

ON BOARD | BAHAMAS

Vibrant CRUISING GROUNDS

The Bahamas offer dynamic social life and pure isolation in equal measure, so if you want to party hard one day and totally relax the next, this is the place for you.

BY MIRIAM CAIN



IGUANA BASKING IN THE SUN

As the temperatures start to dip this winter, the Bahamas are the perfect warm-weather escape for globetrotters seeking some serious sun-splashed downtime, without having to sacrifice nightlife and a little friendly Caribbean bustle. Charters through these idyllic isles reveal beautiful natural formations, top-notch diving and snorkeling sites, pristine beaches and some unexpected wildlife.

Clustered in distinct groups, with a few drifters lying out on a limb, the islands of the Bahamas are perfect for cruising. From Eleuthera and Exumas to Cat Island and the Abacos, the archipelago of more than 700 islands and hundreds of uninhabited cays (small islands) are scattered over 100,000 square miles of iridescent blue waters. In most places the shallow water is so clear that you can see straight to the bottom, but the channels, including the Tongue of the Ocean between Andros and the Exumas, run very deep. Underwater reefs stretch 760 miles and are rich in fish and other marine life.

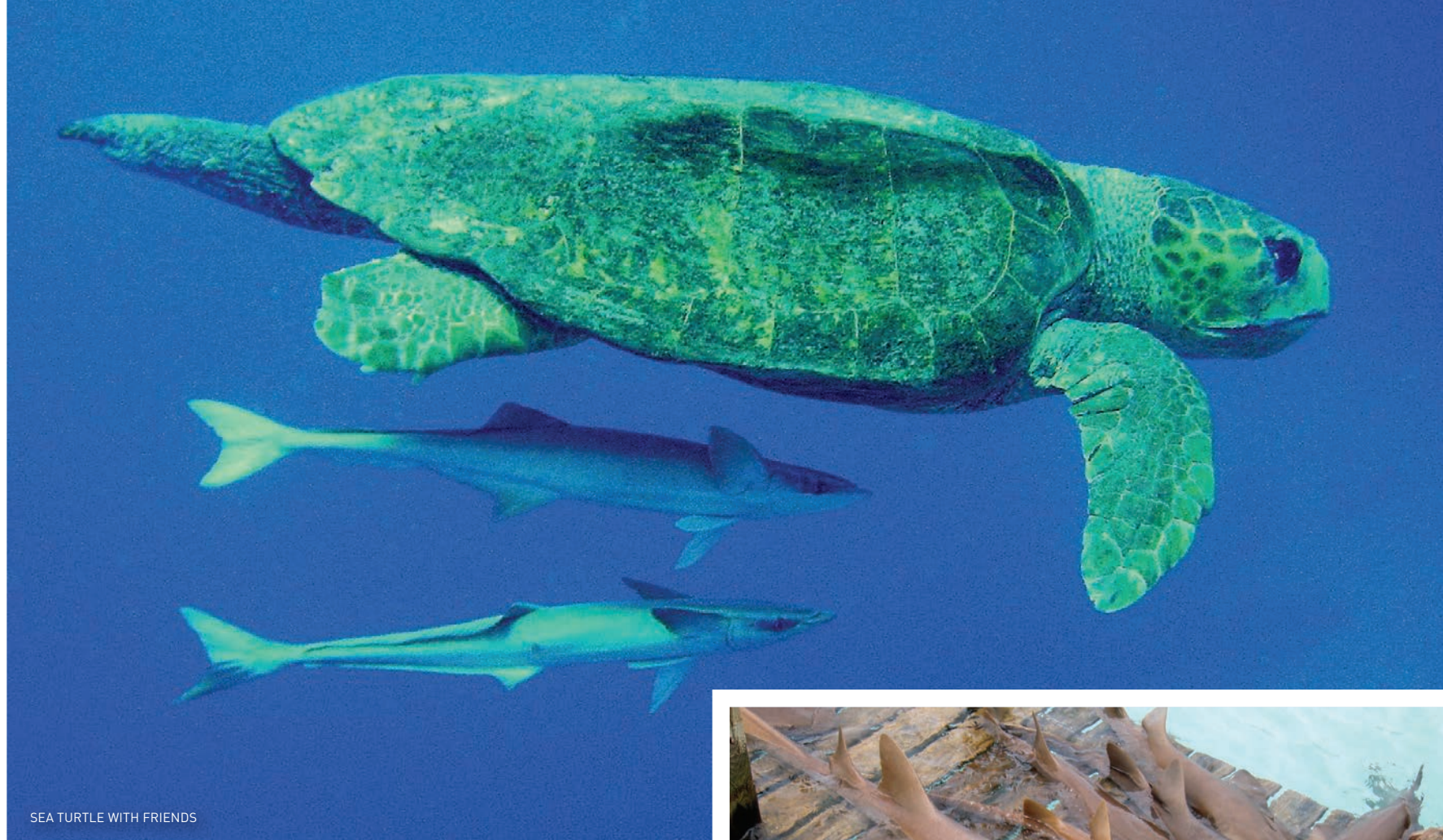
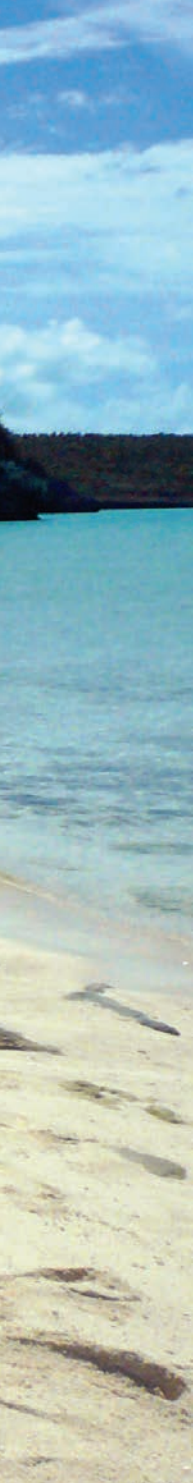
Flying to Miami, you can explore the vibrant club scene before taking off for the capital of Nassau on New Providence Island where you will meet your yacht. Providing a perfect combination of lively fun and laid-back charm, the varied and commercial attractions of the cosmopolitan capital are a stark contrast to the peaceful, unspoiled cays of the Exumas.

THE EXOTIC ISLES OF THE EXUMAS

The most popular cruising grounds in the Bahamas are the Exumas. Though calling them popular may make them sound crowded, the entire island chain comprises some 365 islands, so there is plenty of space to find privacy even during the peak charter season. Each isle has a distinct personality and an appeal all its own, and being located so close to Florida and the shipping channels, they even have history and culture aplenty. The more prominent islands provide wonderful shopping, restaurants and sports, and the smaller isles are remote and largely untouched. Mix up your cruise around the islands to combine clubbing, golf, diving, gourmet dining, shopping and lots of stretching out and doing absolutely nothing on virgin-white beaches.

DAYS 1 & 2: Nassau to Allen's Cay & Compass Cay (35 nautical miles)

Spend a day and night exploring Nassau. City types will love the capital with



SEA TURTLE WITH FRIENDS



COLORFUL MARINE LIFE



FEEDING FRENZY

its plush hotels and casinos. New Providence and Paradise Islands attract visitors with their vibrant nightlife and an abundance of casinos and restaurants. Board your yacht in the **Atlantis Marina** on Paradise Island and gently acclimatize to life on board as you steer your way towards the pristine cays that make up the Exumas.

After a few hours' cruise and a tasty lunch on board, anchor in the center of the three islets that compose Allen's Cay for a spot of fishing. Alternatively, take the tender to the tiny Leaf Cay and feed bananas to the wild iguanas that inhabit the island. Back on board, cruise on to Compass Cay where you will spend your first evening berthed in **Compass Cay Marina**. Spot colorful marine life and nurse sharks in the crystal-clear waters surrounding the docks.

The following day is for activities both in the water and on land. Compass Cay has over a dozen beaches to explore, including the well-known Crescent Ocean Beach, and has scenic trails that crisscross its 450 acres. There is also a shallow creek that runs through the middle of the island and is ideal for bone fishing, while on the northwest of the island is Rachel's Bubblebath. This crystal-clear lagoon is one of the finest swimming holes in the Bahamian ar-

chipelago, and at mid-to-high tide, ocean waves splash into the pool creating a white foam Jacuzzi effect.

After a leisurely lunch on board, or perhaps a picnic on the beach, take the tender and jet skis to the mangrove archipelago known as Shroud Cay. If you time it right and catch high tide you can try the famous Mangrove run. At the end of the run is a hill called Camp Driftwood. Climb to the top for views over the Exumas archipelago.

RECOMMENDED

For a unique marine adventure on Compass Cay, throw hot dogs to the nurse sharks that laze in the shallow waters. The brave amongst the party can jump in and swim with these spectacular creatures.

DAY 3: Compass Cay to Staniel Cay (10 nautical miles)

In addition to being the hub for cruising in the Exumas, Staniel Cay is also the place to fish. From bone to deep-sea fishing, the waters off the east coast of the island are a mecca for mahi mahi, wahoo, tuna and marlin.



SUNSET AT STANIEL CAY YACHT CLUB

For some insider tips, chat with local fishermen while they prepare fresh conch at the dock. Closer to shore and directly off the cay is a drop off that faces the Exuma Sound—a vertical, 75-foot wall populated by colorful marine life and a great spot to explore for any divers in the party. The waters around Big Major's beach are also home to wild swimming pigs, which can often be spotted paddling around the yachts or sunning themselves on the sand. Spend a leisurely afternoon messing about in the water before stepping ashore to the **Staniel Cay Yacht Club** for a well-deserved rum punch and local conch fritters at the **Clubhouse** restaurant. The club has more than 50 years' tradition of fishing tales and sailors' yarns (*Contact: Restaurant Manager Susanna Girolamo, (242) 355-2024; susanna@stanielcay.com; www.stanielcay.com*).

RECOMMENDED

Dive in and snorkel through Thunderball Grotto, the setting for the 007 movies. Tides permitting, you can feed the fish as you swim and snorkel through the waters of this hollowed-out island.



WILD PIG COOLING OFF AT BIG MAJOR CAY



STANIEL CAY YACHT CLUB



ISLAND STYLE



GROUPE



TOP TIMES CAPTAIN MICHAEL FOSTER

DAY 4: Staniel Cay to Warderick Wells Cay (18 nautical miles)

From the protected anchorage of Big Major's Spot just north of Staniel Cay, cruise Cambridge Cay and snorkel the Rocky Dundas caves. Swim into the small caves to gaze at stalagmites and stalactites. Back on board head to Warderick Wells Cay, one of a cluster of islands that make up the **Exuma Cays Land and Sea Park** known as the Garden of Eden. Spread over 175 square miles, the marine preserve abounds in coral reefs and colorful sea life, while the islets and cays have numerous hiking trails where many species of tropical birds can be spotted.

DAY 5: Warderick Wells Cay to Hawksbill Cay (10 nautical miles)

Still within the Exuma Cays Land and Sea Park, cruise past Little Hall's Pond Cay, aka Johnny Depp Island—the actor bought the island a few years ago—to Hawksbill Cay, one of the Exumas' most attractive spots. Spend a leisurely morning ashore walking the trails to explore the ruins of loyalist plantations from 1783 to 1830. Cruise on to lunch at the privately owned Norman's Cay. The island was famous for drug running back in the day, and

you can visit a hidden runway and old plane wreck that crashed into the island's lagoon—a popular snorkeling site.

DAY 6: Hawksbill Cay to Highbourne Cay (20 nautical miles)

A short hop across the shallow waters is Highbourne Cay. There are plenty of options for activities: Take the tender out for a fishing excursion early in the morning, spend the day exploring any of the beautiful beaches or jump in for great snorkeling and diving. In the early evening, enjoy the sunset while spotting rays in the port of Highbourne Cay.

DAY 7: Highbourne Cay to Paradise Island (45 nautical miles)

From Highbourne Cay cruise back towards Paradise Island for disembarkation.

Most Bahamian cruises tend to begin in Nassau before whisking you through the Exumas. For an extended charter, head east to the prime cruising grounds of the Abacos and the Out Islands, which include Harbour Island, Eleuthera and the Berry Islands.

TOP PICKS FROM THE PROS

Michael Foster, captain for the 113-foot *Top Times* has a number of favorite spots in the Bahamas: "My favorite charter expeditions include a slow tender ride through the mangroves of Shroud Cay, snorkeling in the Sea Aquarium off O'Brien's Cay and watching the falling tide recede on the flats at Sampson Cay. **Sampson Cay Yacht Club** is very picturesque and the sand flats dry out at low tide, which is adjacent to the marina. The Staniel Cay Yacht Club is great for sundowners and a visit to the Thunderball Grotto for snorkeling is recommended. Warderick Wells is also a favorite which is the headquarters of the Exuma Cays Land and Sea Park."

Clancy Weller, charter manager at **Camper & Nicholson's International**, grew up in Florida and is an expert on the Bahamas. "If you are looking for a special and unique spot for your next vacation with the perfect mix of remote islands, activities and nightlife, visit the Abacos. As a jumping off point from Marsh Harbour make a beeline for Elbow Cay and spend your evenings anchored out in Hope Town Harbour. Alternatively, anchor just off the harbor entrance for the perfect front-row seat to gaze at candy-striped **Elbow Cay Lighthouse**, a rare kerosene-burning lighthouse built circa 1864. Enjoy dinner and island-style dancing at the famous **Cap'n Jacks** on Wednesdays and Fridays, or catch the Full Moon parties at **Cracker P's** on the nearby Lubbers Quarters. Lunch and a dip at the **Hope Town Harbour Lodge** is not to be missed along with a Goombay Smash cocktail made by their legendary bartender Gary. Cruise down to Sandy Cay for some of the best snorkeling in the Bahamas, before continuing down to Little Harbour for a spot of lunch at **Pete's Pub**. Anchor off Man-O-War Cay and visit the **Albury's Sail Shop** where the ladies have been making their popular durable canvas bags for decades. A trip to the Abacos isn't complete without a visit to Guana Cay for the famous Sunday Pig Roast at **Nipper's** and their signature drink, Nipper Juice."

Hume Jones, charter broker at **Y.CO**, has been organizing charters in the Bahamas for over 16 years and visited the Exumas just last year. "I was blown away by the calm, clear waters and the variety of the stunning islands. The highlights included snorkeling in Thunderball Grotto with a wide array of beautifully colored fish, feeding the iguanas in Allen's Cay, swimming with the sharks at Staniel Cay, as well as witnessing that the swimming pigs in Big Major's are a reality and not a myth! I would recommend the Bahamas to all charterers and I am confident they would return time and time again" (Contact: Charter Broker Hume Jones, 44-207-584-1801; hume.j@ycoyacht.com; www.ycoyacht.com).

Captain **Duncan Stephenson** of the 192-foot motor yacht *Islander* believes that the cruising grounds of the Bahamas are some of the best in the world: "The pristine turquoise seas of the Bahamas, along with the islands' secluded bays and white sandy beaches make for a perfect charter. They provide ample opportunities for fine dining, vibrant nightlife and luxurious spas, as well as amazing snorkeling and scuba diving, fishing and water sports. Each island



THUNDERBALL GROTTO

is unique and every day provides a new experience. With her shallow draft and water jet propulsion, *Islander* is uniquely suited to the shallow cruising grounds of the Bahamas. Guests are able to take advantage of all the archipelago has to offer while still enjoying the luxurious comforts of a superyacht."

Charter Broker **Nicolas Benazeth** at **CharterWorld** has cruised in the Bahamas and sampled some of the activities available in the area. "The potential of the Bahamas as a charter destination is all too often overlooked," explains Benazeth. "This vast cruising area is within easy reach of both Europe and the Americas and offers some of the most pristine tropical environments and an incredible range of experiences. But due to the specific nature of its environment, firsthand knowledge is essential to get the most out of a Bahamas charter. There are many highlights on any charter through these shallow waters, but I would recommend that any cruising itinerary should include Big Major's for feeding and swimming with the wild pigs, cruising the mangroves of Shroud Cay by jet ski or kayak, snorkeling through Thunderball Grotto and hiking to the spring on Highbourne Cay" (Contact: Charter Broker Nicolas Benazeth, 44-207-193-7830; nicolas@charterworld.com; www.charterworld.com).

Captains **Roy Wadeson** and **Jonathan Kline** aboard the 125-foot *P2* recommend an exclusive Abacos itinerary featuring Great Abaco and the new **Baker's Bay Club** on Great Guana Cay. "Guests can fly into Marsh Harbour and be transferred by *P2*'s own 45-foot Wally tender. They can then spend the day sailing in the open Atlantic on *P2* from her private dock at Baker's Bay, or step ashore to play golf at the private Baker's Bay Club including the Tom Fazio course." They also recommend taking the Wally tender to small islands such as Green Turtle Cay and Man-O-War Cay.

Daphne d'Offay, charter manager at **Ocean Independence**, recommends anchoring in the inlet and hiking to the look point on Shroud Cay in the Exumas. "The transition of water from east to west through a small inlet is amazing and totally secluded." D'Offay also recommends Pink Sands on Harbour Island and Rocky Dundas caves off Compass Cay for snorkeling. "For a fine dining restaurant **The Ocean Club** on Paradise Island is amongst the best in the Bahamas, while **Crazy Johnny's** and **Van Breugel's Bar**, both on Nassau, are great local bars."

A LOCAL WELCOME AT BIG MAJOR CAY





SECLUDED SPLENDOR

THE OUT ISLANDS

For those with the desire to prolong their itinerary, the Out Islands and the Abacos can be incorporated as part of an extended cruise from Nassau. The large island of Eleuthera is surrounded by both shallow and deep waters that are great for snorkeling and diving, including the Current Cut channel and the Train Wreck. Inland there is a saltwater lake known as the Blue Hole, which although not as well known as its namesake in Belize also provides fantastic diving opportunities.

Just off the east coast of Eleuthera is Harbour Island. Famous for its pink beaches and pretty pastel-colored houses, the island also has some of the best nightlife in the Bahamas.

Farther north are the Abacos and Berry Islands. The Abacos extend over 120 miles of shallow waters that are increasingly coming into their own as a prime cruising ground despite the restriction for yachts with shallow drafts. Protected from the Atlantic by a chain of barrier islands, the Sea of Abaco offers sheltered anchorages in abundance. Often referred to as the Top of the Bahamas, the islands are a world apart from Nassau, with bright clapboard homes instead of resorts and nightclubs. From Great Abaco and Little Abaco to Elbow Cay, the islands and their surrounding waters provide plenty of opportunities for fishing, diving and simply relaxing on the miles of unspoiled, pristine beaches.

TOP BAHAMAS SPOTS IN A NUTSHELL

- Thunderball Grotto, near Staniel Cay, is famed for its appearance in the films *Splash* and *Thunderball*
- Big Major Cay is where you will find wild pigs bathing in the shallow waters and sunning themselves on the sand
- The Exuma Cays Land and Sea Park is a conservation area for marine life and is great for diving and snorkeling
- The dive site of the sunken drug plane, off Norman's Cay, is a DC-3 airplane that was used for drug smuggling in the 1980s
- Marsh Harbour on Great Abaco is the main town of the archipelago and is well worth a visit
- The candy-striped lighthouse, formally known as the Elbow Cay Lighthouse, dates back to 1864 and is the most famous landmark in the Abacos
- The **Green Turtle Club** on Green Turtle Cay is a great place to dine
- The **Fowl Cay Marine Preserve** off Sandy Cay has the largest display of elkhorn coral in the world

ON BOARD | BAHAMAS

BAD GIRL

THE YACHTS

INSATIABLE

Length | 100 feet

Guests | Eight

Rate | From \$29,500 a week

Contact | Agnes Howard at
Camper & Nicholsons International,
(954) 524-4250;
ahoward@camperandnicholsons.com;
www.camperandnicholsons.com

RESILIENCE

Length | 111 feet

Guests | Eight

Rate | From \$40,000 a week

Contact | Agnes Howard at
Camper & Nicholsons International,
(954) 524-4250;
ahoward@camperandnicholsons.com;
www.camperandnicholsons.com



TOP TIMES

Length | 113 feet

Guests | Ten

Rate | \$70,000 a week

Contact | Agnes Howard at
Camper & Nicholsons International,
(954) 524-4250;
ahoward@camperandnicholsons.com;
www.camperandnicholsons.com



ISLANDER

Length | 192 feet

Guests | 12

Rate | From \$195,000 a week

Contact | Susan Flamma at Yachting Partners
International, (954) 806-0915;
susan.flamma@ypigroup.com;
www.ypigroup.com

P2

Length | 125 feet

Guests | Six

Rate | From about \$87,475 a week

Contact | Rana Johnson at Perini Navi USA,
(401) 619-2200; charter@perininaviusa.com;
www.perininavi.it



DIAMONDS ARE FOREVER

Length | 200 feet

Guests | 12

Rate | From \$395,000 a week

Contact | Peter Thompson
at Ocean Independence,
44-1273-831-010;

pt@ocyachts.com;
www.oceanindependence.com



MIMU

Length | 113 feet

Guests | Ten

Rate | From \$48,000 a week

Contact | Peter Thompson
at Ocean Independence,
44-1273-831-010;
pt@ocyachts.com;
www.oceanindependence.com

VAJOLIROJA

Length | 156 feet

Guests | Ten

Rate | From about \$104,857 a week

Contact | Craig Cohen,
(212) 223-0410;
ccohen@burgessyachts.com;
www.burgessyachts.com

BAD GIRL

Length | 186 feet

Guests | 12

Rate | From \$250,000 a week

Contact | Craig Cohen,
(212) 223-0410;
ccohen@burgessyachts.com;
www.burgessyachts.com