

# The Bahamas

Scattered like dabs of possibility on an adventurer's palette, the Bahamas are ready-made for exploration. Just ask Christopher Columbus, he bumped against these limestone landscapes in 1492 and changed the course of history. But adventure didn't end with the *Niña*, the *Pinta* and the *Santa Maria*. From pirates to blockade dodgers to rum smugglers, wily go-getters have converged and caroused on the country's 700 islands and 2400 cays for centuries.

So what's in it for travelers? There's sailing to Abaconian villages. Diving Androsian blue holes. Kayaking Exumian cays. Lounging on Eleutheran beaches. Pondering pirates in Nassau. Indeed, there's a Bahamian island to match most every water-and-sand-based compulsion. Each of them framed by a backdrop of gorgeous, mesmerizing blue.

But every adventure has irritations, and here indifferent service, high prices and hungry no-see-ums take the lead. Nassau and Paradise Island are the prime troublemakers. But if casinos, Aquaventure and duty-free shopping don't top your to-do list, consider dropping off the grid for a bit in the Out Islands. Prices remain high but there's more bang for your Bahamian buck, with friendlier service, fewer crowds and, well, the pesky no-see-ums haven't gotten the memo. But don't wait long. Change is in the air and the Out Islands are blipping onto the radar screens of mega-developers and land grabbers the world over.

For now loaf, paddle, dive and après-snorkel. Paint your own adventure, the palette awaits.

## FAST FACTS

- **Area** Over 700 islands spread in a 760-mile (1206km) arc that add up to some 5363 sq miles (13,890 sq km) of land
- **Capital** Nassau, New Providence
- **Country code** ☎ 242
- **Departure tax** US\$15. Normally included in ticket prices.
- **Famous for** Spectacular diving and snorkeling, Sir Sidney Poitier, James Bond films
- **Language** Bahamian Standard English
- **Money** Bahamian dollar (BS\$); BS\$1 = US\$1 = €0.64 = UK£0.51
- **Official name** Independent Commonwealth of the Bahamas
- **People** Bahamians
- **Population** 307,000
- **Visa** North American, UK and most Western European travelers don't require a visa; other nationalities need to get one in advance; see p106



## HIGHLIGHTS

- **Fish Fry** (p86) Debate the win-win choice between lobster or snapper at the Wednesday night fish fry at Smith's Point on Grand Bahama
- **Eleuthera** (p92) Navigate hidden turns and bumpy roads to find that perfect secluded beach
- **Exumas** (p96) Kayak through a stunning array of blues while exploring scores of lonely cays
- **Miss Emily's Blue Bee Bar** (p92) Hear engaging tales of the infamous goombay smash and the overserved cay-hoppers who left photos on the walls at Miss Emily's Blue Bee Bar on Green Turtle Cay
- **Andros** (p100) Hurtle off the platform above Captain Bill's Blue Hole, praying that the people-eating *Lusca* doesn't really exist

## ITINERARIES

- **Three days** Explore Pirates of Nassau, the Pompey Museum and Providence Square in downtown Nassau, grab a *jitney* for beach bar cocktails, wander shark-filled Predator's Lagoon then snooze on Cabbage Beach.
- **One week** Add a Bahamas Ferry ride to Harbour Island for pink sand shores and boutique browsing or ferry to Andros for mind-blowing dives to the Tongue of the Ocean and mysterious hikes to hidden blue holes.
- **Two weeks** Add a trip to the Abacos for cay-hopping or to the Exumas for kayaking, kitesurfing and adventuring.

## CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

The Bahamas enjoy around 320 sunny days a year; and daytime temperatures during winter (December to April) average 70°F (21°C) and a perfect 80°F (26°C) in summer. In general, the islands are balmy year-round, with cooling, near-constant trade winds blowing by day from the east.

The so-called rainy season extends from late May to November and humidity in the northern islands is relatively high year-round, but declines from northwest to southeast across the archipelago. Hurricane season is June to November.

The high season typically runs from mid-December to mid-April, when hotel prices

## HOW MUCH?

- **Jitney bus ride** US\$1
- **Two-tank dive** US\$99
- **Kalik bottle** US\$5
- **Conchy Joe Hot Sauce** US\$4.40
- **Mid-sized book on pirates** US\$25

are highest. Some hotels are booked solid around Christmas and Easter. The rest of the year, many hotels reduce their rates significantly. Some Out Island hotels close for the low season, but tourist accommodations are always available.

## HISTORY

The original inhabitants of the Bahamas were a tribe of Arawaks, the peaceful Lucayans, who arrived near the turn of the 9th century. Christopher Columbus arrived in 1492 and soon after the Spanish began shipping out the Lucayans as slaves.

Pirates such as Henry Jennings and 'Blackbeard' (Edward Teach), who terrorized his victims by wearing flaming fuses in his matted beard and hair, took over New Providence, establishing a pirates' paradise that in 1666 was lined with brothels and taverns for 'common cheats, thieves and lewd persons.' With the aid of Woodes Rogers, the Bahamas' first Royal Governor and a former privateer, the British finally established order and an administration answerable to the English crown in 1718. The Bahamas' new motto was *Expulsis Piratis – Restituta Commercium* (Pirates Expelled – Commerce Restored).

Following the American Revolution, Loyalist refugees – many quite rich or entrepreneurial – began arriving, giving new vigor to the city. These wealthy landowners lived well and kept slaves until the British Empire abolished the slave trade in 1807. During the American Civil War the islands were an exchange center for blockade runners transferring munitions and supplies for Southern cotton.

While Nassauvians illicitly supplied liquor to the US during Prohibition, Yankees flocked to Nassau and her new casino. When Fidel Castro then spun Cuba into Soviet orbit in 1961, the subsequent US embargo forced revelers to seek their pleasures elsewhere; Nassau became *the* new hot spot.