



BURT WOLF TRAVELS & TRADITIONS THE GRAND BAHAMAS

The most northerly of the islands of the Bahamas lies about a hundred and fifty miles off the east coast of Florida, at about the same latitude as Palm Beach. There are over seven hundred islands in the Bahama chain, and they swing down to the southeast until they come to an end just above the Dominican Republic.

When Christopher Columbus finally hit land in the New World it was one of the tiny islands of the Bahamas that he banged into. Spanish explorers following Columbus called the area *Baja Mar* which means the shallow sea. Eventually the islands came to be known as the Bahamas.

Today it is one of the most popular resorts in the western hemisphere. It has some of the finest beaches...



places for scuba diving... boating... deep-sea fishing... duty-free shopping... gaming... and spots to just hang out.

The first people to live in the area were known as the Lucayans (which means people of the islands). By all accounts they were a friendly group. They had started out about two-thousand years ago in South America and moved north through the Caribbean. One of the reasons they kept moving was to avoid another tribe known as the Caribs. The Caribs, like so many modern nutritionists, believed that the more different foods you included in your diet the healthier you would be. The Caribs included the *Lucayans* in their diet. And that's one of the reasons that the word cannibal is found in the languages of Europe. Unfortunately when the Spanish showed up, things did not get better. The Lucayans got out of the food chain only to find themselves

in the chains of slavery. Within twenty-five years they had all died and the islands were deserted.

Back in England, the king had become head of the Anglican Church and he thought that everyone should follow him. The Puritan congregations, however, preferred to follow God without the king as a middle man. The king made life difficult for the Puritans, and many of them decided to look for a new place to live. Some of the Puritans that left England ended up on Plymouth Rock and founded Massachusetts. The Puritans who were in Bermuda were also being persecuted by the English government, and they escaped to the Bahamas. In 1647 they formed this nation's first permanent settlement of Europeans.

The next meaningful migration took place during the last decades of the 1700's. It was made-up of American colonists who had decided to stay loyal to the King of England and wanted to have nothing to do with the newly formed United States of America. The Loyalists who arrived here came with their slaves and enhanced the racial mixture of the islands. Then, in 1843 the British Empire decided to abolish slavery, and much to the credit of all of the Bahamians there was an easy transition to a British colony made up of free citizens.

In 1973, after more than 250 years under British rule, the Bahamas became an independent nation. Today it has a



democratically elected government, a stable society, and a prospering economy. But figuring out how to make a living in the Bahamas was not always a simple task.

Most of the islands in this part of the world have a volcanic base which gives them a soil that is ideal for agriculture. The Bahamas, however, are formed from limestone with very little topsoil. This is not an easy place for farming. And that has influenced the history of the Bahamas in some ways that are positive and in some that are not so positive.



Without the ability to grow sugar cane which was the major cash crop for the early European colonies in the Caribbean, the

Bahamians turned to other businesses. For hundreds of years the major local occupation was the salvaging of wrecked ships. These were dangerous waters, and thousands of boats went down on the reefs surrounding these islands. The locals made a living by salvaging what they could.

They also realized that they could improve their business by shifting the shore lights so instead of directing a ship to a safe passage, the light would send the vessel into a rock that was conveniently located for the salvage team. Efficiency has always been important to a well-run business.

Now, some of the salvagers felt that waiting for a ship to get into trouble, even if they helped it along, was just inefficient. They wanted to salvage the ship and everything on it *before* it wrecked. Now, if you did that for a ship that was from your own country, it was called piracy. But if you did it for a ship from an enemy country it was called privateering and that was a totally legitimate business. As a matter of fact, many of the great heroes of the British navy were actually privateers and the Bahamas became a major center for the business. The Spanish would come along and steal the gold from the Native American tribes. They'd put it on their galleons and sail it back to Spain. As they passed the Bahamas, the English privateers would come out and try and get the gold from the Spanish. When they got it, the pirates showed up and tried to steal it from the English. What a business.

The next significant commercial development for the Bahamas came during the War Between the States. The navy of the north tried to block the major ports of the south. Bahamian ship owners made great fortunes by running the blockade, bringing in food and military supplies and taking out cotton.

The end of The War Between The States put an end to the blockade running business.

But, you know, blockade running is a lot like bicycle riding, you can not practice for years and years, then you get back on and your skill level is right there. When the U.S. federal government passed the 18th Amendment to the Constitution, outlawing the manufacture and consumption of alcoholic beverages, many people along the east coast of the United States who did not agree with that law, and many people who owned boats in the Bahamas began to sing the same song. "Seems like old times..."



VACATION PARADISE

The idea of taking a vacation in a warm and sunny spot by the sea goes back for thousands of years. Ancient documents show that over two-thousand years ago, the well-to-do of Rome were heading to the seashore near Naples when they needed a break. The first person to try and put the Bahamas on the vacation map was a man named Henry Flagler.



During the 1800s, Flagler had put together the railroads of Florida and the tourist industry that went along with them. He felt that he could do the same in the

Bahamas by setting up the Miami-Nassau steamship line and building a new hotel in Nassau to receive his passengers. Nice try, but too early. Neither made enough money to stay in business - - but the idea of making Nassau into a vacation paradise hung on.

During the Roaring Twenties the magnificent private yachts of the great industrialists cruised into Nassau. The Whitneys, the Vanderbilts, the Astors, if it floated, and you wanted to flaunt it, Nassau was the place.

And then, in 1940, the ultimate seal of approval for the rich: a royal resident. The Duke of Windsor, the ex-king of England, became governor of the Bahamas. He was fashionable. He was elegant. He had given up the job of king to marry Wallis Simpson, an American. He was media perfect. And the Bahamas became the jewel in the crown of vacation spots.

NASSAU

The island of New Providence may not be at the geographic center of the Bahamas but its capital city of Nassau is clearly the political, economic and tourist hub of the nation. Much of the architecture is from the 1800s, including the public buildings which were the original structures housing the Court, the Legislature, the Assembly, other government officials and the Post Office.



The Nassau Public Library was built in 1798 as a prison. Today it holds a collection of books and photographs that deal with the Bahamas.

Government House was built in 1901 as the official residence of the Queen's representative in the Bahamas. In front is a statue of Christopher Columbus trying to figure out the right direction for the rest of his trip.

The first permanent colony of Europeans in the Bahamas came in search of religious freedom, and that is certainly one of the hallmarks of this nation.

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church was built in 1810.

The St. Francis Roman Catholic Church was the first Catholic Church built in the Bahamas. It was constructed in 1885.

The Greek Orthodox Church is rather new. It was built by the Greek community in the 1930s. A substantial number of Greeks had come to the Bahamas to set-up a natural sponge

industry, which unfortunately came to an end as the result of a sponge blight. The sponges were gone, but the Greeks stayed on to soak up the sun.

FAMILY ISLANDS

The Bahamas are a group of 2,700 coral islands. Most of them are small and uninhabited -- little strips of land scattered in a chain that starts off the coast of Florida, and runs down to the tip of Haiti.



But there's another side to these islands, a side which is quieter, softer and gentler. A side that will allow you to leave the commercial world behind and just relax. A side that is found on what are known as the family islands.

The first European to arrive on a family island in the Bahamas was Christopher Columbus. He looked around, didn't see any gold and moved on. And that was pretty much the story for everyone else who came by. "No gold? No silver? No treasures? Hey! Let's go!"

The first settlers to show up in the Bahamas with the intention of setting up a permanent colony were a group of Puritans who came down here from Bermuda in 1649. They were looking for a place where they would be free to practice their religion -- the same situation that sent a different group of Puritans out of England to establish a colony in Massachusetts. The group that came here were under the leadership of Captain William Sayle. They were known as the Eleutheran Adventurers. *Eleuthera* is the Greek word for freedom.

Their ship was wrecked on the reef out there, but they were lucky enough to be able to make their way to this shore. Their search for shelter led them to a cave just off the beach. They had lost most of their supplies when the ship went down, and were forced to live, as best they could, off the land and the sea. This cave was their only shelter.

Captain Sayle built himself a small sailboat, and with eight of his men headed off to get help from the British colony in Jamestown, Virginia. And,

amazingly, he pulled it off. He returned with enough supplies to last the Eleutherans for two years, at which time they needed help again. Not wanting to tap the same source too often, his second request was made to the British colony in Massachusetts. They responded by sending a shipload of supplies and the Eleutherans thanked them by sending back a shipload of hardwood and a request that some of the proceeds from the sale of the hardwood be used to support the development of Harvard University.



The Eleutheran Adventurers used this cave not only as a place of shelter but as a place of worship. They carved this rock into a

form that could be used as a pulpit and conducted their services. With its cathedral shape and light shining down from the holes in the top of the cave, it's easy to see why they thought themselves blessed. Today it's called Preacher's Cave.

As the early settlers began to spread out, they took up residence on an island called Spanish Wells. Spanish Wells is just off the northern tip of Eleuthera and it got its name because it was the spot where Spanish ships would stop to take on fresh water just before they made a quick right turn and headed back to Seville with the treasures that they had stolen from the local natives. Almost all of the people who live on Spanish Wells are descendants of the original Eleutherian Adventurers and most of them still speak with a distinct British accent.

Spanish Wells has the distinction of being the wealthiest community in the Bahamas, and they owe it all to changing



fashions in food. For about three hundred years, they tried to earn a living by bringing in

the local lobsters. But for 250 of those years, nobody really cared. Lobster was considered to be junk seafood. As a matter of fact, farmers along the Atlantic coast of North America would use lobsters as fertilizer on their farms. Then, in the early decades of this century, everything changed. Lobster became *the* seafood to eat. Supplies went down, prices went up, and the guys on Spanish Wells got rich. And if people continue to pay big prices for big lobsters, people on Spanish Wells will remain in ship shape.

And speaking of shapes, Eleuthera has a rather unusual one. It is 110 miles long and for most of that length it is only about a mile wide. At its widest point it only thickens out to about five miles. Its thinnest point is about five yards, which is a spot known as the Glass Window. On one side you have the Atlantic Ocean and on the other the Caribbean Sea. You can stand on this small bridge of land and see the difference between these two bodies of water. The Atlantic: aggressive, uninviting, often covered with waves and whitecaps. On the other side, the Caribbean: smooth, gentle, inviting you to pull up a beach chair and relax.



Beaches are Eleuthera's big attraction, miles and miles of them, one stretch more beautiful than the next and always uncrowded.

Most tourists to Eleuthera pass their days on Harbour Island. It's just off the coast of the mainland of Eleuthera and you get there by water taxi. The center of Harbour Island is Dunmore Town. It was named after Lord Dunmore, who was the Governor of the Bahamas during the late 1700s. Dunmore Town was once a center for shipbuilding, sugar processing, and the production of rum. The rum business was particularly successful during the period when the United States was under the influence of the Amendment to the Constitution -- the one that outlawed the manufacture and sale of alcoholic beverages. The law did not extend itself to Eleuthera but Eleuthera did extend its rum distribution to the United States, proving once again that a friend in need is a friend in deed.

I passed a day on Harbour Island walking through the streets, looking at the architecture, talking to the people, and enjoying the food.



One of the more unusual sights in Dunmore Town is called the Aura Corner. It's sort of like a giant collage of... well, it's like a collection of thoughts that... actually, it's whatever Ralph Sawyer wants it to be. Sawyer is the curator of Aura Corner. Uncle Ralph, as he's called, collects slogans, sayings, words of wisdom, whatever. He gets them from the visitors who stop by. Then he



paints them on wooden slats and hangs them up in front of his house. And anyone can leave a memento of their own -- hey, Jimmy Buffett did. My favorite is Uncle Ralph's

Recipe For A Happy Marriage: 3 cups of love... one cup of forgiveness... one barrel of laughter -- a recipe! How appropriate.

I began my gastronomic day with a traditional Bahamian breakfast at Angela's Starfish Restaurant -- pineapple juice, yellowtail fish on grits, and johnnycakes. Angela Johnson, who runs the place, is also an expert on the science -- and the art -- of using everyday plants as medicines.

If you take a mid-morning coffee break, the place to do it is Arthur's Bakery.

ROBERT ARTHUR ARTHUR'S BAKERY

Basically, we do about thirty different items every morning. Our mainstay is bread. We start with a base of the Bahamian white bread -- we do a lot of Bahamian white bread -- and then we do interesting things with it. We do a cinnamon raisin bread, we add jalapeño and cheese to it, we do jalapeño-cheese bread, herbal bread, coconut bread, and that's the basis of our breads. We do a nice

baguette, and then we get into the pastries. We do Danishes, donuts, cookies, cakes, pies -- we do an excellent key lime pie. We began in



our house. My wife enjoyed making cheesecakes. She was an accountant and she was bored, so she started baking cheesecakes. Other people on the island had heard about these wonderful cheesecakes and they started ordering cheesecakes from her. The people at the Pink Sands Hotel, they heard about it, and they asked if she would come work for them as a baker. And she said, "No, I don't want to work for anyone, I'd sell you my goods, though." And we started baking out of our little house for the Pink Sands Hotel and other customers, and that's how Arthur's Bakery got started.

Well, if Pink Sands is good enough for Arthur's Bakery, it is certainly good enough for our lunch. It has a three-mile private stretch of pink beach; it's pink because of the coral deposits that have broken down and washed ashore. The resort also has some of the best and most imaginative food in the Bahamas. The specialties include Tandoori Chicken Spring Rolls with a tamarind and guava dip. Marinated Black Tiger Shrimp on mixed greens with caramelized tropical fruit. And a warm tuna salad.

THE DIVING DOG

The water taxi from Eleuthera crosses the harbor in four minutes and ends up at the dock of the Romora Bay Club. There are thirty-eight small houses on the property, lots of



local vegetation, a few tennis players, and a very laid-back main lounge. As a matter of fact, the whole place is laid-back and quiet.

Everyone I saw at Romora Bay was taking it easy, with the exception of the guests that were

taking to the sea. Romora Bay has an exceptional water sports program, under the direction of Jeff Fox and his diving dog.

**JEFF FOX
ROMA BAY CLUB**

This is the famous diving dog.

We do an introductory Scuba program here that teaches people to dive in shallow water. And during the shallow water diving section, he would swim out and circle the divers as they were down below. Eventually, one day we were teaching, and he swam by. He just dove down, swam by, went on up -- which obviously caught everybody's attention. And we've progressed from that point using weights or swimming masks -- anything that we could -- to get him to retrieve. He would swim out, circle, and eventually go down to get it.

And we'd move it deeper, and deeper, until he finally got down to close to twenty feet. So at some point he actually had to grasp the idea of holding his breath...

He coordinates a running, jumping entry, times his breath hold, fights his way down against the buoyancy of the saltwater, and picks up, sometimes, a four-pound lead weight. So, we tell everyone, if they can do that, they're certified.

PINEAPPLES

For many years Eleuthera was a major center for pineapple production. It has a number of large pineapple plantations and because the pineapples are allowed to ripen slowly without chemical assistance they're extremely sweet.



FRANCES THOMPSON

There are two different kinds of pineapples, so the pineapples that you get in the Bahamas are not the pineapples you would get in the United States.

So there is a difference. In the United States, they're from Hawaii and they're very chewy; they have less juice. But the ones you get from the Bahamas, they are very meaty, and they have a lot

of juice, and they are very sweet. They don't grow as big as the ones that you get in Hawaii, but they taste one hundred percent better.

Every June, Eleuthera has a pineapple festival during which they celebrate the history, folklore, and culture of the pineapple. There is an Olympic-like Pine-a-thon in which they do a little running, and a little swimming, and a little bicycle riding. There are pineapple growing contests, and pineapple cooking contests, and the dreaded whole pineapple bobbing contest.

Pineapples have been cultivated in the Caribbean for thousands of years. Scientists have reached that conclusion because the Caribbean pineapple no longer produces seeds, and that is a sign that the fruit has been farmed by man for so long that it no longer feels responsible for its own reproduction. Talk about getting lazy.

TO LEARN MORE . . .

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