

# History

## THE BAHAMAS

The peaceful Lucayans knew a good spot when they found one. This tribe of Arawak Indians paddled into the Bahamas' glistening seas at the turn of the 9th century. They decided to stay and became the country's first inhabitants.

Living primarily off the sea, they evolved skills as potters, carvers and boat-builders, and they spun and wove cotton into clothing and hammocks, which they traded with neighbors. The Lucayans, however, had no conception of the wheel and no written language, and they did not use beasts of burden or metals.

Religion played a central role in Arawak life. They worshiped various gods who were thought to control the rain, sun, wind, and hurricanes. The little that remains of their culture is limited to pottery shards, petroglyphs, and English words such as 'canoe,' 'cannibal,' 'hammock,' 'hurricane,' and 'tobacco.'

### COLUMBUS & THE SPANISH

Native Americans had occupied the Bahamas for at least 500 years by the time Christopher Columbus first sighted the New World on October 12, 1492, during the first of his four voyages to find a westward route to the East Indies.

The expedition had sailed west and after 33 days and more than 3000 miles, the shout of '*Tierra!*' went up and an island gleamed in the moonlight. Columbus planted the Spanish flag on an island he named San Salvador. From here, the fleet sailed south to Santa Maria de la Concepción, then west to a large island he named Fernandina. Turning southeast, they touched at a fourth island, christened Isabela, then sailed southwest to today's Ragged Island Range.

Columbus and his fellow expeditionaries were underwritten by monarchs and merchants whose interest was economic. Gold, or at least the thought of it, filled the sails. The Spaniards did not linger in these barren coral islands. The Indians told Columbus that gold might be found in Cubanacan (middle Cuba), which he translated as 'Kublai Khan.'

Until his death, Columbus was convinced that these islands were the easternmost outposts of Asia. Since he had traveled west to reach them, he named them the West Indies.

There has been much speculation over the decades as to which island Columbus actually landed on first. One of the explorer's biographers believed it to be San Salvador. A National Geographic Society study has convincingly proposed Samana Cay as the first landfall.

As the search for gold dominated all adventurers' priorities it was no surprise that the Spanish returned in 1495, and started shipping out enslaved Lucayan Indians from the Bahamas to work their gold seams in Hispaniola.

This website examines the history, navigation and landfall in the Bahamas of Christopher Columbus; [www1.minn.net/~keithp](http://www1.minn.net/~keithp)

*Buccaneers of America* is John Esquemeling's eyewitness account of the extermination of the Lucayans. It was first published in 1684.

### TIMELINE' 900s

The Arawaks arrive in the Bahamas and Turks and Caicos from South America

### 1492

Christopher Columbus sets sight and foot onto the New World

**WHAT'S IN A NAME?**

'Cay' (pronounced 'key') is an English term meaning 'small island.' The word, however, comes from 'cairi,' the Lucayan word for 'island.' Hence the names given to individual islands depended upon who was doing the naming, not their size. While Harbour Island is a mere 1 sq mile for example, Rum Cay has an area of 30 sq miles.

Siboney Indians were the earliest settlers of the Grand Bahama eventually superseded by the Lucayans; www.interknowledge.com/grandbahama/gbhistory01.htm

For details on the ships and crews that have sailed the Caribbean over the ages, try www.angel.fire.com/real3/caribbeantales/ships.html

The Department of Archives in the Bahamas is the primary repository of the history of the Bahamas and holds records dating back to the 17th century; www.bahamasnationalarchives.bs/index.html

The Indians were worked to death. Those who resisted perished by the sword, the rest by European diseases or mass suicide. Within 25 years the entire Lucayan population of 50,000 was gone. The Spaniards then casually sailed away, leaving the island chain devoid of human life.

**PIRATES EXPELLED – COMMERCE RESTORED**

Tales of Spanish treasure lured pirates and other adventurers to the islands, such as Francis Drake and Walter Raleigh, who operated with the sanction of Queen Elizabeth I. San Salvador became the base for Raleigh's colony at Roanoke Island, England's first settlement in America. Charles Town was then founded by the British in 1666 (renamed Nassau in 1695 in honor of William III, formerly Prince of Orange-Nassau).

During the 17th century, England was constantly at war with France or Spain. Since the Royal Navy couldn't effectively patrol the Caribbean, the crown sponsored privateers to capture enemy vessels and plunder foreign cities. A combination of absentee landlords and the growing number of ruffian residents meant that the city descended into the hands of pirates such as Henry Jennings and 'Blackbeard' (Edward Teach), who terrorized his victims by wearing flaming fuses in his matted beard and hair. Blackbeard took over New Providence, establishing a lawless city that in 1666 was lined with brothels and taverns.

Spain, of course, was outraged, especially since it still claimed title over the Bahamas and on at least four occasions attacked and razed Charles Town. In 1718 Governor Woodes Rogers (himself a former privateer) was appointed by the British king to finally suppress piracy. Rogers arrived with three warships and issued the king's ultimatum to pirates: 'death or pardon'. He described his own tenure: *Expulsis Piratis – Restituta Commercium* (Pirates Expelled – Commerce Restored), words that still adorn the official seal of the Bahamas.

Yet in 1850 as much as half of the islands' population were still making a livelihood from wrecking – as did the government, which took 15% customs duty on the proceeds of sales from salvaged goods.

**THOSE DAMNED YANKEES**

The Bahamas lay close to the North American colonies, and the outbreak of the American Revolution in 1775 put the Bahamas in the firing line. Not for the last time, the American Navy fell upon Nassau, intent on capturing arms and explosives (the first-ever foreign invasion by US forces). The Yankees occupied Nassau, carousing for two weeks before sailing away.

In 1782 a joint Spanish–French–US force again took advantage of England's weakened position to capture the city. Spain declared possession of the Bahamas and then made life intolerable for the city's inhabitants.

Andrew Deveaux, a Loyalist, recaptured the Bahamas for England a year later with 200 pro-British mercenaries. The Spaniards watched from afar as longboats ferried soldiers ashore. As the landing point was hidden from view, the soldiers stood up for the journey to shore and then the same men lay out of sight for the journey back to the ship, repeatedly. Thus the Spaniards gained the impression that thousands of troops were landing. The Spaniards packed their belongings and set sail for Cuba. The Treaty of Versailles formally ceded the Bahamas to England from Spain.

Following the American Revolution, more than 8000 Loyalists and their slaves resettled in the Bahamian islands between 1783 and 1785, tripling the existing population. They introduced two things that would profoundly shape the islands' future: cotton and slaves, but the land was ill-suited to cotton. Then in 1807 the British banned slave trading, and brought their liberated 'cargoes' to the Bahamas. The abolition of slavery in 1834 and transition to a free society went smoothly, but a white elite minority of merchants and administrators now ruled over an ill-represented black majority, a state of affairs that would last for more than a century.

The US Civil War (1861–65) gave the Bahamas another economic boost and the Bahamas became the major trading center for the blockaded South. Ships such as the *Ballymena* became infamous blockade-runners, running supplies to the South and returning with holds full of cotton. Author Margaret Mitchell, in *Gone with the Wind*, presents Rhett Butler as a well-known figure in Nassau, where he loaded his schooner with luxuries for the Confederacy.

But the end of hostilities burst Nassau's bubble again, and the ensuing decades witnessed an exodus of migrant labor to the US.

By the turn of the century, Florida was a tourist hot spot and the Bahamas were catching the spin-off.

**A RUM DEAL**

The islands were again granted divine deliverance in the 1920s with Prohibition, which forbade the sale of alcohol in the US. The Nassau waterfront soon resembled a vast rum warehouse. Millions of gallons of alcohol were whisked across the water to Florida or New Jersey's Rum Row. Construction boomed and the islands' first casino opened, attracting gamblers and gangsters alongside a potpourri of the rich and famous. However the repeal of Prohibition again burst Nassau's bubble, the Depression followed, and the Bahamas hit skid row.

During WWII the islands served as a base for Allied air and sea power. Exhausted GIs came to the islands to recuperate and were joined by wealthy Canadians and Americans wanting some winter sun.

**INDEPENDENCE 'SOON COME'**

The decision to promote tourism coincided with the arrival of the jet age and the Cuban Revolution in 1959. During the 1950s, Havana was the mecca for American tourists. When Fidel Castro spun Cuba into Soviet orbit in 1961, the subsequent US embargo forced revelers to seek their pleasures elsewhere, and Nassau became the new hot spot.

The Bahamas was redefined as a corporate tax haven, aided by statutes modeled on Switzerland's secrecy laws. Tourism and finance bloomed.

*The Story of The Bahamas* by Paul Albury and *A History of the Bahamas* by Michael Craton (San Salvador Press) both give a good general overview of Bahamian history.

These books by Gail Saunders trace the trauma of the slave era; *Bahamian Loyalists and Their Slaves and Slavery in the Bahamas*.

The most famous example for a foreigner's view of the Bahamas is *Out Island Doctor* by Evans Cottman, a Yankee teacher who fell for Crooked and Acklin Islands in the 1940s.

**1678**

Bermudian salt traders clear land in the Turks and Caicos and create *salinas* (salt-drying pans)

**1700s**

Pirates establish bases on Grand Bahama

**1718**

The Bahamian nation's motto; Pirates Expelled–Commerce Restored is coined

**1760**

Governor William Shirley, former governor of Massachusetts, drains swamps, surveys the land and lays Nassau's streets

### A RIGHT ROYAL RENEGADE

In 1940 the Duke and Duchess of Windsor arrived as governor and governess. Formerly King Edward VIII of England, the duke abdicated the throne in 1936 to marry an American divorcee; Wallis Simpson, 'the woman I love.' The couple ensured that the rich and famous poured into Nassau in postwar years, and set the trend for the ruling Brits and their romances to hit the headlines...

Edward, who had suffered great humiliation in Britain, proved as controversial in the Bahamas as he had at home. Some claim that he made strides to right the colony's backward and racist politics. Others believe he endorsed the corrupt ways of the 'Bay Street Boys,' an oligarchy of white lawyers and merchants that dominated the islands' assembly for many years.

It is argued that the duke was sent to the Bahamas as a punishment. Other evidence suggests that on the eve of WWII, the Nazis were planning to kidnap the duke – who had settled in the south of France – and restore him to the throne as a puppet after Hitler's forces had conquered Great Britain. Edward had shown sympathies toward Nazism. Winston Churchill, the prime minister, urged King George VI to send his brother to the Bahamas to place him out of harm's way.

Nonetheless, the duke was beloved by many, Blacks and Whites alike, and became the topic of several endearing songs and poems.

The upturn in fortunes coincided with (and perhaps helped spark) the evolution of party politics and festering ethnic tensions, as the white elite and a growing black middle class reaped profits from the boom.

Only a small number of black representatives (mostly wealthy black businessmen) sat in the assembly, which remained dominated by the Bay Street Boys, descendants of the white Loyalists and British appointees. Middle-class Blacks' aspirations for representation coalesced with the pent-up frustrations of their brethren who remained impoverished.

In 1953 a local firebrand named Lynden Pindling formed the Progressive Liberal Party (PLP) to seek justice for the nation's majority at the ballot box. In 1963 the tensions bubbled up into a violent national strike supported by the PLP. A new constitution, proposed by Britain, was drawn up with the aim of creating a more representative legislature and providing for internal self-government. The UBP, led by white Bahamian Roland Symonette, gained power in national elections by a slender majority, and Symonette became premier. The close race allowed for white dominance to be somewhat diluted, but black aspirations had barely been appeased, particularly since voting was restricted to male property owners, a provision overwhelmingly favoring whites.

Pindling and his party followers refused to recognize the parliamentary speaker's authority. In 1967 the PLP finally boycotted Parliament altogether, but not before winning an elimination of the property-ownership qualification. A new election was held, and Pindling's PLP came to power, a position it would maintain for the next 25 years.

On July 10, 1973, the Bahamian islands officially became a new nation, The Commonwealth of The Bahamas, ending 325 years of British rule.

### THE COMMONWEALTH & COLOMBIANS

Pindling initially continued the progressive economic policies first adopted by his predecessors, based on tourism and finance. However,

foreign-owned development interests enjoyed preferential treatments and when his government tried to redress these problems the economy stalled.

Kickbacks to government members had become a staple of political life by the early 1980s and the Bahamas' hundreds of islands, marinas, and airstrips had become the frontline staging post for narcotics en route to the US. Bahamians from all walks of life made hay on the trade, and the government seemed disinclined to crack down on it.

In 1984 it was suggested by an American television program that Colombian drug barons had corrupted the government at its highest levels, and the country's drug-heavy reputation tarnished its image abroad. Pindling and his ministers were accused of involvement in drug trafficking. A Bahamian royal commission found against several ministers but Pindling was cleared. However the report noted that his expenditure was eight times his declared income.

The country's drug-heavy reputation tarnished its reputation abroad. Tourism and financial investment declined, so the government belatedly launched a crackdown led by the US Drug Enforcement Agency (US DEA).

The electorate had become frustrated and voted in a conservative and business-orientated government, the FNM, in 1992. Lynden Pindling died in August 2000.

### BAHAMAS TODAY

Announcements in 2004 that the American government may reduce funding of the successful joint anti-drug-trafficking campaign (OPBAT) 'Operation Bahamas Turks & Caicos' caused some concerns that drug trafficking could once again get out of hand. The *Tribune*, for example, revisited the days when Colombian drug traffickers rained money down on celebrating Bahamians from planes as thanks for their cooperation and even a clergyman argued that 'principles don't put bread on the table.'

Drug trafficking through the Bahamas to the US and Europe is still very much alive, although concerted Bahamian and US DEA efforts have curtailed much activity. In 2003 and 2004 the Bahamian police announced a number of arrests on Grand Bahama in connection with millions of dollars' worth of smuggled cocaine. The US Attorney-General in 2004 also announced arrests of Bahamians in Eleuthera, the Biminis and New Providence during the cracking of a Colombian-led drug-trafficking network.

### WAS THE BIRTH OF TOURISM THE DEATH OF HIM...?

It was clear in the slump that followed the end of WWII that the Bahamas' future lay in the still-embryonic tourism industry. Canadian entrepreneur and philanthropist Sir Harry Oakes, who owned one-third of New Providence and built the Cable Beach Golf Course, the Bahamas Country Club, and much of the tourist infrastructure, had laid the foundation.

Oakes' brutal murder in his bed on July 7, 1943, and the subsequent trial of his son-in-law, Duke Alfred de Marigny, reverberated around the world as 'The Crime of the Century.' The son-in-law was acquitted, the Bahamas was put on the international map once again and the case remains unsolved.

Captain Leonard M Thompson's autobiographical *I Wanted Wings* is a splendid introduction to Loyalist Bahamian history and ways.

For a look at the Duke of Windsor's highly controversial time in the Bahamas, see *The King Over the Water* by Michael Pye and *The Duke of Windsor's War* by Michael Bloch.

*20,000 Leagues under the Sea* by Universal/Williamson in 1916 was the first underwater motion picture ever made, and it was shot in the Bahamas.

1775

The American Revolution starts an exodus of Loyalists and their slaves to the region

1843

The British abolish slavery and freed slaves establish villages

1920

Prohibition opens the door to the Bahamas first American tourists

1958

Exuma Cays Land & Sea Park becomes the first marine fishery reserve in the world

In August 1999 Hurricane Dennis raked the Abacos and Grand Bahama. A month later, Hurricane Floyd – a 600-mile-wide whopper – pounded Cat, San Salvador, Abaco and Eleuthera with winds up to 155 mph. In 2004 two more hurricanes, Frances and Jeanne, hit these same islands along with Grand Bahama in quick succession. Massive flooding and the destruction of many buildings again hit the villages and tourism industry of these already-struggling islands.

Despite these blows, Prime Minister Perry Christie and the ruling Progressive Liberal Party can celebrate that the Bahamas per-capita disposable income is around \$16,700, one of the highest in the region. The economy has also flourished, thanks to its stable political climate, liberal laws designed to attract investment, and, undoubtedly, its proximity to North America.

One of the country's assets is its large, skilled, well-educated workforce, 10% of which is employed in banking and insurance industries.

Another one third is employed by the government. The wealth is concentrated in Nassau however, so there are plenty of pockets of poverty, especially in the Family Islands, where unemployment is high and much of the local economy operates on a barter basis. Thousands of Bahamians earn their income as itinerant vendors.

Tourism alone accounts for more than 60% of GDP and directly or indirectly employs half of the archipelago's labor force. Despite a slowdown in the tourism sector in 2001 following 11 September, tourist arrivals in 2003 were 4.6 million, the highest number in the Caribbean. Americans now make-up of over 80% of the Bahamian visitors, no wonder the pizzas are so good!

The Bimini Museum has a website that covers local history and events; [www.bimini-museum.org](http://www.bimini-museum.org)

#### A TAX SHELTER IN THE SUN

The Bahamas is one of the world's premier tax-free havens and financial services are the second-most important sector of the Bahamian economy, accounting for about 15% of GDP. Incentives offered to investors attract millions of dollars every year.

The Bahamas levies no taxes on personal or corporate income, capital gains, dividends, interest, royalties, sales, estates, inheritances, or payrolls. The repatriation of foreign investment funds, foreign assets and dividends, and profits arising from investments is permitted tax-free.

The system primarily serves as a tax-planning haven and place of asset security; financial records cannot be subpoenaed or released. Although the FNM government made sweeping changes in banking laws to help the US DEA and the US Internal Revenue Service combat money laundering (Bahamian-held assets are no longer secure from US federal agencies), in 2000 the 26-country International Financial Action Task Force named the Bahamas among a 'black list' of 15 nations failing to cooperate in the fight against money laundering.

Still one of the world's principal international financial and insurance centers, Nassau claimed in 2003 that 284 institutions from the Bahamas, US, Canada, UK, South America, Central America, Asia and Europe were licensed to do business within or from the Bahamas. Financial services annually contributed about 15% of the GDP, paying \$196.5 million in 2003 for salaries and wages to employees who are nearly 94% Bahamian.

However a number of international banks and other financial institutions have withdrawn from the country, whether this is down to changes in the laws protecting client confidentiality from DEA investigations or not, is of much speculation within the country's electronic and print media.

## TURKS & CAICOS

Recent discoveries of Indian artifacts on Grand Turk have shown that the islands evolved much the same indigenous culture as did their northern neighbors. A ball court similar to those of the far more advanced Maya culture in Central America has been found on Middle Caicos. Locals even claim that the islands were Christopher Columbus' first landfall in 1492 (much-disputed by historians).

The island group was also a pawn in the power struggles between the French, Spaniards, and British and remained virtually uninhabited until 1678, when a group of Bermudians settled and began to extract salt and timber. Salt traders cleared the land and created the *salinas* (salt-drying pans) that still exist on several islands. Most of the salt went aboard swift sloops to supply the cod-fishing industries of New England and Canada's Maritime Provinces. Salt remained the backbone of the British crown colony until the 1950s, when the industry collapsed.

As with the Bahamas, the islands became a base for notorious pirates, who were not averse to sacking the wealthy salt merchants' homes. Some people claim that piracy accounts for the islands' name: 'Turks' for the name of a group of Mediterranean pirates and 'Caicos' for the name of the boats. ('Baloney!' say others: 'Turks' refers to the species of native cactus whose scarlet blossom resembles a Turkish fez; 'cayos' is for the Spanish word for 'tiny isles'.)

Following the American Revolution, waves of colonial Loyalists arrived with their slaves to build plantations. By 1820 the cotton crop had failed and the planters sailed off leaving many slaves behind who then also became salt rakers. A whaling industry (now defunct) was established in the mid-19th century.

#### FROM WWII TO SATELLITE TV

Although the US military built airstrips here during WWII, the islands were still British, classified as part of the UK's Jamaican colony until 1962, when they were then annexed to the Bahamas. The Governor of the Bahamas oversaw the island's affairs from 1965 to 1973, when the Turks and Caicos became a separate crown colony of Great Britain.

Meanwhile, the doors to tourism really began to open; Count Ferdinand Czernin, son of the last prime minister of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, ferreted out a tiny dot on the map – Pine Cay, northeast of Provo – on which he planned an exotic resort. After his death, this became the exclusive Meridian Club, a prize-winning resort still frequented by the sophisticated elite. Then in 1984 Club Med opened its doors on Provo, and the Turks and Caicos started to boom. In the blink of an eye, the islands, which had had no electricity, acquired satellite TV.

#### LIVING TODAY

Today the finance, tourism and fishing industries generate most private-sector income. The Turks and Caicos are a tax-free offshore finance center, offering services such as company formation, offshore insurance, banking, trusts, and limited partnerships. Still, the industry is a mere

Did you know that in the 2004 Olympics Bahamian sprinter Tonicque Williams-Darling won the gold medal in the women's 400m final and Debbie Ferguson won bronze for the women's 200m final in Athens.

Did you know that some rock carvings in Sapodilla Bay, Caicos date back to 1844 and record the names of ship-wrecked sailors who found themselves on this island?

*Turks Islands Landfall* by HE Sadler is an illustrated, large-format text regaling the history of the Turks and Caicos.

1960s

Grand Turk's 'white gold' salt export industry collapses

1962

John Glenn splashes down from space, just off Grand Turk

1973

The Bahamas achieves independence and becomes the Commonwealth of the Bahamas

1984

Club Med opens in Providenciales and tourism starts to boom in the Turks and Caicos

*Living in the Turks & Caicos Islands: from Conch to the Florida Lottery* by Charles Palmer depicts island living and the changes from the early '50s to current days.

minnow compared to that of the Bahamas, and you will no doubt be astonished to discover that Grand Turk, the much-hyped financial center, is just a dusty backwater in the sun.

Most capital goods and food for domestic consumption are imported from Haiti and the US, along with some human traffic. Whereas many of the Haitians are en route to the US as illegal immigrants, more than half of the 93,000 visitors in the late 1990s were American tourists. However, tourism fell by 6% in 2002, and in 2005 the per capita GDP was estimated at a low \$9,600.

Major sources of government revenue include fees from offshore financial activities and customs receipts. Still, income from tourism and offshore investment is not yet sufficient for the islands to survive without British aid. Practically all consumer goods and foodstuffs are imported. Agriculture is limited to small family gardens and teeny farms. The islands' most important exports are conch and lobster (about 750,000lb annually). Commemorative coins and souvenir-issue stamps bring in considerable revenue.

With the Turks and Caicos covered by the US-funded anti-drug trafficking operation (OPBAT), some individuals within the country are believed to continue to derive revenue from the international drugs trade.

Although independence was agreed upon for 1982, the policy was reversed and the islands remain a British crown colony, while the existing constitution dates from 1988. A governor from the UK acts as the Queen's representative, with responsibility for internal security, external affairs, and certain judicial matters, also presiding over the Executive Council of Ministers.

Local self-government is administered by the 13-member Legislative Council, an elected body headed by the chief minister (appointed by the governor) and empowered to enact local statutes and run the show on a daily basis, with a good deal of power to determine the islands' future.

Relations between the islanders and British-appointed governors have been strained since 1996 when incumbent Governor Martin Bourke's comments suggesting that government and police corruption had turned the islands into a haven for drug trafficking appeared in the *Offshore Finance Annual*, and opponents accused him of harming investment. Growing opposition threatened to spill over into civil unrest and the Brits sent over a warship and trained policeman. In the end there was no revolt, but the issue created resurgence in calls for independence that still continue today. Mr Richard Tauwhare was named as Governor of the Turks and Caicos, effective July 2005.

## 1996

A British warship arrives in the Turks and Caicos, after the British Governor claims the islands were a haven for drug smugglers

## 2004

Hurricanes Frances and Jeanne lash the islands and the Bahamas win their first individual track Olympic gold medal

# The Culture

## THE NATIONAL PSYCHE

### The Bahamas

Contemporary Bahamian culture revolves around the family, the church and the sea. However the proximity of North America and cable TV has had a profound influence on contemporary life and material values, although many British traditions, courtesies and attitudes remain.

As with any society there are some lovely ironies. For example, although investors are encouraged to build casino complexes on Bahamian soil, gambling is outlawed for Bahamian nationals! Even better, these casinos are then staffed by trained Bahamian croupiers.

A very low crime rate and an extremely welcoming people illustrates the strength of a cohesive community led by overt Christian beliefs. However in 2004 a cruise ship carrying gay passengers and their families planned to dock in Nassau. This resulted in outrage expressed both in the media and on the streets, with protesters calling for bans to stop the ship docking. Another example of this very un-Christian intolerance is the discrimination against Haitian immigrants. Spirit beliefs, held over from slave days, are a mix of African and Christian religions. These are still important to many Bahamians and are presented in many daily rituals (see p32).

In Nassau and Freeport, most working people are employed in banking, tourism or government work and live a nine-to-five lifestyle. The maturation of the banking and finance industries has fostered the growth of a large professional class, many of whom have become extremely wealthy.

The folks of the Out Islands – the Family Islanders – are altogether more at ease as well as more traditional. The practice of obeah, bush medicine, and folkloric songs and tales still infuse their daily lives.

Tourism has barely touched many islands and poverty sits hand-in-hand with undeveloped local economies. Despite many expat billionaires hidden away on these cays, many people live a hand-to-mouth existence alleviated by the government's social security system, fishing, catching conch and lobster, and raising corn, bananas and other crops for the kitchen.

### Turks & Caicos

The islands have their own identity, but are as devoutly religious as their northern neighbors. This doesn't stop some from having a tippie on Sunday, when the pubs (strictly speaking) aren't serving.

Turks and Caicos islanders ('Belongers') are descendants from the early Bermudian settlers, Loyalist settlers, slave settlers and salt rakers. Many resident expats, notably Brits, are employed in the hospitality and finance industries, having escaped the cities and miserable weather of Europe. Others are 'retirement-aged swashbucklers' or those avoiding open conversations about their origins!

More recently, hundreds of Haitians have fled their impoverished island and landed in the Turks and Caicos, many on their way to Miami. Some residents and Belongers, as with the Bahamians, resent the Haitians' intrusion into the islands' scarce economic resources.

### POPULATION

Around 80% of the Bahamian population is urban, with nearly two-thirds of residents living in Nassau (212,432) and around 47,000 in Grand Bahama. The remainder of the population is scattered among about a

Bahamians and Turks and Caicos islanders drive on the left and enjoy the odd roundabout or two. As they say: the left side is the right side, the right side is suicide!

*Speed 2 Cruise Control* with a bomb on board, and *The Loveboat Reunion*, by Aaron Spelling, with several blonde bombshells on board, were both shot in the Bahamas, and should stand as a warning that you can never rely on the brochures when booking your next cruise...

*Water and Light* by Stephen Harrigan is a splendid memoir by a Texan who 'followed his bliss' and spent several months diving off Grand Turk.

dozen Family Islands; predominantly the Abacos, Andros, Eleuthera and a few dozen offshore cays. The islands tend to be less populated as you move south, and the southern islands are suffering significant declines in population.

The Bahamas prides itself on its harmonious race relations. Indeed, the islands are refreshingly free of racial tensions, and class divisions are markedly less related to color than on many neighboring islands. Everyone can socialize together. The most virulent prejudice, among both black and white Bahamians, is against Haitians, a recent immigrant underclass.

Most Haitians are illegal immigrants seeking a better life whom the Bahamian government has tried to repatriate without success. Haitians perform menial tasks, farm labor and domestic work and are frequently exploited at below-minimum wages. A Human Rights Watch report also revealed that 90% of prisoners in the Bahamas are Haitians.

Other immigrants come from the Dominican Republic and Jamaica, or are of Asian or Hispanic descent. There are no descendants of the indigenous Lucayans. But around Red Bay (Andros), you may note the distinct features of Seminole Indians, whose forefathers fled Florida and settled here two centuries ago.

### Bahamian Lineage

About 85% of the population is Black, with ancestry traced to slaves brought from the Carolinas. They in turn were drawn predominantly from West African tribes such as the House, Ibo, Mandingo and Yoruba.

The Bahamas' black population has grown out of several events. When Loyalists arrived in the islands, they brought with them their most trusted and able slaves. In other cases, slave traders called into Nassau en route to other destinations and sold Africans to local slaveholders.

Scores of free Blacks also fled the United States for the islands, where many became large landholders (often slave-owners themselves) and prominent citizens. Additionally, thousands of runaways and Blacks liberated from slave ships by the British also landed in the islands as free people.

Whites constitute 12% of the population; most are of British and to a lesser degree American, Irish and Greek descent. Outside Nassau, most Whites are centered in a few settlements where they are a conspicuous majority: Marsh Harbour, Cherokee Sound, Treasure Cay, Green Turtle

Did you know that actor Sidney Poitier is the current Bahamian Ambassador to Japan?

Did you know that the Bahamas levies no taxes on personal or corporate income, capital gains, dividends, interest, royalties, sales, inheritances or payrolls?

### BUSH MEDICINE *Christopher P Baker*

Traditional folk healing is still alive, especially in the Family Islands, where locals have a suspicion of doctors and cling to folk remedies. Bush-medicine healers, often respected obeah practitioners, rely on native herbs, which they mix into concoctions, or potents, using recipes that have been handed down through many generations.

The sovereign ingredient is *cerasee* (*Momordica charantia*), an orange-fruited vine credited with resolving every imaginable human ailment. Aloe is also used for curing many ills, from sunburn to insect bites, while breadfruit leaves are said to cure high blood pressure.

However, not all cures use berries and leaves. For example, 'goat nanny' (goat droppings) is said to cure whooping cough, while congested air passages are cured by pouring 'chamber lye' on the head. This golden liquid is named for the pot into which a person relieves himself at night when not blessed with an indoor toilet.

There are a couple of grand 'Bush Medicine' walks to be taken in the Grand Bahamas (see p103) and in George Town in the Exumas (see p197) which will give you a few more tips. As will *Bush Medicine in the Bahamas* by Leslie Higgs which provides recipes for curing everything from warts to a broken heart.

Cay, Great Guana Cay, Elbow Cay and Man O' War Cay (Abacos); and Spanish Wells and Harbour Island (Eleuthera).

Most Whites in these settlements can claim descent from the earliest English settlers, Loyalists who fled the American Revolution. Others claim descent from Southerners escaping the US Civil War. A few like to claim ancestry from the English ruling elite. A far greater number are descended from pirates and vagabonds.

Nassau's white community remains somewhat clannish and dominates the upper echelons of economic life. Every Loyalist descendant and other Caucasian born in the islands is known as a 'Conchy Joe,' identifiable by their distinctive features: usually blue or green eyes, freckled skin and blondish hair.

Then there are the thousands of part-time and full-time residents – predominantly wealthy North Americans, who have escaped from the prying eyes of the world.

### RELIGION

Christianity is a powerful and conservative force in the Bahamas and Turks and Caicos Islands, with the overwhelming majority of islanders devout believers who profess to live by the word of God. Virtually every taxi driver has a Bible at hand, as do many office workers. State functions and the school day begin with prayers. Church affairs make headline news, while major international events are relegated to the inside pages. Every political speech is peppered with biblical quotations and is considerate of the Church's position on social issues.

The Bahamian nation claims the greatest number of churches per capita in the world. The vast majority of the populace are mainstreamers; Baptists (35%), Anglican/Episcopalian (15%) and Catholic (14%). The official state religion is the Anglican Church, although some Christian priests hedge their bets and mix a little good-willed obeah into their practice (see p212).

Every island is a veritable jumble of chapels and churches, usually Baptist revival centers, referred to as 'jumper churches' by locals – with every conceivable body in the world represented (as with the Feed My Sheep Church of God). Often you'll see as many as a dozen churches in settlements with barely 200 people. Most of these churches are maintained with much love and money the congregation can ill-afford. Fundamentalists have made serious inroads in recent years often through cable TV, while some Family Islands have been won over by a single church (Seventh-Day Adventists, for example, predominate on Crooked Island).

Sundays really are blessed days, when businesses outside main tourist centers are closed. Less so with the Turks and Caicos islanders, but Bahamians normally dress-up to show respect even if they are working (as with Nassau's taxi drivers) and the churches are a vision of glamour. Hats and heels are *de rigueur* for women, along with suits and ties for the men. Little girls are resplendent in white dresses and their brothers immaculate in shirt and trousers, both impatiently waiting their freedom.

Gospel choirs across the region take their work seriously, with uplifting and joyous sounds wafting out of halls and churches throughout the week, in preparation for Sunday's list of lengthy services.

### Funerals

Some of the most important events on a Bahamian family calendar are funerals. The national newspapers dedicate a huge percentage of space to announcing deaths and funerals (weddings get little play) while radio programs are frequently interrupted by death and funeral announcements.

If you want to check out any lineage that you may share with the peoples of the Bahamas and Turks and Caicos, check out this website and its comprehensive links at [www.genforum.genealogy.com/bahamas](http://www.genforum.genealogy.com/bahamas)

When the British abolished slavery in 1834, many of the emancipated former slaves were bequeathed land by their former owners.

For a hilarious look at what it means to be a Conchy Joe, see Patricia Glington-Meicholas' *How to Be a True-True Bahamian*.

**SPIRIT BELIEFS** *Christopher P Baker*

Despite the force of Christianity in society, many Bahamians and Turks and Caicos islanders still keep spirit beliefs held over from slave days, when African religions melded with Christianity. Rooted in the animist beliefs of West Africa (animism has nothing to do with animal spirits; the name is derived from the Latin word *anima*, meaning 'soul'), they are based on the tenet that the spiritual and temporal worlds are a unified whole.

A core belief is that spirits live independently of the human or animal body and can inhabit inanimate objects. They can communicate directly with humans and are usually morally neutral; it is the service to which humans call them that determines whether they will be a force of good or evil. Cantankerous, onerous people beget evil 'sperrids'; kind and thoughtful people beget good spirits. Spirits particularly like to live in silk cotton trees, of which many Bahamians are extremely wary.

Spirits reveal themselves on a whim; not being able to see them doesn't mean they aren't there. Many Bahamians believe that if you take the 'bibby' (mucus) from a dog's or horse's eye and put it in your own, you can actually see a spirit.

All kinds of practices have evolved to guard against evil spirits. Even physicians are known to tie a black cord around a newborn baby's wrists to guard against evil spirits. A Bible is often placed at the head of a sleeping child for the same reason. And if this fails, a Bahamian may attempt to dispel a malicious spirit by marking Xs all around and repeating the all-powerful phrase, 'Ten, ten, the Bible ten.'

To discover more about these customs, see the boxed text 'Obeah' – the practice of African witchcraft (p212), and pick up *Ten, Ten, the Bible Ten: Obeah in the Bahamas* by Timothy McCarty.

Bahamian funerals are big events. On the Family Islands and cays, businesses close, residents dress in mourning for the passing of the funeral cortege and children play a doleful dirge at the head of the procession.

**ARTS**

Relative to its neighbors, the Bahamas' intellectual tradition is comparatively weak and, for a capital city, Nassau has been surprisingly unsophisticated in the visual and performance arts. That has certainly been changing however, especially in music and art, and with the opening of the National Gallery in Nassau, displays of really impressive works are gaining their rightful place in Bahamian society.

**Literature**

While the Bahamas has produced no writer of world renown, the nation does have its literati. Few, however, are known even within the Caribbean region.

*Bahamian Anthology* (published by the College of The Bahamas) is a selection of poetry, stories and plays by Bahamian writers. In a similar poetic vein, try *Bahamas: In a White Coming On* by Dennis Ryan.

However, the Bahamas has been the setting for work of more notable, non-Bahamian writers. Ernest Hemingway's *Islands in the Stream* is a fictitious but accurate look at the Biminis' history and his own British ways during WWII.

Robert Wilder's *Wind from the Carolinas* is a historical novel that tells of the settlement of the Bahamas in the form of a generational saga. And Barbara Whitnell's *The Salt Rakers* follows suit.

A more contemporary romp is Herman Wouk's *Don't Stop the Carnival*, the tale of a publicist who gives it all up to open a hotel on a fictitious Caribbean isle.

*The Cocaine Wars* by Paul Eddy, Hugo Sabogal and Sara Walden covers drug trafficking in the Bahamas and is an interesting read.

Author Ian Fleming, famous for his James Bond novels, was so taken with the Bahamas that he set several of his books here.

**FOLK TALES & CHILDREN'S STORIES**

Several books trace the evolution and meaning of Bahamian folktales, including *Bahamian Lore: Folk Tales and Songs* by Robert Curry. Patricia Grinton-Meicholas is another name to look out for, this prolific writer has a real panache in bringing oral histories and folk tales to life.

*An Evenin' in Guanima: A Treasury of Folktales from The Bahamas* by Patricia Grinton-Meicholas is a great introduction to the Bahamas.

Telcine Turner's *Once Below a Time: Bahamian Stories* is an illustrated collection of short stories for children. Likewise, youngsters might enjoy *Climbing Clouds: Stories & Poems from The Bahamas*, also edited by Turner, and *Who Let the Dog Out? (Dottie's Story)* by Carole Hughes, a story about a Dalmatian born into Green Turtle Cay who heads off to explore the world.

**Music**

From hotel beach parties to the raw-sound-system dance clubs of Over-the-Hill, Nassau's poorer quarter, the Bahamas reverberates to the soul-riveting sounds of calypso, soca, reggae and its own distinctive music, which echoes African rhythms and synthesizes Caribbean calypso, soca and English folk songs into its *goombay* beat.

**GOOMBAY**

This type of music – the name comes from an African word for 'rhythm' – derives its melody from a guitar, piano or horn instrument accompanied by any combination of goatskin *goombay* drums, maracas, rhythm (or click) sticks, rattles, conch-shell horns, fifes and flutes, and cowbells to add a uniquely Bahamian *kalik-kalik-kalik* sound. It's typified by a fast-paced, sustained, infectious melody. *Goombay* is to the Bahamas what reggae is to Jamaica and is most on display during Christmas and midsummer Junkanoo celebrations.

*Goombay* draws on a heritage of folk music introduced by African slaves from North America, Jamaica and other neighboring islands. Particularly important are the 'talking drums,' once used to pass along information, and folk songs developed in the cane fields to ease the backbreaking labor. Over generations, European elements, such as the French quadrille introduced by planters, were absorbed as well, creating a unique style.

**OTHER BAHAMIAN STYLES**

The Bahamas' down-home, working-class music is rake 'n' scrape, usually featuring a guitar, an accordion, shakers made from the pods of poinciana trees and other makeshift instruments, such as a saw played with a screwdriver.

Rake 'n' scrape music can be heard at local bars throughout the islands, and is a highlight of many festivals such as Family Island regattas. Grand Turk has a fabulous annual festival when these musicians gather from across the Turks and Caicos region to display and enjoy their talents.

Spirituals were brought to the islands by Southern Loyalists' slaves, then adapted to incorporate purely Bahamian 'call and answer' techniques, rhyming exchanges of voices. Bahamian folk music is rooted in spiritual and gospel hymns often performed in 'rhymin' style. Androsian folk-singer Joseph Spence was the islands' master of folk and blues.

Dance hall, a kind of Caribbean rap and the in-vogue working-class music of the formerly British Caribbean islands, has evolved its own style in the Bahamas, where it is known as 'chatting.' It is performed entirely in

Oscar-winning Sidney Poitier tells of his upbringing on Cat Island in his autobiographies, *This Life and The Measure of a Man*.

The Bahamas Concert Orchestra website is [www.geocities.com/bahamasconcert/orchestra/index.html](http://www.geocities.com/bahamasconcert/orchestra/index.html).

*Junkanoo: Festival of the Bahamas* by Clement Bethel examines the history of this fabulous Bahamian festival.



The official Junkanoo website is [www.junkanoo.com](http://www.junkanoo.com).

*The Hermit of Cat Island*, by Peter F Anson, tells the fascinating story of Father Jerome, the hermit architect who blessed Cat and Long Islands with splendid churches. These miniature Gothic buildings are everywhere.

local dialect. The music has its origins in US urban ghettos of the 1990s, and usually has a monotonous yet fast-paced, compulsive beat, often with vocals added to the rhythms. It is most often performed by local DJs with their own mobile discos.

### Architecture

The islands have their own architectural styles reflecting the influences of early Bermudian settlers and US Loyalists. Most plantation and government buildings were built of local sandstone and limestone, as were the homes of the wealthy. The stones were fixed and finished by mortar and plaster containing lime produced by burning conch shells. Being thick – sometimes as much as 3ft – these massive walls became temperature sinks, keeping the building relatively cool even during the heat of midday.

On many islands, wooden houses are more prevalent. On Eleuthera and the Loyalist Cays of the Abacos, a distinctive style evolved that has been likened to that of Cape Cod in Massachusetts. The most splendid examples are in Dunmore Town and Spanish Wells (Eleuthera) and in Hope Town, New Plymouth and Man O' War Cay (Abacos). The Bahamian clapboard house has been widely copied throughout the Caribbean and in the Turks and Caicos a uniquely Bermudian influence has been at work. Often the houses are made of ship-timber driftwood and planking, the framework filled with cemented rubble rock and finished in plaster.

Smaller wooden homes in the Bahamas were elevated atop a masonry ground floor, with balconies supported by stilts or masonry pillars. Not

### JUMPING AT JUNKANOO

You feel the music before you see it...a frenzied barrage of whistles and horns overriding the cowbells, the rumble of drums and the joyful blasts of conch shells. Then the costumed revelers stream into view, whirling and gyrating like a kaleidoscope in rhythm with the cacophony. This is Junkanoo, the national festival of the Bahamas – its equivalent of Carnaval or Mardi Gras – and it is a mass of energy, color and partying that starts in the twilight hours of Boxing Day.

The name, pronounced *junk-uh-NOO*, is thought to come from a West African term for 'deadly sorcerer.' Others say the festival is named for John Canoe, the tribal leader who demanded that his enslaved people be allowed to enjoy a festivity. With its origins in West African secret societies, the parade evolved on the plantations of the British Caribbean among slaves who were forbidden to observe their sacred rites. The all-male cast of masqueraders hid their identity, following West African mask-wearing tradition.

At first Junkanoos were suppressed by the Bahamian colonial government, which feared they might get out of hand and lead to slave uprisings. Later, planters encouraged them. Creole elements found their way into the ceremony, along with British Morris dancing, polkas and reels. On Jamaica and other islands, Junkanoo was suppressed to extinction, but in the Bahamas it became an integral part of the culture.

Junkanoo is fiercely competitive and many marchers belong to 'shacks,' groups who vie to produce the best performance, costume, dancing and music. The most elaborately costumed performers are one-person parade floats whose costume can weigh over 200lb, and depict exotic scenes adorned with a myriad of glittering beads, foils and rhinestones. Many spend a year planning their costumes, keeping their designs a carefully guarded secret.

The energy of this carnival is that of a joyous and frenetic explosion. In Nassau the first 'rush,' as the parade is known, occurs on Boxing Day (December 26); the second happens on New Year's Day and the third in summer, when the shacks go over their game plans. Head for the Fish Frys if you won't be there for the festival, this is where the shacks rehearse their dances and the music for the big nights. Thursday nights are practice night in Grand Bahama. In the Family Islands the summer 'rushes' are on different days to Nassau. Parades start around 3am and finish by noon in time for a big lunch.

only did this allow airflow beneath the living quarters, it also kept them above water level in the event of a hurricane surge.

The Family Islands are also peppered with tiny square stone buildings – 'slave homes' – that have survived decay and natural disasters. Many are still inhabited. Each is the size of a pillbox, with a steep-angled, four-sided roof and an open kitchen in back, but no toilet. Communal outhouses (they, too, still stand) were built along the shore, where one would make a deposit straight into the sea.

Paint finishes were produced from linseed oil, wood spirits, or turpentine derived from pine and mixed with ochre, sienna, and other mineral or organic pigments: iron oxides for barn red, copper oxides for green, cobalt for blue, and zinc for white. The last two were expensive, and a white house with blue shutters became a true status symbol.

Two common features on historic buildings are steep-pitched roofs and an absence of roof overhangs. Designed to reduce wind resistance during hurricanes, the steep pitch aids in rigidity and also prevents airfoil uplift (the process that 'lifts' an aircraft off the ground) when strong winds blow across it. The lack of overhang prevents the wind from peeling back the roof. Those shady verandas you see everywhere are invariably separate 'sacrificial' extensions to the roofs, designed so that the wind may tear them away without taking the roofs as well.

### Visual Arts

#### THE BAHAMAS

The so-called father of Bahamian art is Amos Ferguson, the foremost folk artist. Ferguson is intensely spiritual. His naive, palette-bright canvases focus upon religion, history, nature and folklore, or 'ol' story.' Ferguson began making bird figurines, tumblers and jars for the tourist trade. You can see a permanent collection of his works in the Pompey Museum in Nassau.

Brent Malone, Max Taylor, Rolph Harris and Alton Roland Lowe – the Bahamas' artist laureate for more than three decades – are also all writ large in the Bahamian art world.

The oils of Alton Lowe, a seventh-generation Loyalist Abaconian, are much sought after by blue bloods and corporations. While Eddie Minnis, also cartoonist, songwriter and musician is inspired by his devotion to the church of Jehovah's Witnesses. His limited-edition prints are popular, and his original oils, works of intricate detail and vibrant color (he paints less than a dozen per year), command thousands of dollars.

The islands' plastic arts (ceramics, sculpture, painting, woodcarving and textiles) have been late in flowering, and with the exception of straw-work, the crafts industry is relatively undeveloped. It has been influenced in recent years by the influx of Haitians, who have inspired intuitive hardwood carvings, often brightly painted and highlighted by pointillist dots.

#### TURKS & CAICOS

Though slow to develop, the arts scene in the Turks and Caicos has begun to blossom. Traditional music, folklore and sisal weaving evolved during colonial days and have been maintained to this day.

The local art scene is dominated by the Haitian community who paint delightful oil and acrylic illustrations of village life back home. Many of these artworks are of the vividly colored naif style, which has inspired some plagiarism to benefit from the Haitians' popularity. Look for galleries and stores that sell signed paintings, these originals are still a steal, ranging from around \$18 to \$200.

A splendid book on visual arts is *Bahamian Art* by Patricia Grinton-Meicholas, Charles Huggins and Basil Smith.

Bahamian indigenous artist Amos Ferguson defines his love of the islands in *Under the Sunday Tree: Paintings by Mr Amos Ferguson*, with poems by Eloise Greenfield.

The stunning National Art Gallery of the Bahamas, housed in Lord Dunmore's old house, now has a website at [www.nagb.org.bs](http://www.nagb.org.bs).

However, Turks and Caicos Belongers artistry is also well represented. Much of the work is inspired by the islands' scenery, bird and marine life, with rich colors redolent of the Caribbean. A thriving art scene has also attracted expat artists from around the globe whose work should not be dismissed lightly.

Some roadside stalls sell decorative metal tapestries, designed as wall hangings. These are cut from old car wrecks, painted and varnished and illustrate underwater scenes as well as Turks and Caicos island life. These works are clever, witty and mostly small enough to fit in a suitcase. Go shop!

The Bamboo Gallery, in Provo, promotes the work of local artists, including Dwight Outten, from Middle Caicos, whom some people consider the leading artist in the islands. Another family member, Phillip Outten, a Rastafarian, produces acrylic works (some in gay primary colors, others more somber) inspired, he says, by his meditations and 'concept of daily reality.'

The North Caicos Art Society in Whitby (North Caicos) sponsors local art, emphasizing silkscreen painting. Lookout for Anna Bourne, one of many expat artists who now lives on Provo and paints on silk with French dyes.

The shopping section in Provo profiles a few really talented local artists and details galleries (p250).

*Artist on His Island: A Study of Self-Reliance* by Randolph W Johnston, tells of his and his family's lives in the Abacos.

# Environment

If you're keen to get close to nature, you'll find plenty to keep you enthralled in the Bahamas and Turks and Caicos. You'll also be doing the islands a good turn, with nature tourism one of the most practical ways to save wild places and their inhabitants from erosive exploitation. The Bahamas and Turks and Caicos governments take their role as guardians of their ecology seriously and work in cooperation with several world-wide conservation bodies. Both nations have designated large areas of land and sea as national parks.

## BAHAMAS

The Bahamas archipelago sits atop, and is formed by, one of the greatest masses of limestone in the world: a reef-shelf of solid sea fossils 20,000ft thick, rising sheer-sided from the seabed. The result of nearly 150 million years' deposits, the islands as we know them today began to take their present form only about 500,000 years ago.

### THE LAND

The mostly linear islands are strewn in a general northwest-southeast array. Several – Great Abaco, Eleuthera, Long Island, Andros – are as much as 100 miles long. Few, however, are more than a few miles wide. All are low lying, the terrain either pancake-flat or gently undulating. Cat Island's Mt Alvernia, the highest point in the Bahamas, is only 206ft above sea level.

These shores are lined virtually their entire lengths by white- or pinkish-sand beaches – about 2200 miles in all – shelving into turquoise shallows.

Most islands have barrier reefs along the length of their eastern shores, anywhere from 200yd to 2 miles out, that offer protection from Atlantic waves.

### Blue Holes

The islands are pocked by giant sinkholes – water-filled, often fathomless circular pits that open to underground and submarine caves and descend as far as 600ft.

Unique creatures have evolved to exist solely within the gloom of the underwater caverns, including blind, pigmentless fish. Local lore attributes deadly mermaids, mermen and sea monsters to many of the holes.

### WILDLIFE

Apart from the cute curly tailed lizards darting around everywhere, a number of iguanas can be found on Bahamian cays. Unfortunately development hasn't been good for them, and most species are now endangered. Animal lovers will also enjoy seeing the wandering bands of donkeys, horses and chickens.

Virtually every island is a bird watcher's haven, with accessible vegetation and a variety of habitats for migrating and resident populations.

### Animals

The archipelago has only 13 native land mammal species, 12 of them are bats. All are endangered. The most common is the leaf-nosed bat. Bats

If you love whales, find out more about them on this site dedicated to the whales of the Bahamas [www.rockisland.com/%7eorcasurv/bcruisgd.htm](http://www.rockisland.com/%7eorcasurv/bcruisgd.htm).

For a general overview, *Caribbean Flora* by C Dennis Adams has detailed descriptions of individual species, accompanied by illustrations.

*After the Sunset* (2004) had Pierce Brosnan, Woody Harrelson and Salma Hayek swanning around the shores of Eleuthera while involved in a big heist: a retiring thief's parting shot.

## BIG BLOWS

The hurricane season in the Bahamas, like that of the US east coast, is from June to November, with most activity occurring in August and September. The Turks and Caicos are luckily out of the main hurricane paths.

Hurricanes that hit the Bahamas form off the coast of Africa and whip in a westerly direction across the Atlantic. The first stage of a hurricane's approach is called a tropical disturbance. The next stage is a tropical depression. When winds exceed 40mph, the system is upgraded to a tropical storm and is usually accompanied by heavy rains. The system is called a hurricane if wind speed exceeds 75mph and intensifies around a low-pressure center called the eye of the storm.

The strength of a hurricane is rated from one to five. The strongest and rarest hurricanes, the Category-5 monsters, pack winds that exceed 155mph. Hurricanes travel at varying speeds, from as little as 6mph to more than 31mph.

If you are caught by an approaching hurricane, follow local warnings. Hotels are typically of concrete and steel construction capable of withstanding strong winds. If you have an oceanfront room relocate inland.

In August, 1999, Hurricane Dennis raked the Abacos and Grand Bahama. A month later, Hurricane Floyd, a 600-mile-wide whopper, pounded Cat, San Salvador, Abaco and Eleuthera with winds up to 155 mph. In late 2004 two more hurricanes, Frances and Jeanne, hit these same islands along with Grand Bahama in quick succession. Massive flooding and the destruction of many buildings again hit villages and the tourism industry. Luckily, few lives were lost.

For warnings, check the USA National Hurricane Center's **Tropical Prediction Center** ([www.nhc.noaa.gov](http://www.nhc.noaa.gov)).

consume large amounts of insects, especially mosquitoes, and act as important seed dispersers and pollinators for flora.

The only native terrestrial mammal is the endangered hutia, a cat-size brown rodent akin to a guinea pig; a small population lives on a small cay in the Exumas.

Wild boar roam the backcountry on larger islands. You might be surprised to find North American raccoons on Grand Bahama. They were introduced during Prohibition (popular pets among Yankee bootleggers).

Iguanas are shy and harmless vegetarians that have been virtually eradicated by humans, feral dogs and cats, and now inhabit some outlying isles and are protected.

Many Bahamian islands have endemic species of reptiles, such as Cat Island, home to the Cat Island terrapin. Great Inagua also has its own terrapin.

There are frogs, too, including the Cuban tree frog, whose mucus is poisonous.

## BIRDS

Bird-watchers exalt in the Bahamas' 300 recorded species of birds. Only a few are endemic, including the Bahama swallow, endangered Bahama parrot and the Bahama woodstar hummingbird, which weighs less than a US nickel.

The West Indian (Caribbean) flamingo, which is the national bird, inhabits Crooked Island, Long Cay and Great Inagua, a sanctuary with over 50,000 birds.

From September through May, the forests swarm with visitors. Vireos, flycatchers, thrushes and plovers visit, migrating between summer and winter habitats. Bird-watchers also can spot Bahama whistling ducks, guinea fowl, quails, snipes, coots, herons and gallinules in the wetlands.

The human population on Mayaguana is outnumbered five to one by wild horses and burros.

A useful book is *Birds of New Providence and the Bahama Islands* by PGC Brudenell-Bruce. Also try *Natives of the Bahamas: A Guide to Vegetation and Birds of Grand Bahama*, a nifty pocket-size booklet by Erika Moultrie.

The pinelands of the northern Bahamas support a wide variety of resident summer nesters, plus migratory songbirds in winter.

The red-tailed hawk is one of several birds of prey commonly seen soaring high overhead, as is the jet-black turkey vulture, unmistakable with its undertaker's plumage and bald red head. The beautiful and diminutive osprey and kestrel prefer to spy from atop telegraph poles.

The islands are also home to the burrowing owl and the barn owl. Both are protected species.

## MARINE LIFE

Different sources claim that the Bahamas has between 900 and 2700 sq miles of coral reef. What is certain is that there are countless species of fish inhabiting these coasts, such as bonito, inflatable porcupine fish, three species of stingrays, moray eel, lobsters, parrotfish, sharks, kingfish, groupers, barracudas, jewelfish and deep-blue Creole wrasse.

Many dive outfitters offer trips to encounter wild stingrays. Up to 5ft across, stingrays are quite gentle and will take food from your hand.

Humpback whales pass through the waters windward of the Bahamas and blue whales are also frequently sighted. Atlantic bottlenose dolphins frequent these waters, as do the less often seen Atlantic spotted dolphins.

Three species of marine turtles – green, loggerhead and, more rarely, hawksbill – use the islands' beaches as nest sites. Turtles migrate thousands of miles to nest and lay their eggs here, as they have for at least 150 million years. Unfortunately these gentle creatures are endangered, yet still hunted.

## Plants

The Bahamas thin, rocky soil, underlain by limestone, is not conducive to lush vegetation. Nonetheless, the islands together boast more than 1370 species of trees and plants, including 121 endemics, such as Bahamian mahogany and Bahamian pine.

Lignum vitae, the national tree – which you may recognize by its clusters of dark-blue blooms – has the heaviest timber of all known woods and is much in demand among carvers (its bark, gum, fruit, leaves and blossoms also serve useful purposes, including medicines for gout and syphilis).

The waxy branches of the candlewood tree, another endemic species, were once lit as torches by Lucayan Indians.

## NATIONAL PARKS

The Bahamas has 22 national parks, reserves and protected areas which include large sections of the barrier reef.

The parks are used for both scientific research and for protecting endangered species, and are maintained by the **Bahamas National Trust** (BNT; ☎ 242-393-1317; [bnt@batelnet.bs](mailto:bnt@batelnet.bs); The Retreat, Village Rd, Nassau). Notably, the 175-sq-mile Exuma Cays Land & Sea Park was created in 1958 as the first marine fishery reserve in the world. The park now teems with prehistoric life forms, coral reefs, turtles, fish and endangered rock iguanas and hutias.

The following boxed text does not include all the Wild Bird Reserves, obtainable from the **Department of Agriculture** (☎ 242-325-7413; fax 242-325-3960; Levy Bldg, E Bay St, Nassau).

## ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

Outside of the national park system, inappropriate development, pollution and overexploitation increasingly threaten wildlife and marine resources. Although the Bahamas was the first Caribbean nation to outlaw

The 287-sq-mile national park on Inagua protects the world's largest breeding colony of West Indian flamingos.

*Flipper* (1996) brought us a fresh (and tuna-free) version of the old TV series. A young boy and dolphin become pals and once again save the day, showing the Bahamian seas in all their glory.

## WILDLIFE PRESERVES IN THE BAHAMAS

Park	Features	Activities	Location	Page
Abaco National Park	20,500 acres; endangered Bahama parrot	hiking, bird-watching		p165
Black Sound Cay National Reserve	small mangrove island; wintering habitat for waterfowl & avifauna	walking, bird-watching	Abaco; adjacent Green Turtle Cay	
Pelican Cays Land & Sea Park	2100 acres; extensive coral reefs, undersea caves, abundant terrestrial plant & animal life	yachting, snorkeling, diving, bird-watching	Abaco	p160
Tilloo Cay National Reserve	20-acre area of pristine wilderness; vital nesting site for tropical birds	hiking, bird-watching	Abaco; between Marsh Harbour & Pelican Cays	p160
North Bight, Fresh Creek, Blanket Sound, Young Sound & Staniard Creek	initial stages of designation		Andros	p140
Conception Island National Park	yachting, snorkeling, diving, bird-watching	temporary station for migrating birds & nesting green turtles	between Long Island and San Salvador	p220
Crab Cay & Mamma Rhoda Cay	wild bird reserves	walking, bird-watching	Berry Islands	
Exuma Cays Land & Sea Park	176 sq miles; world's first marine fishery reserve (1958); coral reefs, turtles, fish, endangered rock iguanas & hutias	yachting, snorkeling, diving, hiking	Exuma Cays	p204
Moriah Harbour Cay	beaches, sand dunes & mangrove creeks; gull-billed terns, least terns, nighthawks, ospreys & oystercatchers	yachting, snorkeling, diving, hiking, bird-watching	between Great and Little Exuma	p205
Peterson Cay National Park	1½-acre cay & surrounding coral gardens	yachting, snorkeling, diving, hiking	Grand Bahama	p118

long-line fishing as a threat to the marine ecology, the islands' stocks of grouper, spiny lobster, turtle and conch all face the consequences of over-fishing.

Commercial poaching, mostly by Cuban-Americans from Florida in the west and by Dominicans in the east, has also been a significant problem. From the late 1970s the problem stirred several island communities to establish their own nongovernmental reserves. The conch has been listed by the **Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species** (CITES; www.cites.org) as 'commercially threatened' since 1994, and the Bahamas' groupers are now considered as being at the same risk. In early 2005 Bahamian fishermen were complaining that international poachers were fishing the stock during the ban. It should be added that it was still possible to find locally caught grouper in the Bahamas at this time. See the boxed text on p89.

Coral reefs have also experienced damage by anchors, careless divers and snorkelers as well as by Bahamian fishermen. The biggest culprit, however, is Mother Nature: hurricanes cause as much devastation as a minor war.

As someone new (or not so new) to diving or snorkeling, why not learn how to avoid damaging the reefs that sustain the marine life? Have a look at www.brief.org.

Park	Features	Activities	Location	Page
Lucayan National Park	world's longest known underwater cave & cavern system; mangrove wetland; birds	yachting, snorkeling, diving, hiking, bird-watching	Grand Bahama	p101
Rand Memorial Nature Center	100-acre site & BNT HQ; captive flamingo flock, native boa constrictors & curly tailed lizards	hiking, bird-watching	Grand Bahama	p103
Walker's Cay Marine Park	tropical fish, marine predators & underwater cathedrals	yachting, snorkeling, diving, hiking	Grand Bahama	p101
Bahamas National Trust Park	287 sq miles; world's largest breeding colony of West Indian flamingos	bird-watching tours organized through Nassau's BNT office	Great Inagua	p237
Union Creek Reserve	7 sq miles; tidal creek & marine turtle research facility	tours organized through Nassau's BNT office	Great Inagua	p18
Little Inagua	no freshwater or habitation, with undisturbed biodiversity	contact BNT for access	Little Inagua	p237
Little Island, Goat Cay	wild bird reserves	walking, bird-watching	Little San Salvador & adjacent cay	p214
Bonefish Pond National Park	1800 acres; marine nursery for fish, crawfish, conch, waterfowl & flora	yachting, snorkeling, diving, bird-watching	New Providence	
Harrold & Wilson Ponds	250 acres; 100 avian species including herons, egrets & cormorants	hiking, bird-watching	New Providence	p63
Primeval Forest	hardwood forest supports diverse plant species & features	hiking	New Providence	
Retreat	11 acres; very large collection of palms & tropical plants; BNT HQ	hiking	New Providence	p63

## TURKS &amp; CAICOS

The islands are predominantly semi-arid, notably Salt Cay and much of South Caicos and Grand Turk, which were denuded of vegetation to dissuade rainfall during the heyday of the salt industry. The larger, middle islands of North, Middle and East Caicos are lush, with creeks, sand flats, lagoons and marshy wetlands. Most of the sandy beaches – some of the finest on the planet – are on the north and west shores, facing the open ocean.

More than 30 protected areas have been set aside to conserve delicate ecosystems and wildlife habitats.

WILDLIFE  
Animals

There are almost as many donkeys, wild horses and cattle as humans, though they stay in the wilds.

*The Turks and Caicos Islands – Beautiful by Nature* by Julia and Phil Davies is a lovely illustrated introduction to the islands.

Iguanas once inhabited much of the Turks and Caicos until they lost their lives to introduced dogs and cats and their habitats to development. Now Little Water Cay, Fort George Cay and Ambergris Cays are all protected iguana reserves.

The Turks and Caicos rock iguana is monogamous over its 40-year life-span.

### BIRDS

The vast wetlands in the southern portions of the Caicos and numerous uninhabited cays make perfect nesting sites for seabirds. More than 175 species have been sighted, of which 78 are migratory land birds. Ospreys are numerous and easily spotted, as are sparrow hawks and barn owls. Flamingos – once numerous throughout the chain – are now limited to West, North and South Caicos, where you may also see Cuban herons.

Frigate birds are more commonly seen here than in the Bahamas. The most important nesting site is Vine Point (Middle Caicos), but they also nest on Penniston Cay (near Grand Turk) and other islands. Many cays are important nesting sites for sooty and roseate terns, Audubon's shearwaters and brown noddy terns.

### MARINE LIFE

A flourishing population of bottlenose dolphins lives in these waters. Some 7000 North Atlantic humpback whales use the Turks Island Passage and the Mouchoir Banks, south of Grand Turk, as their winter

breeding grounds between January and March. Manta rays are commonly seen during the spring plankton blooms off Grand Turk and West Caicos.

The waters are favored by four species of turtle; hawksbills (an internationally endangered species, although sadly not recognized in this region), greens, Loggerheads and occasionally leatherbacks.

### Plants

Unique to the islands is the Turk's Head cactus, which you'll see on the national flag. It's easily recognizable: a short, stubby cactus topped by a red flower shaped like a fez. Aloe and sisal are also common.

Wild orchids bloom in winter. The bougainvillea, the magnificent royal poinciana and the casuarina are common introduced species.

Trees that bear fruits include the pigeon plum (good for making jams), passion flower, genip (known in the Florida Keys as 'Spanish lime') and wild dilly, whose gummy fruit is favored by iguanas (humans prefer its domesticated cousin, which produces chicle, once the main ingredient in chewing gum).

### FLOWERING VARIETIES

Flowers abound every month of the year. In spring, all the islands are ablaze with the orange blossoms of the croton and the dramatic vermilion

Listen to the dolphins chatting to each other, and follow links to a heap of dolphin sites and pictures at <http://neptune.atlantis-intl.com/dolphins/sounds.html>.

#### WILDLIFE PRESERVES IN TURKS & CAICOS

Park	Features	Activities	Location	Page
West Caicos Marine National Park	coral reefs	yachting, diving, snorkeling	West Caicos	p242
Lake Catherine Nature Reserve	breeding grounds of flamingos, osprey & waterbirds	hiking, bird-watching	West Caicos	p242
Northwest Point Marine National Park	elkhorn coral; inland saline ponds attract roseate spoonbills & other waterfowl	wall diving, hiking, bird-watching	Providenciales, Caicos	p245
Chalk Sound National Park	a cay-studded lagoon	snorkeling, swimming	Providenciales, Caicos	p245
Princess Alexandra National Park	the shore and offshore reefs along Grace Bay & the cays northeast of Provo	snorkeling, diving, yachting, hiking	Providenciales, Caicos	p242
Ramsar Site	marsh & intertidal wetlands; breeding site & nursery for waterfowl, lobster, conch & fish	hiking, bird-watching, snorkeling, diving	North, Middle & East Caicos	p242
Three Mary Cays National Park	seabird nesting site	hiking, bird-watching	North Caicos	p242
East Bay Islands National Park	numerous small cays off North Caicos, favored sites for seabirds	hiking, bird-watching, snorkeling, yachting, diving	North Caicos	p242
Conch Bar Caves National Park	an extensive cave system, some with lagoons & most with colonies of bats & Indian petroglyphs	hiking, bat-watching, swimming, historical site viewing	Middle Caicos	p255
Middle Caicos Reserve & Trail System	beaches, freshwater lakes & pine forests are accessed by 10 miles of trails inside the Ramsar site	hiking, bird-watching, swimming	Middle Caicos	p255

Park	Features	Activities	Location	Page
Vine Point & Ocean Hole Nature Reserve	vast intertidal swamplands along the south shore, a frigate-bird breeding colony & a huge blue hole	hiking, bird-watching, snorkeling	Middle Caicos	p255
Admiral Cockburn Land & Sea Park	scrub-covered shore & offshore coral reefs off western South Caicos	hiking, snorkeling, yachting, diving	South Caicos	p242
Belle Sound & Admiral Cockburn Cays Nature Reserve	mangroves & bonefish flats west of South Caicos	hiking, bird-watching	South Caicos	p257
Columbus Landfall National Park	western shore & coral reefs off Cockburn Town; the ocean deep begins within 400yd of shore	hiking, bird-watching, snorkeling, yachting, diving	Grand Turk	p259
South Creek National Park	mangroves & wetlands along the island's south shore, home to migrating shorebirds & waders	hiking, bird-watching, snorkeling, yachting, diving	Grand Turk	p259
Grand Turk Cays Land & Sea Park	comprises tiny cays – Gibb's, Penniston, Long & Martin Alonza Pinzon – off the southeast shore; important nesting sites for seabirds, with abundant iguanas & Turk's Head cactus	hiking, bird-watching, flora & fauna spotting, snorkeling, yachting, diving	Grand Turk	p266

of the *Spathodea*, known locally as the 'Jesus Christ tree' because it blooms blood-red at Easter. It is commonly found outside churches.

The long, thin, twirled leaves of the sisal (which rattles in the wind and is therefore also known as mother-in-law's tongue) are used for weaving.

Many plants have long been used for bush medicines. Five-finger (also known as chicken-toe), for example, is used to make a tea that relieves body aches. The aromatic leaves of white sage are used as a salve for chicken pox and measles, and wild guava is used to treat diabetes.

## NATIONAL PARKS

Native flora and fauna are protected within 33 areas set aside as national parks, nature reserves, sanctuaries and sites of historical interest under the aegis of Turks and Caicos Islands National Parks, which administers 23 national parks and nature reserves. More information can be sought from the **Department of Environment & Coastal Resources** (Grand Turk ☎ 649-946-2855; ccr@tcway.tc; Providenciales ☎ 649-946-4017; South Caicos ☎/fax 649-946-3306).

**Turks & Caicos National Trust** (TCNT; ☎ 649-941-5710; tc.nattrust@tcway.tc; PO Box 540, Providenciales) is a nongovernmental organization dedicated to the preservation of the cultural, natural and historical heritage of the islands. The Trust has established three underwater snorkeling trails: two off Provo (Smith's and Bight Reefs) and another off Grand Turk. It has initiated countrywide studies of bird populations, and in 1999 gained international funding to manage the Ramsar wetlands in North, Middle and East Caicos.

*The Turks and Caicos Pocket Guide*, edited by Julia Blake, is a handy encyclopedia full of facts and figures.

# Diving

Jean-Bernard Carillet

Be prepared to run out of superlatives. When it comes to providing enjoyable, enthralling diving for the experienced and novices alike, the Bahamas has no peer. Its great success as a diving mecca is due primarily to the unbeatable repertoire of diving adventures it offers. Pristine reefs, shipwrecks, blue holes, vertigo-inducing drop-offs, colorful tropical fish, rays, sharks and dolphins are the reality of diving here. Where else in the world can you join a shark feed, then go mingle with dolphins, visit movie-set shipwrecks, descend along bottomless walls and explore a mysterious blue hole – all in the same area? Added bonuses include state-of-the-art dive operations and warm turquoise waters year-round. In this fantasyland of colors, textures and shapes, several weeks would not exhaust the opportunities for adventure and discovery.

## DIVING CONDITIONS

There are consistently optimal diving conditions throughout the year. Gin-clear visibility is the norm – it runs to 100ft and more – although the occasional winds can roil the waters. The lack of pollution and run-off is a definite bonus. Current conditions vary, but are generally imperceptible to mild.

During the coolest months (December through April), water temperatures are usually between 72°F and 76°F. Summer water temperatures range from a balmy 78°F to 84°F. You won't need anything more than a 3mm wetsuit.

## MARINE LIFE

The Bahamas is one of the richest marine realms in the Caribbean. Its warm tropical waters hold one of the greatest varieties of sea life found in the region. Dream of encountering the big stuff? You can mingle with Caribbean reef sharks and nurse sharks, barracuda, bottlenose dolphins and spotted dolphins. Prefer smaller, Technicolor critters? You'll spot loads of reef fish, including angelfish, snapper, jacks, grunts, parrotfish, lobsters, cardinal fish, damselfish, Nassau groupers, stingrays and moray eels. Want to see invertebrates? The vertical walls drip with gorgonians, hard corals, sponges and crinoids, combining to create a vivid and sensual tapestry.

'When it comes to providing enjoyable, enthralling diving...the Bahamas has no peer.'

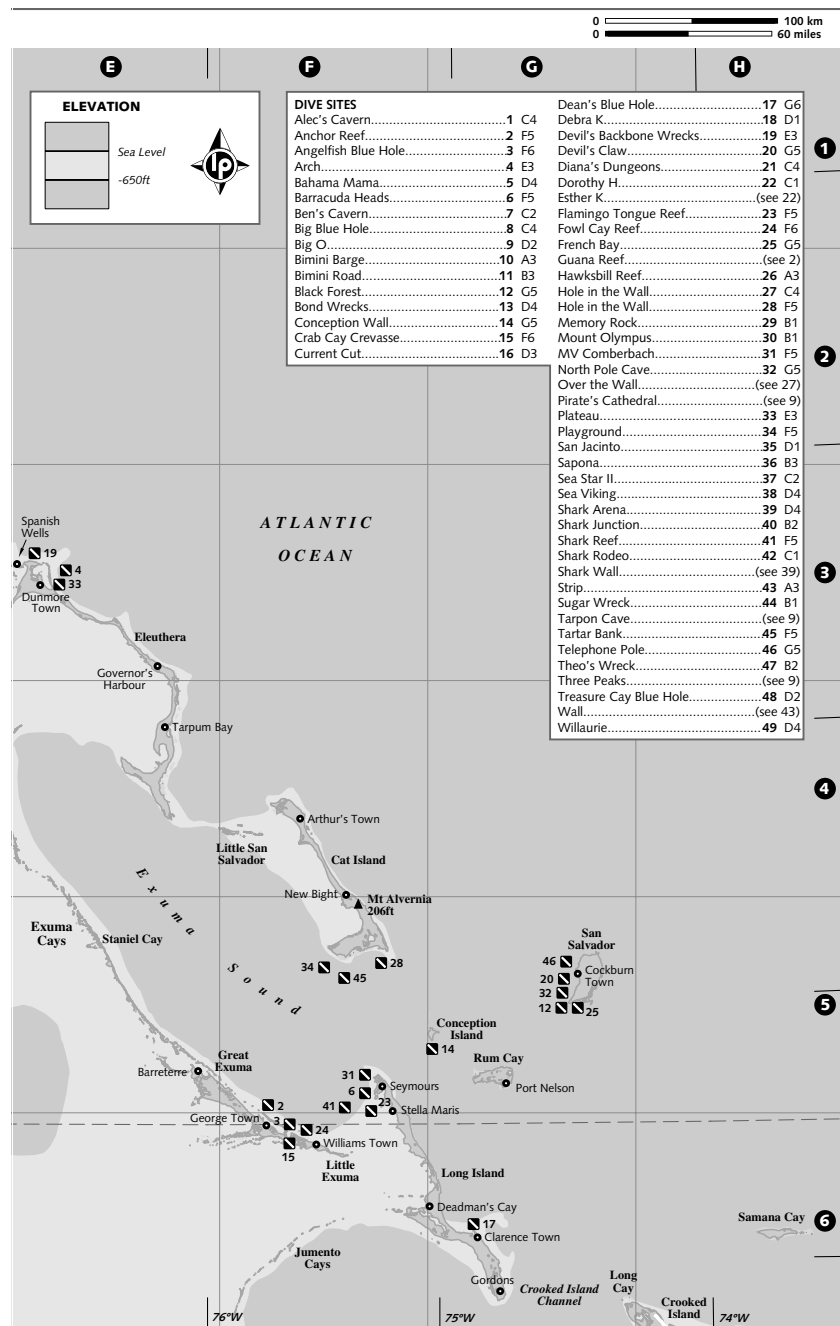
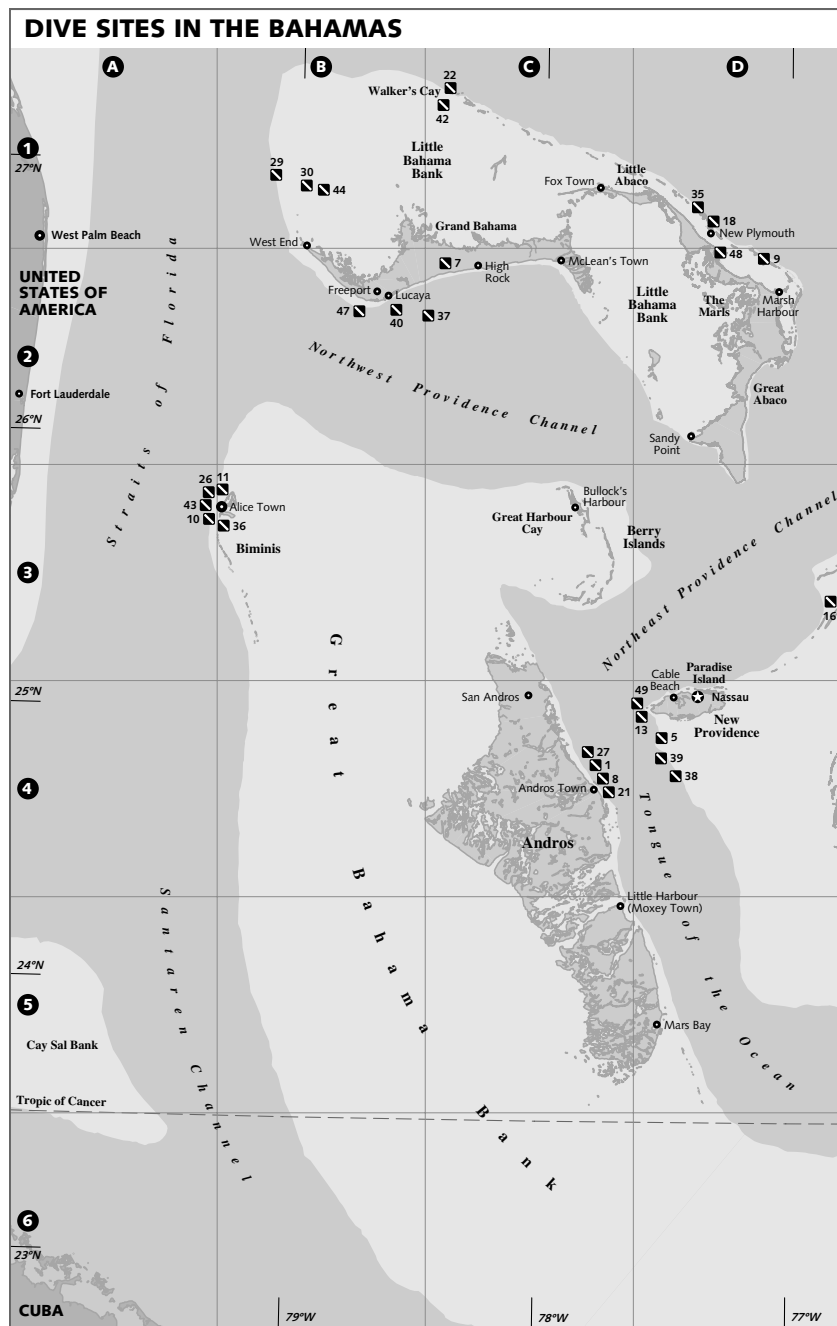
## DIVE SITES IN THE BAHAMAS

The following descriptions are by no means exhaustive. For a detailed guide of the Bahamas' underwater possibilities, see Lonely Planet's *Diving & Snorkeling Bahamas*.

### NEW PROVIDENCE

The strength of New Providence is the sheer variety of attractions, including superb shipwrecks, breathtaking walls along the Tongue of the Ocean, a varied topography and healthy coral gardens. But what makes it so unique is the shark diving. Divers from all over the world come here to experience a fantastic adrenaline rush at Shark Wall and Shark Arena, two feeding spots south of the island. On a coral rubble patch, in less than 65ft, the divers form a semicircle a few meters away from the feeders to watch the show. And what a show! Wearing a helmet and steel





gloves and using a pole spear, the feeders dip into a box and pull out a hunk of fish. In a few seconds they are surrounded by a dense cloud of Caribbean reef sharks, along with nurse sharks. The scene is awesome: the sharks tear hunks off the bait, ripping it away with a shake of the head. The divers are motionless, within touching distance of the sharks. After 15 minutes of intense activity, the remains are tossed aside and the dive continues at a calmer pace.

Need a less challenging site? Check out the numerous wrecks around the island. The Bond Wrecks are probably the most appealing. The site earned its name from the wrecks' roles in James Bond '007' films. They feature a tug that sits upright on a sandy bottom in about 45ft, and a nearby mock fighter plane that has disintegrated. You'll swim around and inside the ribs of the mock-up, festooned with soft and hard corals, all with vivid hues. Other recommended wrecks include the massive Willaurie, draped with corals and glowing sponges, in about 60ft, the 110ft Bahama Mama, which was scuttled in 1995, and the Sea Viking, another vessel still in good shape, on the edge of the drop-off. The abundant fish life around the wrecks is a bonus. All of them are accessible to novice divers.

### GRAND BAHAMA

Like New Providence, Grand Bahama boasts an exceptional diversity of underwater wonders. The island is world famous for its Dolphin Experience programs offered by the Underwater Explorers Society (UNEXSO; p107). Divers can interact with tame bottlenose dolphins in the open ocean, in a fascinating – though artificial – show conducted by dolphin trainers. Divers are positioned on the seafloor while two semicaptive dolphins glide over and play with them, under the guidance of the trainer. Take your regulator out of your mouth and these graceful cetaceans will expect a kiss! Some divers find it fun, while others are much more skeptical about this circuslike performance and prefer real encounters in the wild.

Grand Bahama is also blessed with first-rate shipwrecks. The photogenic Theo's Wreck is a long-standing favorite. She rests on her port side at a depth of 110ft. Divers can penetrate the engine rooms and cargo holes. Another prime wreck is the Sea Star II, a large vessel scuttled in 2002. She is starting to be encrusted by invertebrates, and can be entered as well. In less than 20ft, the scattered remnants of Sugar Wreck are not exactly impressive but they host a profusion of fish life, including nurse sharks, moray eels, turtles, groupers and barracuda.

Mount Olympus and Memory Rock rank among the most spectacular sites, and for good reason. On the eastern edge of the Gulf Stream, far from the island, they boast a dramatic seascape. Memory Rock is a superb wall dive, sporting a dazzling array of sponges, corals and gorgonians. The frequent occurrence of pelagics also spices up the diving. Mount Olympus is a very atmospheric site, featuring a series of prominent, mountainlike coral boulders laced with sand valleys and gullies. The area shelters an underwater Eden of lush coral growth and copious fish life. If you're lucky, you'll spot hammerheads.

Inland, experienced divers might want to dive at Ben's Cavern, which sits within the boundaries of Lucayan National Park. The vast cave is decorated with huge stalactites and stalagmites.

In the mood for a thrill-packed dive? Try Shark Junction, another shark dive. Here, the feeders wear chain mail shark suits and lead an exceptional show. They can literally place sharks in a trance, stroking their snouts and holding the predators' heads in their laps for several seconds. Visiting divers are thus given a chance to approach a shark very closely.

'...sharks tear hunks off the bait, ripping it away with a shake of the head.'

### BLUE HOLES

Blue holes are the result of changing sea levels and chemical reactions (the limestone platforms are dissolved by the combination of fresh water and carbon dioxide). The Bahamas, and especially Andros, are famous for their numerous, massive and mysterious blue holes that form a fantastic playground for divers. They vary in shape and size, but many blue holes lead into elaborate cavern systems. The opening resembles a large, deep-blue disk.

### ANDROS

A mere 20-minute plane hop from Grand Bahama opens up a whole new world of diving. Andros is one of the most intriguing islands in the Bahamas, with a sense of frontier diving. Dive Andros Wall and you'll understand why. This awesome drop-off plummets down 6000ft into the Tongue of the Ocean. It is adorned with sponges, sea whips and gorgonians, and riddled with overhangs, chimneys, arches and caverns, such as those in Diana's Dungeons, Alec's Cavern, Hole in the Wall and Over the Wall, four fantastic sites at the edge of the wall. Keep your eyes peeled for big pelagics. There are also numerous shallow reef dives in the area.

Another attraction is the presence of oceanic and inland blue holes. Over the years Andros has become the epitome of blue hole diving. While inland blue holes are for highly trained specialty divers only, there are some exceptional oceanic blue holes that are perfectly suitable for novice and intermediate divers. Consider the Big Blue Hole that originated from a collapse of the sea wall. This magical site features an enormous cavern system endowed with huge tunnels, boulders and other massive geological structures. You'll feel like you're floating in a lunar landscape. Unforgettable.

### CAT ISLAND

Less-visited Cat Island is a true gem with numerous untouched sites for those willing to venture away from the tourist areas. The dramatic seascape is the main drawcard, with an outstanding vertical wall that borders the south end of the island. It is peppered with numerous chasms, coral canyons, sandy valleys, gullies, faults and swim-throughs. Pelagics, especially sharks, regularly patrol the area. There are also elaborate shallow reefs and coral gardens inside the reef. Recommended sites include Hole in the Wall, an L-shaped channel in the wall, teeming with snappers, groupers, jacks and lots of soft and hard corals; the Trench, an impressive groove in the reef, with an exit over the vertical wall; the Playground, at the tip of Devil's Point, a varied site with a prolific fish life, including turtles, jacks, groupers, lobsters, squirrelfish and nurse sharks hanging under ledges. Tartar Bank, an offshore pinnacle three miles from the coast, deserves special attention: the site's near-constant current attracts plenty of schooling fish, along with nurse sharks and turtles.

### BIMINIS

The Biminis are famous for the Wild Dolphin Excursions offered by Bill & Nowdla Keefe's Bimini Undersea dive center (p129). The experience differs completely from the Dolphin Encounter programs in Grand Bahama. Here it's much more spontaneous. You'll snorkel with a pod of wild Atlantic spotted dolphins in their natural habitat on a flat northeast of the island – it requires a 1½-hour boat trip from the marina. While the encounter is not exactly guaranteed, Bill & Nowdla Keefe's Bimini Undersea claims a success rate of 80%. On a safe, sandy bottom less than

'Andros is one of the most intriguing islands in the Bahamas, with a sense of frontier diving.'

33ft deep, the graceful creatures gently frolic with the snorkelers. The dolphins are never forced to do anything they don't want to, and they are never rewarded with food. Don't miss this exhilarating excursion, it's sheer delight.

Diving in the Biminis is not limited to dolphin encounters. Wreck buffs will explore the Bimini Barge, a magnificent barge sitting upright in about 90ft near the edge of the drop-off, and the Sapona, which sits half in and half out of the water and is surrounded by a smorgasbord of reef fish. Both are decorated with a kaleidoscope of delightful corals and sponges.

Experienced divers won't miss the Wall, a sensational, high-voltage drift dive in the nutrient-rich Gulf Stream, over the edge of the continental shelf. Here you never know what you're going to see. Other favorites include the Strip, a colorful night dive along a strip of reef surrounded by sand, Hawksbill Reef and Bimini Road, an unusual site with a double line of large, neat square slabs, said to be the remnants of the legendary civilization of Atlantis.

## SAN SALVADOR

'San Sal' boasts world-class wall-diving. Look at a topographic map and you'll see why. The island is an exposed seamount, surrounded by walls that tumble vertically to several thousand feet. Its isolation and the depth of the surrounding water make it a magnet for both pelagic and reef species, including big numbers of friendly groupers and passing hammerheads. There are also big cave and tunnel formations. Most dive sites are scattered along the west coast, sheltered from the prevailing winds. Don't think this is all challenging diving, however. You don't need to go deep – the wall starts at just 50ft or so. The local dive center, Riding Rock Resort & Marina (p218) uses at least 20 dive sites. Don't miss Devil's Claw, Telephone Pole, Doolittle's Grotto, North Pole Cave, Black Forest and French Bay.

## THE EXUMAS

If you want relaxed diving, the Exumas will appeal to you. There are some excellent reef dives off George Town, near Stocking Island – ask for Guana Reef, Fowl Cay Reef or Anchor Reef, ablaze with colorful life. The barrier reef is in pristine condition and you'll have the sites to yourself. Another

### CLOSE ENCOUNTERS WITH SHARKS AND DOLPHINS

The Bahamas was one of the very first places where the art of shark diving was refined. Shark feeding started in the '70s in Long Island and has now reached a very commercial level. Divers from all over the globe come to the 'shark-diving capital of the world' to sample the thrill of a lifetime. Whether or not these artificial encounters are a good idea is open to debate. On the one hand, it undeniably disrupts natural behavior patterns. Sharks that grow dependent on 'free lunches' may unlearn vital survival skills. Some have developed dangerous Pavlovian responses to the sound of revving boat motors. On the other hand, it is undoubtedly spectacular and it has been conducted without any accident so far. Some experts we met, including people from **BREEF** (Bahamas Reef Environment Educational Foundation; ☎ 242 362-6477; www.breef.org) and Dr Samuel Gruber, a marine biologist based in the Biminis, think that these well-choreographed performances have educational virtues and are a good way to raise awareness among divers. In other words, a diver who has viewed this often-misunderstood creature up close becomes an instant shark lover. These encounters have done a lot to restore a positive image of these denizens of the deep.

And what about dolphin encounters? Again, the big dolphin business might make you feel uncomfortable, and for good reason. But underwater your suspicions will be dissipated: interacting with wild dolphins in the open ocean is an extraordinary experience.

highlight is the numerous caves and blue holes that are hallowed out in the reef. They are far less intimidating than those at Andros and are a perfect introduction to blue hole diving. You'll explore the nooks and crannies of Crab Cay Crevasse, a very atmospheric blue hole, divable only at outgoing tide, and Angelfish Blue Hole, with an O-shaped entryway in about 25ft. Look for the resident lobsters, grunts, angelfish and nurse sharks.

## WALKER'S CAY

Walker's Cay's main claim to fame is Shark Rodeo, a bewildering shark gathering that will enthrall even the most blasé divers – expect more than 100 sharks at a time. Guests are positioned on the seabed while bait made of frozen fish scraps – commonly referred to as a 'chumsicle' – is lowered in the midwater. It attracts dozens of sharks that hurl themselves on the offerings. What's astonishing is the variety of species that congregate around this free snack; you'll see the usual bulky Caribbean reef sharks and nurse sharks, plus bull, blacktip and lemon sharks. Sometimes a hammerhead joins the fray. If you feel comfortable, you can swim around with the swirling predators. A truly memorable experience.

The dive menu also includes two wrecks, the *Esther K* and the *Dorothy H*. These 100ft tugboats were scuttled as artificial reefs. They rest upright on a sandy bottom in about 100ft and are home to a variety of reef species.

## LONG ISLAND

Relaxed, unhurried Long Island offers superb dive sites off its northwestern tip. There are some outstanding reefs with thriving fish life, and a not-to-be-missed wreck, *MV Comberbach*, a 103ft steel freighter scuttled in 1986 and resting upright in 100ft. Since then it has become nicely encrusted and has attracted a host of colorful species, including amberjacks, groupers and parrotfish. Inside you'll find a broken van. Another Long Island perennial favorite is Barracuda Heads. Imagine a vast, sandy expanse studded with a jumble of large coral heads, with the usual species of multicolored reef fish fluttering about. Big barracuda also patrol the area. Further south, Flamingo Tongue Reef is also well worth it, with a similar setting.

If you're after something more thrilling, you'll find Shark Reef very rewarding. This is a very special shark feed. Divers kneel on the sandy seabed in about 40ft, then a bucket of chum is released from the stern of the dive boat. A gang of Caribbean reef sharks will immediately dart to the scene, vying for the free meal. The frenzy is quite intimidating but when the bucket is empty the sharks usually leave the area. The dive continues across the reef. Dean's Blue Hole is another fave. It's the largest blue hole in the Bahamas and is accessible from shore.

Long Island is also a good base for day trips to Conception Island, an uninhabited island and a national nature reserve 15 miles to the north. It features an absolutely pristine wall, densely carpeted with massive sponges and lush corals. For sheer beauty and plenty of fish life, this protected sanctuary is hard to rival.

## ABACOS

Abacos is a diver's treat, with a good mix of caves, reef dives, wrecks and inland holes. Of particular interest is the *San Jacinto*, which sank in 1865. Her remains are strewn on a gentle slope in less than 50ft. You'll see its big boilers, engine, propeller, stern and other structures. There's abundant fish life hanging around, including schools of grunts, snapper, goatfish, groupers and spotted eels. Further south, the *Debra K* is another fish haven, at about 45ft. It's also broken up, but is very atmospheric.

'For sheer beauty and plenty of fish life, this protected sanctuary is hard to rival.'

There are some excellent reef dives near Great Guana Cay, including Three Peaks, Big O, Cathedral and Tarpon Cave. They feature an intricate cave system, with fissures and chimneys, in about 30ft. You shouldn't feel apprehensive, because sunbeams shine through skylights in the caves. The caverns, nooks and crannies are worth close inspection since they are packed with groupers, silversides, lobsters, snapper and jacks. Outside, you'll probably come across huge tarpon and big barracuda.

Seasoned divers will take to Treasure Cay Blue Hole, a fantastic inland blue hole, accessible by car from Marsh Harbour. The profile is a bit intimidating – there's a sulfur layer between 45ft to 60ft that prevents light from penetrating further. A strong flashlight is needed, and there's a rope to help the descent.

## ELEUTHERA

Eleuthera offers a wide range of diving experiences, ranging from wall diving to drift dives and wreck dives. Most sites are located in the north, out of Harbour Island. If you want a thrilling ride, try Current Cut, a narrow channel between the western tip of North Eleuthera and Current Island. During tidal exchange, divers are sucked into the pass and propelled through the funnel by the powerful current. For about 10 minutes, you'll feel as though you're gliding, accompanied by a procession of fish, both reef species and pelagics. The ride of a lifetime!

Wreck enthusiasts will enjoy Devil's Backbone Wrecks. The treacherous Devil's Backbone reef has snared many vessels, such as the Cienfuegos, a 292ft American steamship that ran aground on the reef in 1895, the Potato & Onion Wreck and the Carnarvon, another freighter. They are mostly dismembered but some of their structures are still recognizable.

Other must-see dives include the Plateau, the Arch, the Grotto and the Blow Hole. As their names suggest, they boast a dramatic topography, with canyons, grooves, ledges, tunnels and crevices, all harboring large and small tropical fish.

## DIVE CENTERS

### FACILITIES & COSTS

The Bahamas' dive centers offer a whole range of services and products, such as introductory dives (for children aged six years and over, and adults), night dives, exploratory dives, specialty dives (such as blue holes, drift dives, Nitrox dives) and certification programs (usually PADI or NAUI).

While most dive shops are owned and operated independently of the island hotels, you may be able to book a dive package that includes both diving and lodging at a reputable hotel or resort. Generally, dive operations provide transfers to and from hotels.

An introductory dive, including equipment, will cost about \$90. A single dive, with only a tank and weights supplied, runs from \$35 to \$45, and much more for a specialty dive (such as shark dives or dolphin dives). If you need to rent equipment as well, expect to pay an extra \$15 to \$20 per dive. There are usually two-, five- and 10-dive packages, which are much cheaper. An Open Water certification course will set you back about \$380.

### CHOOSING A DIVE CENTER

Good news – there's a plethora of full-service, professional dive operations in the Bahamas. All of them are affiliated to one or more professional certifying agencies (PADI, NAUI, CMAS). You can expect well-maintained

### RESPONSIBLE DIVING

The Bahamas islands are ecologically vulnerable. By following these guidelines while diving, you can help preserve the ecology and beauty of the reefs:

- Encourage dive operators in their efforts to establish permanent moorings at appropriate dive sites.
- Practice and maintain proper buoyancy control.
- Avoid touching living marine organisms with your body and equipment.
- Take great care in underwater caves, as your air bubbles can damage fragile organisms.
- Minimize your disturbance of marine animals.
- Take home all your trash and any litter you may find as well.
- Never stand on corals, even if they look solid and robust.

and cutting-edge equipment, top-notch facilities and friendly, knowledgeable staff. But like a hotel or a restaurant, each diving center has its own style. Some people may suit the personalized attention and family-like atmosphere of a smaller outfit, while others will prefer the logistics and the structured professionalism of a larger center. Do your research and opt for the one that best suits your expectations. Check the Bahamas Diving Association website [www.bahamasdiving.com](http://www.bahamasdiving.com) for more information.

### New Providence

**Bahamas Divers** (☎ 242-393-5644, 800-398-3483; [www.bahamasdivers.com](http://www.bahamasdivers.com))

**Dive Dive Dive** (☎ 800-368-3483; [www.divedivedive.com](http://www.divedivedive.com))

**Nassau Scuba Centre** (☎ 242-362-1964, 800-805-5485; [www.divenassau.com](http://www.divenassau.com))

**Stuart Cove's Aqua Adventures** (☎ 800-879-9832, 954-524-5755; [www.stuartcove.com](http://www.stuartcove.com))

### Grand Bahama

**Grand Bahama Scuba** (☎ 242-373-6775; [www.grandbahamascuba.com](http://www.grandbahamascuba.com))

**Sunn Odyssey Divers** (☎ 242-373-4014; [www.sunnodysseydivers.com](http://www.sunnodysseydivers.com))

**Underwater Explorers Society, UNEXSO** (☎ 242-373-1244, 800-992-3483; [www.unexso.com](http://www.unexso.com))

**Viva Diving** (☎ 242-373-4000; [www.vivaresorts.com](http://www.vivaresorts.com))

**Xanadu Undersea Adventures** (☎ 800-327-8150; 242-352-3811; [www.nealwatson.com/freeport.html](http://www.nealwatson.com/freeport.html))

### Abacos

**Abaco Dive Adventures** (☎ 242-367-2963; [www.abacodiveadventures.com](http://www.abacodiveadventures.com))

**Brendal's Dive Center** (☎ 242-365-4441; [www.brendal.com](http://www.brendal.com))

**Dive Abaco** (☎ 800-247-5338, 242-367-2787; [www.diveabaco.com](http://www.diveabaco.com))

**Dive Guana** (☎ 242-365-5178; [www.diveguana.com](http://www.diveguana.com))

**Treasure Divers** (☎ 242-365-8465, 800-327-1584; [www.treasure-divers.com](http://www.treasure-divers.com))

### Biminis

**Bill & Nowdla Keefe's Bimini Undersea** (☎ 242-347-3089, 800-348-4644; [www.biminiundersea.com](http://www.biminiundersea.com))

**Scuba Bimini Dive Centre** (☎ 954-524-6090, 800-848-4073, 242-347-444; [www.scubabimini.com](http://www.scubabimini.com))

### Long Island

**Cape Santa Maria Beach Resort** (☎ 242-338-5273, 800-663-7090; [www.capesantamaria.com](http://www.capesantamaria.com))

**Reel Divers** (☎ 242-338-0011; [www.reeldivers.com](http://www.reeldivers.com))

**Stella Maris Resort Club** (☎ 242-338-2051, 800-426-0466; [www.stellamarisresort.com](http://www.stellamarisresort.com))

'...you'll feel as though you're gliding, accompanied by a procession of fish, both reef species and pelagics.'

**LIVE-BOARDS**

Several live-aboards ply the waters of the Bahamas, with usually weeklong itineraries. A live-aboard dive trip is recommended for those looking to experience unchartered and uncrowded dive sites beyond the reach of land-based dive operations. Each vessel has its own itinerary but most of them stage shark dives and dolphin dives. The following vessels leave from Miami, Fort Lauderdale or Nassau.

**Aqua Cat** (www.aquacatcruises.com)

**Blackbeard's Cruises** (www.blackbeard-cruises.com)

**Bottom Time Adventures** (www.bottomtimeadventures.com)

**Dream Too** (www.dolphindreamteam.com)

**Nekton Diving Cruises** (www.nektoncruises.com)

**Ocean Explorer** (www.oceanexplorerinc.com)

**Andros**

**Small Hope Bay Lodge** (☎ 800-223-6961, 242-368-2014; www.smallhope.com)

**Cat Island**

**Hawk's Nest Resort & Marina** (☎ 242-342-7050, 800-688-4752; www.hawks-nest.com)

**Hotel Greenwood Beach Resort** (☎ 242-342-3053; www.greenwoodbeachresort.net)

**Eleuthera**

**Ocean Fox** (☎ 242-333-2323, 877-252-3594; www.oceanfox.com)

**Valentine's Dive Center** (☎ 242-333-2080; www.valentinesdive.com)

**Exuma**

**Exuma Scuba Adventures** (☎ 242-336-2893; www.exumascuba.com)

**San Salvador**

**Club Med Columbus Isle** (☎ 242-331-2000; www.clubmed.com)

**Riding Rock Resort & Marina** (☎ 800-272-1492, 242-331-2631; www.ridingrock.com)

## DIVING IN THE TURKS & CAICOS

It's more or less the same story below the waterline. Though less charismatic and less varied than the Bahamas, the Turks and Caicos offer premier dive sites. Here, you can expect magnificent reefs, dramatic walls and an abundance of marine life, including wild dolphins, sharks, rays and even humpback whales during winter months in Salt Cay. Most of the dive sites are wall dives on the protected sides of the islands. Here's a list of the main dive outfits:

**Big Blue Unlimited** (☎ 649-946-5034; Providenciales; www.bigblue.tc)

**Blue Water Divers** (☎ 649-946-2432; Grand Turk; www.grandturkscuba.com)

**Caicos Adventures** (☎ 649-941-3346; Providenciales; www.caicosadventures.tc)

**Dive Provo** (☎ 649-946-5029; Providenciales; www.diveprovo.com)

**Flamingo Divers** (☎ 649-946-4193; Providenciales; www.flamingodivers.com)

**J&B Tours** (☎ 649-946-5047; Providenciales; www.jbtours.com)

**O2 Technical Diving** (☎ 649-941-3499; Providenciales; www.o2technicaldiving.com)

**Ocean Vibes Scuba & Watersports** (☎ 649-231-6636; Providenciales; www.oceanvibes.com)

**Provo Turtle Divers** (☎ 649-946-4232; Providenciales; www.provoturtledivers.com)

**Salt Cay Divers** (☎ 649-946-6906; Salt Cay; www.saltcaydivers.tc)

**Silver Deep** (☎ 649-946-5612; Providenciales; www.silverdeep.com)

**South Caicos Ocean Haven** (☎ 649-946-3444; South Caicos)

# Food & Drink

The cuisine of the Bahamas and Turks and Caicos Islands is influenced by the surrounding ocean, with fish and shellfish appearing as the main ingredient in many dishes across the region. Cultural influences are also distinctive. From the African slaves came spices such as chili peppers as well as the side dishes of johnnycakes – sweetbreads or drop-scones made with shortening – and peas 'n' rice. English settlers brought in stews, roasts, pies and the ubiquitous macaroni cheese, while US fast-food dishes, such as burgers (albeit with an island slant) are also hugely popular.

There isn't great variety in the sometimes bland dishes prepared across the islands. However a distinctive French flavor is emerging in the Turks and Caicos which helps to give their cuisine a distinctive edge.

## STAPLES & SPECIALTIES

With little agriculture or production in the region, most Bahamians and Turks and Caicos islanders rely mainly on imported fruit, vegetables, meat and general foodstuffs for their consumption and for supplying the tourists. Conch and grouper, free-range chickens and eggs are examples of the few locally provided proteins.

Rice (imported) is the dietary staple, usually eaten with peas, such as red beans, pigeon peas, or lima beans. Another favorite is grits (ground corn), also usually mixed with peas. Peas also find their way into hearty soups along with okra, meats, and vegetables. Potato salad sometimes takes the place of rice.

Breakfasts tend toward US style, with grits the staple. A local breakfast favorite is grits served with either tuna, corned beef or eggs.

## Fruit & Vegetables

At one time rare and exotic fruits were synonymous with the Bahamas, most notably pineapple, which during the 19th century enjoyed a worldwide

Multi-Oscar-winning *Silence of the Lambs* by Orion Pictures (1991) did a lot for promoting Bahamian cooking. The famous scene where Hannibal tells Clarice that he's having a friend for dinner was shot in the Bahamas.

*Jaws: the Revenge* by Universal Pictures (1987) had scenes shot in the Bahamas. Guess what? There's a hungry shark out there who fancies something other than conch burgers...

### JOHNNYCAKE

Look out for johnnycake, sweet bread that is served hot with creamy butter. This is the bread eaten for breakfast on all regional islands. It is heavier and sweeter than most breads, but when served hot with fresh butter, there is nothing better. Don't even bother adding jam or marmalade. You can make your own with these ingredients:

- ¾ cup vegetable shortening
- 6 cups plain flour
- a generous pinch of salt
- 1–3 tbs sugar
- 2 cups water

Mix the shortening and flour with a dough knife until there is a lumpy consistency throughout. Stir in the salt and sugar, then add the water a little bit at a time until the dough is the proper consistency for regular bread. Knead it for about 10 minutes, until it's smooth, and plop it into a greased bread pan. Bake at 350°F (180°C) until it is tawny and crusty. Serve it right away, plain or with butter.

### TRAVEL YOUR TASTEBUDS

Souse is a regional favorite. There are many different ways of preparing it, but the end result is generally a sort of stew with a thick gravy. Fish is the usual main ingredient, but souses can also be made with conch, chicken, meat or tongue.

Those with delicate stomachs should avoid meat souse; mutton boiled in saltwater, along with tongue, trotters, anything else lying around that is also grey and wobbly, and cooked with lime juice and pepper.

reputation. Only minuscule quantities are produced today, but look for the Eleutheran sugar loaf or Spanish scarlet varieties, considered especially delicious.

Hurricanes have destroyed many small plantations, but there are still fruits and vegetables to be found including green and yellow bananas, plantains and thyme (one of most popular herbs in Bahamian and indeed, Caribbean cooking), tomatoes (crushed and bottled or fresh), Irish potatoes, chunks of cassava, plums, mangoes, a hot variety of chili called finger pepper, onions, sweet peppers, regular limes and the more tart key limes.

Roadside shacks also proffer papayas and pineapples. Also look out for the less well-known but equally enjoyable jujubes, star apples, pigeon plums, Surinam cherries, sapodillas, or soursops.

### Seafood

Conch, crab, grouper, jack, shrimp, snapper, turbot, and tuna are all daily staples of Bahamian cooking, often cooked with carrot, cassava, cucumber, grits, guinea corn, okra, plantain, and wild spinach. Lobsters (crawfish) are other favorites, though being pricey they are not as important a staple as you may imagine.

The region's favorite fish is grouper, a mild-flavored white fish, often served poached, grilled, or steamed in a mildly spiced sauce. It's often eaten as 'grouper fingers' – thin, battered strips that are deep fried.

A popular breakfast dish is 'boil' fish, a bouillabaisse of grouper boiled with salt pork, onion, potato, and seasonings. It is generally served with grits or johnnycakes. If you want to try a johnnycake recipe, see the boxed text, p55.

Everybody consumes conch (pronounced 'conk'); every home, restaurant and roadside takeout has it on the menu. This tough snail-like mollusk is served pounded, minced, and frittered; marinated and grilled; raw as a ceviche or conch salad (which is diced with onions, celery, pepper and cucumber then soaked in lime juice); as a chowder or 'soused' (stewed); 'scorched' (scored in a salad); and 'cracked' (battered and deep fried).

These days fishermen bemoan the difficulty of finding conch and grouper; it's much more difficult than it used to be, and everyone agrees that over-fishing is the culprit.

When it comes to meat, chicken is the most popular. In some places, you can't throw a rock without hitting a place that serves fried chicken and greasy chips. 'Mutton' – frequently seen on menus – can be goat or lamb and is frequently served curried.

The trademark Bahamian dessert is duff or guava duff, a fruit-filled jelly pudding served with sauce made of sugar, egg, butter and rum. It can be steamed, baked or even boiled. Another yummy favorite is coconut tart, a thin baked pie with a sweetened shredded coconut filling.

The conch, a staple protein in the islands, is an endangered species. See the boxed text, p89.

*Bahamas Cookery: Cindy's Treasures* by Cindy Williams is a great collection of the simple regional delicacies – such as moist pineapple cake and guava duff with rum-cream sauce.

Check out *Nassau Memories* by Debby Nash. Successful Bahamian restaurants are profiled along with their signature dishes as a memento of the Bahamas.

Colonial cultural hangovers are often retained on menus in tourist spots as well as in residential suburbs. Regular dishes include steak and kidney pudding, bangers and mash, and shepherd's pie, while main courses across the region are served with a choice of coleslaw and macaroni and cheese. This is not, it must be stated, the same sort of macaroni and cheese that comes in a box with a foil-lined package of powdered cheese product. This is the genuine thing, baked in the oven and packed so tightly that it can be cut into slabs and served in the same style as lasagne.

It is virtually impossible to avoid dishes without some fried ingredient or carbohydrate. This means that healthy eating is not easy or cheap.

### Turks & Caicos Specialties

As in the Bahamas, conch, lobster, soft-shell crab and fresh fish (often blackened with Cajun seasoning) are favorites in Turks and Caicos, along with spicy Jamaican jerk chicken.

Food in this region is generally a lot healthier and uses more fresh fruits, such as sapodillas and sugar apples, and vegetables.

A lot of foods are imported from Haiti rather than the US, which may help to make healthy eating more affordable than in the Bahamas.

The cooking is also more sophisticated; there's less fried-food and it has distinctive French influences.

### DRINKS

The Bahamian beer Kalik is fantastic; golden bubbles and a sharp flavor. The national Bahamian cocktail could be the Goombay Smash, a lethally easy-to-drink fruit juice and rum cocktail (see also the boxed text, p171), although the Bahama Mama is probably one of the better known rum cocktails, with a coffee liqueur thrown in for good measure.

The infamous rum that bottoms up local cocktails is simply called 151, as it is 151% proof. There is an excellent range of duty-free quality rums available in Nassau, including the Bacardi line, which can also be bought at their factory on New Providence (see p99). Flavored rums are also popular and include coconut, banana, mango and pineapple rum, and the best local brand for these is Ricardo.

Wine is widely sold, but costly. Be aware that some bottles will have been exposed to the heat. Wine connoisseurs should head to Graycliff in Nassau; its owner, Enrico Garzaroli, claims the largest wine collection in the Caribbean, with some rare vintages offered at over \$10,000.

#### BAHAMA MAMA

Here are the makings of a classic Bahamian cocktail.

- ½ fl oz (15ml) dark rum
- ½ fl oz (15ml) coconut liqueur
- ¼ fl oz (8ml) 151%-proof rum
- ¼ fl oz (8ml) coffee liqueur
- ½ lemon, juice
- 4 fl oz (120ml) pineapple juice

Combine the ingredients and pour over ice. Garnish with a cherry. Skol! Slàinte! Cheers!

*Red Cross Cookbook* (published by the Red Cross) is a fund raiser sold in the Turks and Caicos. It is a fabulous collection of the whole region's recipes and a bargain for \$10.

Many restaurants in the Bahamas and Turks and Caicos serve the old colonial favorites of 'bangers and mash' and 'steak and kidney pudding'?

### BAHAMAS & TURKS & CAICOS TOP FIVE

- **Club Caribe** (Churchill Beach, Grand Bahama, p114) Sit on the deck and look out over the wide, blue ocean. Bahamians gather here for great peppery fish salads, chilled cocktails and live music.
- **Chez Pierre Bahamas** (Simms Beach, Long Island; p225) Fall asleep following a delicious pasta dinner in your wooden hut on stilts overlooking the sea and deserted beach.
- **Chat n Chill Bar & Grill** (Stocking Island; Exumas; p200) Specializing in Island Daiquiris and yummy grilled barbecues; call for a pick-up from George Town dock, and rejoice in the perfect beach bar!
- **Tiki Hut** (Providenciales, Caicos; p248) A good place for breakfast, but an even better place for Wednesday night's \$10 barbecue; a 13-year tradition that packs out the place.
- **Grace's Cottage** (Providenciales, Caicos; p249) Dine under the stars in a garden sprinkled with flowering shrubs, where chocolate soufflé is always on the menu and the white linen is always crisp.

More people drink wine informally in the Turks and Caicos than in the Bahamas, and the local brew is a full-flavored Turks Head beer. There is also some delicious rum on the market, such as the black and spicy Gosling, which makes potent cocktails.

### CELEBRATIONS

West Indian families are usually enormous and widely dispersed. Despite the distance, families remain incredibly close and when the whole crew gets together every few years, it is a major production that usually takes place over several days. These reunions often happen during events such as island regattas, sporting competitions and Christmas. Needless to say, the familiar recipes are popular at these reunions, with families sitting down to souse and 'boil' fish, myriad conch dishes and the winning favorite; fried chicken with peas 'n' rice.

Throughout the predominantly Christian Caribbean, Christmas is the most important culinary celebration of the year, followed closely by New Year's Eve – often celebrated with parties in which the centerpiece may well be a roasting pig. In fact, in many places, celebrating and feasting stretches from Christmas Eve through to New Year's Day.

And then there's Junkanoo, a celebration in which the entire Bahamian population heads out into the streets for a huge, nonstop party.

### WHERE TO EAT & DRINK

There's a full gamut of restaurant types, from funky seafood shacks and burger joints to ritzy restaurants with candelabras. Restaurants range from wildly expensive (the norm) to humble roadside stands where you can eat simple Bahamian fare from \$6. Small hole-in-the-wall restaurants often serve fabulous local food; don't be put off by their often basic appearance.

Larger resorts have a choice of restaurants, with one always serving buffets. The ultradeluxe hotels have restaurants that are among the best on the islands, but they can't replicate the taste and atmosphere of small, locally run eateries.

Some all-inclusive resorts that are otherwise only for guests sell evening passes that allow you to eat and drink in their restaurants, bars, and nightclubs for a single fee. Hotels may also offer bargain-priced 'Dine-Around' programs, sometimes included in the hotel rate.

The wonderful woman who invented the Goombay Smash cocktail was a teetotaler.

You can buy a rum so flammable that it has been banned from aircraft.

Many of the restaurants geared to the tourist trade are overpriced. Groceries are also expensive; canned and packaged goods are imported and cost up to three times what you might pay at home.

Most settlements have either a makeshift market – where fishermen fillet and sell their fresh catches of dolphin (the fish), grouper, conch, and lobster (in season) – or a cache in someone's home. With the exception of Nassau, it's often difficult to find fresh fruits, vegetables, and spices at markets and roadside stalls.

### Quick Eats

Bahamians have taken to processed snack foods in a massive way, and even the most faraway location is sure to have a local shack selling snacks, from candy bars to cookies and other packaged snack foods. Nassau and Freeport also have dozens of name-brand fast-food outlets in their midst.

Beware! Very few food outlets open on Sundays outside of tourist centers.

### VEGETARIANS & VEGANS

There's no easy way to say this, but vegetarians will find it tough going in the Bahamas and Turks and Caicos, while vegans will find the only way to eat is by buying their own groceries.

The concept of not eating meat or animal products is understood but too rarely experienced to be catered for; nevertheless, there is normally at least one vegetarian dish on a restaurant menu. Off the main islands, dairy foods are the most accessible form of protein and can be eaten with restaurant-staple side dishes of peas 'n' rice, macaroni cheese, plantains and coleslaw.

With so many hotel rooms now fitted with fridges it is possible to keep a stock of fruit and vegetables (when you can find them!) to balance the diet a bit.

All supermarkets stock a range of tinned beans and seeds, while the main islands' supermarkets in the Turks and Caicos also stock some soy meals and tofu.

### EATING WITH KIDS

Generally all the island communities are very family oriented, and this includes restaurants and cafés. However, you will rarely see islanders' children out for late dinner, and if you do, they are very well-behaved and do not freely run around.

Let the cooks know if you don't want any sauces on your children's food. Islanders love very hot pepper and chili sauces as well as lime juice on their food. This may cause you a few pangs, and test your little ones'

How do you imbibe this wonderful liquor using other means than a glass? *Cooking with Caribbean Rum* by Laurel-Ann Morley has the answers.

[www.swagga.com/drinks.htm](http://www.swagga.com/drinks.htm) is the virtual doorway to a teetotaler's Caribbean paradise. Learn how to make everything from seamoss drinks to soursop punch.

### DOS & DON'TS

- Do tip 15% with a smile at all restaurants and bars.
- Do stand in line or wait your turn to be served.
- Do take a small gift when dining at someone's home.
- Don't smoke indoors at restaurants.
- Don't take children to bars.
- Don't assume drinking alcohol is the norm, many islanders are teetotalers.



delicate systems. Also, be aware that conch salads are normally made with raw mollusk.

### **HABITS & CUSTOMS**

The cultural habits of the English and North Americans are similar to those of the Bahamians, and Turks and Caicos Islanders; many travelers will find their eating and drinking customs easily translate to this region. Most people eat three meals a day, and many workers buy takeouts from roadside stalls for picnic lunches. Courtesy is very important across the islands, as is respect for those serving in eateries and bars.