

# TRAVEL

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## DESTINATION: BAHAMAS



Photograph by Susan Klevan Dison

**SAND AND SOLITUDE:** Rent a villa on the beach and you'll be privy to a lifestyle far different from the one at big Bahamas resorts.

# Becoming an insider in Eleuthera

Renting a 'villa' gives visitors a place to call home and helps them get immersed in the island's culture.

By ROBIN KLEVEN DISON  
Special to The Times

Eleuthera, Bahamas  
sprawling black stringy  
glided toward me as I laced  
on my inflatable raft, moving  
as gracefully as a moose car-  
pet through the clear, waist-  
deep water. It resembled Caribbean  
scenes I'd seen a hundred times on TV  
commercials.

But this wasn't a cruise or even a re-  
sort. These were the open, uncrowded  
waters of Eleuthera, a rugged Baha-  
mian island where swimmers are more  
likely to see bonefish and barracuda  
than other tourists.

Just a mile or so wide and 110 miles  
long, Eleuthera is a lanky squiggle of  
land between the Caribbean Sea and  
the Atlantic Ocean. It's part of the 700-  
plus-island chain that constitutes the  
Bahamas, a British commonwealth bet-  
ter known for the tourist resorts and  
casinos of Nassau and mega-entertain-  
ment hotels like the Atlantis on Paradi-  
se Island.

Eleuthera is different. Just an hour's  
flight east of Miami, the island feels as if  
it is 10 time zones removed. Most tour-  
ists who venture here stick to north  
Eleuthera, where a short cab and ferry  
ride from the local airport takes them to  
Dunmore Town on tiny Harbour Island.  
Here, plush hotels and resorts, upscale  
shops, restaurants and nightclubs cater  
to jet-setters from around the world.

But my husband, John, and I had  
come for a different island experience,  
one of isolated beaches rather than  
yachts, and more of laid-back than big  
money. We had come for the quiet that a  
fellow writer had recommended, away  
from city sounds and traffic. We were  
looking for the chance to meet the peo-  
ple who lived here, for the opportunity  
to do nothing for hours — maybe days —  
at a time.

We'd heard that Eleuthera has an en-  
igmatic charm and a rhythm all its own.  
And we learned that, for getting to know  
this elusive isle, there's nothing better  
than a beach house to call your own for  
a week or two.

Rent a house on the island — they're  
commonly called villas, no matter what  
their square footage and you'll be  
privy to a far different lifestyle than you  
would find at the big Bahamas resorts.  
On Eleuthera, accommodations range  
from elegant beachfront estates to col-  
orful cottages a short walk from the wa-  
ter. Come at the end of high season, say  
in May, June or July, and prices can be  
less than \$100 a day for two.

Villas, easily found on the Internet,  
generally can be rented by the night or  
week. Towels, linens and cookware are  
usually included; for an extra charge,  
you can arrange housekeeping services,  
a rental car or a guide.

We chose to search the area near  
Governor's Harbour, the island's cap-  
ital. The laid-back town is home to a  
small airport on the outskirts, a handful  
of grocery and liquor stores, a few gas  
stations, the regional medical center  
and several local attractions, such as a  
small orchid farm, a library and some  
lovely pastel-painted old homes. It's a  
good place to stock up on ice, water, pro-  
cessed and information before driving  
south along the two-lane Queen's High-

**BLUE MOOD:** At the end of high season, in May, June or July, villas can be rented by the night or the week for less than \$100 a day per couple.

way to even smaller communities such  
as Savannah Sound, Turpin Bay and  
Palmetto Point.

**Finding a villa**  
In any part of the world,  
choosing a villa from the  
dozens advertised on the In-  
ternet is a two-part process.

As one part intuition, plus a big  
spray of Google as our search engine and ty-  
ping in key words such as "villa," "rental"  
and "Palmetto Point." We found several  
appealing-looking cottages.

We also checked out some villas on  
nearby Windermere Island, a favorite of  
the British royal family and other well-  
heeled folk. It was here that a pregnant  
Princess Diana was photographed in a  
bikini by some enterprising paparazzi,  
to the repeated displeasure of the queen.  
Also, the stunning beachfront houses on  
this private enclave command fees of  
\$5,000 to \$10,000 a week.

After narrowing our choices to three  
villas in our price range and calling the  
owners for specifics, we made our deci-  
sion. For two years in a row, we have  
rented a compact two-bedroom villa  
perched on a cliff above quiet Ten Bay,  
about four miles south of Palmetto  
Point. Like many of the rental homes on  
the area, the house takes advantage of  
the sea with a wraparound deck fur-  
nished with hammock, chaise longue  
and chairs — perfect for taking in the  
sunset with a cold Kalik, the local beer.

Inside, the master bedroom, living  
room and small but well-stocked  
kitchen also overlook the water. A tiny  
second bedroom and full bath offer  
views of tropical vegetation. Through-  
out there is the steady chirping of cicad-  
as and the constant rustle of coconut  
palms punctuated by the splash of  
waves against the reef.

Beneath the house, in the cistern,  
there's an occasional raucous outburst  
of frogs competing for a foothold in the  
tank. No need to be alarmed: "Frogs in  
the cistern, the water is good," says an old  
Eleutheran saying. That said, it's still a  
good idea to buy bottled water for drink-  
ing and cooking.

There's no broadcast TV in the

house, just a stereo, a VCR and a selection  
of tapes and movies. We've never felt  
the urge to use any of them, preferring  
the sounds of wind and water. For enter-  
tainment, we bring our own movies and  
stereos, along with a cheap inflatable  
raft, polarized sunglasses and sun-  
block. In the past, we've rented one of  
the island's aging cars to explore some  
of the communities around Ten Bay.

Driving here requires a little extra  
concentration; in the Bahamas you  
drive on the left. Because most cars are  
standard American models, with the  
steering wheel on the left, this can be un-  
nerving. But our best-up Mercury came  
with a handy sticker across the wind-  
shield reading: "Keep left!"

**A classic tropical beach**  
UK drives helped us find  
other possible rental areas:  
on the Atlantic side of  
North Palmetto Point  
(north and south of the  
Unique Village Resort), at Double Bay  
(a broad pink sand beach on the Atlan-  
tic) or in Governor's Harbour near the  
old Club Med. Along the Caribbean, we  
also saw several cute beachfront cot-  
tages sprinkled along Queen's Highway  
from Governor's Harbour south to Tur-  
pin Bay.

But the porch overlooking Ten Bay  
continues to draw us. Situated on the  
calm Caribbean side of the island (the  
Atlantic side tends to be windier, with  
larger waves), Ten Bay rates a 10-plus.  
It sits at the end of a winding, poorly  
marked, heavily rutted dirt road off  
Queen's Highway, like a hideaway  
straight out of central casting.

The beach is a classic island post-  
card, without the crowds: a spectacular  
creciant of sand fringed by wind-  
sculpted pine and palms. Ten Bay's  
shell-strewn beach slopes gently into  
water that seems to be a thousand grad-  
ually on windless days and nights. To  
degrees during our visit in early May —  
Ten Bay enables waders and snorkelers  
to venture out several hundred yards  
without getting in over their heads.

The villa's owners have stocked the  
house with books and magazines, a se-  
lection of board games and bug repel-  
lent. Mosquitoes and no-see-ums can  
be brutal nearly any time of year, espe-  
cially on windless days and nights. To  
keep them at bay, at least inside, we  
bring our own plug-in mosquito de-  
stroyers and a mosquito net to hang  
over the bed.

Along with instructions about what  
to do in case of a hurricane (the official  
season is June to November) and com-  
ments from previous renters, the villa's  
guest book includes a list of recom-  
mended places to eat. The list is invalua-  
ble. Although we cook sometimes, the  
native Bahamian cuisine is irresistible.

**Fresh from the sea**  
CRACKED conch (fresh  
queen conch, pounded for  
tenderness and quickly  
deep-fried) is an island spe-  
cialty. It's served alone, with  
French fries, with colelaw, in sand-  
wiches, even on top of pizza. The favor  
is reminiscent of abalone; the texture,  
calamari-esque. Order cracked conch,  
and the rhythmic pounding of the meat  
teases you from the kitchen as you wait  
for the crispy, hot results to arrive.

Baked chicken (every yard seems to  
host a few hens and a rooster), steamed  
local grouper, pork chops and bar-  
becued pork ribs are other staples. On  
the side is peas 'n' rice, a savory esse-  
nce of black-eyed peas, rice, tomatoes  
and a fragrant dash of thyme, often fer-  
rified with salt pork or bacon. For de-  
sert, local coconuts often serve guava  
or pineapple duff, which resembles a fresh-  
fruit-filled jelly roll.

We're regulars at several restau-  
rants, but our favorite is Mate &  
Jenny's, Palmetto Point's neighborhood  
bar and pizza place. Cooled by ceiling  
fans and illuminated by Christmas  
lights and bright smiles all year round,  
Mate & Jenny's feels like home. Proprietor  
Maitland Bethel, an Eleutheran na-  
tive, serves up delicious pepperoni or  
conch pizzas and potent Goombay  
smash rum drinks along with witty con-  
versation and a hug for return visitors.

Unique Village is another worthwhile  
restaurant, as well as an adventure to  
find. There's no address for this dining  
room and resort on the Atlantic side of  
Palmetto Point, but most locals can give  
you directions. A bit more upscale than  
other local eateries, Unique Village of-  
fers reasonably priced meals, a full bar,  
one of the best burgers on the island and  
fresh fruit duff for dessert. Then there's  
the view: Tables inside and on the deck  
overlook one of Eleuthera's storied  
beaches, as well as a tiny pink sand beach  
by trillions of ground-up shells.

You'll find another pink sand beach  
near the former Club Med near Gover-  
nor's Harbour. The once-bustling club  
facing the Atlantic has been closed since  
Hurricane Floyd blew through in 1999,  
but you can ask the guard on duty for di-  
rections to the nearby beach. A short  
walk down a jungle trail, and the flour-  
teared sand awaits, often with no  
other tourists in sight.

One thing we learned: Most of the  
beach debris offer the spectacular ar-  
ray of tropical fish you see in Hawaii or  
Tahiti. Serious snorkelers and scuba  
divers prefer other locations, the Ba-  
hamas, such as Abaco or Andros Island.  
Eleuthera is about sun and sand, hunt-  
ing for shells and loling in the shadows.  
And the sport of horsefishing.

For rod-and-reel connoisseurs, the  
beach at Ten Bay is one of the top spots  
in the world for the lean, hard-fighting  
fish, which is typically caught and re-  
leased. We spent many an hour on our  
porch watching a couple of British an-  
gler cast in vain for the sluttish fish that  
lingered just beyond their hooks. Eleu-  
thera's waters also are home to barracuda,  
the occasional porpoise, lots of  
starfish, sand dollars, long-legged  
shorebirds and giant seahorses.

The first time I spotted a 6-foot ray

### All about Eleuthera



Los Angeles Times

**GETTING THERE:**  
From LAX, connecting service to Miami (change of  
planes) is available on American Airlines, changing  
to US Airways. Restricted nonstop flight: Tampa to Eleu-  
thera.

**WHERE TO STAY:**  
Bahama Villa, Ten Bay, 660-824-8807, www.bahama-  
villas.com. We've stayed here the last two years.  
Book for up to four people at about \$1,075 per  
week (November to April, \$800 per week, May to Oc-  
tober).

**WHERE TO EAT:**  
Mate & Jenny's, Queen's Highway south of Governor's  
Harbour, 660-202-0487. View of the sea and the  
steaming maveric from the small dining room and  
bar. Single, well-prepared Bahamian specialties  
such as cracked conch with rice and salt, essen-  
tial pork chops. Dinner starts at \$18.

**Unique Village, Queen's Highway south of Governor's  
Harbour, 660-202-0487. View of the sea and the  
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bar. Single, well-prepared Bahamian specialties  
such as cracked conch with rice and salt, essen-  
tial pork chops. Dinner starts at \$18.**

**Be sure to ask questions: Is it quiet? How far is the  
beach? Is there air conditioning? Make sure you  
understand the rules about deposits, cancellations  
and refunds.**

**SOLE TO LEARN MORE:**  
Eleuthera Tourist Office, Central Post Office,  
Governor's Harbour, 660-202-0142.  
Bahamas Tourist Center, 240 Wilton Blvd.,  
Nassau, Bahamas, CA 96016, 660-439-0963.  
See (112) 360-2864, www.bahamas.com.

— ROBIN KLEVEN DISON

heading toward my slippery little raft,  
I'd admit I wobbled I wobbled looked con-  
fused, and the beach seemed miles away.  
But as I clung to my float, lifting my  
toes above the water and wondering  
what strategies like to eat, the big fish  
coasted to a stop right beneath me.  
Four feet down, almost close enough to  
touch, it was the gentle experience of what  
makes Eleuthera so magical.  
No crows, no worries. That's what  
island style is all about.