

DESTINATION REPORT

YOUR TRAVEL SPECIALIST

Deana Olles
Away We Go Travel LLC
585-880-0325
Email: dolles@awaywegotravelllc.com

64 Brianna Ln
Hilton, New York 14468

YOUR TRAVEL SNAPSHOT: Destinations included in this guide

Bahamas

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INTRODUCTION

When Christopher Columbus first set foot in the New World, he did so in the Bahamas, although the exact island where he landed is still a matter of debate. (San Salvador is the popular favorite, and a white cross marks the spot where he supposedly landed.) He didn't stay long, however, being intent on finding riches that this group of islands didn't seem to hold.

Perhaps he was looking for the wrong things. These days, travelers are quite satisfied with the treasures they find in the Bahamas: brilliant turquoise water, gorgeous sandy beaches, excellent fishing and diving, and surroundings that range from quaint colonial villages to lovely secluded coves.

Those making landfall in the islands can choose from several distinct experiences. Visitors looking for the standard resort amenities should head to Nassau on New Providence Island or Lucaya on Grand Bahama Island. Splashy Nassau, the biggest city and main port, is awash in pink colonial buildings, bustling street markets, upscale chain resorts (with more to come as Cable Beach redevelops) and great restaurants. Sister island Paradise Island is home to megaresort Atlantis and its opulent casino and fabulous water features.

In Freeport and Lucaya, the Bahamas' second-largest port, options range from frolicking with dolphins to perusing duty-free goods. Downtown Freeport, however, has been in a slump since the hurricanes of 2004 and 2005; the Royal Oasis resort complex remains closed and International Bazaar is almost empty but for a few businesses, leaving Lucaya as the most viable option for vacationers at present.

Those more interested in deserted beaches, sailing, diving, fishing and a generally slower pace will want to visit some of the many Out Islands (also known as the Family Islands), most of which are thinly populated or uninhabited, yet which offer all manner of activities plus a chance to experience charming vignettes of Bahamian life.

MUST SEE OR DO

Sights—Rawson Square; Straw Market; Queen's Staircase; Fort Charlotte; Pink Sands; Harbour Island; Hope Town; The Glass Window Bridge; Exuma Cays Land and Sea Park; Ardastra Gardens and Zoo; Rand Memorial Nature Centre.

Museums—Pirates of Nassau; the Pompey Museum of Slavery and Emancipation; Albert Lowe Museum; the Bahamas Historical Society Museum; Balcony House.

Memorable Meals—Graycliff Hotel and Restaurant; Sunday night pig roast at the Chat N' Chill restaurant and bar in Stocking Island, Exuma; gourmet nouvelle fare at The Landing.

Late Night—Leave your bra at the End of the World Saloon; drinking Goombay Smash at Miss Emily's Blue Bee Bar; learn some local moves at Port Lucaya Marketplace.

Walks—Strolling Bay Street; hiking in Abaco National Park.

Especially for Kids—Dolphin Encounters at Blue Lagoon Island.

GEOGRAPHY

The northernmost island of the Bahamas lies in the Atlantic Ocean, about 50 mi/85 km off the southeast Florida coastline—not in the Caribbean, as is popularly thought. The balance of the archipelago, about 700 islands and 2,000 islets called cays (pronounced *keys*), spreads south and east toward Hispaniola.

With a total landmass of more than 5,000 sq mi/13,000 sq km spread over 100,000 sq mi/260,000 sq km of water, the Bahamas chain is larger by far than any of the Caribbean island groups and occupies an area almost as great as the Caribbean Sea. Besides New Providence and Grand Bahama Island, only about 30 of the other islands

are inhabited.

As for topography, don't expect to see mountains and waterfalls—these islands are very flat. They are also largely dry, lacking any kind of streams or rivers. Because of this, no runoff sediment is deposited into the sea, resulting in the amazingly clear waters that surround the islands, which mostly occupy two shallow marine plateaus separated from each other—and from North America and the Greater Antilles—by deep ocean trenches.

HISTORY

The Lucayan Indians had the islands mostly to themselves until Columbus showed up in 1492 and claimed them for Spain. But the Spanish were in search of gold, silver and valuable trade goods, and the newly acquired Bahamian real estate provided few of those things. The Spanish soon moved on without really colonizing the islands.

By the mid-1600s, England claimed the region, and British colonists began to settle New Providence and a few other islands, while pirates used remote coves scattered throughout the vast island chain. Many ships foundered in these treacherous waters. Salvaging shipwrecks became an established part of the local economy, and communities were known to purposely ground ships by lighting beacons.

Beginning in the late 18th century, the history of the Bahamas was closely intertwined with that of the U.S. After the Revolutionary War, British Loyalists moved to the islands from New England and the Carolinas, both to remain under British rule and to escape the patriots' reprisals. They principally settled Eleuthera and the Abacos. Some Loyalists brought African slaves with them and set up smaller plantations throughout the Bahamas.

Later, slaves from the southern U.S. fled to the Bahamas to gain their freedom. During the Civil War, Confederates used the islands as a center for blockade running, and during Prohibition, the islands were a base for rumrunners.

When the Bahamas became independent in 1973, it remained part of the British Commonwealth, and the lasting legacy of the British connection is strikingly felt in Bahamian cultural, legal and parliamentary traditions, language and in the bobby-style uniforms that the Bahamian police officers wear.

African customs, such as the Junkanoo street parades held on Boxing Day and New Year's Day, are also prevalent in modern Bahamian culture. Nevertheless, the islands have been influenced by heavy doses of U.S. tourism and television, which is evidenced by the new architecture, clothing, music and restaurants.

SNAPSHOT

The Bahamas offer a wide choice of attractions including stunning beaches, historical sites, gambling, nightlife, shopping, restaurants and fabulous hotels, plus superb golf, sailing, fishing, snorkeling, scuba diving, sea kayaking and boat excursions.

Visitors who want an island experience in a different country but want to minimize the unfamiliar will probably enjoy the Bahamas. The islands provide a taste of the tropics, but the use of English and the lack of poverty (relative to other countries in the region) will mitigate any culture shock.

POTPOURRI

Conch (a dietary staple, pronounced *konk*) and love vine (a bush tea) are both believed to have aphrodisiac effects.

The flamingo is the national bird of the Bahamas, and the southern island of Great Inagua is home to the Western Hemisphere's largest breeding colony. The ratio of flamingos to people on that island is 61-to-1.

The name Bahamas derives from the Spanish *baja mar*, which means "shallow sea."

Geologically speaking, the islands were born of the sea and are made of limestone, which is primarily formed of cemented skeletal remains of trillions of marine organisms accumulated on the seabed over millions of years.

The highest point in the Bahamas—at 206 ft/63 m above sea level—is the peak of Mount Alvernia (locals call it Como Hill) on Cat Island.

Eleuthera still derives much of its income from producing pineapples, introduced from South America in the 18th century. The first pineapples planted in Hawaii came from Eleuthera.

The Nassau Public Library and Museum, located on Shirley Street, was built in 1797. The octagonal-shaped structure once housed more than hundreds of leather-bound books: The building was home to Nassau's most notorious prisoners as the city's main jail.

Several companies in the Bahamas will provide everything you need to get married underwater. In some ceremonies, a bottlenose dolphin serves as the ring bearer.

Kalik beer gets its name from the sound made by the cowbells used in the island's Junkanoo music.

A local music genre known as rake n' scrape is where musicians use rudimentary objects, such as nails scraping a saw, played to the beat of catchy island lyrics. Rake n' scrape can be traced back to slave traditions and Cat Island.

LOCATION

The Bahamas' main cruise port is in Nassau at Prince George Wharf near Rawson Square, a short stroll from downtown attractions such as the Straw Market (a sturdy two-story concrete structure featuring live music and 400 booths for carvers, food and other authentic crafts), the Pirates of Nassau museum and the shopping on Bay Street.

The huge dock is big enough to accommodate as many as 15 of the largest cruise ships. Work is under way on a new dock that will eventually hold more slips and is part of a redevelopment plan for downtown Nassau that would turn Bay Street into a pedestrian mall.

The Bahamian government has completed a major harbor expansion project to accommodate some of the world's mega cruise ships such as Royal Caribbean's Oasis class of ships.

The Bahamas Ministry of Tourism Information Center at the wharf provides maps and touring advice. Also located there is Festival Place, an indoor shopping arcade catering to cruise-ship crowds with local crafts, food, a tour desk where guided walking tours can be arranged, post office, phones and Internet access (phone 242-323-3183). Horse-drawn cabs, called surreys, also depart there for guided tours of colonial Nassau. Taxis park near the end of the dock; you can take one to nearby Paradise Island for about US\$5-\$10, or hop on a water taxi for US\$3 each way.

On Grand Bahama Island, the renovated Lucayan Harbour Cruise Facility is located in Freeport Harbor and can accommodate a pair of large cruise ships. The facility has retail and entertainment facilities as well as taxi service. Phone 242-350-8000.

SHORE EXCURSIONS

Paradise Island is probably the most popular shore excursion among cruise passengers arriving in Nassau; many make a beeline to the Atlantis resort to try their luck at the lavish casino or make a day of the fun-filled Aquaventure waterpark. Cruise lines typically offer an excursion to The Dig, a mock exploration of the lost city of Atlantis, part of the largest open-air aquarium in the world.

Other popular excursions include Dolphin Encounters, an interactive "swim with the dolphins" experience located on Blue Lagoon Island, a private island 3 mi/5 km from Nassau; the interactive Pirates of Nassau museum; snorkeling and scuba diving out of Stuart Cove; and visits to historic Fort Charlotte, the Queen's Staircase and the iconic Government House in downtown Nassau. Cruise ships also will inevitably offer a rum cruise out of Nassau.

On Grand Bahama, typical shore excursions include shopping tours to Port Lucaya Marketplace, beach passes to

Our Lucaya Resort, a visit to Lucayan National Park, nature trips to Rand Memorial Nature Centre and Garden of the Groves, and interactions with dolphins at UNEXSO Underwater Explorers Society.

Excursions change frequently and vary by cruise line, so check before you go.

SIGHTSEEING

Nassau has some fine examples of colonial architecture, including the parliament building and law courts in the center of town, and its three forts. The 100-acre/40.5-hectare Fort Charlotte is worth a special visit. Built in 1789, it has a moat, drawbridge, menacing-looking cannon and sweeping views of Nassau Harbor. The Queen's Staircase is Nassau's most-visited attraction. The picturesque, 65-step incline, carved by slaves from solid limestone, is located off Elizabeth Street and is free to climb; it leads to Fort Fincastle.

Other remainders of the past are the New England-style architecture of Harbour Island, Green Turtle Cay and Hope Town, plus the Hermitage atop Mount Alvernia on Cat Island. The hermitage was built by Father Jerome Hawes, an architect-hermit who also built two beautiful churches on Long Island.

When visiting Nassau, don't miss the impressive aquarium and water-based theme park of the Atlantis Hotel on Paradise Island (<http://www.atlantis.com>). The Ardastra Gardens are a placid presentation of Caribbean wildlife and feature a show of marching flamingos and lorikeet feeding. The new downtown Straw Market is more than a shopping destination, but also a hot spot for local food and live entertainment.

The Port Lucaya Marketplace on Grand Bahama Island offers a nice mix of upscale and inexpensive dining, shopping (including a small but friendly straw market), open-air bars and entertainment, including evening Junkanoo dance and Gospel choir performances.

Lucayan National Park showcases not only Grand Bahama Island's natural beauty but also its precolonial history: The Lucayan Indians used the local caves as a burial ground. A boardwalk leads through a mangrove tidal creek to the vast, mostly deserted sweep of Gold Rock Beach, and sea-kayaking offers an exciting way to explore the mangrove forest. <http://www.bahamas.com/node/52641>.

Nature is also the focus of the Rand Memorial Nature Centre and Garden of the Groves.

RECREATION

A number of islands have attractive nature preserves that lend themselves to a variety of ecotours and activities. Each island has a different character, and the attractions are diverse. Swimming, snorkeling and sunbathing are great activities on any of the islands.

BEACHES

All the isles boast superb beaches, although a few truly stand out from the pack. Nassau's Cable Beach is lined with hotels, as is Paradise Island Beach. They're often packed with people, but have the benefit of plentiful watersports.

Harbour Island, in Eleuthera, is known for Pink Sands Beach—it truly is rose-colored. And Taino Beach, on Grand Bahama, is a long, white-sand stunner. The white-sand beaches of Exuma Land and Sea Park are also exceptional. Treasure Cay on Great Abaco Island routinely wins awards for its white, fluffy sands.

BIRD WATCHING

On New Providence, Ardastra Gardens Zoo and Conservation Center, Nassau Botanical Gardens, the Royal Victoria Garden and The Retreat offer opportunities for birding. Egrets and waterfowl are easily seen in Lucaya National Park, and the Rand Nature Centre and Garden of the Groves also are exceptional.

Birdwatchers will be amazed by the 50,000 flamingos that live in Inagua National Park on Great Inagua. The endangered Bahamian parrot clings to existence in Abaco National Park, which has trails.

BOATING & SAILING

In the same way that both Grand Bahama and Andros are a paradise for divers, the steady breezes and the charming natural harbors of Abaco Sound are a sailor's delight. The Exumas are considered the apogee for all boaters.

Sailing races from Miami to Nassau have been organized semiregularly since 1934, and the National Family Island Regatta, held each April in Georgetown on Great Exuma, is world-renowned.

Motor boats and sailboats can be rented on almost every island.

FISHING

The Bahamas are synonymous with sportfishing for marlin, tuna and wahoo, as fans of Ernest Hemingway know. The deep-sea trenches are spectacularly rich in game fish, and almost every island is a venue for fishing.

Boats can be chartered for fishing trips on most islands, including Potter's Cay in Nassau. There are many fishing tournaments year-round; Bimini is especially known for its game-fishing tournaments.

Andros and Great Exuma are known for excellent bonefishing in crystal clear waters on broad, shallow sandbanks. Andros boasts small fishing lodges often operated by a fishing guide, such as Capt. Rupert Leadon's Andros Island Bonefishing Club. Phone 368-5167. <http://www.androsbonefishing.com>.

GOLF

The Bahamas are a popular golfing destination. Paradise Island and Nassau have a driving range and two courses with another on the way in the under-construction development of Baha Mar on Cable Beach, Grand Bahama Island has four currently open, and Great Abaco and Exuma are also home to magnificent 18-hole courses, where tournaments often take place.

HIKING & WALKING

Visitors should don comfy shoes for exploring colonial Nassau on foot, as well as the lovely Loyalist cays off Great Abaco, where you can also rent golf carts. More serious hiking is possible in a few wilderness parks such as Abaco National Park. Otherwise, visitors can content themselves with strolling the mile-/kilometer-long beaches.

HORSEBACK RIDING

There are stables on New Providence and Grand Bahama. Otherwise, horseback-riding opportunities are few.

SCUBA & SNORKELING

The Bahamas is a diver's delight, with almost every island offering spectacular diving and exceptional visibility in consistently warm waters.

Coral reefs are sprinkled throughout Bahamian waters, which include some of the world's longest barrier reefs and some of its most spectacular wall and cave dives. There are also dozens of wrecks to explore.

The wonderful reefs, drop-offs, blue holes and caves in the Exuma Cays Land and Sea Park on Grand Exuma will fascinate experienced divers. The barrier reef near Andros is the third longest in the world; thrilling scuba activities include the "over the wall" dive and blue-hole diving. Several islands offer shark diving, as at Stella Maris on Long Island and on Grand Bahama Island. On Eleuthera, a unique draw is the train wreck a few fathoms down.

Swimmers of every ability can enjoy snorkeling in the shallows. Many resorts rent snorkeling gear, which can also be bought on most major islands.

TENNIS & RACQUET SPORTS

Tennis can be played at the major resort hotels.

SHOPPING

Many luxury items sold in the Bahamas are duty-free, including perfumes, leather goods, linens, crystal, china, photographic equipment, liquor, telescopes and binoculars. The islands have a good selection of jewelry from around the world (including Colombian emeralds) as well as imported woolens, Swiss watches, English china and other foreign luxury items.

Duty-free shopping isn't always a bargain. Check prices at home first to make sure the savings justify the hassle of transporting the items. Bay Street in Nassau and the shops of Atlantis on Paradise Island are the primary shopping meccas, but Lucaya is also exceptional.

Local goods include liquor, handicrafts and art. Androsia batiks, with their vivid colors and striking designs, are great souvenirs—it's fun to visit the Androsia factory in Central Andros, where you can buy your blouse, wrap, scarf or fabric at the source. In Freeport, the Perfume Factory makes and sells fragrances using local ingredients.

Straw markets in Nassau, the Port Lucaya Marketplace and on several other islands sell woven goods and other handicrafts. You'll find everything from hats and handbags to dolls. However, most of the straw items sold at the major markets are actually synthetic Asian imports (don't believe the "Made in the Bahamas" labels). At Atlantis' Marina Village in Paradise Island, look for the Plait Lady for authentic straw goods. The Nassau Straw Market is also inundated with fake designer goods, but that standard is supposed to change with the opening of the new straw market, where only authentic wares will be accommodated. Festival Place, adjacent to the cruise port in Nassau, features authentic crafts by dozens of local artisans.

For more authentic, locally made straw items, head to the Out Islands, including Long Island, which still retains its weaving traditions. If you don't see what you want on display, ask for it—sometimes the weaver will make it to order. The community of Red Bays in Andros is known for its unique style of basketry, which often incorporates Androsia batik. In Nassau and at Atlantis' Marina Village in Paradise Island, head to Doongalik Studios for Junkanoo masks, finely crafted furniture and fine art made by locals.

Bargaining in the local markets is not as prevalent as in some of the Caribbean countries, but it doesn't hurt to try.

Shopping Hours: Monday-Saturday 9 am-5 pm in Nassau and Port Lucaya. Some shops in Nassau open for a few hours on Sunday when ships are in port. Hours vary on the other islands.

DINING OVERVIEW

The main tourist areas of the Bahamas offer a variety of restaurants and foods that span the globe, including seafood, steak and international cuisine (mainly American, Continental, Italian, French and Asian, but also East Indian, traditional English and nouvelle cuisines). Nassau and Lucaya each have world-class dining.

Harbour Island also has some cosmopolitan options, but dining on the more remote Out Islands is restricted to fairly basic local cuisine. Be sure to call ahead to popular Out Island eateries: Local chefs prepare small batches, and meals tend to go fast. If you want to sample traditional Bahamian food, look beyond the upscale resorts to restaurants named after the owner, and colorful beach shacks and conch stands.

The Bahamas is not known for its cuisine, which copies U.S. dining habits in many regards. More authentically, Bahamian dishes, like most Afro-Caribbean cuisine, rely on the sea and on rice and beans accompanied by chicken or goat.

The one food item associated with the islands is conch (pronounced *konk*), a giant seabed mollusk that Bahamians consider an aphrodisiac and that they can't seem to get enough of. Most commonly deep-fried in batter (known as cracked conch), this slightly rubbery creature also makes a delicious chowder and finds its way into all manner of other dishes, including the popular conch salad made fresh before your eyes with diced raw conch, green peppers, tomatoes and onions seasoned with salt, Scotch bonnet peppers and lime. Try Arawak Cay or Potter's Cay in Nassau and the conch shacks at Grand Bahama Island's West End for the real thing.

Among the local specialties are stew fish (fried pieces of grouper or whole snapper, smothered in a sauce made of a roux, chopped onions, green peppers and tomato sauce), pea soup with dumplings, chicken souse with johnnycake (sweet and baked in loaves) and grouper cutlets. The "lobster," a clawless variety of giant crawfish, is delicious.

We strongly advise against eating barracuda. Although not illegal to consume, the fish can be poisonous and even deadly if prepared incorrectly.

Try the guava duff or soursop ice cream for dessert. Among the excellent tropical fruits are sugar apples, sapodilla, *kinip* (also spelled *guinop*, an unusual citrus fruit that Bahamians suck like candy), wild sea grapes, hog plums and mangoes.

Kalik is the Bahamas' national beer, and there are lots of fruity, rum-based cocktails such as the Goombay Smash and the Bahama Mama. You'll also find a number of excellent British ales to sample. The Cricket Club, near Fort Charlotte, offers one of the largest selection of ales on Nassau. Various nonalcoholic malt drinks are also worth a try.

PERSONAL SAFETY

Crime exists in the Bahamas, especially in the Nassau and Freeport areas, but observing a few commonsense precautions should keep you out of trouble: Don't accept any offers on the street for guide service or go to remote beaches or backstreets alone—tourists, particularly cruise-ship passengers—are easy targets for crime. When in doubt, ask responsible hotel personnel for guidance. Use only licensed taxis; tourists who accept rides from others are sometimes assaulted or robbed.

The shorefront urban areas of Grand Bahama Island and Nassau are considered relatively safe during daylight hours, at least in the spots frequently visited by tourists, but be careful about visiting other parts of town alone, and don't wander off the beaten path after dark. Avoid the "over-the-hill" area south of downtown Nassau especially after dark.

Most thefts occur from hotel rooms or at the beach or swimming pool, so keep your valuables in the hotel safe and don't leave items such as cameras unattended. Don't wear flashy jewelry, which can tempt thieves. (Rolex watches are a favorite target.)

Though crime may occur on the Out Islands, it is relatively rare. In fact, Bahamians living on the Out Islands rarely lock their front doors; some guest houses have no locks.

Only book with recommended Jet Ski or parasailing operators—some companies have no insurance. Scooter rentals are also poorly regulated.

The legal drinking age in the Bahamas is 18, but it is lightly enforced. Women, in particular, are advised to limit their alcohol consumption, travel in groups and not to accept rides from unlicensed taxis or drinks from strangers.

For the latest information, contact your country's travel-advisory agency.

HEALTH

You can drink the water, but it may taste a bit mineral-laden. On some islands (including New Providence), the taste is bad enough that most people stick with bottled drinks. Sanitary conditions in most restaurants are acceptable, but use your best judgment.

Mosquitoes and tiny sand flies can be a problem throughout the islands, and especially on the Out Islands, so take along repellent. Stay off the beaches at dawn and dusk to avoid sand flies, and wear long pants and long-sleeved shirts when exploring mangrove areas.

Hot, freshly cooked food should be safe (especially if it's included on a package tour), but peel fresh produce before eating, make sure meat is cooked thoroughly and avoid local dairy products, as well as any seafood or meats that may have been sitting in the sun or left too long unrefrigerated. Sometimes unaccustomed digestive systems will experience adverse effects, such as diarrhea, from consuming quantities of conch. Take it slowly at first.

The biggest problems in the Bahamas are dehydration and sunstroke. Wear sunscreen and a sunhat, and drink plenty of water to stay hydrated. Avoid imbibing in too much alcohol. Riptides (hidden undertows) can be a life-threatening presence on beaches where high surf comes ashore. Never swim alone and be especially cautious at night.

Medical facilities are adequate to good on the main islands. There are public and private hospitals in Nassau and Freeport. The public hospitals are understaffed and can be a bit chaotic. Clinics exist on most populated islands, but in the more remote locations they are often fairly rudimentary. A hepatitis A vaccination is recommended.

For more information, contact your country's health-advisory agency.

DOS & DON'TS

Don't confuse reggae music with calypso. Though it's now heard everywhere in the Bahamas, reggae initially developed in Jamaica. The more traditional style in the Bahamas is calypso (though it hails originally from Trinidad). The album *Junkanoo* by the Baha Men (available internationally) is a good introduction to Bahamian calypso music, which is distinguished by its predominant use of Junkanoo cowbells and goatskin drums.

Don't be surprised if you're called "Darlin'," "Honey" or "Sweetie" in the Bahamas. It's as common a greeting in the Bahamas as "Mon" is in the Caribbean. Women use it in conversation with men, and vice versa, and it rarely if ever implies a flirtatious come-on.

Don't plan to sunbathe nude on beaches: This is illegal in the Bahamas (though topless bathing is tolerated on a few resort beaches). Bahamians are very conservative folks, and anyone dressing immodestly away from the beach can expect to be admonished or even arrested.

Don't worry about changing money if you're a U.S. citizen. The U.S. dollar is on par and accepted along with the Bahamian dollar.

Do travel between islands on a mail boat if you want a true Bahamian experience. Your companions will be Bahamians (and sometimes their goats and chickens), and your passage will be a true adventure. Just be sure to take your sea-sickness pills in advance, and stock up on food and beverages for the long voyage, which can take two days to more remote isles.

Don't expect to find full banking services on all islands. Make sure you have enough cash if you go beyond the major islands. On the smaller Out Islands, you may have to pay cash for car rentals and accommodations.

Do go swimming with dolphins, which you can do in Nassau, Grand Bahama and Bimini. Whether you swim in the open sea or at a marine wildlife attraction, an immersion with these loveable and intelligent creatures is an experience you'll treasure forever.

Don't expect to always understand the local dialect—especially when Bahamians are talking among themselves. The Out Islands each have their own, sometimes hard-to-understand dialects. Many white Bahamians of the Loyalist Cays speak a form of lilting Elizabethan or Shakespearian English, and all Bahamians use some unusual colloquialisms you may have to ask to be explained.

Geostats

Passport/Visa Requirements: All U.S. citizens must have a passport when traveling by air to or from Bermuda, Canada, the Caribbean, Central and South America and Mexico. Citizens of Canada, Mexico and the British Overseas Territory of Bermuda also must have a passport or other designated secure document to enter the U.S. Passports are required for land crossings at the Canadian and Mexican borders with the U.S. and for cruise passengers returning to the U.S. from Mexico, the Caribbean, Canada or Bermuda. Reconfirm travel-document requirements with your carrier prior to departure.

Population: 310,426.

Languages: English, some Creole (among Haitian immigrant population).

Predominant Religions: Christian (Protestant, Roman Catholic); some Obeah (African-based religion) in the Out Islands.

Time Zone: 5 hours behind Greenwich Mean Time (-5 GMT). Daylight Saving Time is observed early April-late October.

Voltage Requirements: 120 volts.

Telephone Codes: 242, country code;

Currency Exchange

The Bahamian dollar is on a par with the U.S. dollar, which is universally accepted. Travelers using U.S. dollars will not need to exchange money.

ATMs are widely available, although the ones that dispense U.S. currency frequently run out of cash. U.S. currency machines can be found on Bay Street in Nassau, in the Welcome Center on Prince George Dock, at the Lynden Pindling International Airport, in Cable Beach, in Caves Village and at the Atlantis Casino on Paradise Island and Crystal Palace Casino in Cable Beach. All others dispense Bahamian dollars.

When using ATMs, check which currency the machines dispense: You may end up with more Bahamian dollars than you need. There is a full-service bank at the Lynden Pindling International Airport (International Terminal) where you can exchange Bahamian currency prior to returning home.

Banking hours of operation are generally Monday-Thursday 9 am-3 pm, Friday 9 am-4 pm. Some commercial banks are open with limited services on Saturday.

Taxes

There is no sales tax in the Bahamas. Effective 1 January 2015, this will change, as the government will add a 7.5% value-added tax to the majority of consumer goods and services.

Government taxes, resort levies and service fees are added to all accommodations rates and can amount to anywhere from 6%-12%. A US\$15-\$18 departure tax (cruise and air) is included in your ticket price.

Tipping

Tip hotel and restaurant employees 15% if a service charge hasn't already been added to the bill. It usually has, so check the bill.

Weather

On average, the sun shines 358 days a year in the Bahamas. Because of the Gulf Stream, winters in the Bahamas are fairly mild, about 10 degrees F/5 C warmer than in nearby Florida. The summers can be humid, rainy and warm (day temperatures reaching into the low 90s F/33 C) but are moderated by trade winds.

High season in most of the islands is late November to mid-April, when the weather is generally good. In Bimini, spring-summer is high season—because of its close proximity to Florida, boaters from the U.S. flood the island that time of year. Hurricane season is June-November, and most rain falls at that time. Rainfall decreases markedly on the islands in the far southeast, such as Inagua, where semidesert predominates.

There really is no bad time to go, but take along at least a sweater during the winter, especially in the northern islands. Average day temperatures in fall and spring are in the 70s-80s F/23-32 C, with nights in the 60s F/15-22 C. Winter temperatures can be about 10 degrees F/5 C cooler.

What to Wear

Although many locations are generally informal, Queen Victoria's influence is still felt. Unless you're at the beach or the pool, walking around in a swimsuit isn't appropriate. Casual, summer-weight clothing should be worn. Make sure you take comfortable footwear for walking—the sidewalks get hot enough to make you uncomfortable in thin-soled shoes. Don't forget a hat or sunscreen to protect against sun exposure. A jacket or sweater may be needed on cooler winter nights (December-February).

Dress conservatively if you plan to attend church: Shorts for men are frowned upon, and women should cover their shoulders. Wear a jacket and tie or a suit when attending a business meeting. Jackets for men and dresses or nice slacks for women are typical attire in the casinos and some better restaurants, especially in Nassau and Lucaya. When you make dinner reservations, ask about the dress code.

Telephone

BTC Bahamas provides phone and cellular service throughout the Bahamas. You can rent a local cell phone or use your own; roaming charges vary by cell phone carrier. Check with your local provider for daily charges and cost per minute. Cellular service on remote Family Island can be poor at times.

You'll still find plenty of pay phones in the Bahamas, but most no longer take coins and operate only with prepaid BTC phone cards, which you can purchase at local BTC offices.

Calls to and from the U.S. can be dialed directly; the area code for the Bahamas is 242. Note that when making toll-free calls to the U.S. from hotels in the Bahamas, the hotel will charge the same as for non-toll-free calls. Avoid using the exorbitant international credit-card pay phones.

Internet Access

Internet access is provided by BTC Bahamas, Cable Bahamas and Securenet Bahamas. Most hotels and resorts offer high-speed Internet or wireless access. The larger Nassau and Grand Bahama Island resorts often charge for wireless. In the Out Islands, even the smallest inns run their business via Wi-Fi and usually have free access in the lobby area, if not in the rooms. Wireless hotspots can be found at the Welcome Center at the Nassau cruise port and the Freeport airport.

The downtown areas in Nassau and Port Lucaya on Grand Bahama Island have cybercafes, and Internet cafes also are available in many off-the-beaten-path destinations such as Long Island and San Salvador.

Mail & Package Services

There are more than 45 post offices in the Bahamas, including branches on all major islands. Postcards (US\$0.50) and airmail letters (US\$0.65) can be sent from the Bahamas to the U.S., Europe and around the world.

There's a post office at Lynden Pindling International Airport, in Festival Place at the Nassau cruise port, downtown on Shirley Street, in Cable Beach and on Paradise Island. Branches are open Monday-Friday 9 am-5 pm, Saturday 9 am-12:30 pm. Phone 242-322-3344.

The local postal service can be a bit unreliable. If you need a package to get to a destination by a specific date, it may be best to use a courier service. Federal Express, UPS and DHL have offices in Nassau and on Grand Bahama Island.

Newspapers & Magazines

Many hotels and resorts provide copies of *USA Today* and *The Miami Herald*. Local newspapers include *The Bahama Journal*, *The Nassau Guardian*, *The Punch* and *The Tribune*.

Visitor guides include *What-to-Do Nassau*, *What-to-Do Grand Bahama*, *Welcome Bahamas* and *Dining & Entertainment Guide*. Similar visitor guides offer information on the major Out Islands. All are available free of charge at most hotels and ports of entry.

Transportation

The ease of navigating through the islands depends on where you choose to stay. You'll find an abundance of transportation options on islands such as New Providence, Grand Bahama, Exuma and Abaco. Getting around on these islands can be done via taxis or rental cars. The major bus systems are in New Providence and Grand Bahama, but the schedules are not consistent.

It might prove to be more difficult to find taxis and rental cars on the less inhabited islands throughout the Bahamas. Be sure to book car rentals well in advance, as vehicles are limited, particularly during major festivals, homecomings and regattas.

Traveling from island to island can be done by air or sea for the more inhabited islands. Many of the cays can only accommodate private, chartered aircraft and do not operate after dark.

To hop from island to island, start in a hub destination such as Nassau or Grand Bahama, then connect to other islands by plane or boat. Bahamas Fast Ferries provides fast, safe, reliable catamaran service from New Providence to many of the major Out Islands (<http://www.bahamasferries.com>). If you have time to spare and are looking for a truly authentic island-hopping experience, travel via mail boat from one destination to another in the Bahamas.

Air

The easiest way to get to the Bahamas is by air. Several U.S. airlines, plus Bahamasair, offer direct flights to Nassau, Freeport and the most popular Out Islands from several major U.S. cities.

Nassau's airport, Lynden Pindling International Airport (LPIA, formerly Nassau International Airport) is 14 mi/23 km west of town.

LPIA underwent an extensive transformation. The entire US\$409.5-million redevelopment project includes three seamless terminals—U.S. Departures, Domestic and International Arrivals, and International Departures.

Freeport's Grand Bahama International Airport (FPO) is 5 mi/8 km from the tourist area of Freeport.

Both Nassau and Freeport airports have U.S. customs and immigration preclearance facilities. Taxis and buses are available at both, and there is frequent air service from both Nassau and Freeport to the inhabited Out Islands via Bahamasair. Private charter companies also fly between the Out Islands using small planes.

Bus

There are private minibuses and jitneys on New Providence and on Grand Bahama that can be less expensive than taxis: The trip from Freeport to Lucaya costs about US\$1-\$2 by jitney, and a taxi costs about US\$7. (To let a jitney driver know you want to get off, holler "Bus stop!")

Private minibuses also operate on New Providence and Grand Bahama. Bus transportation is also available on the larger Out Islands, although service is sometimes sporadic.

Car

Rental cars are available on some of the major islands, but if you can make do without one, we'd recommend doing so—especially in Nassau, where traffic is heavy and a little crazy. Grand Bahama Island (outside of Freeport-Lucaya) and Out-Island traffic, on the other hand, is thin to non-existent at times. If you decide to rent a car, note that driving can be confusing: Driving is on the left, but most cars are U.S. models with the steering wheel also on the left.

Be aware that the accident rate is very high throughout the Bahamas: Speed limits are laxly enforced, local drivers display little respect for the law, and road conditions off the main thoroughfares are bad. (For this reason, we also don't recommend renting motorbikes or scooters.)

Car rental on most islands is extremely expensive and often only well-worn, out-of-date vehicles are available. When possible, use a credit card with rental car insurance benefits when renting in the Bahamas. Note that on some smaller islands such as Bimini and the Abaco cays, golf carts are the primary mode of transport and available for rental.

Ferry

The Bahamas Fast Ferry runs between Nassau and several Out Island landings. Water taxis connect Nassau to Paradise Island; North and South Bimini; Harbour Island and Spanish Wells to mainland Eleuthera; Stocking Island and Great Exuma; and Marsh Harbour to the outlying cays.

Passage can also be booked on mail boats for travel between various islands and Nassau. It takes a lot of time to see the islands this way, and it's by no means luxurious, but it's a great way to get to know Bahamians. Space is first-come, first-served. Inquire about schedules at the dock master's office at Potter's Cay in Nassau. Schedules are loosely enforced, however, and boat captains often take the liberty to detour from the charted course. Don't forget to take along seasickness medicine, as the seas are often rough. You'll also need to pack sufficient victuals for the voyage.

Ship

Arriving by cruise ship is a good way to get a taste of Nassau, Freeport and Bimini. There is some cruise-ship service between Fort Lauderdale and Freeport. Service is available between Miami and Bimini via Resorts World Miami. Day cruises depart from both Fort Lauderdale and Palm Beach with options to extend overnight. About a half-dozen cruise lines visit Nassau.

Often, itineraries incorporating the Bahamas also include visits to the cruise lines' private islands (often owned by the line), mostly in the Berry Islands.

Taxi

Taxis are the main form of transport on most islands (and often the only way), making it sometimes expensive to get around: To get from one end of Eleuthera to the other, for example, would cost about US\$100. Ask what the fare will be before setting off. If you wish to explore the length of such islands, it may be cheaper to do so on shared excursions organized by your hotel.

For More Information

Tourist Offices

Nassau: Bahamas Ministry of Tourism, P.O. Box N-3701, Nassau, Bahamas. Phone 242-302-2000. Toll-free 800-224-2627. Fax 242-302-2098. <http://www.bahamas.com>.

Grand Bahama: Grand Bahama Island Tourism Board, P.O. Box F-40251, Freeport, Grand Bahama Island. Phone 242-352-8044. Fax 242-352-2714.

Canada: Bahamas Ministry of Tourism, 6725 Airport Road, Suite 202, Mississauga, ON L4V 1V2. Phone 905-672-9017. Toll-free 800-677-3777. Fax 905-672-2092.

U.S.: Grand Bahama Island Tourism Board, 210 N. University Drive, Suite 300, Coral Springs, FL 33071. Phone 954-796-3555. Toll-free 800-422-7466. Fax 954-796-3250.

U.S.: Nassau/Paradise Island Promotion Board, 1200 S. Pine Island Road, Suite 700, Plantation, FL 33324. Phone 954-888-5907. Fax 954-236-0733.

Bahamian Embassies

Canada: High Commission for the Commonwealth of the Bahamas, 50 O'Connor St., Suite 1313, Ottawa, ON K1P 6L2. Phone 613-232-1724. Fax 613-232-0097.

U.S.: Embassy of the Commonwealth of Bahamas, 2220 Massachusetts Ave. N.W., Washington, DC 20008. Phone 202-319-2667. Fax 202-319-2668.

Foreign Embassies serving the Bahamas

Canada: Canadian Consulate, Shirley Street Shopping Plaza, P.O. Box SS-6371, Nassau, Bahamas. Phone 242-393-2123. Fax 242-393-1305.

U.S.: U.S. Embassy, Mosmar Building, Queen Street, P.O. Box N-8197, Nassau, Bahamas. Phone 242-322-1181. <http://nassau.usembassy.gov>.

Recommended Guidebooks

Yachtsman's Guide to the Bahamas (Tropical Island Publishers). An indispensable reference book for sailors, updated annually.

The Bahamas: A Great Destination by Chelle Koster Walton (Countryman Press). Lots of good cultural, experiential information.

Bahamas Handbook (Etienne Dupuch Jr. Publications). This reference book, revised and published annually, contains articles about the country's history, business, investing, real estate, politics and personalities.

Additional Reading

Bahama Saga: The Epic Story of the Bahama Islands by Peter Barrett (1st Books Library). An epic history book regaling the full sensuous sweep of the Bahamian past.

The Bahamas: A Family of Islands by Gail Saunders (MacMillan Caribbean). History and highlights with beautiful color photography by a respected Bahamian historian.

The Bahamas: Portrait of an Archipelago by Larry Smith and Michael A. Toogood (MacMillan). A collection of photographs.

Bahamian Art edited by Basil Smith (Nassau, BI: Finance Corporation of Bahamas). A celebration of modern island art with fabulous illustrations.

Bush Medicine in Bahamian Folk Tradition by Martha Hanna-Smith (Dodd Printers). Photographic field guide to medicinal plants.

How To Be a True-True Bahamian: A Hilarious Look at Life in the Bahamas by Patricia Ginton-Meicholas (Guanima Press). Available locally.

Nassau's Historic Landmarks by Gail Saunders and Linda M. Huber (Macmillan Education). A stimulating illustrated description of Nassau's architecture and history.

Out-Island Odyssey by Nan Jeffery (Avalon House Publishing). Inspiring and amusing autobiographical vignettes by a family who traveled through the Family Islands.

Talkin' Bahamian: A Useful Guide to the Language of the Islands by Patricia Ginton-Meicholas (Guanima Press). A humorous look at the colorful Bahamian dialect.

Tourist Offices

Bahamas Tourism Office

There is a Tourism Office in Festival Place at the port in Nassau and one at the port on Grand Bahama Island. Brochures and information on the island are available there and at all hotels. For other information, contact the Ministry of Tourism. Phone 242-302-2000. Toll-free 800-224-2627. <http://www.bahamas.com>.

Address
Bahamas
Phone
242-302-2000

Calendar

The highlight of the year is the annual Junkanoo Parade on Boxing Day (26 December). Though many Bahamian towns put on a party, you'll find the biggest and best in Nassau. Elaborately costumed dancers parade through the streets to cacophonous music. Beware: The fun starts at 1 am. New Year's Day is a public holiday to recover from the celebrations of New Year's Eve. A reprise of the Junkanoo Parade occurs on 1 January. A Junkanoo Summer Festival, June-August, extends the party to nearly year-round. There are also plans underway for a week-long Bahamas Carnival in May.

Throughout the year spectacular sailing regattas of Bahamian sloops take place on various islands. The country's most important event takes place the third week in April. The National Family Islands Regatta has been an annual event in Great Exuma's Elizabeth Harbour for more than 50 years. Other islands host smaller annual versions of their own regattas.

Easter is also a big religious holiday in the Bahamas. The Friday before and Monday after Easter Sunday are holidays. All major shopping districts and grocery stores are closed to commemorate the religious holidays.

Fishing tournaments, such as the Billfish Championship (April-June; <http://www.bahamasbillfish.com>) in the Abacos and Eleuthera, are also popular events.

Each of the islands also has its own signature festival. In June the pineapple is the queen of the festival in Eleuthera and the land crab the king in Central Andros. The Cat Island Rake n' Scrape Festival also occurs in June. The town of McLean on Grand Bahama Island has held its annual Conch Cracking Contest in October for more than 25 years.

Bahamian independence from Great Britain is celebrated on 10 July, when fireworks and parades are the order of the day. The first Monday in August marks Emancipation Day, when Bahamians celebrate the end of slavery in 1834. Discovery Day on 12 October is a public holiday commemorating Christopher Columbus' arrival in the islands.

The Bahamas Tourism Board's Web site has a list of major festivals (<http://www.bahamas.com>). A more complete listing can be viewed at <http://eventguide.com/Bahamas>.