

Travel Time WITH CHASE & BUD | THE EXUMAS



Our floating home for a week was the **Stepping Stone**, Ruth and Steve Coney's 55' Fleming trawler—designed for live-aboard comfort and easy coastal voyages.



Sharks are plentiful as well as very visible in Exuma waters. Here they are circling near the Staniel Cay Yacht Club, looking for snacks--fish, not folks!



The Exuma Cays Land and Sea Park encompasses more than 112,000 acres and was established in 1958--the first park of its kind in the world. Moorings and anchorages are available among the secluded islands and park wardens protect both the land, the sea and all its creatures. We spent most of our time island-hopping in the park, enjoying the biodiversity and were thrilled to enjoy the park's Sea Aquarium, a natural underwater pool teeming with more tropical fish than seemed possible.

THE EXUMAS IN A TRAWLER

The Exumas are a chain of 365 islands in the Bahamas. The water is an impossible shade of turquoise and so clear that you can see to a dizzying depth of 25 or 30 feet. Most of the islands have a decidedly "Robinson Crusoe" feel — beaches are footprint-free and there's nary a tiki bar or a high rise condo in sight. Remote. Peaceful. Lovely.

Honestly, the Exuma Islands were not exactly on our radar. We've snorkeled on Kauai, Grand Cayman, St. Maarten—even Australia's Great Barrier Reef. We were kind of snorkeling snobs. But then friends (and former Bow residents) Ruth and Steve Coneys asked us to join them for a cruise on their 55' trawler, *Stepping Stone*. "Plan on a week," Ruth said. "We've got lots to show you."

We cast aside thoughts of potential cabin claustrophobia, terrifying thunder and lightning storms and booked it. The result? A week of heaven. Just take a look! **Photos | Chase Binder & Ruth Coneys**



Staniel Cay Yacht Club is a great place to dine in elegant fashion--or chow down in the bar and listen to mariners' fish tales. Visitors quickly learn that is where Sean Connery hung out during the filming of 1965's *Thunderball*. You can actually snorkel through nearby Thunderball Grotto. Steve and I paid the grotto a fun visit while Ruth and Bud kept the dinghy from harm.



Yes... there are swimming pigs in Exuma, on the uninhabited Big Major Cay, near Staniel Cay. Some say a few were shipwrecked there years ago, some some they were abandoned by a group of sailors. Nevertheless, there are a dozen more in residence on an easily accessible beach.

Note: they know just how to approach you for food and, not surprisingly, the beach has a rather piggish aroma.



Captain Steve clearly had things in hand as he piloted us out of Staniel Cay harbor and off to the more remote islands of the "real Exumas." Our voyage was a piece of cake for the Coneys--this past fall they completed the iconic two-year Great Loop aboard the Stepping Stone--a trip of at least 5500 miles up the East Coast from Florida to the St. Lawrence Seaway, through the Great Lakes, and back down the great rivers of the US to Florida.



Where does your boat "hail" from? It's always interesting to see. Here is Bow, NH proudly on the stern of the **Stepping Stone**.



The Coneys' Stepping Stone has a draft of 5' with a 16' beam and overall length of 62', so the trusty dinghy (Pebble, of course!) was our transport into bays and coves. See the footprints in the sand? Ours alone! Deserted beaches in the Exumas are more than plentiful!



Ruth caught this image of Bud and me playing Titanic. We were fortunate enough to have marvelous weather, calm seas — and not an iceberg in sight!



Sunsets like this were the norm. Serene with bursts of color, sea birds floating overhead, sharks and barracudas lazing around our stern. Does it get any better?

IF YOU GO

The Exumas: The Exumas are a unique destination. The true magic is in the remoteness and the best info is at www.bahamas.com/islands/the-exumas.

Getting there: The islands are roughly divided into three areas: Great Exuma and Little Exuma to the south end of the chain and the Exuma Cays at the northern end. Most itineraries from the US will fly you into Nassau where you grab a connector flight to Great Exuma where George Town has an international airport. Start at www.exumabahamas.org/flights. We were meeting the Stepping Stone in the more northern cays at Staniel Cay's tiny airport, so booked on Flamingo Air (www.flamingoair.com) out of Nassau.

Staying There: Accommodations run from David Copperfield's entire private island (Musha Cay) at \$57,000/night to exclusive resorts at \$1500/night (most in the southern cays) to VRBO's and small B & B's starting at \$200/night, many to the north on Staniel Cay. Of course if you have a boat with accommodation, chartered or not, you have the best opportunity to experience the Exumas. Google Exuma Boat Charters to start.