



# mission: bahama

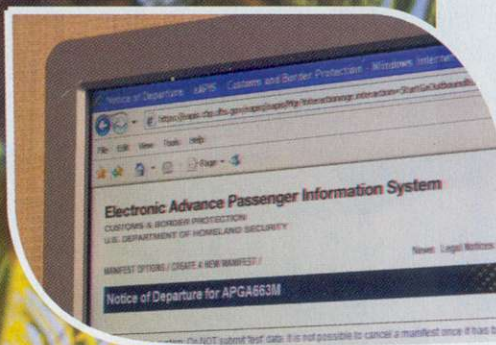
Rules of the road for the trip  
of a lifetime By Thomas A. Horne

**f**or many pilots, cross-country flying is why we learned to fly in the first place. Who wouldn't want to cover 50-plus nautical miles in a single bound, view a decent change of scenery, and get the endorphin rush that goes with any trip over new territory? But there are destinations, and then there are destinations.



# mmas

Photography by Chris Rose



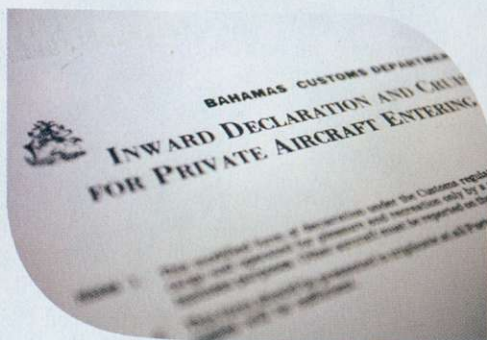
If your flying routine has become, well, routine, then consider going to the Islands of the Florida coast, and the closest island—Bimini—is a mere 55 nm from Fort Lauderdale. That's about a half-hour flight in even the lightest piston single. From there, some 700 other islands await, most separated by 100 nm or less. This makes island-hopping a great adventure as you shake hands with the world of ocean flying, hone your navigation skills with each landfall, and you'll never forget the inspiration that comes from scanning those clear, turquoise waters.

Is flying to the Bahamas difficult? Not really, especially when you factor in the huge value of learning international travel procedures. Dealing with the bureaucracy can be a challenge at first, but help is available, and with practice you become a pro. Balanced against the fun you'll have cruising to the resorts, the hassle factor is well worth it. We can break Bahamian flying down to five basic elements: flight planning, border crossings, overwater issues, weather, and airports.

### Flight planning

Start by opening up World Aeronautical Charts CH-25 and CJ-26 to get a feel for the islands' layouts, locate special-use airspace, and plot your routes. Pilot Publishing Inc. (800-521-2120; [www.flytheislands.com](http://www.flytheislands.com)) also puts out a nice VFR chart, one that covers the entire island chain. Another great planning aid is the *Bahamas and Caribbean Pilot's Guide*, also from Pilot Publishing. It contains charts, helpful aerial photos of each airport, plus resort descriptions and contact information.

The basics of flight planning don't change no matter where you go, but understand that there is no night VFR flying in the Bahamas. Also, there are very few airports served by instrument approaches, so if you intend to fly under IFR your destinations are limited to Nassau International (MYNN—Bahamian airports use an "M"



*Above, left to right: Dealing with eAPIS means going online and filling in the blanks. The trip from Fort Lauderdale Executive to Freeport is just 90 nm. A sampling of the survival gear you should take along. “Gen decs” must be filed when arriving in the Bahamas—depending on the location, some customs locations may ask for anywhere from three to five copies, but you can fill them out before arrival. A ramp scene at the Stella Maris Airport on Long Island. On your way to the beach at Cat Island’s Sammy T’s Beach Resort (below).*

prefix), Freeport International (MYGF), and Treasure Cay International (MYAT).

You can fly direct VFR routes to many Bahamian airports, but know this: Your first landing in the Bahamas must be at an *airport of entry* (AOE). And when returning to the United States, you must leave from a Bahamian airport of entry—and arrive at an American airport of entry. There are 20 Bahamian AOE’s, spread far and wide, so you are not required to land at busy Nassau or Freeport International airports to clear customs and immigration inbound. You can fly straight from any airport in Florida, then land at one of the scores of farther-flung “Out Islands.”

### Border crossings

This is the bureaucratic part. First, all aboard need current passports. You will need your pilot certificate, medical certificate, and a restricted radiotelephone operator’s permit. The airplane’s airworthiness certificate, registration, and radio station license are other musts, along with a current Customs and Border Protection decal. If you are renting or borrowing your airplane, a letter authorizing your use of the airplane, signed by the owner, is a very good idea.

As for paperwork, there’s a lot to say. I’ll hit the high points, but AOPA’s Pilot Information Center has some great resources ([www.aopa.org/members/pic/intl](http://www.aopa.org/members/pic/intl)). Also, check online for a complete procedural checklist for flying outbound from the United States ([www.stellamarisresort.com](http://www.stellamarisresort.com)) and for the return to American airports of entry ([www.abacobeachresort.com](http://www.abacobeachresort.com)).

- **eAPIS.** This stands for *Electronic Advance Passenger Information System*, and you must prepare and file online eAPIS manifests for each flight departing from or returning to the United States. Before filing, you have to register with the U.S. Customs and Bor-

der Protection online (<https://eapis.cbp.dhs.gov/>). This gets you a “sender ID” that you can use on subsequent international flights. The AOPA Air Safety Foundation has a great online tutorial for filling eAPIS forms ([www.asf.org/eAPIS](http://www.asf.org/eAPIS)). What information does eAPIS require? A lot. The names, addresses, passport numbers (and expiration dates), and birth dates and places for pilot and passengers, for starters. Include the date and time of arrival at your Bahamian or U.S. AOE. It helps to file both your outbound and inbound eAPIS manifests at the same time—before you leave the United States—because Internet access can be slow, intermittent, or nonexistent at many Out Islands.

- **Flight plan filing.** You must file a Defense VFR (DVFR) or IFR flight plan when leaving or returning to the United States. Activate your flight plan before leaving Florida. Flight following is available from the Miami International Flight Service Station on a number of frequencies—but coverage is spotty the farther, and lower, you fly. Frequencies are on the WAC charts, or you can obtain them from your preflight briefer. Nassau Radio on 124.2 or 128.0 MHz can be used for flight following, or to file and close flight plans. But again, coverage and signal strength can leave a lot to be desired. At Bahamian airports of entry, there are blue telephones that can be used to file and close flight plans, free of charge.





*The beach at Cat Island's  
Fernandez Bay Village Resort.*

## Bimini is a mere 55 nm from Fort Lauderdale.

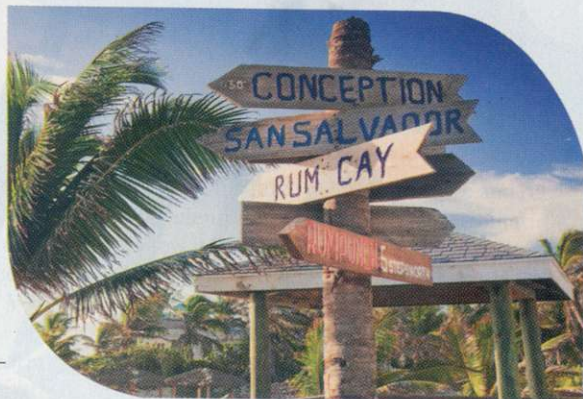
That's about a half-hour flight in  
even the lightest piston single.



## Learning the ropes

Should you feel the need for someone to show you the ropes one on one, know this: The ATA Flight School, at the Hollywood-North Perry Airport in Pembroke Pines, Florida ([www.ataflightschool.com](http://www.ataflightschool.com)), offers personalized training in Bahamas flying. Typically, there are three hours of ground school and a one-hour familiarization visit at a U.S. Customs facility. Then it's time for some dual flying on an actual trip to the islands. This happens in your own airplane or in one of ATA's Cessna 150/152s, 172s, or a Piper Lance. The flight can be a simple out-and-back, or an overnight at an island resort. "Of course, the flight time is by the hour. And if we stay overnight the student has to pay for my room," says ATA's Michael Punziano. Total cost—excluding room and board for an overnight—runs "about \$500," Punziano said.

—TAH



- **General declarations, immigration cards, and transires.** Upon arriving in the Bahamas, some paperwork awaits. You need to fill out three copies of the C7A, or general declaration form (better known as "gen decs"). Here, you simply list the names of all aboard, provide your N-number, plus departure and arrival airports. Each person gets an immigration card, which is returned—along with a \$15-per-head departure tax—when leaving on the return flight to the United States. A *transire*, sometimes called a *cruising permit*, is issued for interisland flying. It's stamped at each Bahamian airport you visit, and is for keeping track of your whereabouts in the islands.

- **Customs notification and ADIZ crossings inbound to the United States.** Part of your flight planning duties for the return trip is to estimate your time of crossing the U.S. Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) boundary; another is to calculate your estimated time of arrival (ETA) at your U.S. AOE. Before taking off from the Bahamas to the United States, call Customs at your AOE and give them your ETA. This is also a great time to check to make sure they have your eAPIS. Once in flight, call up Miami Flight Service on 126.7 or 126.9 MHz before crossing the ADIZ. They'll give you a discrete transponder code and wave you in to your AOE.

### Overwater

GPS takes a lot of the stress out of ocean flying, but it's still a very good idea to follow your progress on your charts. Many times I'll call up the GPS receiver's page showing the airplane's current latitude and longitude. In case of an emergency, I can quickly give my coordinates.

Speaking of emergencies, carry life vests for each occupant of the airplane as a bare minimum. A good raft and signaling devices are worth their weight should you have to ditch. Several coastal airports in Florida will rent you vests and a raft; call ahead to get the specifics.

Does flying out of sight of land make you or your passengers anxious? GPS or no, all that water can work on your imagination. You can take comfort in knowing you have adequate fuel reserves, knowing your position, and talking with Miami or Nassau radio. But that doesn't help when you think the engine is running rough. This phenomenon—known colloquially as "automatic rough"—is well documented, and usually happens the moment you lose sight of land. That's your imagination at work, and soon the "roughness" goes away.

### Weather

A veteran island pilot once told me that if the weather in the Caribbean was below a ceiling of 1,000 feet "then you're in a hurricane." An exaggeration, but not far from the truth. Generally speaking, Bahamian weather is good visual meteorological conditions with excellent visibilities, scattered cloud bases seldom below 2,000 feet msl—and more often than not, much, much higher.

Cumulus buildups maturing late in the day can trigger rainshowers and the occasional thunderstorm. But buildups can usually be circumnavigated visually, providing you an excellent view of rainbows. Daytime buildups can serve as nav aids of sorts. As island surface temperatures rise during the day, the heat can generate cumulus buildups over land. That buildup off to your left may have an island beneath it—and can be used to help confirm your position.

Surface winds can be problematic at times. That's because wind speeds can reach 20 knots or more, and terrain-induced turbulence can make for a wild ride down final. However, surface winds are nearly always out of the easterly points of the compass, and so Bahamian airports are usually laid out into the wind. Runway 9 is a common runway orientation, *mon*.

We all know that yes, hurricanes do happen in these parts. Hurricane season runs

from June to November, so these are the months to keep a close watch on the tropical weather situation (and, coincidentally, these are the months with the lowest resort prices). Should a tropical disturbance crop up, count on islanders to take notice at the first sign. Long before winds pick up out of the northeast—one surefire warning of an approaching tropical low—you'll hear plenty of warning. In hurricane season, Bahamians live with an ear on the radio, the television tuned to the weather, and an eye on the windsock.

### Airports

Practically every island is served by at least one airport, and sometimes more. But make sure you check on your proposed destinations during the preflight briefing. Only a small handful of airports have control towers, let alone radar sequencing and separation. In the Out Islands, self-announcing on a published unicom frequency is the rule.

Airports in the Bahamas vary greatly. It's a far cry from well-paved and -marked Nassau International (11,000 feet long, 150 feet wide) or Treasure Cay International (6,900 feet long, 150 feet wide) to the Pittstown Point Airport (MYCP) on Crooked Island, with its 2,070-foot-long, 60-foot-wide runway with compacted-coral overruns. A note in the *Bahamas and Caribbean Pilot's Guide* adds this little detail about MYCP, which should interest those understandably interested in landing on the numbers: "Five-foot berm or sea wall on approach to runway 10. Several planes have left their gear here. Use more glide slope [sic]."

Does all this sound like too much work? I think you'll change your mind once you're hanging out on the beach or yukking it up at the tiki bar with the other pilots. Oh, did I forget to mention that a huge proportion of Out Island visitors are general aviation pilots?

Thomas A. Horne is editor at large for AOPA's publications.