

## Bahamas getaway provides retreat

Resort on Bahamas' Long Island provides a place in the sun without the hustle and bustle of other warm-weather locations

**David Wei**

Canwest News Service

'Oh, you makin' babies?' Taken aback, I stammered as I felt a warm flush come to my cheeks.

Susan Earley waited just long enough for me to feel uncomfortable, then laughed uproariously. We had just met Susan and her husband, Jack, travellers from Rhode Island, at Max's Conch Bar -- a veritable fixture on Long Island in the Bahamas. Susan explained that almost every time she or Jack ordered a conch dish, a server would ask them the same, rather personal question. Apparently, Long Islanders consider the local conch (a close relative of our own northern abalone) to be quite an aphrodisiac as well as delicious.



CREDIT: Handout photo  
Cape Santa Maria Beach Resort has a world-renowned six kilometres of exquisite, fine coral sand beach.

Suffering from a bad case of the winter blahs, my wife, Suzanne, and I were looking for a quiet place in the sun. We wanted somewhere with an uncrowded beach, no loud music, no beach vendors -- and definitely no motorized watercraft buzzing up and down the shore. Cape Santa Maria Beach Resort, on Long Island in the Bahamas, captured our imagination.

The Free and Sovereign Commonwealth of the Bahamas consists of 700 main islands, and about 2,500 smaller cays. The archipelago -- former coral reefs and atolls pushed above sea level by the collision of massive tectonic plates eons ago -- is spread over 160,000 square kilometres of the Atlantic Ocean, and stretches southeast some 1,200 kilometres from South Florida to within 80 kilometres of Cuba and Hispaniola.

One-hundred-thirty kilometres long and no more than eight kilometres wide, Long Island suits its name. The island lies north-south, straddling the Tropic of Cancer, and is a 45-minute flight southeast from Nassau, the nation's capital (and international airline hub) on New Providence Island.

Lucayan aboriginal peoples settled the island between 500 and 800 AD, naming it "Yuma." Christopher Columbus landed on the island in 1492. He claimed it for Spain and, to please his patrons, rechristened it "Fernandina." He also named the northernmost point Cape Santa Maria after one of his three legendary ships. At the cape today, a monument atop a high, windswept bluff commemorates Columbus' discovery but is also, touchingly, dedicated to the original Lucayan inhabitants.

Finding no riches, and having contributed to the extinction of the Lucayans, the colonial Spanish soon abandoned the Bahamas. The area remained a sparsely populated haven for pirates until British Loyalists established cotton plantations on the island after the American War of Independence, in the 1780s.

When the British declared an end to slavery in 1834, growing cotton was no longer economically viable on Long Island. Today, many of its 3,200 permanent residents are descended from plantation owners or their slaves.

Visitors to Long Island fall mainly into two camps. The waters around the island are noted for an abundant variety of sea life, attracting people who enjoy sportfishing, snorkelling, or scuba diving. Others love the remoteness of the island and its relatively light development for quieter, get-away-from-it-all vacations. While most of the guests at Cape Santa Maria Beach Resort fall into the latter category, the resort has a small fleet of boats that offer fishing, diving, and sightseeing excursions. Bert Adderley, one of the resort's top fishing guides, took us on a one-day bonefishing charter. I had to eat humble pie as Suzanne thoroughly trounced me by catching two of Long Island's famous bonefish to my none.

The resort is located on Galliot Cay, joined to Long Island by a causeway over a narrow tidal stream. Its buildings face west, overlooking the azure waters of Calabash Bay. The resort's 10 widely spaced duplex bungalows and four quadruplex villas are only steps from a magnificent six-kilometre sweep of coral-sand beach.

During the heat of the day, we could read in the shade of our beachfront gazebo. In the morning and late afternoon, Suzanne and I enjoyed the solitude of lazy walks along the wave-lapped shore. The only time we saw any number of other guests was when they gathered on the beach to watch the glorious sunsets, then retreated into the resort's Beach House Bar and Restaurant for a drink and supper.

The Queen's Highway, a good paved road with the occasional spectacular pothole, traverses Long Island from north to south. Renting a car is the best way to visit the island's many interesting sites. Because the island is so narrow, a visit to either its rugged Atlantic coast or sheltered western coast is just a few minutes' jaunt off the main highway.

Displayed prominently in the middle of our rental car's windshield, a decal proclaimed "KEEP LEFT" to remind North American drivers that the Bahamians drive on the left-hand side of the road. Luckily, there were no other cars nearby the two times I forgot. A loud warning emanating constantly from the right-hand seat also did wonders to keep me on the correct side of the road.

We drove through kilometres of tropical bush interspersed with trim, pastel-coloured bungalows in tiny communities boasting names like Burnt Ground, Alligator Bay, Salt Pond, and Scrub Hill. School buses picked up groups of smartly uniformed students, boys in blue pants and crisp white shirts, girls in blue or plaid skirts and white blouses. The island's two main airports are in the principal communities of Deadman's Cay and Stella Maris. Strangely, the island's only banks seem to be the Royal Bank of Canada and ScotiaBank.

With little tourism infrastructure, and few signs of any kind to name roads or significant attractions, sightseeing becomes quite an adventure. Trying to discover stops of interest is a reason to pray, and actually finding them a reason to celebrate. Luckily, there are numerous churches of every denomination along the route, and even more bars.

In the town of Hamilton's, we had arranged to meet with Leonard Cartwright, a genial grandfather, for a tour of a limestone cave on his family's property. Leonard's family settled on Long Island in the 1770s, and has owned the cave property since 1847.

The cave system, with some passages over 15 metres wide and three metres high, has never been fully explored. It extends from a hill just a few hundred metres east of the main road all the way to the ocean, kilometres away. For the most part, we were able to walk upright through a labyrinth of colourful stalactites and stalagmites, some with a dazzling dusting of salt crystals. Leonard recalls playing in the cave as a boy with his eight brothers, and hiding there from hurricanes. He showed us a stone basin where Lucayans once ground cassava roots, and nearby, a tiny natural spring of potable water. The floor of the cave is covered in a deep layer of reddish-brown soil rich in guano from five species of bats, which at times occupy the cave by the thousands.

We owed finding our next stop to Shenique, one of the resort's reception staff. She told us to watch for a low wall near the town of Dean's that had just been repainted from pink to white with blue trim. Without her advice, we would have blithely driven past the otherwise unmarked entrance to fabulous Dean's Blue Hole.

A blue hole is an underwater depression so deep that the waters turn a cold, dark blue. The one in Dean's is almost circular, and thought to be (at over 200 metres in depth) the second-deepest blue hole in the world. A jagged, semi-circular bluff wraps the east side of the blue hole, rising 20 or more metres, and effectively sheltering the hole from the Atlantic Ocean's pounding surf and prevailing east winds. Dean's Blue Hole is a wonderful place to dive or snorkel, take a refreshing swim, or just loll in the surrounding turquoise shallows.

In Deadman's Cay, we were intrigued by a line of flags lining the west side of the highway, then noticed "Max's Conch Bar" hand-lettered on a derelict car across the road. Nearby stood a wildly decorated open-air tavern where Max (a.k.a. Gary Ritchie) is reputed to have invented the conch salad.

Made fresh by Max himself, the salad -- a mixture of celery, sweet onions, red peppers, and loads of cubed conch, marinated in lime juice and served with a sprinkling of hot pepper flakes -- is absolutely delicious.

Near a community called The Bight, the roofless, weatherworn remains of St. Mary's Anglican Church (rumoured to be the oldest church in the Bahamas) glowed in the warm light of a late afternoon sun.

We would enjoy one more supper in Cape Santa Maria's restaurant before leaving Long Island. I gave the server our order: "To start, a conch salad and a conch chowder for me, and conch fritters for my wife. A main of cracked conch for me, and a conch burger for ...." Our waitress discretely said nothing, but a broad smile spread across her face.

## **IF YOU GO**

### **GETTING THERE**

Air Canada and Westjet offer flights to Nassau via Toronto. From Nassau, there are commuter flights to Long Island via:

#### **SOUTHERN AIR CHARTERS**

[www.southernaircharter.com](http://www.southernaircharter.com)

Phone: 242-335-1720

#### **BAHAMAS AIR**

[www.bahamasair.com](http://www.bahamasair.com)

Phone: 800-222-4262

Commuter airlines land at Deadman's Cay Airport for southern resorts, or Stella Maris Airport for northern resorts.

## **WHERE TO STAY**

### **LONG ISLAND RESORTS:**

#### **CAPE SANTA MARIA BEACH RESORT**

[www.capesantamaria.com](http://www.capesantamaria.com)

Phone: 800-663-7090

#### **STELLA MARIS RESORT CLUB**

[www.stellamarisresort.com](http://www.stellamarisresort.com)

Phone: 800-426-0466

#### **GEMS AT PARADISE**

[www.gemsatparadise.com](http://www.gemsatparadise.com)

Phone: 242-337-3016

## **CURRENCY**

The Bahamian dollar is pegged 1:1 to the American dollar. American dollars are accepted everywhere at par.

Outside of the resorts, use only cash, or USD traveller's cheques.

Money can be exchanged at ScotiaBank and Royal Bank of Canada branches in Stella Maris or Deadman's Key.

## **CAR RENTALS**

Car rentals cost between \$70 and \$90 per day, and you must return cars with a full tank of gas. Resorts will arrange to have rental cars brought to and picked up at the resort at no extra cost.

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