

Cay of Pigs

by Chris Knight

The Bahamas is famous for a few things, such as: its perfect climate, soft white sand, crystal clear turquoise waters, the vast array of animals that inhabit them and of course, the Swimming Pigs!

These adorable pigs can be found on Big Major Cay, an uninhabited island situated just north of Staniel Cay in the chain of islands known as the Exuma Cays.

In the last year or so their popularity has been rapidly growing and we have started to see a lot of pictures and articles on the pigs popping up on the internet and on social media. What were once just a few pigs minding their own business on a little island, has now turned in to somewhat of a tourist attraction and is now known as Pig Beach. They are even featured as one of the things you must see on the official Bahamas tourism website.

So how did they get there in the first place?

No one seems to know for sure as Big Major Cay is uninhabited and the pigs are not native to the island.

Some say they were left by a group of sailors, who planned to come back and cook them. Or that the pigs

were stranded there when the ship they were on got wrecked nearby. I think that these may be tall stories made up by tour operators and travel guides to add to the mystery and to gain peoples interest.

I asked our local guide his opinion and while he said he had heard the tales, it was actually just a case of them being brought over from Staniel Cay some years ago by their owners who were receiving complaints from their neighbours.

Having already planned a trip to the Bahamas to photograph the friendly spotted dolphins on the island of Bimini, I thought that while I was there I should try to make my way over to see and photograph these pigs.

Having rented a small cottage on Staniel Cay, the owner's son Dreko arranged a boat for us and took us on a local tour of the area.

Within 5 minutes of leaving we had already come across Big Major Cay and turned a corner in to a large bay that was littered with super yachts. As we approached the beautiful, long and relatively empty beach in our little boat, it became apparent that something was making its way out to meet us. As we pulled



in we realised that it was a huge pig swimming out towards us with the hope of receiving a nice selection of scraps.

I jumped out of the boat in to the water and the pig rushed over to see what I had. After a thorough investigation he eventually realised that all I had was a camera and quickly lost interest and swam back to shore. He then joined his friends

under a canopy that had presumably been built by the locals to offer them some shade and protection from the elements.

Very quickly the sky quickly turned black, the heavens opened and a long downpour of rain began. Looking happy lying under the shelter the huge pig glanced at me and gave me a look as if to signify that he knew that the rain was coming. I rushed

back to the shelter of the boat and we took off but planned to come back the following day.

Our guide had another trip booked the following morning but agreed to drop me off on before and pick me up when he had finished, allowing me plenty of time to get some good pictures.

Arriving back at 10am the next morning, it was a totally different atmosphere than the day before. The area was littered with tourists that had come in on the tenders from their yachts or who had arrived on big tour boats from some of the larger islands a bit further away.

The beach was chaos with pigs running around all over the place trying to suss out who had the food. Not quite the pigs swimming around in clear water on an empty idyllic beach that the internet had led me to believe it would be.

Not wanting to end up with lots of people in my pictures, I chose to walk around for a while and watch what was going on and I found amusement in the lengths that people will go to get the perfect selfie.

Let me tell you, these pigs are smart and large and it was hilarious watching people trying to lure a pig in to the water by bribing it with bread or scraps of food in one hand while trying to line up the perfect picture with their phone or camera in the other. Some were tripping over in the water and very nearly getting their hands bitten by the hungry pigs who were most definitely only concerned about the food, not the pictures.

I was wondering if the pigs were getting annoyed however they seemed to be generally running the show, obtaining the food that they were looking for and it was nice to see the local islanders and tour guides turning up with big containers



of food and fresh water. They clearly seemed to respect the pigs and value them as an essential part of their trips and a lure for the tourists.

I have to say that there were some people there who disappointed me in their behaviour towards the pigs. Some tried to pick up or hold the smaller pigs for their photos and you could tell that they weren't keen on being handled. I'm all for giving an animal a treat and snapping a quick picture but I was very disappointed with some who seemed to only care about their photos and not how the pigs felt.

There was one moment in particular when a very persistent child was harassing a large pig trying to hug it and almost climb on its back with a go pro in hand to film the whole thing. I was making my way over towards them to put a stop to this when the pig lost his patience, bit the go pro (lucky for him it wasn't his hand) and then proceeded to chase



the now screaming child down the whole length of the beach. Looking on I quietly chuckled to myself and thought, what goes around comes around I guess!

I was sad to hear that a few weeks prior to my arrival, some of the pigs had been found dead on the island. Reports stated that 7-10 of the pigs which make up just under half of the previous total were believed to have died from fatal doses of alcohol. Unfortunately pigs will eat and drink just about anything and judging by some of the behaviour I saw there – this didn't actually surprise me.

Wayde Nixon, one of the owners responsible for the pigs, said he blames tourism for the lost pigs. He said "Tourism is blowing out of proportion, anybody can bring food there We have people giving the pigs beer, rum, riding them and all kinds of stuff."



Since this incident there are now signs up at the beach with some rules and guidelines about do's and don'ts regarding the pigs although I'm not sure how many people take the time to read them.

Looking in to this incident further I came across an article by Delaney Chambers published in National Geographic which stated that an inspector from the Humane Society said that they had most likely ingested sand which led to their death.

Veterinarians who visited the site found large quantities of sand in the deceased animals' stomachs, which

may have been caused by visitors throwing food on to the beach.

The pigs have been on the island for a long time now and were used to foraging for their own natural food. However with the increase in tourism it seems that with people bringing food, the pigs are choosing to eat this instead, leading to them ingesting a lot of sand when picking it up off the beach.

Before the influx of tourists they used to live in the forest where the food that they would normally forage for could be found in more soiled areas around the bushes and trees further

inland. It appears that they have now got lazy and live on the beach relying on the tourists to turn up daily with bags of food for them.

The vets also found that their natural source of water had dried up. This could have been due to the changing climate as the Bahamas experienced an unusually dry January this year. With not much natural water left on the island it is believed that both of these factors most likely played a key role in the death of the pigs.

Currently, boats can drive up to the pigs, and it's legal for tourists to

swim with and feed them.

According to a statement from the Minister of Agriculture and Marine Resources, V. Alfred Gray - these deaths may spur new rules to protect the animals.

"If we have boundary lines, people will be able to take photographs and see the pigs swim, but they will not be able to feed them things."

The government also plans to post a warden on the beach to protect the animals.

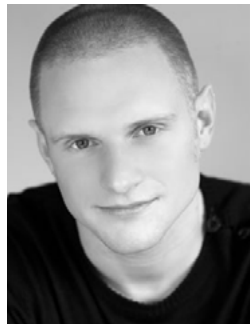
None of this had been put in place when I was there a few weeks



ago but I'm hoping that these deaths were an isolated incident and that people will learn to treat these and all animals that they come across with more respect in the future.

Having said all of this I do have to say that it was a unique and truly enjoyable experience and I thoroughly recommend that you pay them a visit if you are ever in the Bahamas!

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