

The Bahamas:

What a Life!

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Introduction

For any boater along the U. S. southeast coast it is imperative to visit the island nation of the Bahamas, located only ninety miles from Miami. Since 2000 my family and I have been to different sections of the Islands a number of times. Each area is different in topology, economy, and culture but they share one key attribute: they are where you want to be when you want to be nowhere!

This overview of the Islands will review their historic and economic origins as well as the delights of the five island groups: the *Inner (Western) Islands*—Andros Island, the Berry Islands, Chubb Cay, Bimini; the *Upper (Northern Islands)*—Grand Bahama Island and the Abacos Islands; the *Outer (Eastern) islands*—the Exuma Islands, Eleuthera, Harbor Island; and the *Lower (Southern) islands* of the Exumas—Long Island, Cat Island, San Salvador, and Ragged Islands. The road most travelled to these quiet and friendly islands runs through the central island of New Providence where Nassau, the historic capital, holds 70 percent of the nation's population.

By the way, the word *Cay* is pronounced *K*, not *Key*. Few Bahamians will have the temerity to correct a visitor—after all, everyone knows what you mean. But if you want to be clearly identified as a first-time visitor, refer to the *Ks* as *Keys*.



The Islands of the Bahamas

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Advice for Boaters

In our experience, Bahamians are friendly, outgoing, and helpful; they seem uninterested in “gotchas.” This extends to Customs agents, who make our U. S. counterparts seem like Vlad the Impaler. But several points should be kept in mind when boating to the Bahamas:

- **Bring passports:**

- One hears that drivers’ licenses or similar identification are accepted at Bahamas Customs and Immigration. *Don’t count on it.* Even if they are, don’t expect to get back to the States without one.

- **Pets:**

- If you are bringing pets you must complete an immigration application for *each* pet and send it to the Department of Agriculture in Nassau with an international postal money order totaling \$10 for each pet (yes, for two pets it can be a single \$20 MO); The Department will issue a permit and mail it to you; for an extra \$5 it will be faxed—maybe. Start on this well before your visit because the Bahamas run on Bahama time and efficiency is not in the job description—I’ve waited weeks before finally harassing the Department.
- You must bring a completed document from your veterinarian stating that your pets are in good health—one for each pet. Do not send it with your permit application. Veterinarians usually have the forms, but they are available online.
- You are supposed to have a Bahamas veterinarian check your pets within a set period of time after arrival. We have always ignored this because that requirement seems to be for *permanent* pet immigration, not temporary visitation. Nobody has ever asked us for pet papers after we’ve cleared Customs and Immigration on arrival.

- **Weapons:**

- Back in the 1980s the Bahamas were a hot spot for drug trafficking—Carlos Leder’s group took over Norman’s Cay in the upper Exumas, dispossessed the residents, and ran a drug operation from that base until finally forced out by the Bahamians. The reason? No, not drug trafficking! Leder’s mob had not accurately disclosed the amount of ammunition they had amassed.
- If you are bringing weapons there is no problem. But you are required to disclose them *and* to give a total count of ammunition aboard your vessel. Nobody has ever checked to verify our ammunition count. The philosophy is, I think, to accept your count but if anything happens and their count is higher, you have a problem.

- ***Navigation Aids:***

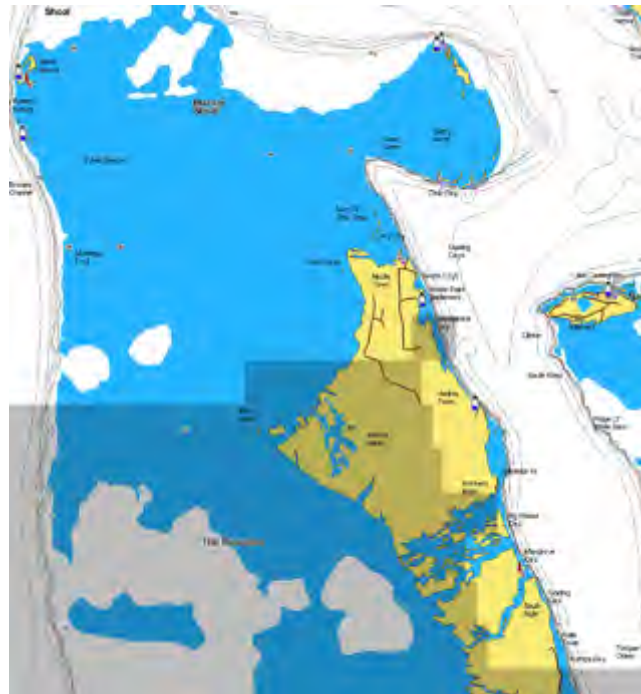
- Navigation aids are reasonably abundant and clear in the populated areas around the central islands, but in the other islands they are sparse or absent, and many are homemade devices rather than official markers—vertical plastic pipes, unmarked pilings, and so on. *Beware, there be dragons there!*

The Inner Islands

The Inner Islands are located in a large atoll surrounding the Great Bahama Bank on the western side of the Bahamas. On the western edge of the Bank are a string of small islands, chief among them the Biminis (North and South), and North and South Cat Cay. The Biminis and South Cat Cay are standard points of entry for boats coming from Southeast Florida.

North Cat Cay is a private island owned by the Cat Cay Yacht Club. South Cat Cay is a port of entry with a long public pier, a small airport, and a housing development. Moor your boat at the pier and walk to the Customs and Immigration Office at its base. After the paperwork the agent might want to visit your boat.

About 75 miles across from the western Bank's atoll islands, on the eastern edge of the Bank, are more substantial islands: the Berry Islands in the north, Andros, the largest island, in the south, and Chub Cay between the Berry Islands and Andros Island. Chub Cay is a common stopping spot for boats crossing the Bank to get to the central or outer islands. It sports a fine large marina filled with sport-fishing boats, and a housing development filled with sport-fishing fans.



The Inner Islands with New Providence Island

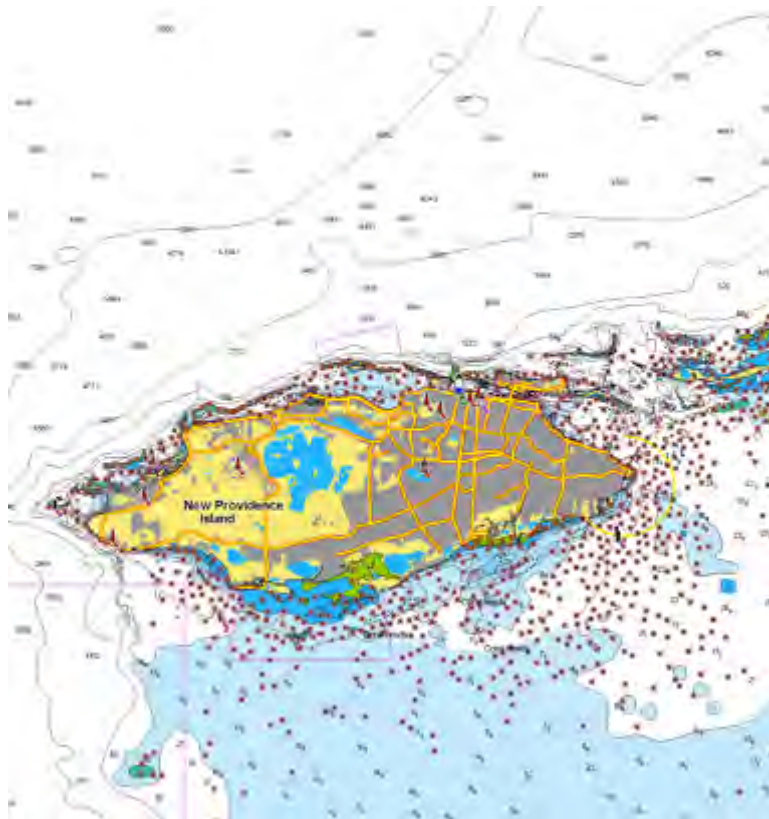
In spite of its size, Andros is accessible only on its eastern due to the shallow bank on the northern and western sides. Once I tried to approach its northwestern tip on a five-foot draft boat. My advice is—*Don't!* The east side is not much deeper.

“The Tongue of the Ocean” is a body of open Atlantic water running eastward between the Grand Bahama Island on the north and the Abacos Islands, then turning southward along the eastern side of the Bank and down past Andros. Its name comes from its shape—like a dog’s lolling tongue. The Tongue is the boater’s path to the New Providence and the outer islands, as well as to Andros Island’s west side.

Andros is best known for its fishing, particularly the bonefish that inhabit the shallows. The Island is reported to have a number of Blue Holes to visit. While there are places to stay, restaurants, and other facilities, check with someone who has been there about the desirability of a visit to the Big Island. Bahamian facilities are generally not great and Andros might not even meet that standard. Also, there is a rumor that the Andros natives are not as friendly as the other Bahamians, but I have no personal experience on that score.

The Central Islands

The two central islands—New Providence Island and Paradise Island—are the center of the Bahamian economy and its population. Nassau, the nation's capital, is a congested area at the eastern end of the island: traffic jams are constant, the flow of people—both natives and cruise ship passengers—is unceasing, and crime is ever present. Nassau has its sights—mostly old government buildings and churches—but it's a better place to visit than to stay.



New Providence and Paradise Islands

The Carib Indians were New Providence Island's first settlers. In 1670 the British aristocracy arrived on New Providence with their slaves to establish plantations in what was once a fertile land; Britain ended slavery in 1807. The British established Charles Town, essentially a fort, as their capital and center of government. From that time on, New Providence was a geopolitical football. In 1684 the Spanish attacked and burned Charles Town. In 1703 the Spanish and French occupied New Providence; they remained until 1718. In 1782 the Spanish, led by Cuba's governor, invaded and briefly held the island before another return to British sovereignty.

In 1713, during the Spanish occupation, it was reported that Charles Town was populated by thousands of pirates and only hundreds of residents. The pirates were a fractious lot that feasted on commercial shipping—particularly the British traffic along America’s east coast. Piracy, especially of British ships, was supported by the Spanish government in Charles Town until British reoccupation of New Providence in 1718 established order and sent the pirates elsewhere to do their dastardly deeds.

The appeal of New Providence and other islands to the British and their enemies was its strategic location on the “triangular trade” routes that trafficked slaves, rum, and common goods between America, Europe, and Africa. Permanent settlement was encouraged by the suitability for plantation agriculture.

Throughout its history the Bahamas—that is, essentially, New Providence Island—were caught between British rule and American events. At the onset of the American Revolution in 1776, American Continental Marines briefly occupied New Providence; again the British retook it. During the Revolution, New Providence and other Bahama islands enjoyed a flood of Loyalists leaving America for a more peaceful life in a British area; on some islands—like Spanish Wells—the descendants of those Loyalists still abound. During the American Civil War blockade-running ships carried goods to America’s southern ports and left laden with cotton bound for Europe.

Until World War II the city of Nassau was the primary settlement on New Providence—areas outside the city were either uninhabited or devoted to farming. After the war the population began drifting westward and heavily populated suburbs sprang up. Today the bulk of population is still around Nassau, but the entire island is occupied.

British dominance of the islands continued until the Bahamas was granted independence in 1973, though the Bahamas are still part of the British Commonwealth.

Paradise Island—once called Hog Island—is New Providence Island’s smaller twin, joined at its hip on New Providence’s northeast side with a narrow channel running between them. Paradise Island was once purely agricultural—the source of livestock goods, vegetables, and other agricultural products for residents of New Providence. Today it is on the good side of the tracks, with upscale housing and estates like Lyford Cay at its west end and The One and Only Club on its east end. Large homes now cover the island.

The transformation of Paradise Island began with Huntington Hartford’s 1958 purchase of the island. Hartford was the vastly wealthy heir to the Great Atlantic and Pacific Tea Company. He built an impressive personal estate at the east end; it is now the site of the opulent One and Only Club Resort and is well worth a visit, if not a stay. Among its many charms is an original 14th century Augustine Monastery

cloister; it was imported in the 1920s from France by William Randolph Hearst and not reassembled until Hartford bought it in the 1950s. Hartford also constructed a golf course (Gary Player was the first pro) and a tennis club (Pancho Gonzales was the first tennis pro) on the island. Paradise Island opened for business as a pleasure island in 1962.



Paradise Island

Hartford obtained a gambling license for Paradise Island: co-partnership with the newly formed Resorts International provided the investors in a casino. In 1980 the Hartford estate sold Paradise Island for a mere \$79 million. It was then resold to Merv Griffin for \$400 million, and last sold to Sol Kerzner for \$125 million. It's estimated current value is \$2 billion.



Atlantis Paradise Island Resort

Today the central feature of Paradise Island is the extravagantly gauche Atlantis Paradise Island Resort, visible from many miles at sea. Atlantis is a heavenly spot for families on vacation, with several large swimming pools, water slides, a massive underground aquarium, restaurants galore, a fine marina populated by super-yachts, and upscale shopping. While the children are at water activities the parents can go to the Casino and bask under a huge Chihuly crystal chandelier costing \$1 million, all while losing money.

As is true around the Bahamas, much money has been poured into development. Most of it never comes to fruition because the cycles of the Bahamian economy and of Bahamas popularity gets in the way. But there are some huge pockets of recent development that might be fruitful on New Providence: the Chinese Bah-Mar hotel to the west of Nassua near the International Airport, and, on the south side, the Albany Marina and housing development with a Tiger Woods golf course are two examples that might or might not make it—only time will tell. The only major development that seems to last is the Atlantis Paradise Island Resort, but it is not as well maintained as it once was, and that's not a good sign.

The Northern Islands

The islands along the northern edge of the Bahamas are atoll islands Grand Bahama Island and the Abacos Island chain. Grand Bahama is at Miami's latitude and easily reached on a day trip if the Gulf Stream is accommodating. However, if a strong north wind is blowing against the fast-flowing northbound Stream, you'll be sitting in a Florida marina or in the Bahamas until you can brave the passage.

Grand Bahama Island has size, but not much else. At the island's west end—90 miles from Miami—is the cleverly named West End, a point of entry. West End has housing, restaurants, fuel and a large marina. This is where boaters traveling to the northern or central islands check in, and it is the entrance to the Abaco Island chain. West End is not a destination, except for those who live there, but it is an excellent spot to stay for a couple of days to sit out bad weather or to do some late trip planning, or just to put your feet up.



Grand Bahama Island and the Abacos Islands

When you exit West End (called Settlement Point in the chart above) you'll find yourself with two routes into the Abacos. The first, for deeper-draft boats, is to go northwest to Memory Rock, then turn southeast and cross the bank toward West

End Cay on Little Abaco Island; I've done this in a 7-foot draft vessel. An alternate route for shallow-draft boats is to exit West End to the northwest and after about a mile or so you will see a vertical spar on your starboard side. This marks a narrow and shallow entrance to the bank. I once traveled this route in a boat with 1½-foot draft and there were moments when it was almost too much.

If, instead, you exit West End and turn east along Grand Bahama Island you'll arrive at Freeport, an unappealing area filled with cruise ships and gambling parlors. But from Freeport you can turn southeasterly and head for New Providence Island.

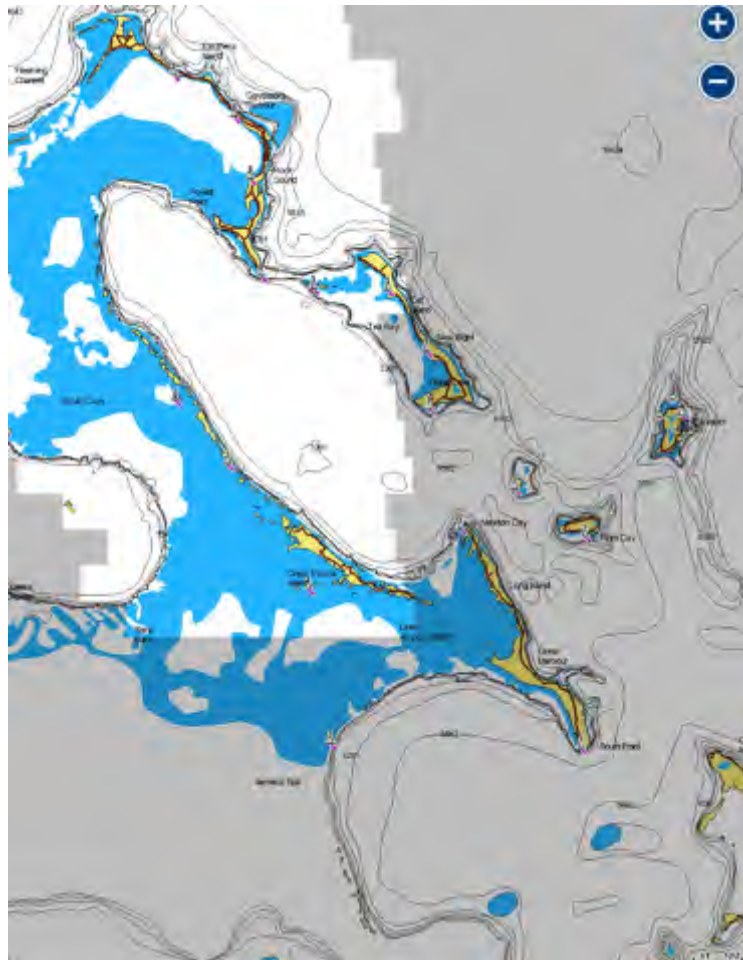
The Abacos Islands are a rich destination for boaters. There are actual towns to visit—Hope Town and Marsh Harbour are well worth it. And there are cays with marinas to visit—Spanish Cay and Green Turtle Cay are examples. But the Abacos are dotted with reefs and I've seen at least one large vessel high up on a reef. It's a cautionary tale.

The captain had been heading from Spanish Cay to Green Turtle Cay, both on the Atlantic side of Great Abaco Island. Green Turtle Cay has a tricky entrance because you don't see it until you are past it. The sun was in his eyes and he continued past the entrance to Green Turtle and began to enter Black Sound, mistaking it for Green Turtle Cay's harbor. He came up on a wide reef at the extremely narrow and poorly marked entrance to Black Sound. The channel was easy to miss, especially because the homemade markers were small and there were a number of other pilings around the reef that looked like entrance markers.

The Outer Islands

Like the Inner Islands and the Abacos, the Outer Islands are formed as an atoll around a large body of water. For the inner islands that body of water is the shallow Great Bahama Bank; for the inner islands it is the very deep Exuma Sound with the Exuma Islands on the west and the outermost outer islands, particularly Eleuthera and Harbor Island, on the east.

The Exuma Islands on the west side of Exuma Sound are a string of small cays from Highbourne Cay (“Gateway to the Exumas”) in the north to Great Exuma Island 100 miles south of Highbourne Cay.



The Outer Islands

Highbourne Cay is 30 miles southeast of Nassau, across the Yellow Bank with its abundant coral heads. When crossing the Yellow Bank it's advisable to go slow, have the sun behind you, and wear your polarized sunglasses. It's really not that dangerous, but all it takes is one unusually large coral head approaching you at high speed to spoil your day.

Highbourne Cay is an *H*-shaped cay with a fine marina in a harbor on the lower portion between the legs of the *H* and a road along its ridge where houses have been built for staff and for private purchase; plenty of lots are left for you. The ridge road is set perhaps 50 feet above the marina, with a wide paved access road—cut through lava—dropping sharply down to the marina. At the marina are a restaurant, the marina office, and two small but very fine beaches.

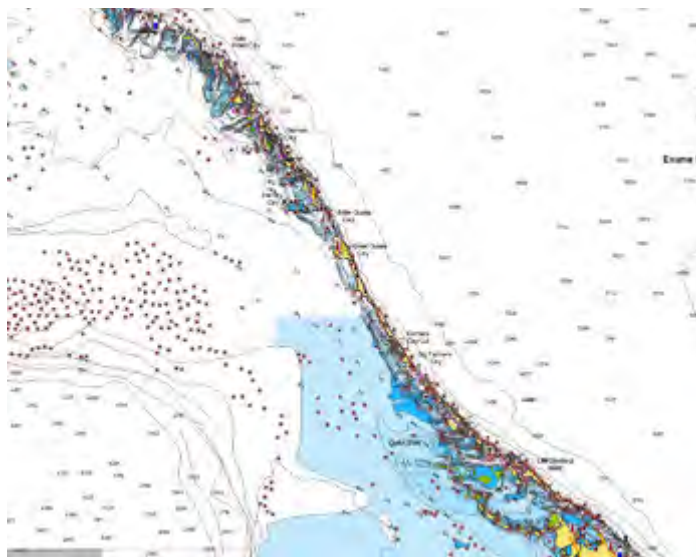
If you can get up to the road by foot, bike, or golf cart, the residential area for staff and owner is at the northern end of the cay, and a really super beach is in the uninhabited harbor on the upper part of Highbourne's *H*. Someone has a great sense of humor—along the road you'll find a bench marked "Bus Stop." On the bench sits a Halloween skeleton. There is also an airport landing strip.



The Upper Exumas

In the long-ago Highbourne Cay was a plantation growing watermelons and aloe; both attest to an abundance of fresh water. The old aloe bushes still run rampant across the island. On Highbourne's Exuma Sound side is a long and very inviting beach that can be reached by marked paths from the ridge road. It is little used by boaters because the Atlantic weather can be troublesome and because lava outcroppings stymie access by small craft.

As you go down the Exuma chain you'll pass a rich array of small cays, some of them private. In the past we've enjoyed visiting Norman Cay, about 5 miles south of Highbourne Cay's marina. Carlos Lederer's drug operation was based there in the 1980s after he dispossessed the homeowners on the cay; an FBI lookout was on a small cay just off of Norman's Cay. In the Norman's Cay harbor you can still find the rusted hulk of a DC-3 that crashed many years ago. The story is that it was carrying "grass." (No, it wasn't marijuana; it was real sod that Lederer was fond of installing around "his" island.) There is a completely torn-up harbor-side restaurant you can investigate, and an airstrip adjoining a resort hotel on the west side of the cay.



The Middle Exumas

Fifteen miles farther south of Norman Cay is Warderick Wells Cay, the center of the Exuma Cays National Park. You can anchor there but only after a fee is paid to the Ranger at the Warderick Wells station; if you don't check in, don't worry—he or she will find you.

Near the Ranger station there is a large cairn on a bluff where visitors leave small items to honor a group of shipwrecked folks who died there many years ago; the walk to the cairn is treacherous so be careful and wear sturdy shoes.

Six miles further south are O'Brien and Bell Cays. Bell is the property of the fourth Aga Khan, 49th Imam of the Nizari Ismailis sect within the Shia sect of Islam. The island appears to be a resort for family and friends. Just off O'Brien Cay's southern tip is a very small ledge marked by a wooden cross. It is a small but superb snorkeling spot.

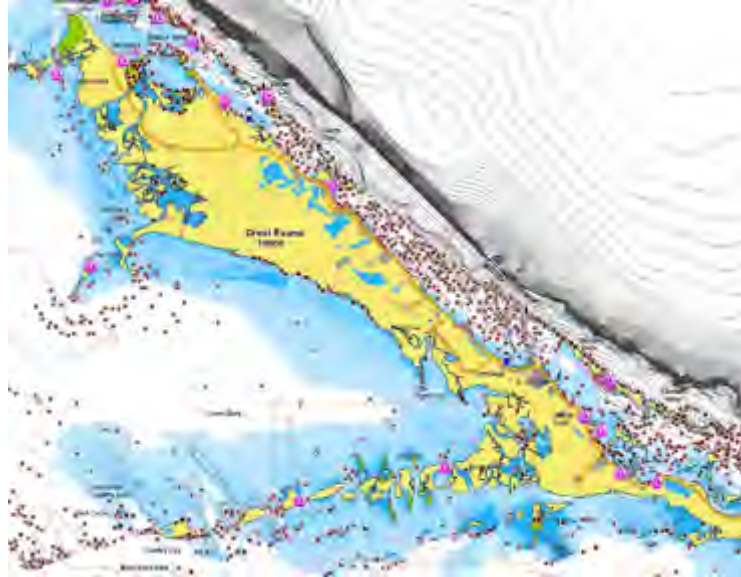
Another eight miles brings you to Sampson Cay, once one of the Exumas finest stops with a fine marina, well-maintained buildings, and houses perched on the heights. We always made it a stop for several days, using it as a base to explore the area. Regrettably, the owner shut it down a few years ago and converted it to his family's private use: you can enter its harbor and scan it, but you can't go ashore. The facilities are still beautifully maintained, but they are vacant. The owner's reason for closing it, according to the grapevine, is that he gave up on Bahamian labor to run the place: friendly, yes; honest, perhaps; diligent and efficient, no way.

Yet another eight miles south is Staniel Cay, the traditional base of operations for boats in the mid-Exumas. Along the way from Sampson to Staniel is Big Majors Spot, a sizable cay noted for its feral pigs. They are feral but tame: pull a boat up on the beach and say hello! But bring something to feed them.

For such a small island, Staniel Cay is populated. The village buildings near the marina are attractively painted in pastel colors that give life to the cay. It has restaurants and the people are friendly. It has a decent marina with a restaurant, and it has an airstrip.

Staniel Cay Marina is located near Thunderball Grotto, a popular snorkeling spot used in the 1960s James Bond movie *Thunderball*. If you want to go inside the grotto, be aware that the current can run very fast and put you at risk: it's wise to wait until the tide is slack. The last time I visited the grotto was with an elderly gent who wanted to go inside when the current was running fast; it took a trained diver/EMT who happened to be in the area to save him; Thank You, God!

Great Exuma Island is forty miles south of Staniel Cay. It is the largest in the chain and has several communities. Georgetown, near the island's midpoint, is an amazing boaters environment. Boats of all types anchor off of Georgetown for months at a time. They form a community that organizes its activities by radio: there are bridge groups, church services, ventures to restaurants, house (oops! boat) calls by new friends, and boat parties. The social life is like that in any community.



Great Exuma Island

Great Exuma Island is also a spot to rent a car and explore the island. It has a great variety of things to see and places to go, especially by Bahama standards. Among the treats are the Four Season Resort and Emerald Bay Marina near the northern end. The Four Seasons was (is) a top-end operation with beaches and a golf course. It came on line in the early 2000s, ran into financial difficulty, and was sold to another group a few years. The marina, where people had bought slips, was closed; the marina's new owners reimbursed much of the price. The marina fairway was dangerous during hard northeast winds—it is narrow, travels between two reefs, and requires a 90-degree turn before hitting a seawall. I once I saw a 100-foot boat coming in sideways; it made it but the video is chilling. However, I've heard that the marina and resort are now open. I'd love to revisit them!

Now we jump across Exuma Sound to the outermost islands, dominated by the large island of Eleuthra. Eleuthra was once a haven for elite tourism with upscale resorts like the old Windemere Club, now restored as a private club called the Windemere Island Club. The island's decline began with the arrival of national independence in 1973, was assisted in 1992 by Hurricane Andrew's devastating blows, and the financial crisis of 2008-2009 administered final blows to the traditional resorts on Eleuthra. Efforts to revive Eleuthra have had little success, with one important exception: Harbour Island, at Eleuthra's northeastern tip remains vibrant.

Note the area at the top left in the map, below. This is a particularly successful area holding the town of Spanish Wells. Spanish Wells residents are the offspring of the Loyalists who came to the Bahamas during the American Revolution, and of their predecessors—the "Eleuthran Adventurers," Puritans who arrived in 1648 seeking religious freedom. The population of Spanish Wells forms a tightly

knit community sharing a number of features: white skin, a sort of Scotch-Irish brogue, and (often) red hair. The economy of Spanish Wells is based on lobster fishing, and the fishermen have become wealthy they moved to Russell Island adjacent to Spanish Wells. Spanish Wellians go to the U.S. mainland for college—but they always return!



Eleuthera Island

Royal Island, adjacent to Russell Island, has an interesting background. In the 1920s it was purchased by a gentleman who built a mansion overlooking the island's harbor as a gift to his new wife. Apparently the wife couldn't take the isolation and the estate was abandoned long ago. The remnants of that mansion and its outhouses for staff are still visible, but vegetation has taken over.

Since that abandonment there have been several attempts to resettle—and gentrify—Royal Island. About fifteen years ago a group bought the island and began building a resort with lots for private homes. A Greg Norman golf course was in the plans, as well as a marina. At our last visit in 2015 little progress had been made and the island was in a caretaker's hands. Once again, the eyes had been larger than the stomach in the Bahamas.

For the boater, Royal Island's harbor is a wonderful treat. It is well protected, quiet, and affords opportunities to get ashore at the old mansion's cement dock (such as it is). It is also close enough to Spanish Wells to provide food and entertainment.

The route to Harbour Island is through the "Devil's Backbone," a treacherous reef through which boats of any size should be piloted by a local; even boats without any size might seriously consider the option. A Spanish Wellian pilot named "A-1" was popular in our day because his name was mentioned in a popular cruising guide. Time showed that he was as adept at finding a reef as he was at avoiding it. Look elsewhere!

To reach Harbour Island one can take two routes. First, from an island called "Meek's Patch," located between Royal Island and Spanish Wells (see the dot below Russell Island), there is an inside route to the Devil's Backbone that goes counter-clockwise around Spanish Wells and into the Backbone. That route provides some entertaining and very close brushes by land, and a view of the Preacher's Cave where the Puritans are said to have huddled when they first arrived. The second route reaches the Backbone directly from the Atlantic by passing by Spanish Wells on its north side.

Once at Harbour Island you find the entirely un-Bahamian Dunmore Town. It is densely populated by Bahamas standards, it has a variety of houses from extremely well kept ancient structures on the waterfront to more modern, larger, but not gauche, houses off the water. It has pink sand beaches on its Atlantic side. The locals travel on its decent roads by car, truck, or golf cart; the outlanders use rented golf carts. One of my fond memories was of a boat trip there with a very Scottish (read: miserly) friend who had a second home on Eleuthra. He bargained a golf cart down from \$40 to \$30. We hopped on for an island tour and within a block a wheel came off. The miser had still paid \$10 per wheel!

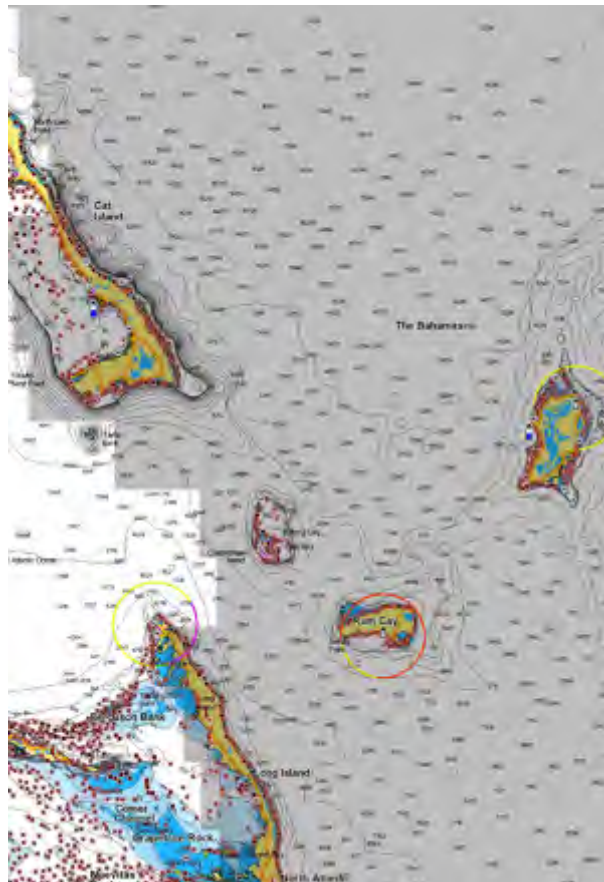
Harbour Island abounds with resorts, restaurants, and a feeling of liveliness. It is a fun place to visit, but you can only get there by water—either water taxi or ferry from the very northern tip of Eleuthra, or by private boat. Once there, you might want to stay awhile at one of the marinas: our choice was always Valentine's.

What about the rest of Eleuthra? Sadly, I have no first hand knowledge: we have never heard of anything to attract a visit. That doesn't mean that it is without interest, but there's not enough of a buzz to be heard.

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The Southern Islands

The Southern Islands of the Bahamas are the road-less-travelled. Compared to other areas, these are less visited because by the time you've explored the other islands its time to go home. We have stayed in one of the two marinas at Clarence Town, Long Island's capital on Long Island, from which we took a rental car excursion to, well, who knows where? Clarence Town has a population of about 1,700; its singular features are two architecturally interesting churches—and light traffic. The feel was that of a frontier town that the railroad had bypassed.



The Southern Islands

We have also anchored near Cat Island and enjoyed dinner at a resort on Fernandez Bay, only to learn that it was scheduled to close down.

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Summary

Try the Bahamas. You'll come back! They are the best reason to have a boat.