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Travel

Inside: Civil War trivia and dinner, too, K10

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Luxury Travel SPECIAL SECTION

Live like a king (or at least a duke)

The crown is optional, but you'll feel like royalty after a night in a stately manor

By **JOAN SCOBEY**
Travel Arts Syndicate

Düsseldorf, Germany — “Soft or hard-boiled?” asks the duke. He has just brewed tea and is offering eggs, cheese and meat to six guests at breakfast.

We are sitting at a long table in the paneled library-cum-dining room of Ossenberg Castle, his 280-year-old home in western Germany. A crystal chandelier hangs from a charming 18th-century ceiling fresco of naked cherubs wafting through puffy clouds. The china is Villeroy & Boch; the napkins, paper.

Our host sits down to join us and the breakfast conversation turns to the weather, the news and sports, which, in Germany that morning, means the upcoming World Cup games. What else would you talk about with Wilhelm Albert, the fifth Duke von Urach?

Ossenberg Castle is the first stop on a stately homes stay in the tranquil North Rhine-Westphalia area northwest of Düsseldorf. By the time we finished the tour, we had also dined with a count, attended a concert with two barons, and shared a bratwurst picnic with assorted chino-clad titles. Who said you have to be to the manor born? Though the tour is affordably priced, it feels like a luxury trip.

The nobility and their ancestral digs are part of a new association of private country estates called Culture & Castles. Actually, they are rather grand bed-and-breakfasts, giving guests a chance to mingle with landed aristocracy, sample upper-class life at below-stairs rates, and explore lesser-known parts of the countryside.

After breakfast, the Duchess von Urach — “Call me Karen” — shows us around the 200-

► Please see **CASTLES, K6**



A crystal chandelier hangs from a ceiling fresco in the elegant paneled dining room and library at the 285-year-old Ossenberg Castle in western Germany.



The foundations of Burg Boetzelauer, once a knight's castle, date to the 12th century. The front of the castle in western Germany is more modern — it's glass.

Photos by Konrad Hamacher

A silver lining in wake of Ivan

Grand Cayman Island hotels went all-out to refurbish. **PAGE K8**

Ritz-Carlton

The 365-room Ritz-Carlton on Grand Cayman, whose opening was pushed back by hurricane damage, provides lots of attention in cozy surroundings.



The Cove

For less touristy Bahamas, venture to Out Islands

By **SOPHIA DEMBLING**
Travel Arts Syndicate

Andros, Bahamas — “She da star of da place,” said a smiling employee of Tiamo Resorts as he passed a couple of guests cooing at a large iguana (the staff has named her Agnes), who paused from snacking on foliage to slowly turn her best side to the cameras.

This is what passes for excitement on Andros, the largest and least developed of the Bahamian Out Islands.

I first visited Andros in 1977, when I was 19 years old and on my first solo trip out of the States. On a puddle jumper from

► Please see **BAHAMAS, K5**

Snorkelers investigate the waters at the Cove, a small, upscale and recently renovated property on Eleuthera in the Bahamas.

SPECIAL *Luxury Travel* SECTION**Bahamas: Trip to Out Islands pays off in relaxation**

► Continued from K1

Nassau, the man next to me asked where I was staying. I told him.

"Um ... you're on the wrong plane," he said.

I'd boarded a plane for Andros Town on the north side of the island instead of Congo Town on the south — and Andros is an island in two parts with no bridge between. It was an ignominious start to my travel career.

Thirty years later, Andros is not much more developed, and there is still no connecting bridge. So my husband and I listened carefully in the (still bleak) Nassau airport and made sure that we boarded the plane to Congo Town.

The Out Islands are not yet entirely user-friendly. The Bahamas comprise more than 700 islands (including uninhabited hunks of land and rock) within a 100,000-square-mile archipelago. Nassau/Paradise Island and Grand Bahama Island have the big hotels, the gambling, the nightlife and urban scene, Bahamas-style. The Out Islands include everything else. Getting to these less developed islands isn't always easy, and prices may be high, but so is the payoff: the kind of relaxation that makes Type A's tense until they try it.

Roads don't reach Tiamo Resorts, so after the 15-minute flight from Nassau to the Congo Town International Airport on Andros, we had a 10-minute van ride to a 10-minute boat ride. Approaching the resort, we saw a long strip of white beach, a stand of 100-year-old coconut palms, some with hammocks strung between them, and a row of kayaks and sailboats. That's all. Everything else was tucked behind palms and sea grapes.

A young woman led us to the lodge, where a late lunch awaited, and gave us the lay of the land, explaining the dining schedule and activities included in the all-inclusive rate. While Andros has a handful of other resorts and guesthouses, many catering to fishermen (Andros is considered the bonefishing capital of the world), Tiamo is the most intimate and high-end.

Tiamo, which calls itself a "nature resort," treads lightly on its environment, with solar energy, thermal water heaters, composting toilets and other gentle policies and technology. Eleven pretty bungalows are screened, with no solid walls, but utterly private in all ways but auditory — you might hear snores from next-door neighbors. Naturally, they contain no phones or televisions, but they do have electricity, big, comfortable beds and full bathrooms with spacious showers.

As the sun began its slow descent, I took a stroll on the pristine soft-sand beach, where conch shells collect on the shoreline and starfish twinkle under the crystal-clear water, which is so shallow I could have walked a mile out without getting in over my head.

Then it was time to dress (casually) for dinner, a single-seating gourmet event. Each evening, guests gather for happy hour at the bar at 6:30 p.m.; at 7, the chef announces that evening's menu and at 7:30 we're at the communal table with a handful of people.

These family-style meals initially put off some guests, but Mike Hartman, who owns the resort with his wife, Petagay Hollinsed-Hartman, says the dinners consistently rank high on comment cards. The resort will gladly accommodate anyone preferring a private table, in the dining room or on the beach, white tablecloth and all.

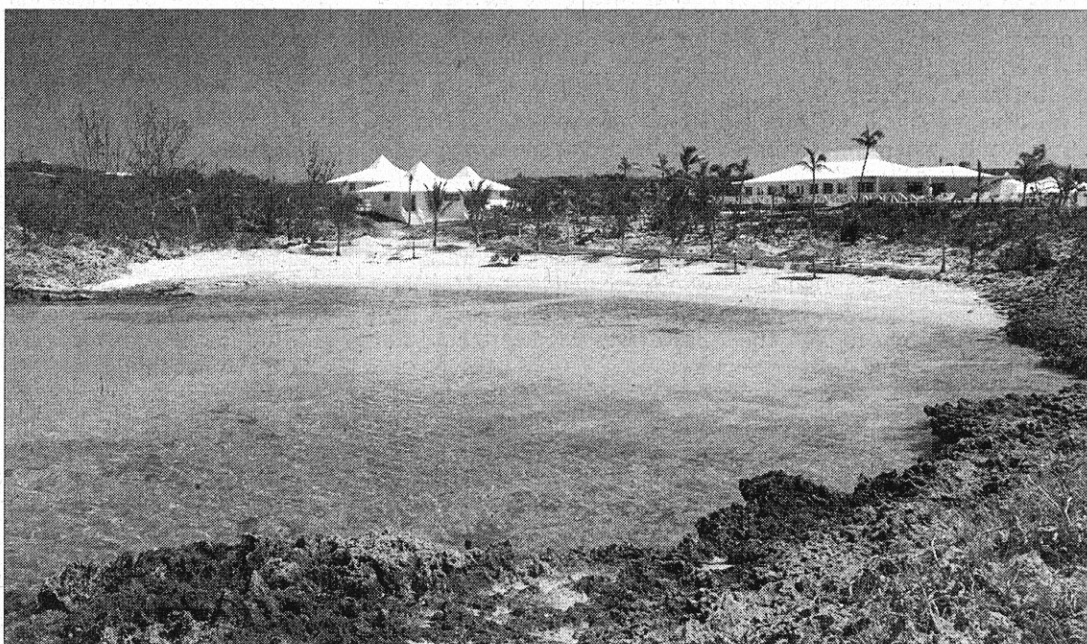
The next day, a snorkeling excursion with one of the resort's young naturalists was a quick boat ride to a nearby blue hole, where we met a sea cucumber (ugly devil), played hide-and-seek with a snapper the size of a beagle and snaddled among colorful fish, fans, coral and sponges. If we'd had more time, Andros also has the third-largest barrier reef in the world, and Tiamo offers snorkeling excursions there. (While most activities at Tiamo are included, diving and fishing are add-ons.)

After lunch, while my husband indulged in the resort's most popular activity (hammock, novel), I explored one



Tiamo Resorts

The bungalows at Tiamo Resorts are screened and have no solid walls but still feel private. They have big, comfy beds and spacious showers but no phones or TVs. This "nature resort," which uses solar energy, is on the southern part of Andros Island in the Bahamas.



The Cove

The Cove has its own beauty to enjoy, but you also can use it as a base to explore the rest of Eleuthera, the first permanent European settlement in the Bahamas.

of the hiking trails that wind behind the buildings, over jagged limestone, past cactuses, along a marked orchid trail, and through the field of solar panels that hummed quietly as they turned toward the sun. If I'd had time for a guided hike, I could have visited the ruins of an old settlement.

Leaving Tiamo is hard to do, especially if you're on the 7:30 a.m. flight out of Congo Town (it means waking at 5). But if off-the-beaten-track isn't easy, at least it's worth the effort.

On to Eleuthera

Eleuthera is less challenging to visit, and it will soon be even easier. Eleuthera is only now gearing up from a few intimate getaways to lots of luxury escapes (Starwood is among the hotel companies building here). The Cove, a small and casual but upscale property, is a few steps ahead of the pack.

When old friends and developers Scott and Leslie Bumpas and George and Ann Hartley purchased this circa 1969 property in 2004, it was tragically shabby. Even so, loyal guests returned year after year for the lazy vibe and the property's exquisite location on a Caribbean cove just down the road from rocker Lenny Kravitz's ocean-



Thomas H. Battles

The waves of Surfer's Beach on Eleuthera can cause unintentional somersaults, but surfers and Boogie boarders like them.

front property.

A year later, the new owners had stripped the buildings down to the studs and rebuilt, hired a French chef and one of the island's most popular bartenders, the elegantly friendly Wallace Sands, and opened their pretty getaway.

Our suite, done in fresh shades of turquoise and tangerine, had one of the most comfortable beds I've ever enjoyed. I wished for a better view from the bed than a blank

wall and bathroom, but one of the limitations of refurbishing rather than building from scratch is that you have to make the best of others' decisions. Rooms and suites have no television or phone, although there is WiFi, for the desperate-to-connect. (The largest and most expensive suite, in Point House, located on a high outcropping, does have a television.)

We started our mornings at the Cove with breakfast by the pool with a glorious view, and



Tiamo Resorts

Tiamo's lodge is where meals are served. Dinner is a single-seating gourmet event where the dress is casual. Though guests often come to appreciate the family-style atmosphere, the resort will provide a private table with the works for those seeking a little more privacy.

IF YOU GO**Getting there**

► **Eleuthera has two airports:** Eleuthera Airport (EHL) and Governor's Harbour Airport (GHB). The two larger airlines that fly to Eleuthera are Continental Airlines (1-800-231-0856, www.continental.com), with flights from Fort Lauderdale, Fla., and US Airways (1-800-428-4322, www.usair.com), with flights from Miami. Or you can fly one of many major carriers to Nassau and connect there to Bahamas Air (1-800-222-4262, www.bahamasair.com/online).

► **High-speed ferries run between Nassau and Eleuthera:** 242-323-2166, Ext. 2; www.bahamasferries.com.

► **Lynx Air International** (1-888-596-9247, www.lynxair.com) recently started offering two direct flights per week between Fort Lauderdale and Andros.

► **Western Air** (242-377-2222, www.westernairbahamas.com) operates flights from Nassau to Congo Town (MYAK) and to Mangrove Cay (MAY). Two important caveats: Western Air takes reservations but does not allow pre-purchasing; you will have to buy your ticket at its counter in Nassau, and it's cash only.

► For an easier but pricier trip to Andros, a seaplane from Nassau is \$478 each way; 242-393-2522, www.safariseaplanes.com.

Where to stay

► **Tiamo Resorts, Andros.** 242-357-2489, www.tiamoresorts.com. From \$265 per night per person; rates go up for fall. Closed August and September.

► **The Cove, Eleuthera.** 1-800-552-5960, www.thecoveeleuthera.com. From \$225 per night.

Tips for the Bahamas

A passport or birth certificate is necessary for travel to the Bahamas. (After Dec. 31, U.S. citizens will need a valid passport for air and sea travel to or from the Caribbean, Bermuda, Canada, Mexico and Central and South America.)

American dollars are fine, though you will receive change in Bahamian dollars. Many businesses are cash only, so bring a fully loaded wallet.

Renting a car on Eleuthera is a funky business, cash only with individual entrepreneurs. The Cove is happy to do the legwork for you.

If you have a long layover in the Nassau airport, skip the sorry-looking airport snack bars and dine like the pilots: Buy a hot meal from the lady selling them out of the back of her station wagon in the parking lot.

No-see-ums, those tiny biting bugs, are a problem. The bites itch, and they linger for days. An Avon product called Skin So Soft is said to be the only deterrent.

Good hiking shoes are a must on Tiamo's sharp-edged limestone trails.

— Sophia Dembling, Travel Arts Syndicate

spent our days exploring what was nearby on Eleuthera and the relative bustle of Harbour Island, a five-minute water taxi ride away.

Eleuthera, the first permanent European settlement in the Bahamas, is 110 miles long, rimmed with white sand beaches. On the east side, the Atlantic crashes; on the west, the Caribbean basks in tropical sunshine.

Driving from tip to tip can take hours, and right now, there's a lot of delicious nothing between north and south but beach and views, though that is rapidly changing. Walk into Tippy's, a new restaurant that overlooks a wide beach and masquerades as an island shack, and you can practically smell the dollars in the pockets of the sleek blond and European crowd, denizens of the luxury homes springing up nearby. (And cash is important at Tippy's because credit cards are not accepted and dinner for two can run \$80.)

Governor's Harbour is Eleuthera's big town. It was the site of the first seat of government on the island more than 300 years ago. There's not much

happening here aside from pretty buildings, but it passes for sightseeing.

We also visited nearby Surfer's Beach, although waves wild enough for the surfers and Boogie boarders who come here are too violent for my liking. While companions did unintentional somersaults in the surf, I opted to wade in the placid water at one end of the long beach.

At the end of each day, the Cove's protected waters are inviting for a leisurely dip, and dinner is an elegant and caloric affair in the dining room. Guests can opt for a daily meal plan for breakfast and dinner for \$60, not including beverages. Otherwise, breakfast is \$8-\$14, lunch \$8-\$15 and dinner \$11-\$32.

One night, we joined other locals and tourists crowding into a tiny shack of a club, Elvina's, for live music and happy-dancing. (Kravitz is rumored to take the stage here sometimes.)

Eleuthera feels far away, but it won't be an "out" island for much longer.

Sophia Dembling is the author of "The Making of Dr. Phil" and "The Yankee Chick's Survival Guide to Texas."