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# Travel

The New York Times

# We're All Boomers Now

From backpacking to glamping, the postwar generation has long determined travel options. This year it's truer than ever.

By STEPHANIE ROSENBLOOM

Big font. Easy-to-print pages. Luxury hotels that can be sorted by amenities like cooking lessons and connecting suites. If you find yourself enjoying the carefully planned features on Preferredfamily.com, you have the baby boomer generation to thank.

From new hotel Web sites to shorter cruises to smaller tours, the travel in-

dustry is redoubling its efforts this year to win the hearts and wallets of people between the ages of 49 and 67.

It's a generation that, given its size (about 26 percent of the population) and its collective wealth (it controls the lion's share of the country's disposable income), has been shaping the nation's travel choices for decades. Your lost summer backpacking through Europe? Thank the boomers who in the 1960s and '70s made

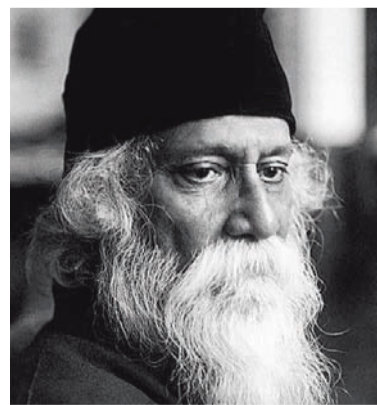
shoestring student trips to Europe de rigueur. Your naughty romp at Club Med? It was the boomers who propelled the singles resort scene to its apotheosis in the 1970s. Your posh room at the Copacabana Palace in the 1990s? Fueled by boomers' appetite for luxury hotels.

Yet when the economy tanked in 2008, boomers began snapping their wallets shut and stowing their luggage in their closets instead of airplane bins, helping to

send the travel industry into a tailspin. Now, five years later, with the economy showing signs of recovery and the first wave of boomers retiring, many travel companies have declared a New Year's resolution: seduce the boomer. (Again.)

Whether it's a yen for Wi-Fi in the Serengeti or a disdain for bus tours, boomers' latest needs, whims and aspirations are determining 2013's large and small vaca-

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## A Poet's Place

One Hundred Miles From Kolkata, Tagore's Dream Lives On.

BY ERIC WEINER, PAGE 5.

## Off the Tourist Grid in the Bahamas

Island-hopping on mail boats, trading lido decks for local secrets.

By PORTER FOX

Waves rolled through the night, pitching the ship from side to side. From the bridge deck, the white sand beaches of the Exumas glowed blue-white under the starlight, and the rising moon spread a thin layer of silver over the sea. A few miles north, toward our destination in Nassau, lightning flickered.

I was on a freighter heading through the Bahamas. The sweeping view couldn't have been more different from the one on deck: shrink-wrapped palettes cradled cinderblocks, baby diapers and bottled water



SARA MAYTTI

obsured the bow; oiled two-by-eight planks concealed crates of produce, furniture and hardware stowed in the cargo hold. Amidships, a 70-foot crane was lashed to a steel boom crutch. Tucked away in private cabins behind the wheelhouse, two dozen passengers slept soundly.

The ship was one of 15 government-contracted mail boats that deliver provisions, passengers and a few adventurous tourists to the Out Islands, the hundreds of remote islands beyond the tourist and

CONTINUED ON PAGE 6

ISLAND IMMERSION Sunset over estuaries on the island of Andros, known for its abundance of bonefish.

# Off the Tourist Grid in the Bah



**FROM AFAR AND UP CLOSE**  
From top, the Exumas, and house on Governor's Harbour on Eleuthera. Right, workers loading cargo onto the Grand Master mail boat, which the writer took on the first leg of his trip, at Elizabeth Harbour in George Town, on Great Exuma.

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commercial centers of New Providence, Grand Bahamas and Paradise Islands. My boat was one of three mail boats that I took on a six-day, 350-mile journey last spring to explore the Bahamas the way Bahamians do. I had vacationed in the islands several times before, usually cooped up in a resort with every amenity a guest could dream up, and I'd long wanted to get beyond the more touristed areas. Mail boats have been the primary means of inter-island travel for locals for more than a century and seemed the perfect way to do it. There are no tour guides or lido deck, and the nighttime entertainment consists largely of gazing at a starry sky over the drone of a diesel engine. But for a shockingly cheap ticket (from \$45), passengers can get a meal, a bed and one thing that eludes even the most dogged Caribbean traveler: immersion in authentic Bahamian culture.

Like any respectable seafarer, I kept a log. What follows is an account of the journey, which covers towns, bars and beaches largely uncharted by guidebooks.

**Leg 1: Grand Master from George Town, Great Exuma, to Nassau, New Providence. 14 hours; 150 miles.**

The Out Islands are made up of more than 700 islands, many of them belonging to particular archipelagos or chains. Each chain is served by its own mail boat system, and because I was vacationing with friends in the Exumas, I started my exploration there. A resident told me about a mail boat heading to Nassau, and I was soon onboard a ship listening to Capt. Lance Brozozog outline our loose itinerary: cross the Tropic of Cancer at sunset; bisect the 360-island Exuma archipelago through a 150-foot-wide channel at midnight; arrive in Nassau sometime after dawn. Mr. Brozozog knows the route well. Since he was a boy, the 41-year-old Bahamian has been loading the Grand Master with food, water, tools, scrap metal and every other provision that helps to keep the Exuma Islands operating.

My room, which was the size of a typical train sleeper compartment, was filled with some of those provisions: screen doors, crates of juice and a half-dozen packages addressed to recipients in Nassau — name and phone number only. There were three other berths in the room, but since the ship wasn't full I had it to myself.

After leaving my bags, I wandered on deck, where Mr. Brozozog chatted with passengers over the din of the big diesel engines rumbling to life. As the sun set he shared some of his own history, which included growing up on nearby Staniel Cay and the honor of captaining one of the most famous crossings in the Exumas: in 2006 he piloted (by remote control) the Black Pearl while Johnny Depp clung to the wheel during the filming of "Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End."

He also threw in a recommendation for a hotel that I'd use later, as did several other islanders onboard: go to the hotel at Junkanoo Beach; visit the food shacks on Potter's Cay in Nassau; avoid Paradise Island at all costs.

Our own meal — served on paper plates — was a Bahamian favorite: barbecued chicken with peas and rice. Afterward, I retired to my cabin for the night, but it soon became clear that, thanks to its location just over the engine room, it would be intolerably hot. At midnight I took the cushion off my bed and dragged it to the upper deck where I was rewarded with a cool breeze and a view of that stunning moonrise and a shooting star falling through the Big Dipper.

**Leg 2: Port of Call: Nassau, New Providence. Four hours.**

The next morning Captain Brozozog steered the Grand Master around two Jet Skis, a tourist excursion boat and a cluster of dilapidated steel freighters, before par-

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY SARA MAYTI (LOADING DOCK, PASSENGERS, M

allel parking between two ships with 20 feet to spare on either side. Our destination, Potter's Cay, home port for the mail boats in Nassau, looked the part: it was crowded with rows of shipping containers, stacks of cardboard boxes and fishermen cleaning snapper and conch. A half-dozen mail boats lined the key, all of which were contracted to make a weekly or biweekly run to one of the major Out Islands. Most return directly to Nassau. The trick to touring the islands, Mr. Brozozog had told me, is finding a boat that lays over for a couple of days or visits twice a week, allowing you to stay for a few nights and catch a ride back.

Then he told me that there weren't any mail boats scheduled to leave Potter's Cay for days.

I'd learned on previous trips that schedules, assurances and even time itself were abstract concepts in the Bahamas, so I walked the docks anyway, asking if any boats were leaving — for anywhere. An old man standing beside a stack of lumber told me that the Island Link would sail for Eleuthera at noon that day. The cleaning woman on the Island Link told me it would leave at 3 p.m. Dockmaster Craig Curtis said he thought the ship was departing in two days.

Then I found Conrad Sweating, who owns the boat and was selling tickets in a tiny blue shack with his grandson. He said that the boat would actually leave that day, at 1 p.m. Then he sold me a \$90 round-trip ticket and booked me a hotel room and a rental car through his cousin with a single phone call. "Mr. Green will be waiting for you at the dock," he said.

I spent the next four hours walking among the wooden food stalls I'd been directed to by passengers on the Grand Master. Cooks mixed diced conch with onions, sweet pepper, celery and lime juice into what was rumored to be the best conch salad in the Bahamas. Across the street, I bought mangoes and bananas from a row of tarp-covered vegetable stands.

**Leg 3: Island Link from Nassau to Hatchet Bay, Eleuthera. Five hours; 60 miles.**

The Island Link wasn't close to leaving at 1 p.m., but I boarded anyway, edging past a man trying to back a Buick LeSabre up the slick ramp and a forklift loaded with pallets of toilet paper trying to get around him. An hour later the crew cast off, and the captain steered the ship through the narrow slot separating Potter's from Paradise Island. The 130-foot catamaran was newer and faster than the Grand Master — was able to cruise around 13 miles per hour compared with 8 — and had an enclosed passengers' lounge with airplane-style seats, a snack bar and a 50-inch flat screen



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seemingly programmed with Queen Lati-fah's filmography. Wind and rain whipped the windows as the boat pulled away from Nassau. I fell asleep in my seat, and five hours later saw the bowling green coast of Eleuthera rise up from the ocean.

Mr. Green, a sweatshirt hood cinched around his face to protect it from the rain, was waiting with about 50 other islanders when we docked. He waved me down, hustled me into a gold Jeep Cherokee, and in 10 minutes we were in Gregory Town, a tiny settlement with a few restaurants, bars, a gift shop and a liquor store, which happened to be the only place to swipe a credit card. So he hopped out, billed me for both the hotel and the rental car, and pointed me to Daddy Joe's hotel three miles north. "See you in a couple of days," he said.

**Leg 4: Port of call: Gregory Town, Eleuthera. Two days.**

Bahamians refer to the limestone-crusted Out Islands as the Family Islands, because they look like a family surrounding Nassau. But there's a second meaning. Residents on the Family Islands stick together, live a life largely independent from foreigners and are, for the most part, related.

Three centuries after Columbus is said to have made landfall in the Out Islands in 1492, the indigenous people had been either wiped out or shipped to Hispaniola, and the largely deserted land was settled by British loyalists and their slaves, whose ancestors make up most of the Bahamas' residents. Today, almost everyone in the country shares a few dozen last names — Rolle, Nixon, Wells — inherited from British slaveholders.

# amas



PHOTOGRAPHS BY: ETHEL DAVIES/ROBERT HARDING, VIA NEWS.COM (BEACH JETTY); MICHAEL DEFREITAS/DANITADELMONT.COM, VIA NEWS.COM (EXUMAS); GREG JOHNSTON/LONELY PLANET IMAGES—ZUMA PRESS.COM, VIA NEWS.COM (HOUSES)



**HEADING OUT** From top, passengers on the boat leaving Elizabeth Harbour; on Government Dock, Elizabeth Harbour. Bottom left, beach and jetty near George Town, on Great Exuma.

**Leg 5: Island Link from Eleuthera to Potter's Cay, Nassau. Five hours; 60 miles.**

It was Sunday afternoon, and the boat was packed with weekenders returning to Nassau, so I sat on a bench on the bow. Everything was golden and blue except for the white hull cutting through the waves. I fell asleep, and when I woke the sky was so full of stars it was hard to make out a single constellation. It was chilly, too, so I sprang for a \$30 sleeper cabin. At midnight, I woke to a woman standing in the doorway, saying, "We've reached ... we've reached."

**Leg 6: The Captain Moxey from Potter's Cay, Nassau, to Drigg's Hill, Andros. Seven hours; 65 miles.**

Back in Nassau, I realized I had time for one more trip, so I spent a few frustrating hours on the Internet looking at my options, finally settling on the Captain Moxey to Andros, one of two mail boats that were leaving that day.

The 68-year-old captain, Boycel Moxey, holds the record as the youngest ship captain to have been certified in the Bahamas. (He was 18 when he passed the Grade A Master's Test.) He was my final guide, filling me in on the state of mail boats while his crew stacked pallets of mayonnaise, potato chips and Styrofoam plates on the bow. Mr. Moxey said the mail boat fleet had thinned considerably in the last 15 years, mostly because the freighters were outdated and government subsidies that largely finance them hadn't kept pace with spiking fuel costs. They faced new competitors, too: catamarans, known as "fast ferries," that are even more modern and faster than the Island Link, traveling 17 miles per hour and using far less fuel. The government recently allowed them to start carrying mail. "I'm not sure how much longer we can keep this up," he said.

The ship was full that night, and for \$45 I shared my cabin with a giant man named "Jolly" whose snore matched his frame. I got up at 2 a.m. and climbed to the bridge deck to see the stars and the eerie blue hue of the 6,000-foot-deep trench called Tongue of the Ocean we were steaming over. An older man from Andros sat outside the wheelhouse, and I asked him about the boats and if he'd ever made the trip by plane. "Never been on a plane," he said. "I like the smooth ride."

**Leg 7: Port of call: Drigg's Hill, South Andros. One day.**

The Captain Moxey reached at 7 a.m. at Drigg's Hill, an unfrequented outpost on South Andros. There were two resorts in town, but one was closed and the other charged affluent bone fishermen \$800 a night. So I loaded into a taxi with three women, 200 feet of PVC tubing, 10 cardboard boxes and a frozen red snapper wrapped in a plastic shopping bag and headed to the Coral Reef Inn, which is owned by the first mate's cousin.

As far as I could tell, the Coral Reef sits exactly in the middle of nowhere, and soon I was swimming along a pristine beach in water so clear I could see 20 feet in front of me.

That night, I headed out with the inn owner's son, Troy, to the Player's Club, an empty building across the street containing a wall of liquor bottles and 12 computer terminals for online gaming. I had stretched my vacation a bit too far and decided then and there that it was time to head home. I booked a flight to Nassau through Troy's friend at the bar. (The baggage handler, mechanic and ticket agent were also there.)

Four Cherry Bombs and one night later I was on a plane. Below me I could see mangroves and spidery tidal estuaries; ahead, sky and sea. An uneasy feeling came over me. The passengers were either asleep or reading the paper. No one spoke. Three thousand feet below, the ocean rushed past.

**ISLAND-BY-ISLAND CHEAT SHEET**

In case you can't work up the nerve to improvise your entire vacation based on locals' recommendations, here are a few suggestions for visiting (and staying) on the various islands served by mail boats.

**NASSAU, NEW PROVIDENCE**  
**The Junkanoo Beach Resort** (West Bay Street; 242-322-1515; [nassaujunkanooresort.com](http://nassaujunkanooresort.com)) is across the street from a gorgeous beach and has rooms from \$79, with free Wi-Fi.  
**Charles's Place** at Nassau Stadium (Fowler Street off East Bay Street; 242-394-0300), an old professional boxing ring turned cafe, is where the finest eggs and johnnycake in town can be found.

**ELEUTHERA**  
**Daddy Joe's** (Queen's Highway North; 242-335-5688), a hotel and bar in Gregory Town, below, is the best pick for food and fun on Eleuthera.



**ANDROS**  
**Dick Birch's 1960 Small Hope Bay Lodge** (Fresh Creek; 242-368-2014; [smallhope.com](http://smallhope.com)) is one of the highest-rated and most down-to-earth places to spend the night in the Bahamas.

**EXUMAS**  
**Poor Man's** at the George Town fish fry, a mile north of town on the Queen's Highway, draws plenty of locals.

For food on any island, ask where the local fish fry is. You'll be steered to a group of shacks near the fishing pier that specialize in steamed fish, conch salad and souse (Bahamian soup).



Tiffany Johnson, manager of Daddy Joe's hotel and soon-to-be personal guide, is from one of those families. She told me that each island chain is distinct and passionately independent. Spanish Wells is the lobster capital; the Abacos are the most popular tourist destination; Andros is the bone-fishing hub; the Exumas are the domain of celebrities like David Copperfield, Faith Hill and Tim McGraw. The islands share a similar dialect — work is "woik," "reached" means arrived, "sip-sip" means gossip — but each maintains a distinct identity, as well as its own municipal government, and all are competitive with one another. "You ought to hear them yelling at each other at Regatta," she said, referring to the interisland sailing competition held in George Town annually.

Tiffany gave me a tour of some local secrets, including the Queen's Bath, a set of natural stone pools cut into the island's Atlantic coastline, and Eleuthera Island Shores, a rustic commune on the east coast where a few dozen surfers and hippies live in geodesic domes and homemade shacks above Surfer's Beach, home to what locals

**For \$45 and a sense of adventure, you can know the Bahamas like a local.**

say are the best waves in the Caribbean. She took me to Diana "Lady Di" Thompson's pineapple farm next, owned by a 64-year-old who shared her experiences cultivating goats and pineapples on a homestead she started 30 years ago. "I signed the lease on a Tuesday and went into labor with my firstborn on Wednesday," she said.

Tiffany had to go shopping that afternoon — everyone shops the day after the mail boat arrives — so I went for a drive on Queen's Highway, the only north-south thoroughfare on 110-mile-long Eleuthera. I rolled past casuarina pines, coco plum bushes, limestone sea cliffs and Preacher's Cave, where the island's first settlers, English Puritans, gave sermons. At some point I realized I hadn't seen a tourist all day.

As the sun turned from yellow to a deep gold, I headed back to town and caught a

small ferry to Harbour Island, a 10-minute boat ride away. The colonial-era retreat was once known as the shipbuilding capital of the Bahamas but is now famous for the pink sand beaches on its eastern shore and snowbirds like Elle Macpherson and Diane von Furstenberg who winter there.

Tourists driving golf carts zipped over the coral-block streets of Dunmore Street when I got off the boat, ferrying children and grandparents through a labyrinth of clapboard hotels, restaurants and shops. Tiffany had said the food and drink on the island made it worth a visit, but after two days "on the mail" I was more interested in finding a local watering hole. I spent the evening somewhere in between, at a boutique bar she suggested called Blu Bungalow, where chilled Champagne and Campari cocktails were served alongside bruschetta on thick crusts of bread with fresh goat cheese, local basil and cherry tomatoes.

The next day I had to get to the dock for another boat to Nassau; the car-rental agent had told me to pick up Sidney Green "under the tree in town," which was ex-