


**adventuregetaway**

# Bahamas Out Islands

by John T. Kounis • photos by George A. Kounis

An aerial photograph showing the tail and wings of a white Cessna 337 with blue accents flying over a series of small, lush green islands in the Bahamas. The water is a vibrant turquoise color, and the islands are scattered across the sea. The aircraft's registration number, N3771B, is visible on the tail.

Rick Gardner and Anton Leonhardes fly Rick's Cessna 337 near Thomas Cay in the Exumas, about 5 nm northwest of Staniel Cay.



## TRANQUILITY AND HOSPITALITY

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From the bustling streets of Nassau, with its casinos and expansive resorts, to isolated coves and uninhabited islands, the Bahamas is a diverse country.

I thought I knew what to expect before I pointed my airplane eastward from Fort Lauderdale, Fla., for the short over-water flight to the small island country of the Bahamas. Indeed, the unspoiled beaches, rustic resorts, and clear blue water did not disappoint. But the overwhelming impression I came away with—one that sets the Bahamas apart from many other destinations—is the friendliness of the people.

From the bustling streets of Nassau, with its casinos and expansive resorts, to isolated coves and uninhabited islands, the Bahamas is a diverse country. This trip focused on the more remote and laid-back Out Islands, where the pace is slower and people don't lock their doors at night. It's the kind of place where kids on bicycles wave as they ride past, drivers stop to offer directions if you appear lost, and the police chief sits down to share a soda with you in a restaurant.

## Trip Planning

Rick Gardner, a Bahamian native and member of the Bahamas General Aviation council, and his wife, Pia Hilbert, operate **Caribbean Sky Tours**, a company that conducts escorted flying tours of the Bahamas and Mexico, and offers vacation planning services for solo travelers to the Caribbean, Mexico, and Central America. Rick traveled the islands extensively by boat

while growing up on New Providence Island. Drawing on his expertise, he planned the itinerary for me and my brother George, concentrating on his favorite out-of-the-way places, many of which he has visited since childhood. He also escorted us in his Cessna 337 Skymaster, (786) 206-6147, [www.caribbeanskytours.com](http://www.caribbeanskytours.com).

A week before the trip, Rick e-mailed me a trip plan with a nav log and route maps built by Jeppesen FliteStar and RMS Flitesoft, as well as a daily itinerary. We would meet at Fort Lauderdale Executive Airport (FXE), brief, and then depart for the Bahamas as a flight of two aircraft. This was my first over-water flight where I was in sight of another airplane the entire time, and seeing Rick's Skymaster 30 ft. away was certainly comforting. Along the way, Rick gave George and me a crash course on Bahamian phrases that would prove useful during our trip. "Skylarkin" means to goof off and "tingum" is any object, which would be loosely translated as a "thingamajig." Unlike the period, which is silent at the end of English sentences, all Bahamian sentences end with "mon"—mon.

Our route took us across the Nassau Terminal Control Area (TCA), the larger of the two control areas in the Bahamas. The controller was working a couple of frequencies, transmitting non-stop to IFR traffic and making handoffs so quickly that we couldn't get a word in edgewise for

our initial VFR call. We actually penetrated about 10 nm into the TCA before establishing contact, but the controller seemed unconcerned; he simply approved our transition and asked us to report 10 nm past Nassau on the way out. After leaving Nassau behind, we continued down the Exumas chain of islands. The farther we flew, the sparser the traffic became and the more idyllic the scene below us.

## Stella Maris

Our first stop in the Bahamas was on the 80-mile-long, aptly named Long Island. The difference between the coastlines on each side of the island was apparent as we flew south to Stella Maris (MYLS), our destination 7 nm from the northern tip. Mangroves and white sand beaches against a backdrop of the shallow, light blue waters of the Great Bahama Bank dominate the west coast. Along the east coast, waves crash against a rocky shoreline that plunges into the deep, blue waters of the Atlantic Ocean.

After landing on Stella Maris's 4,000 x 75-ft. paved runway, we taxied to a small customs building and a one-room FBO framed by palm trees. The image confirmed my idea of what a Bahamian airport should look like. Between the two buildings, a few locals were relaxing in the shade on benches in the open-air "terminal," separated from the ramp by a three-foot-high fence.

Pristine white sand beaches and crystal clear waters invite you to relax (below left); With advance notice, Bahamas Civil Aviation usually approves seaplane landings throughout the country (below right); The friendliness of the locals is contagious (above right).



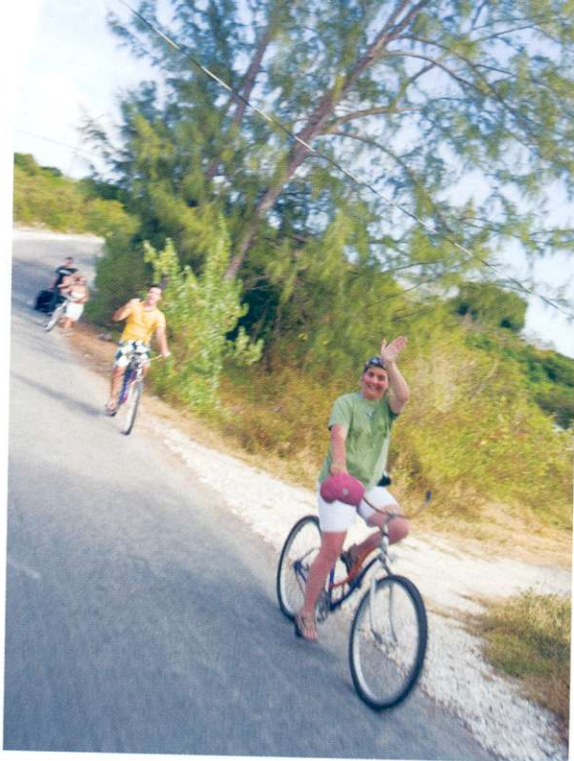
Rick had already filled out our paperwork for us, so we cleared immigration and customs in just a few minutes. While paying for fuel in the FBO, we noticed a large poster entitled "The Devil's Triangle" showing the mythical Bermuda Triangle. If a nervous passenger sees the poster, you could point out that quite a few airplanes have flown to the Bahamas since the last downed aircraft depicted on the poster: a B-25 that went down in 1956.

It's just a 3/4-mile taxi ride to the nearby **Stella Maris Resort Club**, perched on a hill between the airport and the rocky coast to the east. From the main reception area and restaurant, small roadways lead through palm trees to one- to four-bedroom rental houses. The houses are privately owned, so the number that can be rented varies; as of February 2008, 13 houses were available.

The nicest home is the Dolphin House, owned by the original founders of Stella Maris, the Manovich family from Düsseldorf, Germany. The four-bedroom house has a bright, spacious central living room and kitchen area with high ceilings, rattan furniture, and ceiling fans throughout. Two nautical porthole windows flank a large sliding glass door with ocean views. Steps lead down to a private swimming pool and continue to a sandy-bottom tide pool

fed by a small inlet and sheltered from the surf by a rock outcropping. Three suites and 13 hotel-style rooms are also available. Accommodations run \$145–\$630.

The shoreline near the resort is good for snorkeling on calm days, but a bit too rocky for lying on a beach towel. Fortunately, Stella Maris provides free shuttle service to five nearby beaches. Resort co-owner Neils



**BUT THE OVERWHELMING IMPRESSION I CAME AWAY WITH—ONE THAT SETS THE BAHAMAS APART FROM MANY OTHER DESTINATIONS—IS THE FRIENDLINESS OF THE PEOPLE.**

Thurman drove us to Cape Santa Maria Beach, which he claims is one of the nicest **beaches** in the Bahamas. The last mile or so of the 9-mile drive is along a bumpy dirt road. Neils parked at a wide spot in the road and led us along a footpath. The view suddenly opened up to reveal expansive, white sands. A couple of sailboats were anchored offshore in the clear, turquoise waters. Though it was the busy winter season, the beach was remarkably uncrowded. Looking back at my lone footprints on the sand, I could easily imagine I was a castaway on a faraway island.

On the way back, we passed a dirt strip. Neils mentioned that it is the private 2,200-ft. runway (MYLM) for guests of **Cape Santa Maria Resort** at the north end of the beach with beachside bungalows and villas, \$235–\$795, (250) 598-3366 or (800) 663-7090, [www.capesantamaria.com](http://www.capesantamaria.com).

A two-mile drive farther north ends at Columbus Harbour, where we hiked a small hill to the **Columbus Monument**.

THOUGH IT WAS THE BUSY WINTER SEASON, THE BEACH WAS REMARKABLY UNCROWDED. LOOKING BACK AT MY LONE FOOTPRINTS ON THE SAND, I COULD EASILY IMAGINE I WAS A CASTAWAY ON A FARAWAY ISLAND.

It's believed that Christopher Columbus made his third landfall near here on October 17, 1492. The stone pillar topped with a metal cross protruding from a globe was built in 1992 to commemorate the 500-year anniversary of his discovery of the New World.

Stella Maris will transport free loaner **kayaks** to Columbus Harbour, where channels lead among sandbars and mangroves between Newton Cay and Long Island. You'll likely see turtles swimming under your paddles, and conch shells strewn everywhere. (Unfortunately, you can only look; conch shells—and live turtles for that matter—are on the U.S. Customs "red list" of prohibited items.) A coconut grove is a popular lunch stop; bring something to crack open the coconuts. Stella Maris will pick you up at the outlet at the far end of Newton Cay.

Excellent **scuba diving** spots allow for more interactive experiences with ample sea life like barracuda, huge deep-sea triggerfish, and even sharks. Stella Maris is the first operator to offer a **shark dive** in the Bahamas. Led by the dive master, divers descend from the boat in a well-controlled group to the bottom—without a cage. Then buckets of bait are thrown from the boat into the water. Since these excursions

Final approach to Rwy 16 at Staniel Cay (below), where most of the multi-colored cottages have balconies that overhang the water (above).



Courtesy Staniel Cay

occur regularly, and Shark Reef is well offshore where no other boats usually dock, sharks start following the boat as soon as it starts making its way there, guaranteeing a large number for the event. Seeing sharks swarming around above you and fighting over bait is a once-in-a-lifetime experience (although hopefully not by its own nature). Don't worry, divers are not shark bait, and in the more than 40 years that Stella Maris has been conducting the trips, no diver has been attacked. Shark dives cost \$130 per person (payable in advance please).

The resort also offers full-day cruises twice a week, included with the price of the lodging. The boat anchors both in the morning and afternoon at good **snorkeling** spots, where you'll likely see little wrasses, grouper, and maybe schools of barracuda, stingrays, or eagle rays. Lunch on the beach is included.

Other activities at Stella Maris include free loaner **bicycles** and Sunfish **sailboats** to explore the island, as well as events like barbecues, rum punch **parties**, dance parties, and cave parties. (The last really do take place in a natural cave with stone benches and tables, illuminated by the smoky flames of kerosene lamps.) Anglers enjoy excursions on the Golden Bear, Stella Maris's **deep-sea fishing** boat, \$950 per day.

For more information, contact the Stella Maris Resort Club, (954) 359-8236 or (800) 426-0466, [www.stellamarisresort.com](http://www.stellamarisresort.com).

## Deadman's Cay

On the southern half of Long Island, 6.5 nm southeast of the 4,000 x 80-ft. runway at Deadman's Cay Airport (MYLD), you'll find a shallow lagoon. But tucked into its northern edge is a circular hole where the water turns deep blue, marking the world's



deepest blue hole. At the surface, **Dean's Blue Hole** is around 100 ft. wide, but after descending about 60 ft., the hole expands into a more-than-300-ft.-wide cavern that continues to a depth of 663 ft. Descending along its rocky walls, you'll see abundant sea life. Rick first dove here 22 years ago while constructing the mail boat dock in Clarence Town (mail boats supply the Out Islands with provisions from Nassau once or twice a week). He reminded us to pay attention to our depth gauges; in such clear water, it's easy to descend too deep.

With enough interested divers, Stella Maris Resort conducts full-day scuba trips here. Solo travelers will need a rental car, either through the resort, \$75–\$110 per day, or from Clarence Town. (Three businesses listed in the Bahamas and Caribbean Pilot's Guide are Ellen's Car Rentals, (242) 337-0888, Ophelia's Rent A Car, (242) 337-1042, and Sierra's Club (242) 337-1057.) Caribbean Sky Tours can also arrange ground transportation and guided tours in the Clarence Town and Deadman's Cay area.

## Staniel Cay

Unlike Long Island, the Exumas comprise a 120-mile-long chain of small islands that line the edge of the Great Bahama Bank. Strong currents between the shallow waters to the west and the deep Exuma Sound to the east have shaped the sea bottom and carved twisty, deep blue channels through shallow, turquoise sandy areas. The result is myriad shades of blue-green over sandbars, punctuated by deep green

Caribbean Sky Tours is planning two seven-day, escorted group trips to the Bahamas in 2008. The Labor Day in the Bahamas trip includes Staniel Cay and Long Island, with an optional excursion to Cat Island, Aug 31–Sep 6. The Bahamas Off the Beaten Path excursion includes Cat Island and Long Island, with an optional excursion to Staniel Cay, Dec 7–13. Trips include lodging, most meals, and some activities, \$1,550–\$1,575 per person, plus \$350 per airplane. Drawing on Rick's network of contacts throughout the country, the company also provides vacation planning services that include hotel booking, assistance with clearances and permits, and advance flight notification to airport authorities, \$150–\$350, (786) 206-6147 or (866) 420-9265, [www.caribbean-skytours.com](http://www.caribbean-skytours.com).

The "Bahamas & Caribbean Pilots Guide" by Pilot Publishing is also useful for trip planning. It's available through Pilot Getaways, (818) 241-1890 or (877) 4-AVBOOK, [shop.pilotgetaways.com](http://shop.pilotgetaways.com). For more details on required documents, flight procedures, and equipment, see the Flying Tips article, "Flying to the Bahamas," on page 74.





Above: A C-47 in the water off Norman Cay is a remnant of its days as a smuggler's haven. Below: Waters in the Bahamas are perfect for both scuba diving and snorkeling. Below right: Stella Maris operates deep-sea fishing charters for mahi-mahi and other fish.

islands ringed by white sand beaches and small sailboat-dotted coves. From the air, the colors are vivid, reflecting on the undersides of the wings and even bathing the cloud bottoms in pale blue light.

We stopped for lunch at Staniel Cay (MYES), near the middle of the chain. The 3,030 x 75-ft. strip ends near a bay, and a shallow inlet wraps around two more sides of the strip. Our taxi was a golf cart—a common transportation method on this tiny 2 1/2 x 2-mile island—and everyone we passed waved a cheerful greeting to us. The nearby **Staniel Cay Yacht Club** started in 1956 as a small fuel station and restaurant, and has since grown to a full-service resort. You can step down off the dock in front of the restaurant and pet the docile nurse sharks that crowd around the pilings when fishermen are cleaning fish on the dock. Burgers, sandwiches, and seafood were on the menu; we chose the conch sandwich, pieces of fried conch on a bun with mayonnaise and

lettuce, an island specialty and definitely worth passing up the burgers for.

Nine colorful cottages and suites dot the small peninsula. The Pink, Blue, Orange, and Lavender cottages are one-bedroom units. Others include two-story cottages (called "suites") with a bedroom upstairs and a living room with sleeper sofa downstairs, as well as the three-bedroom Coral Cottage that sleeps up to seven. Most have balconies that overhang the water. Cottages run \$145–\$335, with a 20% discount for pilots who fly themselves to Staniel Cay. All-inclusive rates that include meals, airport transportation, snorkeling, kayaks, bicycle, and 13-ft. Boston Whaler usage, as well as discounted golf cart rental, are \$159–\$230 per person (no pilot discount), (242) 355-2024 or U.S. number (954) 467-8920, [www.stanielcay.com](http://www.stanielcay.com).

One popular destination is an island with **swimming pigs**. No, not philandering pilots. The four-legged variety. Ask at the

restaurant for a bag of leftovers to feed the pigs before you set sail for the island, about five minutes away. When the pigs see you coming, they'll swim out to the boat. One particular pig was rather aggressive and used to jump into the boats often, startling the tourists. He hasn't been seen lately. No word if pork has been on the menu recently.

Right across from the Yacht Club and just one minute away by Boston Whaler is the **Thunderball Grotto**, used in the James Bond film "Thunderball," as well as in "Never Say Never Again" and "Splash." You can snorkel into the large cavern, where shafts of light streaming through holes above illuminate the interior with a blue-green hue that reflects off the limestone walls. (Bring bread to feed the fish.)

A 45-minute boat ride north of Staniel Cay, the **Exuma Cays Land & Sea Park** has prolific sea life, coral reefs, and rare pillar coral that can grow to several feet high. When you snorkel or scuba dive, resist the urge to reach down and pick up lobster that, due to the prohibition on fishing in the area, do not retreat into dark crevices as soon as you approach. Shipwrecks and airplane wrecks are also popular dive spots. You can dock at Warderick Wells (where the park headquarters are) or Hawksbill Cay, and hike to abandoned 18th-century British loyalist settlements, or beach your boat for a picnic on many small islands in the park.

If you are not a certified scuba diver, the diving here is a compelling reason to get certified. When Michele and Ray Leese came to Staniel Cay in 2005 with their stepson Jake, they simply intended a short stop, but were so enchanted with the friendly people that they never left. They recently acquired a dive boat and opened the **Staniel Cay Divers**. Jake, a PADI-certified master scuba diver trainer, conducts classes and dive trips with Captain Cliff Smith, a Staniel Cay native, private pilot, and experienced boat captain. Three- to four-day open-water courses are \$600–\$1,000. Two- to four-tank dives run \$180–\$400, (242) 422-7090, [www.3ns-StanielCay.com/diving.html](http://www.3ns-StanielCay.com/diving.html).

Captain Wade Nixon has lived and fished here his whole life. He knows the best spots to take you out on his 21-ft. Seastrike **fishing** boat to catch mahi-mahi, yellowtail, king mackerel, wahoo, barracuda, or marlin. His guided sightseeing and snorkeling cruises include snorkeling at the Thunderball Grotto, a visit to "pig beach," island-hopping in the Exuma Cays Land & Sea Park, and swimming with nurse sharks at Compass Cay. Half-day cruises start at \$400; full-day cruises start at \$600, (242) 355-2049 or cell, (242) 464-1892.

## Great Exuma

The main airport on the Exumas chain is Exuma International Airport (MYEF) on Great Exuma. It's a full-service airport with regular airline service, ample general



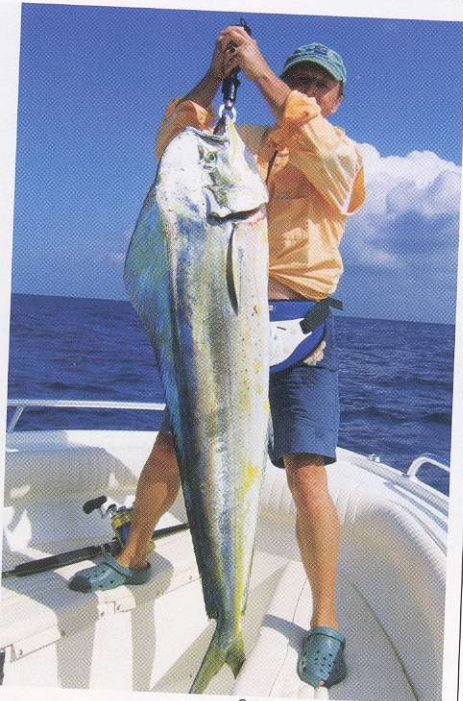
Courtesy Bahamas Ministry of Tourism

aviation parking, and customs. The CTAF frequency, 122.8 MHz, is often busy with a mix of traffic from small Cessnas to airliners. There is no parallel taxiway, and the main ramp is about halfway down the 7,051-ft. runway, so you may want to land long to minimize taxi time.

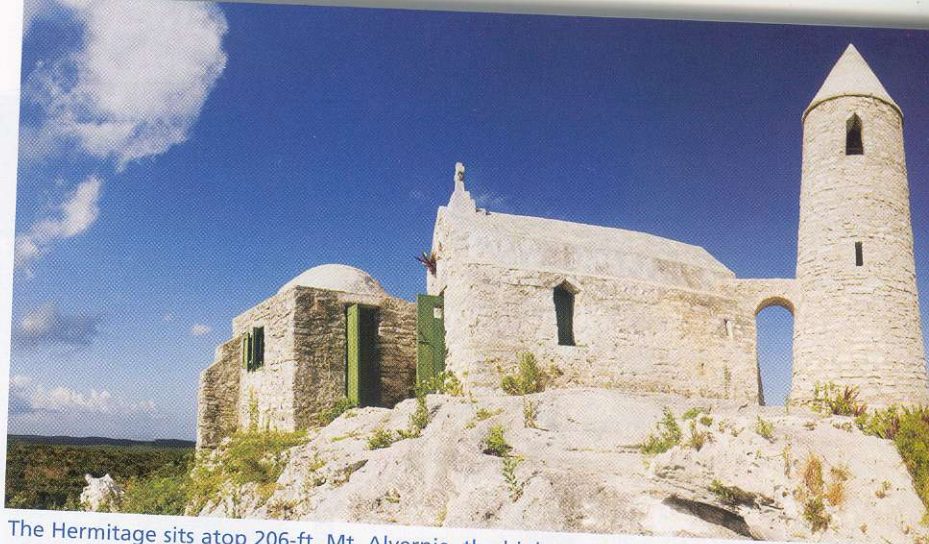
For refined elegance, it's hard to beat the **Grand Isle Villas**. An 18-hole golf course wraps around this opulent resort, situated at the north end of a long, sandy beach just north of the airport. The one-bedroom villas to four-bedroom penthouses are luxurious condos with modern furniture, full kitchens, and washing machines. Each of the two spacious bedrooms in our 2,285-sq. ft. villa had a king-sized bed piled high with pillows and a down comforter, an LCD TV, and a large bathroom with marble counters, stone flooring, and shower, as well as a whirlpool tub in the master bathroom. Upstairs, the living room, kitchen, and dining area were decorated with nautical artifacts, seashells, and artwork. With all the things to do outside, we never used the 50-inch plasma TV and DVD. You can dine in numerous on-site and nearby gourmet restaurants, or you can order in-villa catering or even a private chef and wait-staff, villas \$350-\$2,500, (242) 358-5000 or (888) 472-6310, [www.grandislevillas.com](http://www.grandislevillas.com).

### Fernandez Bay

The last stop on our island adventure was Cat Island. Just five resorts and about a dozen small inns dot the 47-mile-long, boot-shaped island, and the largest resort has only 16 rentals. Along the west coast, shallow waters, narrow channels, and marshland make for excellent kayaking. The Gulf Stream in the deep waters off the east coast brings flotsam from huge distances, making for great beachcombing. Rick Gardner has found glass balls from



Courtesy Stella Maris Resort



The Hermitage sits atop 206-ft. Mt. Alvernia, the highest point in The Bahamas.

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Courtesy Bahamas Ministry of Tourism

**ALONG THE CREEK JUST SOUTH OF THE RESORT YOU CAN SPOT TURTLES, NURSE SHARKS, AND SMALL RAYS AS YOU PADDLE THE SHALLOW CHANNELS AROUND SANDBARS AND SPARSE MANGROVES.**

Above: Most resorts have complimentary kayaks for guests.

Below: Fernandez Bay Village has beachfront accommodations and a rustic atmosphere.

Right: Resort owner Sammy T, Rick Gardner, and taxi/tour driver Danny King (L to R).

European fishing nets, pieces of navy drones, and even a buoy from Canada.

Ruins of abandoned cotton plantations and even remnants of a narrow-gauge railroad can be found if you explore the interior. We toured the island with Rick in a right-hand-drive car. He felt right at home driving on the left hand side of the road, and kept saying “Mon, don’t worry ain’ no problem” to calm our nerves. **The Hermitage** stands atop Mt. Alvernia, which, at 206 ft., is the highest point in the not-so-mountainous country of the Bahamas. The late Father Jerome, a once-wealthy British architect, escaped to the Bahamas to live a life of piety. He built this humble stone abode in the 1940s, along with small monuments depicting the 14 Stations of the Cross at regular intervals on the hike up the hill.

Once we finished exploring the island, we had authentic Bahamian dishes and cold Kalik beers at the **Blue Bird Restaurant** across the street from the turn-off to the Hermitage. The rustic building is right on the beach and has a back deck where you can dine with the backdrop of the Caribbean waters. The crack conch, strips of conch breaded and fried, are a local favorite. The three sisters who own the establishment, Jennie, Gracie, and Nika, made us feel right at home with their warm Bahamian hospitality.

New Bight Airport (MYCB) is in the middle of the island and has a 5,000 x 100-ft. paved runway. Customs and immigration are available 8:30 a.m.–5:30 p.m. winter (until 6:30 p.m. in summer), (242) 342-2016. Although they have both 100LL and Jet A fuel trucks, 100LL fuel was unavailable

during our visit, so it’s a good idea to call ahead, (242) 342-2125, [www.earcoelite-bs.com](http://www.earcoelite-bs.com). The nearest reliable fuel is at Stella Maris (MYLS) 45 nm south, or Exuma International (MYEF) 51 nm southwest.

Less than a mile from the threshold of Runway 9, the **Fernandez Bay Village** evokes the image of a quintessential island resort. Owned by pilot Tony Armbrister and his wife Pam, the resort has palm-frond umbrellas that dot a curved, white sand beach. Climb stone steps flanked by wood posts and a rope railing to an open-air deck, where you can enjoy a drink and the view from wicker chairs at umbrella-clad tables. The thatched-roof limestone clubhouse houses the dining room, library, and reception area. Inside, tropical plants and ceiling fans hang from exposed wooden beams. Enormous picture windows frame bay views and impart a bright, island ambience.

Accommodations include six freestanding one-bedroom cottages, four hotel-style rooms (also called cottages) in the north wing of the clubhouse, and six two-bedroom villas. We stayed in Shane’s Shack, a circular stone cottage with a thatched roof, which is much more luxurious than the name implies. All that separates you from the beach is a wrap-around, covered terrace with white wooden Adirondack chairs and a low stone wall adorned with conch shells. Inside, sloping wooden beams converge at a central, tall stone column, while light



streams in through a wall of windows. The bathroom is a large stone room with elegant fixtures and the resort's signature open-air "Garden Shower" (no roof), cottages \$220-\$295, villas \$315-\$395, (242) 342-3043 or U.S. numbers (954) 474-4821 or (800) 940-1905, [www.fernandezbayvillage.com](http://www.fernandezbayvillage.com).

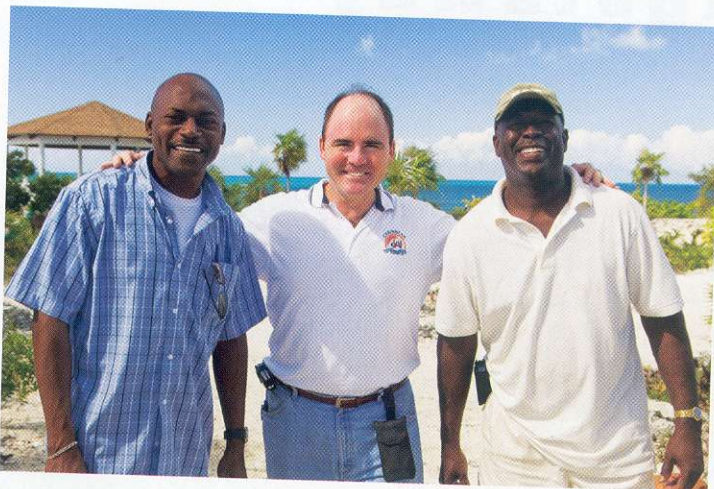
Complimentary **watercraft** include one- or two-person ocean kayaks or canoes. Along the creek just south of the resort you can spot turtles, nurse sharks, and small rays as you paddle the shallow channels around sandbars and sparse mangroves. (A saltwater inlet that connects back with the sea is called a "creek" here.) The end of this creek is at Shell Beach, where you can stop for a picnic or beachcombing. You can also rent a 13-ft. Boston Whaler for \$25 per hour.

The small island about a quarter mile offshore from the resort is a great **snorkeling** spot. Angel fish, grouper, large starfish, and fans populate the small coral heads that dot the sandy bottom around the island. Two- to three-hour guided snorkeling trips to other destinations run \$35 per person.

The front desk at Fernandez Bay can assist in securing **rental cars** if you would like to explore the island or dive at the southern resorts. Cars such as a Toyota RAV 4 run about \$85 per day. Otherwise, it's about \$50-\$60 for the 20-mile cab ride to the south end of the island.

## Sammy T's

The less-developed northern half of Cat Island is served by Arthur's Town Airport (MYCA) that has no fuel or services. On our visit, we had the 7,000-ft. runway and



large ramp to ourselves, except for children who were playing on baggage carts. They were curious about my airplane, since we had removed the left door for aerial photography. (When we returned later that day, nothing had been disturbed, even though it had been parked without a door.)

**Sammy T's Beach Resort** is about a 10-minute cab ride south of the airport. It's off the beaten path of Cat Island, which itself is off the beaten path of the Bahamas. If you're seeking deserted beaches, unspoiled estuaries to kayak in solitude, and quiet coastal hikes, you've come to the right place. Rick first came here when he was only twelve years old and always looks for an excuse to come back. Perched on a hill overlooking a long, pink sand beach, seven cozy, unassuming wood units are connected to the reception area and restaurant with paved walkways. Sammy plans to add another five units this spring, which he says will be the "total max" for the resort. "I'm on vacation here," he explains. "Any more than that and it would be too much like work."

Kayaks and snorkeling gear are available for guests; 18-ft. Sunfish sailboats are planned for next season. Sammy is documenting an **eco-touristic** route that includes blue holes, caves, and nature trails in untouched corners of the island. You can rent cars for \$80 per day or mopeds for \$50 per day to drive the route. Rooms run \$145-\$265, (242) 354-6009, [www.sammytbahamas.com](http://www.sammytbahamas.com).

After our stay on Cat Island, the last leg of our tour was back to Exuma International for fuel. The response to my first call on 122.8 MHz was

anything but standard: "N63MG advise when ready to copy special instructions." I tensed up. What could I have done to attract the attention of ATC? "N63MG are you ready to copy yet?" The Unicom operator was getting impatient while I fumbled for a pen and paper. Finally, I told him to go ahead. "OK... do you want one Kalik [the local Bahamian beer] or two after landing?"

I wasn't expecting that! I asked for three. I figured I could buy the Unicom operator a beer too, and he jokingly agreed over the radio. (Later I found out that a friend was waiting for me in the tower, and he had come up with the idea together with the Unicom operator.)

In my 27 years of flying, I have never been offered a welcome drink over the radio. It's indicative of the laid back, friendly atmosphere that prevails in the Bahamas—an atmosphere that combines with crystal clear waters and pristine beaches to make it not only a beautiful place to visit, but a place where you can truly relax while doing so. ■





## Flying to The Bahamas

### PLANNING YOUR FLIGHT TO THE TROPICS

by John T. Kounis

airports of entry in Florida. Caribbean Sky Tours provides one copy for each airplane on their group trips, and to customers of their vacation planning services, (786) 206-6147 or (866) 420-9265, [www.caribbeanskytours.com](http://www.caribbeanskytours.com). It is also available through Pilot Getaways, (818) 241-1890 or (877) 4-AVBOOK, [shop.pilotgetaways.com](http://shop.pilotgetaways.com).

#### Flying to the Bahamas

Twelve-inch N-numbers are required on aircraft in the ADIZ. If they're not painted on, you can use duct tape like I do. File an international VFR or IFR flight plan and activate it before you penetrate the ADIZ eastbound. You should request customs by indicating "ADCUS" on your flight plan, although it's a good idea to call ahead and confirm Bahamian customs availability if you're flying into a small

airport with irregular customs service.

The overwater distance is about 50 nm from the Fort Lauderdale/Miami area to Bimini and another 60 nm to Andros Island. From the West Palm Beach area, it's about 60 nm over water to Grand Bahama Island (where Freeport is). You can fly most subsequent legs by "island hopping" with shorter overwater distances, and you'll usually be in sight of land the entire time.

Your first landing in the Bahamas will be at an airport of entry. Close your flight plan by using a "blue phone" that is available at all customs airports. It has speed-dial buttons for free telephone connections to Bahamian and U.S. flight service stations and customs facilities. Many airports in the Bahamas also have good, but expensive, cell phone coverage for GSM (AT&T or T-Mobile) phones. CDMA (Sprint/Verizon) phones will likely not be able to roam outside of Nassau, Freeport, or George Town. Roaming calls from U.S. cell phones run around \$2 per minute.

Check in with customs and immigration to show your aircraft paperwork and passports, fill out a form C7A (Inward Declaration and Cruising Permit for Private Aircraft Entering the Bahamas), provide a general declaration form for your flight, and receive Bahamas Immigration cards. You can download a C7A at [www.bahamas.com/assets/content/pdf/PilotC7form.pdf](http://www.bahamas.com/assets/content/pdf/PilotC7form.pdf).

#### Flying in The Bahamas

Flights from sunset to sunrise must be made under IFR; otherwise, most rules are similar to the United States. Fuel prices are also on par (\$5.25 per gallon at Exuma

CONTINUED ON PAGE 70

**P**ilots who have not flown abroad may be apprehensive about flying to the Bahamas, especially if they haven't flown over water before. However, with a little advance planning, most pilots have found the flight goes smoothly and leaves them with lasting memories.

#### Trip Preparation

Apply for your passport well in advance. Recent changes in passport requirements have resulted in many new passport applications, increasing the processing time beyond the official three to four weeks.

Verify that you have the standard aircraft and pilot documents that are required for any flight: a pilot certificate and a current medical for you, and airworthiness and registration certificates, operating limitations, and weight and balance for the airplane. You'll need the permanent aircraft registration; a temporary "pink slip" is not valid for international travel. International flights require a radiotelephone operator's license for you and a radio station license for the airplane. To get them, submit three FCC forms (159, 160, and 605), along with a \$50-\$100 application fee. Download the forms from the FCC's website or apply online, (202) 418-0680, [wireless.fcc.gov/aviation](http://wireless.fcc.gov/aviation). Also, check with your insurance agent to confirm that you are insured in the Bahamas.

Get a customs user fee decal, which costs \$27.50 and is valid for one calendar year, at [www.chp.gov](http://www.chp.gov) (click "Travel" and then "User Fee Decals and Transponders"). For more information on customs procedures, download the "Guide for Private Flyers" from the CBP's Travel page.

U.S. Coast Guard-approved life jackets are required for each occupant; a life boat is recommended as well. Hangar 63, Banyan's Aviation Store at Fort Lauderdale Executive Airport (FXE), sells vests for \$46 and Survival Products life rafts for \$1,095-\$1,295, Mon-Sat 8 a.m.-7 p.m., Sun 9 a.m.-6 p.m., (954) 493-8615 or (888) 305-4932, [www.hangar63.com](http://www.hangar63.com). You can also rent life vests for \$6 per day or rafts for \$35 per day at Banyan's FBO counter, open 24 hours, (954) 491-3170, [www.banyanair.com](http://www.banyanair.com). Ask them for a Bahamas packet, with all the forms you'll need as well as useful information. The staff will even help you fill out the forms.

If you'll be flying over water regularly, you may want to upgrade to lighter, more comfortable vests, like SOSPENDERS. Their Coast Guard-approved, inflatable Nomex vest has multiple pockets for gear, \$219. One of the most useful items you can put in those pockets is a Personal Locator Beacon (PLB), such as the ACR Microfix that I carry, \$650. Both the PLB and the vest are available from Prepared Pilot, (801) 455-5271 or (866) 869-9639, [www.preparedpilot.com](http://www.preparedpilot.com).

The Miami Sectional Aeronautical Chart covers the western Bahamas, including Nassau, Freeport, Treasure Cay, northwestern Eleuthera, and the northwestern Exumas. To go any farther east or south, you'll need the CH-25 or CJ-26 WAC charts. The "Bahamas & Caribbean Pilot's Guide" by Pilot Publishing is an indispensable, illustrated airport directory for the Bahamas, and most of the Caribbean including Cuba, the Virgin Islands, Puerto Rico, and U.S.

# FLYING TIPS

## FROM PAGE 74

International as of February 2008). An innovative document called the "Pilot Bill of Rights" outlines all the services to which visiting pilots are entitled at any Bahamian government airport: no landing fees, tiedown fees, or customs & immigration overtime fees for any single-engine, non-commercial, aircraft under 6,000 lbs. For aircraft over 6,000 lbs., fees are reasonable; for example, the landing fee for a Cessna 337 at Exuma International was \$6. (Fees at private airports may be different.) When you compare the language in the Bahamian Pilot Bill of Rights to the U.S. Customs Guide for Private Flyers, which lists all the violations you can make that could subject you to a \$5,000 fine, it becomes apparent just how pilot-friendly The Bahamas are.

### **Returning to the U.S.**

You'll need to clear Bahamian exit customs at an airport of entry. Return your C7A, turn in The Bahamas Immigration cards, and pay a \$15 per person departure tax at customs. You can file a flight plan back to the U.S. on the blue phone. You must also call the U.S. Customs office directly to inform them of your ETA at least 60 minutes in advance. When you call, request the ID of the officer you speak to (e.g. "Tango-Alpha").

You must clear U.S. customs at the airport of entry closest to the point that you cross the coast. For example, you cannot clear customs in Orlando; you would have to clear at West Palm Beach International (PBI) first. The list of approved airports is in the CBP "Guide for Private Flyers."

If you are on a VFR flight plan, contact Miami IFSS at least 15 minutes before you penetrate the ADIZ westbound for a squawk code. Miami ARTCC handles ADIZ notification automatically for IFR aircraft. If you're running late, ask Miami IFSS to update your ETA with customs, since you are not permitted to arrive later than 15 minutes past your ETA. You also can't arrive early, so slow down or fly S-turns if you have to.

When you land in the U.S., taxi to customs and park in the specially marked area in front of the building for clearance. You'll need to show your customs decal, fill out an arrival report and immigration cards, and show your passports.

### **Additional Resources**

The Bahamas actively promotes general aviation. To learn more, contact Keith Gomez, the Aviation Specialist for The Bahamas Tourist Office, (954) 236-9292 or (800) 32-SPORT, [flying.bahamas.com](http://flying.bahamas.com). For more information on flying to The Bahamas, vacation planning services, or to join an escorted fly-in, contact Caribbean Sky Tours, (786) 206-6147 or (866) 420-9265, [www.caribbeanskytours.com](http://www.caribbeanskytours.com). ■

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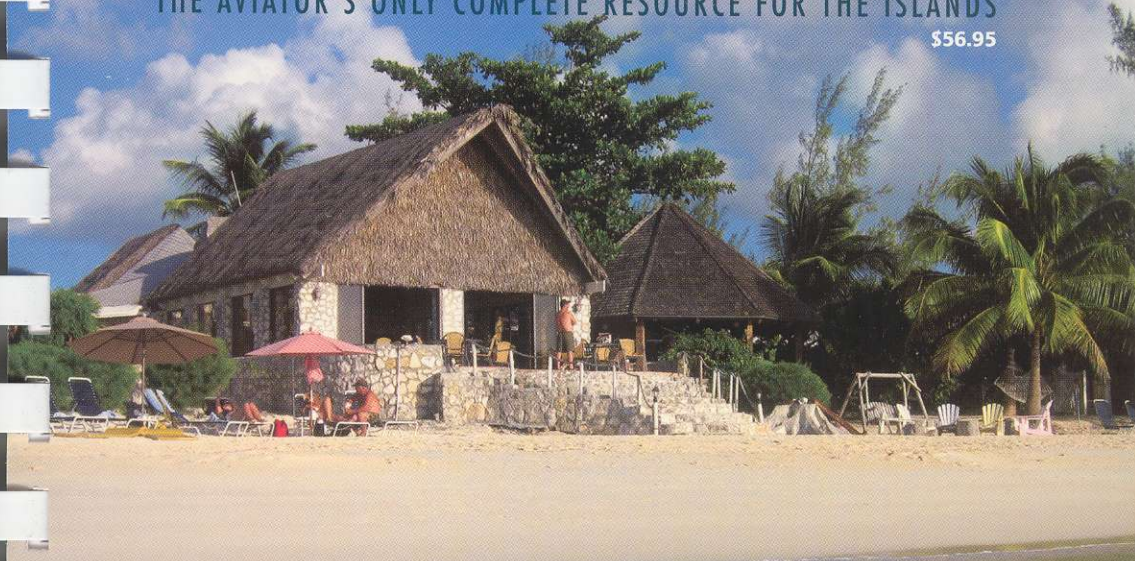


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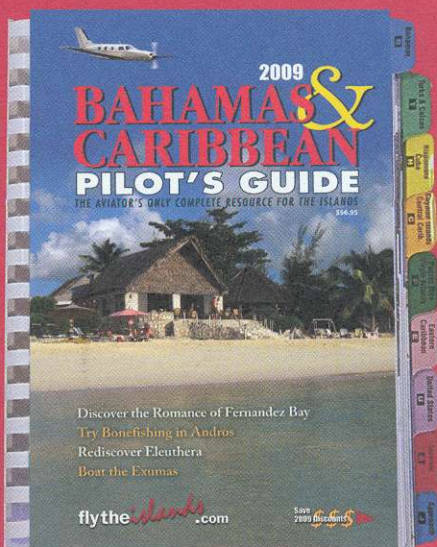
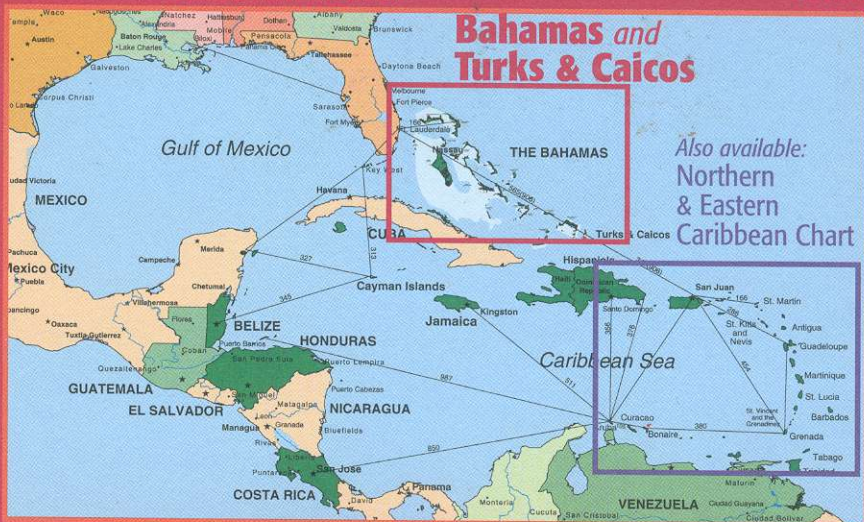
## 2009 Travel & Aviation Chart

WAC Scale 1:1,000,000

Longitude:  $4\ 3/8'' = 60\text{nm} = 1^\circ\ 60'$  • Latitude:  $4\ 3/8''$  at Equator only  
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