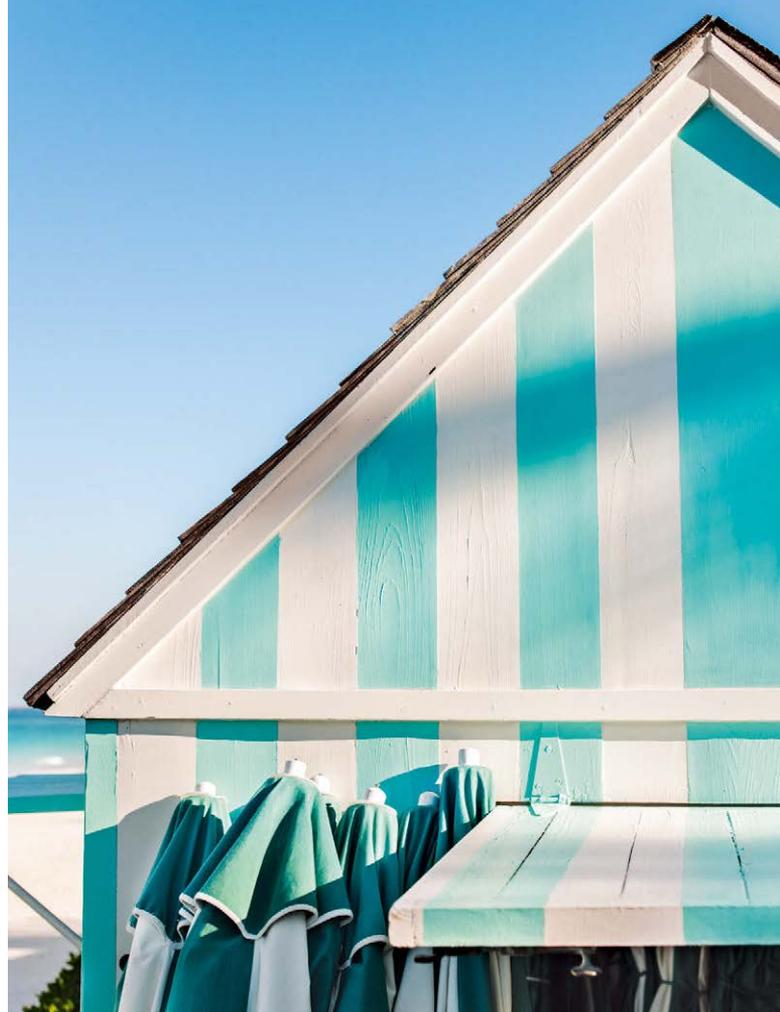
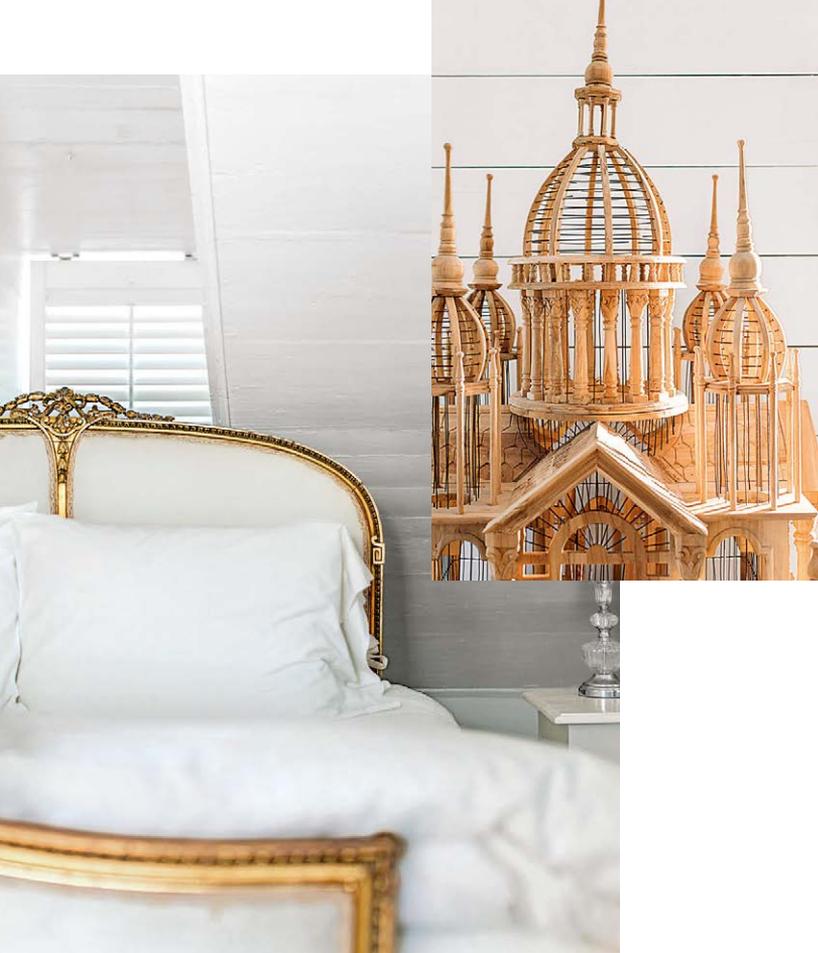


BAHAMAS ON MY MIND

A smart little corner of the Bahamas is suddenly in the spotlight because of its handful of incredibly chic new places to stay. **Vassi Chamberlain**, who's been coming to Harbour Island for over two decades, checks in

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANA LUI



I fell madly in love with the rakish Sixties elegance of the Bahamas the first time I saw *Thunderball*. I was only a child, yet imagined myself drinking Rum Dums at the bar of the Lyford Cay Club in Nassau, dressed in Valentino and smoking Kent Lights, with a teenage approximation of Sean Connery by my side.

So when, in August 1992, a friend invited me to go with her to the Bahamas, I accepted instantly. “In August—are you sure?” people asked me, as if going in the hottest and most hurricane-prone season was somehow a mistake. It wasn’t, it was perfect.

We were not heading for the capital, Nassau, but to Harbour Island (around 5km long and 1km wide), a 15-minute flight away. I remember the heat slapping me in the face as we disembarked in North Eleuthera, a neighbouring island with the area’s only airstrip. But I was happy. I was young and felt as if I was finally meeting my exotic destiny. After a taxi ride to a nearby bay that took roughly three

minutes, we boarded a water taxi for Harbour Island—an endless beach of the most unimaginably perfect coral-pink sand where the only mode of transport was (and still is) a golf buggy. That was 26 years ago. I’ve returned almost every year since.

Further south in the Caribbean, there is chic French St Barth’s, and even further, almost touching Venezuela, aristocratic British Mustique—both magnets for tropical glamour hunters for more than half a century. Harbour Island, on the other hand, has been a slow burner, an insider’s secret, lazily coming of age and stretching out its arms to visitors only recently. It’s really only known by sailing and fishing enthusiasts, a few fashionable New York regulars including Diane von Furstenberg, the Miller sisters, J Crew’s Mickey Drexler and Revlon tycoon Ron Perelman. They’ve built houses that have grown, over time, into sprawling compounds along the Narrows. The most deserted part of the island, it can only be reached by bumping along an

overgrown dirt track where hermit crabs and tortoises hog the road and sunlight knives through the canopies of bougainvillea and hibiscus overhead. And this place might well have stayed a secret forever had it not been for Prince Charles’s goddaughter, India Hicks, who came on holiday here, fell in love, stayed with her boyfriend, had children, opened a hotel (The Landing) and a shop, and is now Harbour Island’s de facto social ambassador, throwing dinner parties around her pool for new visitors.

As often as I go, I am still hard-pressed to notice much change. I search the island’s contours, but the same pastel-coloured 19th-century colonial cottages line the harbour-front like those on a vintage postcard. Valentines Marina, where boats moor, has barely grown in the last 26 years. There is now an open-air restaurant and bar where crews discuss the weather while watching football and basketball games over burgers and bottles of local Kalik beer. But no Nikki Beaches or Nobus or waiting lists to get in anywhere. →

Clockwise from top left: a room at The Landing; a birdcage at The Other Side; The Dunmore’s façade; the beach in front of The Dunmore; Valentines Marina; a bathroom at The Dunmore; crab salad at the hotel; a dining room and a pineapple at The Ocean View Club.

Previous pages from left: The Ocean View Club’s bar; sunrise at The Other Side



Harbour Island can be confusing for those who arrive expecting to be instantly dazzled, because at first, it feels indolent and quiet, not so much rundown as charmingly frayed and discreet. Locals go to church on Sundays dressed as if to meet the Queen; on weekdays, children walk to school in immaculate uniforms; in the early evening, people chat on their front porches and play dominoes; at all hours, roosters run down the streets, crowing. There are only two things that really count here: natural beauty and falling in with the laid-back rhythm. The 2,000 or so inhabitants will tell you how proud they are of the place they call Briland (the island's old name). Everyone you meet will want to chat, a sense of humour infecting their every word. My two favourite signposts for the local shop (it sells jam and books) read: 'Dilly Dally Dis Way' and 'Dilly Dally Dat Way', depending on which direction you're coming from.

Until recently, Harbour Island had few decent hotels. **Pink Sands** (pinksandsresort.com; doubles from

B\$675 or ₹43,930) and **Coral Sands** (coralsands.com; doubles from B\$345 or ₹22,500), almost identical properties within yards of each other on the beach, have been here for years. Both are clean and friendly, and now a little spruced up with private cottages, but, given their prices, not quite 21st-century enough and not always prepared for the cosmopolitan demands of their increasingly high-maintenance guests. I once stayed at Coral Sands with a friend who rang reception to ask where her mini-bar was and if someone could come and unpack her bags. The receptionist wasn't quite sure what she meant and the words 'island time' were spoken. My friend threatened to leave, but somehow never did.

And then there was Pip's Place, further along the beach, more eccentric, with its giant open-air chess set and beautiful ramshackle cottages. All the hotels have been tidied up, some more than others, although it's Pip's Place, now called **The Ocean View Club** (ilovetheoceanview.com; doubles from B\$300 or ₹19,560) and run by Pip's son

Ben and his wife, Charlie, that feels as if it could compete with an Ibiza-boho equivalent. But no matter where you stay, the main focus will always be Pink Sands beach, one of nature's greatest achievements. The sight of horses (they live just off the sand dunes) galloping through the surf makes my heart sing.

However, Harbour Island is also, confusingly, more than just a beach. There's also something very special about Dunmore Town, as the two central streets are known, with its handful of kooky shops, restaurants and cafés. It feels like the sort of village you want to know better, where you can imagine yourself living, and every year, I am pulled between the two. We have rented cottages in town, and loved it—you can eat breakfast on your porch while watching island life, and then later, hear the fishermen laying out their catch on the dock. But this year, I stayed at Ocean View, curious to see what the family handover had brought. Arriving here feels like stepping into a private villa; you go through the restaurant onto a terrace high above the beach, and →

Clockwise from top left: the exterior of The Landing; the Coral Sands' beach; inside The Dunmore; a view from the plane to Eleuthera; a room at The Dunmore; breakfast at The Landing; the reception and a room at The Other Side; a deck at The Dunmore

then wind your way down paths passing one whimsical cottage after the next, no two identical. We were in the Boy's Cottage, the sea visible through the foliage, a little passage snaking its way to the sand below.

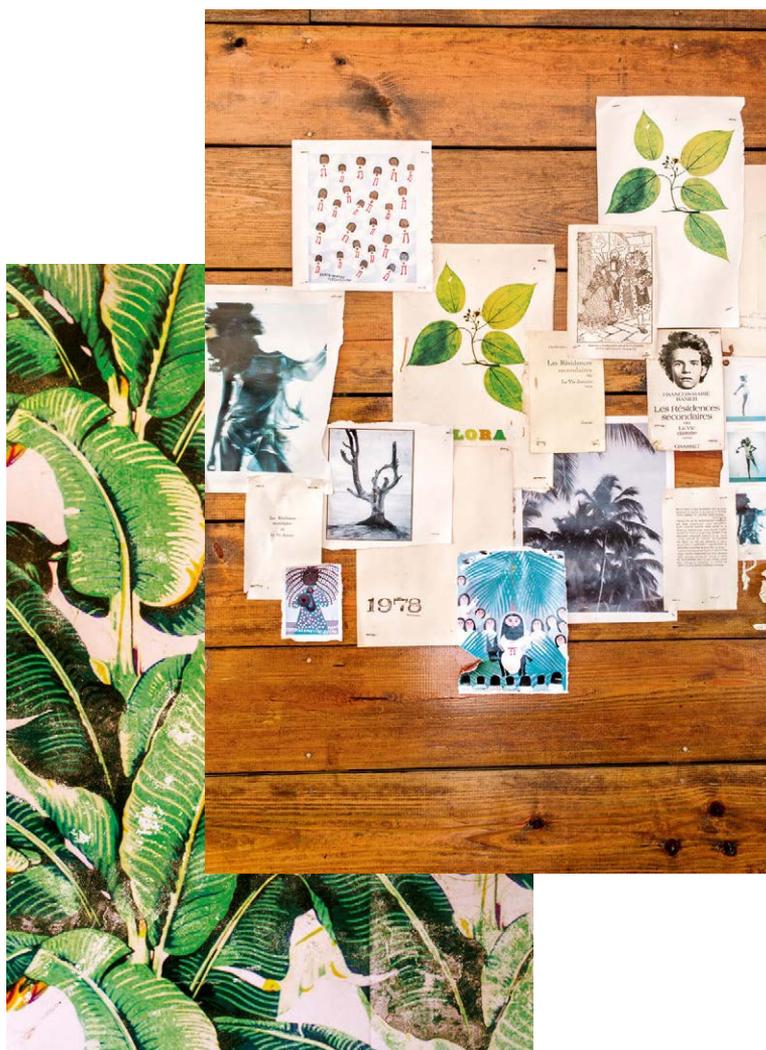
The hotel has been dressed up with fashion photographs, a legacy of its glamorous past and present (Victoria's Secret shoots some of its swimwear catalogues on the island). Fabrics clash prettily with antique mirrors and quirky, colourful china. Here, island style is not about 24-hour room service, ironing and shoe-polishing, but charm and candlelit dinners on the terrace of barbecued ribs cooked by a young Haitian chef.

Then we did something completely unprecedented: we left Harbour Island. Ben also has a new project on North Eleuthera that I couldn't resist seeing: an encampment of tents fittingly called **The Other Side** (ontheos.com; from \$550 or ₹35,800). After a seven-minute water-taxi ride from Valentines Marina,

we were deposited on a wild, deserted beach extended by a few feet with a stretch of lawn on which sit four massive, photogenic safari tents. It's Robinson Crusoe, but with an Aman-style makeover. The Other Side sleeps 12 in total, in three tents and three shacks further up on a promontory. Unless you want to stay marooned in your room, head to the drawing-room tent, with its backgammon boards and prints of Tintin on the walls, for cocktail hour when shakers are passed around between guests. Then it's on to the next tent, a few steps away, for dinner, where the bread is homemade and straight out of the oven, the main dishes depend on whatever came in on the boat that morning. For the adventurous, the hotel will organise expeditions down the long, thin snake of Eleuthera. The Other Side is a post to pitch up to when Harbour Island gets a little frenzied, particularly at Christmas and Easter, and you can still pop over for dinner as it is so close.

But as ever, we were excited to get back to the fray and try **Bahama House** (elevenexperience.com; doubles from B\$550 or ₹35,800), a collection of colonial villas, shutters half open to the breeze, in the centre of Dunmore Town. It is part of the Eleven Experience group, specialists in the very highest-end action holidays—places where you stay chic and you adventure chic, doing things such as kite-surfing on wild beaches or bone-fishing in secret coves. We rang a doorbell just off Dunmore Street, where a row of brand new golf buggies was parked outside in perfect formation. The New Orleans-style central courtyard is an oasis of one-storey houses, with a pool, sunken tropical bar, terraces and hidden alcoves shaded by tall palm trees. It reminded me a little of that James Bond Lyford Cay scene: old-world, but elegantly modern. We had our own concierge, and our first-floor suite—with expensive fabrics, a four-poster bed and →

Clockwise from bottom left: a shack at **The Other Side**; a palm-tree canvas and an inspiration board at the camp of **The Other Side**; a private deck at **The Ocean View Club**





complicated Lutron lighting—would have looked at home on the cover of an interior-design magazine. There is no restaurant, but a chef arrives to cook breakfast to order on a terrace, and will return for dinner on request.

While there, we stuck to our ritual of an elevesnes run to **Bahamas Coffee Roasters** (bahamascoffeeoasters.com) for double macchiatos, burritos and cookies, followed by cinnamon rolls at **Arthur's Bakery** (myharbourislandbahamas.com). We popped into **Eva's Straw Work** (at the foot of Government Dock) for locally woven bags, the **Sand Dollar Shop** (at the top of Gustie's Hill) for shells and India Hicks's designer boutique, **The Sugar Mill Trading Company** (+1 242 3333 558), for homeware. Whenever we rent a cottage, there are always mad dashes to the mini markets of **Piggly Wiggly** (+1 242 3332 120) or **Captain Bob's** (+1 242 3333 628) before they sell out of avocados or bread. Bahama House arranged a spot for us on the beach ("Turn left at the bougainvillea bush, just before the Narrows"; we were instructed) with chairs, parasols and cold

drinks. They'll organise a picnic, too, but my favourite lunch spot—apart from the Coral and Pink Sands hotels for fish tacos and beautiful terraces overlooking the ocean—has always been **Sip Sip** (sipsiprestaurant.com). It's where quiet billionaires, their guests and yachtsmen see who's new and might be worth inviting for dinner. I love the Goombay Smash cocktail and the conch-chilli soup; it's the ocean in a bowl.

The island explodes into life at night; people dress up (Lisa Marie Fernandez bikinis, Vita Kin kaftans, Zimmermann dresses and expensive straw bags bought in Saint-Tropez market) to flock to town for dinner. I particularly like **The Landing** (harbourislandlanding.com), a hotel and restaurant in an old colonial home overlooking the harbour. Tables are laid out inside and around the fairy-lit garden, but pop into the wooden ship-like bar first for cocktails. Like Sip Sip, The Landing will give you the measure of the island. It also does a mean breakfast of ricotta pancakes and coconut bread. **The Dunmore** (dunmorebeach.com), on the beach, is more formal and less frenetic.

What happens after dinner on Harbour Island is also important. Open-air bars such as **Beyond the Reef** (+1 242 3333 478), **Daddy D's** (+1 242 3597 006) and **Vic-Hum** (+1 242 3332 161) crank up; graffiti covers the walls, table-tennis games get competitive, reggae and hip-hop blare out from massive speakers and the rum punches are volcanically strong. If you have teenagers, they'll be begging for curfews to be extended. And that's the thing about Harbour Island—you can come here as a child and before you know it, your own children will be throwing you out of Daddy D's, bottles of Kalik hidden behind their backs, because they now think that they own the place. 📍

GETTING THERE

Fly to Nassau with British Airways via London, from Mumbai or New Delhi. From Nassau, take the Southern Air Charter flight to North Eleuthera Island followed by a cab and water taxi to Harbour Island. Indian passport-holders can apply for a UK visa with VFS (vfsglobal.co.uk). Visas cost ₹7,980 and take up to eight weeks to be processed.

Clockwise from top left: a shack at **The Other Side**; a conch shell at **the Dunmore**; a basket at **Coral Sands**; a room at **Coral Sands**; tapas at **Coral Sands**; **The Other Side's** pool; a sitting area at **Coral Sands**; a pink leaf typical to the area; an island house