900m stretch of sand, sits the jewel in Baha Mar's crown: Baha Bay.

**Attractions:** The water park, which opened in 2021, boasts 42 attractions, including 24 slides, a 500,000-gallon wave pool and a surf simulator. Guests at the Grand Hyatt enjoy free, unlimited access to Baha Bay. There are 100 daily tickets set aside for people who aren't staying at the hotel, but these get snapped up pretty quickly. As I explore the park, it's easy to see why.

**Thrills and spills:** Kids will love Turtle Beach and Stingray Cove, where a rainbow of pint-sized slides and a water fight battle zone make for a miniature water park paradise. The star of the show for adrenaline seekers has to be the Thunderball, which sends riders

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down a near-vertical drop at speeds of up to 25mph. After climbing the six storeys, my advice would be to not look down. For something a little tamer, hop in a rubber ring and cruise through the park's tropical foliage on The River as it winds through 400m of twists and turns.

**Stylish stays:** With such impressive amenities, expectations are high for the five-star accommodation. Luckily, the Grand Hyatt Baha Mar doesn't disappoint. Each of the 1,800 rooms is kitted out with either one king bed or two queens, plus a Juliet or full-sized balcony. From my balcony, I enjoy sweeping views of the calm Caribbean waters, while guests on the opposite side of the building overlook the impressive fountain display, which comes to life with a dazzling nightly show of lights and music. There's also the option of connecting rooms that sleep a maximum of six, giving families and small groups more flexibility and a total floor space of up to 87square metres.

**Book it:** Major Travel offers seven nights' room-only ➤

BEST  
OF THE  
*Rest*

### COUPLES' RETREAT

For a romantic getaway, recommend the newly renovated **Sandals Royal Bahamian**. This adult-only hotel boasts lavish swim-up suites, six pools and 10 gourmet restaurants. But the real highlight is Barefoot Cay, the resort's private island. A five-minute boat ride is all it takes to reach the island's pristine beaches, swim-up bar and luxury spa.



### FULL OF CHARACTER

In the centre of vibrant downtown Nassau, the boutique **Graycliff Hotel** is steeped in history. The building dates back to 1740 and features 16 charming guest rooms. There's also a chocolatier that offers tours and tasting sessions, and a cigar factory where visitors can learn the art of cigar rolling.

### BOUTIQUE LUXURY

**Goldwynn Resort & Residences**, which opened this year, has a prime location on Cable Beach. Recommend Goldwynn to clients seeking luxury on a smaller scale – there are 81 guest rooms and suites, plus a beachfront infinity pool and sophisticated spa.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: The Royal at Atlantis; Graycliff Hotel wine cellar; Fish restaurant by José Andrés; the Queen's Staircase provides direct access from Nassau to Fort Fincastle PICTURES: Ron Starr; Liz Clayman; Tadeu Brunelli;

Nassau Paradise Island Promotion Board

at the Grand Hyatt from £1,165 per person, based on two adults and two under-12s sharing, including flights departing August 26, 2024. [major.travel](http://major.travel)

**THE ROYAL AT ATLANTIS**

**Foodie favourite:** As soon as I enter the grand lobby of The Royal at Atlantis, I see that it truly is fit for royalty. Golden shells are carved into domed ceilings, while intricately designed statues pay homage to the Greek mythology from which the resort takes its name. No wonder The Royal has become one of the Bahamas' most famous landmarks. With its status as an A-list property, it's only right that The Royal boasts a roster of A-list chefs to match, making it a paradise for foodies.

**Famous faces:** World-class eateries fronted by Michelin-starred chefs aren't hard to come by at Atlantis. Fish by José Andrés is a seafood lover's dream, while new addition Paranza, led by chef Michael White, serves innovative pasta dishes inspired by Italian coastal culture. Silan will join the ranks in 2024, with celebrity chef Alon Shaya at the helm. In the heart of the sprawling Atlantis casino, Shaya will fuse his Israeli heritage with traditional Bahamian flavours in dishes such as marinated conch and za'atar fried chicken.

**Crowd-pleasers:** There are 42 eateries, and with rotating menu options, there's a seemingly infinite number of dining venues. New to the roster of casual

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eateries is Shake Shack – the fast-food chain's first outlet in the Caribbean. Since July, it has been serving burgers with a Bahamian flair from its prime location on the Royal Deck, adjacent to aquarium The Dig. Inside, floor-to-ceiling windows allow diners to get up close and personal with some of the 250 species of marine life that reside in the tanks.

**Royal renovations:** Each of the 1,201 rooms and suites at The Royal at Atlantis, including the famous 10-bedroom Bridge Suite, were renovated earlier this year in celebration of the hotel's 25th anniversary. There are sumptuous queen and king beds and every room comes with a terrace, harbour or water view. The rooms can sleep up to four, while larger groups can opt for one of the suites (the Grand and Regal Suites have the highest occupancy of eight), or request connecting rooms.

**Book it:** Caribtours offers seven nights at The Royal at Atlantis in June 2024 from £3,355, including transfers, UK lounge access and flights departing June 12, 2024. [caribtours.co.uk](http://caribtours.co.uk)

4 OF THE BEST

**THINGS TO DO IN NASSAU**

**Visit the Educulture Junkanoo Museum**

This interactive museum showcases the Bahamian tradition of Junkanoo – an exuberant parade that began as a celebration of slaves' three-day Christmas break. Original costumes, music and a look into the tradition's history are all on offer at the museum.

**Climb the Queen's Staircase**

A trip to Nassau isn't complete without going up – or down – the Queen's Staircase. These 66 steps were hand-hewn by slaves to provide direct access to Fort Fincastle, and are still standing today for visitors who want to explore the island's complex history.

**Blend your own wine**

There are more than 250,000 wine bottles in the Graycliff Hotel's cellar, and visitors can add to this collection with their own custom blend. Budding sommeliers can create something unique and, because the recipe stays on file forever, they can enjoy a glass of their own blend in the hotel's restaurant at any time.

**Explore Clifton Heritage National Park**

Take to one of the meandering walking trails to spot native songbirds or simply enjoy the panoramic views from the clifftop. One of the best ways to explore is with a snorkel. Those who venture beneath the waves will discover shipwrecks and striking sculptures and statues.