

The Bahamas' **San Salvador Island**

Text and photos by Christopher Bartlett





The beautiful blues of the west coast dive sites of San Salvador Island

A 50-minute flight southeast from the bustle, cruise ships and tourist-centric capital city of Nassau in the Bahamas, lies the sleepy island of San Salvador. Twelve miles long and five miles wide, she is the tip of an underwater mountain rising from 5,000 metres below (15,000 feet) surrounded by picture-postcard, crystal-clear, blue seas.

Now home to 1,200 Bahamians, "San Sal" has a past as colourful as her long sandy beaches are white. The native Lucayan Indians who settled

here around the 6th century AD called her "Guanahani". It is widely believed that, in 1492, Christopher Columbus, in his quest for a westward route to the East Indies, made his first landfall on this island and renamed the island "San Salvador", or "Holy Saviour". In his journal, he noted "the beauty of these islands surpasses that of any other".

I would disagree; as great a traveler as Columbus was, he didn't have air miles and he'd just spent weeks on end staring at the horizon wondering where in salvation land might be. Alcatraz would probably have looked pretty stunning to him at that point too. That said, the long beaches on San Salvadore are almost as deserted as they were then—there is one hotel chain and one 42-room,



Nassau grouper



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Caribbean reef sharks turned up and came close on every dive; Parrotfish and schoolmaster; On approach in Stella Maris Air's 6-seater; Schoolmasters and grunts a-plenty; Big-eye jack looks surprised; Sleepy Cockburn town is a short stroll down the sandy road

island only regained her current moniker in 1925, even though, much to the chagrin of the locals, Club Med had tried to rebrand her as "Columbus Isle".

The centre of the island has many lakes, waterways and archaeological points of interest on the sites of native Lucayan settlements and is home to a range of birdlife, wild hogs and goats. The area can be explored by renting a car or golf cart, or on a guided tour. But these are small bonuses—San Sal's big draw is underwater.

Below the surface

Whilst her windward east coast is often rough, the leeward

side is mostly as flat as a pancake—azure blue at the water's edge, turning to cobalt, sapphire and finally indigo blue over the wall. It's only a short boat ride to the wall that



family-owned-and-run hotel on the island.

In the 17th century, British buccaneer and loyalist John (aka George) Watling took over the island. Fittingly, he was known as the "pious pirate" as he forbade attacks and gambling on the Sabbath. The ruins of his large plantation house, estate and lookout tower are still points of interest today. The

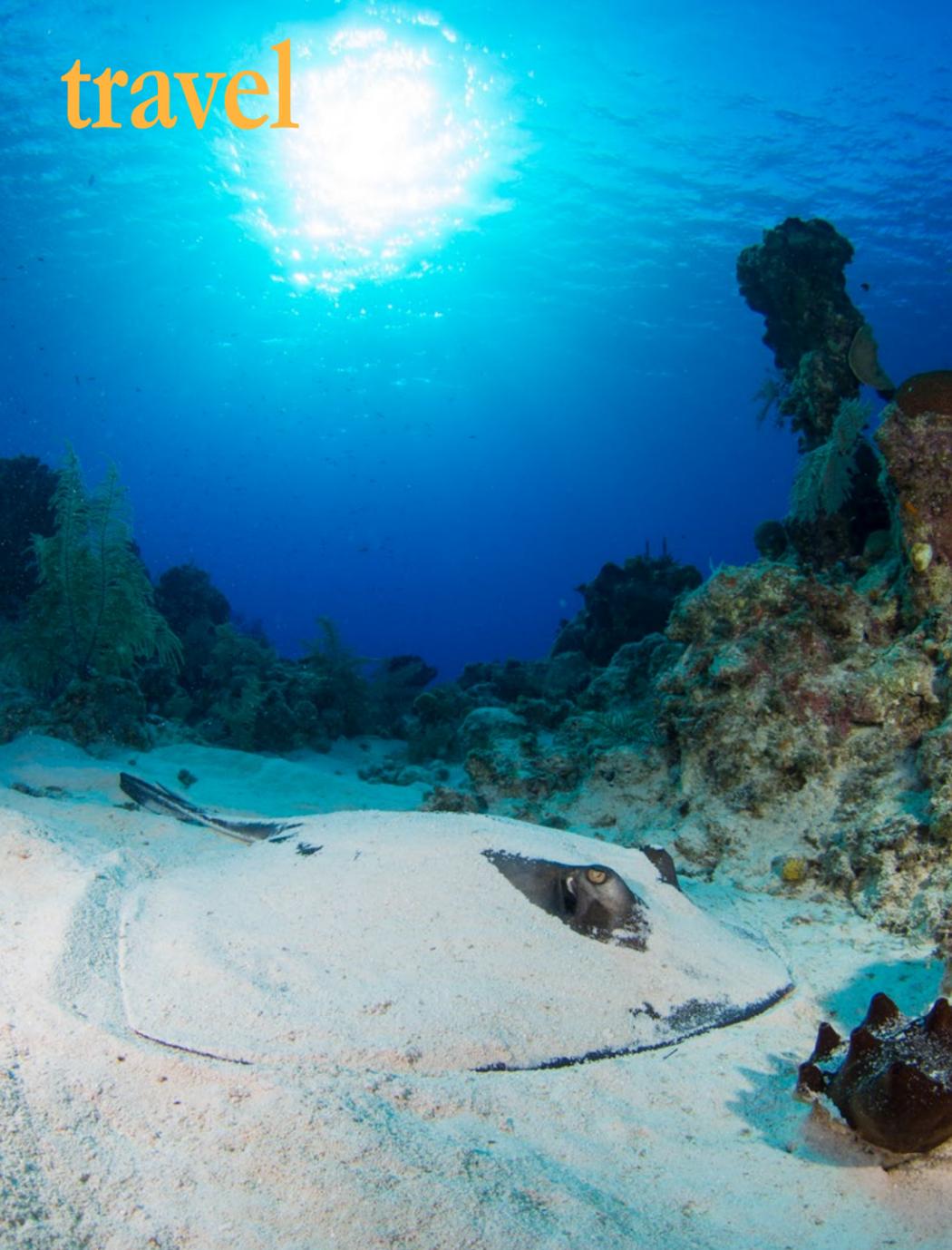
starts at ten metres (30 feet) deep.

Striding off the boat, you can see the sandy bottom—a haven for sting-rays—turn into coral reefs, with fans and sponges acting as

meeting points for grunts and snappers. The hue of the blue and its 30- to 50-metre (90 to 150-foot) visibility is mesmerising in itself.

Upon reaching the edge of the wall, more sizeable company generally turn up pretty fast. Nassau groupers are com-





CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Stingray on the sand; Pulling in to Riding Rock Marina; View from the room; Riding Rock beach; Grouper and author in Mick Jagger impersonation contest



mon, jacks flit around, and the longest I had waited to see a reef shark was two minutes. Most dive sites seem to be patrolled by two to four of our cartilaginous friends, either Caribbean reef or blacktip sharks.

And when the water temperature drops below 25°C (76°F), scalloped hammerheads return for the winter. I've dived with sharks all over the world, and these ones off San Salvadore Island will come as close to a diver as any I've seen on a baited or fed dive,

just without any food being put in the water—it's a fantastic, natural experience.

The topography of the wall is varied, with overhangs, cracks, swim-throughs, and some stunning chimneys. In particular, Santa Claus' chimney to the south of the island is a cracker (sorry!), dropping from the top of the reef down to 40 metres (130 feet).

The cracks and crevices shelter a variety of eels, lobsters and shrimps, as well as gobies and blennies. The walls are adorned

with barrel, rope and vase sponges—a veritable feast for the healthy hawksbill turtle population. Throw in some wrecks, vertical coral pillars, the "Cathedral", and another 40-plus dive sites, and there is enough diving to keep you busy for at least a week.

Topside attractions

Back on shore, Michelle, Peaches, Jason and the crew of Riding Rock Inn provide simple, comfortable air-conditioned beachfront

accommodation, complete with three hearty meals a day (there aren't many skinny Bahamians). The Driftwood Bar on the premises offers free rum punch and conch fritters on Monday evenings. Cars or vehicles can be hired, and the main, but small, settlement of Cockburn (pronounced "Coburn") Town is a ten-minute stroll down a sandy road. Nature walks, historical tours and game fishing can be arranged. ■