

# TRAVEL TIPS FOR THE BAHAMAS

by Ellen Sarbone

The Bahamas is an independent nation of 700 islands (30 inhabited) and 2500 islets called cays, strung out over 750 miles and only 50 miles from Florida at the closest point. It is both an action-packed touristy destination and an out-of-the-way tropical paradise. It's also casinos, duty-free shopping and sleepy little islands with only one street. It has the third largest barrier reef in the world where diving or snorkeling can include beautiful, healthy reefs teeming with tropical fish, wrecks, blue holes and caverns, encounters with dolphins, sharks and giant turtles.

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The two best-known islands, New Providence (Nassau) and Grand Bahama (Freeport), boast large hotel complexes, casinos, shopping centers, plus restaurants and entertainment for every taste. The other islands, called "The Out Islands" or "The Family Islands," are quieter, more remote, less populated, have quaint towns and miles of deserted beaches. Transportation to the Bahamas is fairly easy and local air carriers are excellent although some don't have daily flights. Check with American Eagle, Bahamasair, Chalks International, Gulfstream, Major's Air Service and local charter companies.

U.S. citizens only need two proofs of citizenship and a return ticket for entry, but a passport always makes things easier. Peak tourist season is June - July and during Spring Break in March. The Bahamian dollar and U.S. dollar are freely interchangeable and equal in value. Public telephones use U.S. quarters. Many restaurants add a 15% tip to the bill. Be sure to save \$15.00 in cash for the departure tax. Happily, there's pre-clearance by U.S. customs officers in the Bahamas, so you don't have to go through it again when you land.

The dazzling water is usually crystal clear, with ever-changing colors from cobalt blue to pale green, and excellent visibility. Average winter water temperature is 73° - 75°; but 85° in summer. A jacket will be appreciated Sept. - May, but summer temperature is in the 90s. The tropical sun is very strong, even in winter, and mosquitoes and "no-see-ums" are ubiquitous, so bring sunblock and insect repellent.

## INDIVIDUAL ISLANDS

Grand Bahama has a highly

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developed infrastructure, many activities for tourists, and its cultural roots go back to the Lucayan Indians and Loyalist settlers of the U.S. revolution. There are beautiful deserted beaches to explore, fine golf courses to tackle, and the Dolphin Research Center to visit. The Underwater Explorer's Society, UNEXSO, offers unique programs allowing visitors to swim with these fascinating mammals.

Shopping, dining and nightlife are centered at the International Bazaar and Port Lucaya. The latter has live bands and outdoor entertainment. It's home to Club Estee Disco, Luciano's Gourmet Restaurant, The Brass Helmet, and Lionel's Bahamian Restaurant. If it's your cup of tea, take a sunset "Booze Cruise," or spend some time in the casinos.

Bimini, although closest to the U.S., retains its remote, relaxed, Out Island character. Actually two islands, South Bimini is smaller, mostly agricultural, with one hotel, a small airstrip, and water taxi transfers to the 7-mile long by 700-yard wide main island, North Bimini. Although small and laid-back, Bimini offers visitors heaps to do while meandering from one end of Alice Town to the other.

Several hotels like The Compleat Angler, and Sea Crest afford a range of accommodations. Big game fishing, popularized by Ernest Hemingway, is still in vogue. Bimini Big

Game Club and Hotel is the center of these activities, hosting several Billfish tournaments a year. You can rent kayaks or windsurfers from Bimini Undersea Adventures, and they'll be glad to take you diving or snorkeling on the "Bimini Road." It's a long, double line of large man-made rocks close to the north shore of the island in about 15 feet of water. Scientists keep studying the site to determine whether it's part of the lost continent of Atlantis and tied to mysterious disappearances in the Bermuda Triangle. Hire a Bonefish guide to take you to "The Healing Hole", a deep hole hidden amid shallow mangrove swamps that's rumored to have curative powers. Watch the seaplanes arrive and leave.



Restaurants abound. At the upper end of the scale are Bimini Big Game Club and the romantic, gourmet ambiance of Bimini Bay Restaurant (in a former mansion on the north shore, transportation for the 10-minute ride is provided.) The Anchorage and The Red Lion are in the middle range, with many local eateries like Captain Bob's, Bimini

Breeze and C J's. Nightlife includes bar hopping between The Compleat Angler, The End of the World, Sand Bar and Star Sea View Disco. They have live bands, and dancing several nights a week.

New Providence is the seat of government and best known island. There aren't enough hours in your trip to cover all the options here. Try excellent restaurants like the elegant 5-star Graycliff or the appealing Tamarind Hill in Nassau. Atlantis Submarines is a different way to visit the deep, and sightseeing choices include: Coral World marine park, several Forts, Ardastra Gardens and Zoo. Explore uncrowded beaches in Coral Harbour; shop at the Straw Market. Nightlife includes elaborate shows and casinos on Paradise Island and Cable Beach.

Although very close to New Providence, Androc is one of the least explored islands and has untouched and diverse diving plus excellent bonefishing at Small Hope Bay Lodge. The family run resort is virtually unchanged since it was established by Dick Birch in 1960. Main shore activities are: relaxing in hammocks or the hot tub, reading, beachcombing, bicycle riding, bushwalking and playing table games.

San Salvador is the small island (6 by 12 miles) where Columbus made his first landfall. It has excellent diving on healthy reefs and walls with "Big Critters." The beautiful Club Med Columbus Isle Resort is reason enough to visit San Salvador. I had never considered myself a "Club Med type" and avoided visiting the resorts in the past. After staying at Columbus Isle, I'm a convert! In addition to the friendliest, most versatile staff you could want, it's decorated with Thai antiques, offers luxurious accommodations and first class meals, plus activities that include scuba diving. It's the ideal place for a getaway with someone special.

Exuma is made up of 350 cays surrounded by luminous, translucent waters. Great Exuma is the largest and the consummate tropical island. It's a peaceful haven for landlubbers as well as divers and the sailors whose boats fill the harbor. Everything is laid-back. George Town, the "urban center", consists of about 6 hotels, several markets, a few restaurants and shops. Activities include visits to Stocking Island beaches, bonefishing, scuba diving or renting a boat to explore the many cays and beaches, or a bicycle or motor scooter to explore the island. You may also want to time your visit with one of George Town's regattas in March or April.

Now that you know the extent and diversity of this extraordinary destination, you'll probably feel as I do, that any trip to the Bahamas should include at least one of the Out Islands.

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