

Getting Started

Your visit to the Bahamas and Turks and Caicos will benefit from a bit of preplanning. It's not particularly difficult to get to the region or to navigate your way around, but a little forethought will save you money as accommodations, travel and eating costs can be high. If you're after a get-away-from-it-all experience it's wise to avoid costly stays in Nassau between flights. See the island chapters and Transportation on p287 for more suggestions and local airline information.

See Accommodations on p270 for some suggestions on how to save money on accommodation.

WHEN TO GO

The Bahamas and Turks and Caicos enjoy approximately 320 sunny days a year. During winter (December to April), temperatures average 70°F to 78°F, while in summer (mid-April to mid-December) a range of 80°F to 90°F is the norm. Winter is the best time to visit as the weather is balmy and there are fewer mosquitoes. Humidity in the northern islands is relatively high year-round, but lower in the southern islands. The rainy season extends from late May to November, with the hurricane season occurring toward the end of this period – from September through November.

The peak holiday season typically runs from mid-December to mid-April, and at this time hotel prices are highest. Some hotels are booked solid around Christmas and Easter; it's especially advisable to plan ahead if you want to visit during these periods.

See Climate Charts (p277) for more information.

COSTS & MONEY

The Bahamian dollar is linked one-to-one with the US dollar, and the Turks and Caicos has the US dollar as its official currency, so all prices in this guide are in US dollars. A midrange traveler visiting during peak season and budgeting on accommodations and two meals a day should expect to spend from \$120 to \$200 per day. If you're traveling on a budget you can get by on \$105 to \$120 per day, while those wanting to stay in top-end accommodations will pay upward of \$200 each day. On top of

DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

- Photographic equipment and film as these are pricey in the Bahamas and Turks and Caicos.
- Proof of ownership of laptops and computer equipment to show customs officials.
- Your patience, if flying with Bahamasair across the region.
- A healthy liver and a bottle opener – there are some fabulous local beers!
- An empty suitcase in which to gather some duty-free goodies and original vibrant artworks.
- Your manners, which will be held in very high esteem across the islands.
- A balance of priorities for any vegetarians and vegans who will enjoy much here, but not the cuisine.
- Diapers, tampons and teabags as these can be hard to find and expensive to buy in the outer islands.
- Condoms, especially as AIDS is a growing concern in the Bahamas.

these prices you will also need to budget in bottled water, all drinks, activities and travel to your costs.

Even if you prefer to use cash, credit cards are required by airlines and most lodgings as a form of security (with the paperwork torn-up upon payment). Travelers checks are accepted in many places, but the further off-the-beaten track you are, the more cash is preferred.

TRAVEL LITERATURE

There are heaps of good books that will provide insight into the history, culture and lifestyle of the Bahamas and Turks and Caicos. Below is a selection of these.

- *Bahama Saga: the Epic Story of the Bahama Island* by Peter Barratt is a well-researched, very digestible 'factional' novel that details the history of the Bahamas.
- *Isles of Eden* by Harvey Lloyd is a splendid coffee-table book about life in the southern Family Islands. This book has some super photos.
- *Tale from Margaritaville: Fictional Facts & Factual Fictions* by Jimmy Buffett. He is better known as a singer-songwriter, and he clearly adores the Bahamas; this collection of short stories affectionately depicts island life.
- *Don't Stop the Carnival* by Herman Wouk is a funny romp about a New York publicist who gives it all up to open a hotel on a fictitious Caribbean isle. The book was made into a musical by Jimmy Buffett in the '90s.
- *Islands in the Stream* by Ernest Hemingway provides a fictitious but accurate look at the Biminis and island life, as well as his own bohemian ways during WWII. Not one of his best, but an interesting read nevertheless.
- *'Who Let the Dog Out?' Dottie's Story* by Carole Hughes tells the tale about a Dalmatian born in Green Turtle Cay who heads off to explore the world. This one is for the kiddies, and is lots of fun.
- *Once Below a Time: Bahamian Stories* by Telcine Turner's is an illustrated collection of short stories for children. Youngsters might also enjoy *Climbing Clouds: Stories & Poems from the Bahamas*, which is also edited by Turner.

INTERNET RESOURCES

See also Tourist Information on p285.

Abacos Islands (www.go-abacos.com) The official website has good practical information.

Bahamas Ministry of Tourism (www.bahamas.com) The official tourism site is a useful place to start researching your trip.

Bahamas Out Islands Promotion Board (www.bahama-out-islands.com) Information about the Family Islands, including a listing of events.

Grand Bahama Island Tourism Board (www.grand-bahama.com) Another good official site, with useful regional information.

Lonely Planet (www.lonelyplanet.com) With postcards from other travelers and the Thorn Tree bulletin board.

Provo.net (www.provo.net) Providenciales (known as 'Provo'), the main gateway to the Turks and Caicos Islands.

Turks & Caicos Islands Tourist Board (www.turksandcaicostourism.com) The official site of these islands has much practical information.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

If possible, try to catch the island's biggest and best festivals: Boxing Day's Junkanoo, summer's *goombay* celebrations, and any of the island's

CONDUCT IN THE BAHAMAS & TURKS & CAICOS ISLANDS

People are courteous and conservative on the islands, and it takes very little to open the door to their welcoming and friendly ways.

- Always greet people with a smile, and, when driving on the outer islands, with a wave.
- When greeting someone, ask about their welfare before addressing any business.
- Wait in lines or queues to be served.
- Tip around 15% in bars, restaurants and cafés.
- Dress formally for church and smartly for any evening entertainment.
- Cover up swimming gear and bare bods when heading for town.

regattas. For more information on these and other festivals in the region see the island chapters and the Directory on p279.

RESPONSIBLE TRAVEL

The Bahamas and Turks and Caicos are promoting care for their environment; here's how to help.

- Don't touch or stand on coral. Coral is extremely sensitive and can be killed by touch. Snorkelers, divers, fishing fans and boaters should be especially careful.
- Don't buy products made from endangered species, such as anything made from coral or conch shell. Some of these are killed to make trinkets for tourists, so please shop with a conscience.
- Don't eat meals using endangered species. Whatever the tourist dollar will buy, the poacher will supply. Still widely eaten across the islands, grouper and conch fall into these categories.
- Keep to the footpaths. When you're hiking, always follow designated trails. The breeding grounds of animals and habitats of plants are easily destroyed by walkers who stray off the beaten path.
- Discourage littering. Forget about social protocols – if you see other travelers throw their litter on the ground or stick their cigarette butts in the sand, please do something about it. If they're bigger than you, pick up their rubbish. Otherwise, tell them to put it in the trash themselves.

“...catch the island's biggest and best festivals: Boxing Day's Junkanoo... and any of the island's regattas.”

Itineraries

CLASSIC ROUTES

The Bahamas' 870-mile run is a waterbaby's delight: snorkel, dive or enjoy the shallows off tiny islands dotted with cute churches and lively bars. Jump on a water taxi, ferry or plane for your next deserted beach.

BAHAMAS HIGHLIGHTS

Spend three days in **Nassau** (p63) sightseeing before taking a three-day trip to Alice Town in **North Bimini** (p127). There, go bonefishing or snorkel the mystical Bimini Road, and raise a glass at **Hemingway's haunts** (p131).

Make your way to **Grand Bahama** (p106) for glorious beach bumming, trips to see **dolphins** (p107) and kayaking in **Lucayan National Park** (p118). Fly to Abaco's Treasure Cay and enjoy the exquisite **Treasure Cay Beach** (p165). Take a ferry from **Marsh Harbour** (p148) to friendly **Green Turtle Cay** (p171) for a Goombay Smash, and to **Elbow Cay** (p155) to wander Hope Town's streets.

Having returned to Nassau, catch a fast ferry to see the beautiful people on **Harbour Island** (p175), and enjoy the rosy hue of **Pink Sands Beach** (p178) at sunset. Then catch a ferry and hire a car so you can delight in the beaches and Duck Inn at Governor's Harbour in **Eleuthera** (p187). Fly via Nassau to George Town in **Great Exuma** (p193) to sleep under the stars in a **houseboat** (p198). Visit **Stocking Island** (p200) and snorkel at **Thunderball Grotto** (p206). Then fly onto pretty **Long Island** (p222). Once there, drive to the striking churches of **Clarence Town** (p227) and the world's deepest blue hole at **Turtle Cove** (p228). Dive from **Shark Reef** (p226) and at **Guana Key beach** (p226).

One to Two Months

TURKS & CAICOS TRANQUIL TOP SPOTS

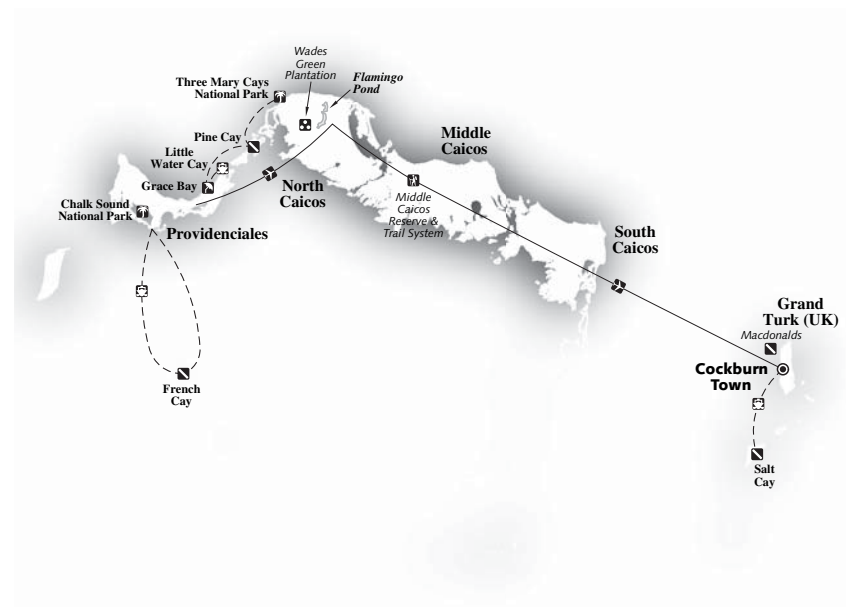
Three Weeks to Two Months

Fly into friendly **Providenciales** (p242) for a few days' bumming around on delightful **Grace Bay Beach** (p242) and nights' playing at the surrounding bars and restaurants. Hire a car to visit some sights such as the stunning **Chalk Sound National Park** (p245) and the western hills. Then sign up for fantastic boat excursions to **Little Water Cay** (p252) to meet friendly iguanas, **French Cay** (p252) for a dive with gentle stingrays, or **Pine Cay** (p252) for an unforgettable dive or two or to bask in the light of glowworms.

Take a flight directly to **North Caicos** (p253) and spend a few days cycling along the paved roads, enjoying the scenery of this island's lush vegetation. Make sure you visit the **Wades Green Plantation ruins** (p254), the magnificent, leggy flamingos at **Flamingo Pond** (p254) and **Three Mary Cays National Park** (p242), which is also a flamingo sanctuary, for a snorkel. Hikers should then fly to the **Middle Caicos Reserve & Trail System** (p255), where the unspoilt beauty of pine forests and freshwater lakes, and the adorable lovely cottages of Middle Caicos can be enjoyed.

Divers and those who appreciate the quiet life should fly from North Caicos to **Grand Turk** (p260) for a few relaxing days. Wander the quiet beaches and streets of **Cockburn Town** (p261) and spend the evenings at friendly local bars, such as the **Sand Bar** (p265), or take night dives to the famous and fabulous reef wall, where the coral glows as though it has gemstones encrusted in it. Make sure you don't miss diving at **Macdonalds** (p263), which is frequented by groupers and angelfish, or near the 18th-century shipwreck at **Salt Cay** (p266). Here, the land holds relics of the 'white-gold' trade and the seas envelope birthing **humpback whales** (p268).

Start with some partying, then move across the 95 miles of this route for some beach living and exhilarating encounters in the ocean's coral 'cities'. On these islands time ticks by slowly. The soothing seas and gentle folk will entice you to slow down, unfold and really blossom.



ROADS LESS TRAVELED

OUT ISLAND ADVENTURES

Travel the untrodden 2390-mile route through this region, detouring to many cays that surround each island group. Journey by boat for watery adventures, by land to mark your footprints in pristine earth and sand, or by air to give yourself the time you will need to traverse each of these places.

For explorers, the vast but relatively undeveloped **Andros** (p135) will surely appeal. Smothered in pine forests, thick undergrowth and wetlands, the **Bluff** (p144) on South Andros has a palm-lined sandy hideaway. **Central Andros** (p138) has waterways and caves.

Culture vultures may want to focus on the African heritage of the Bahamas, still found in **Cat Island's** (p209) plantation and church ruins as well as in the mysticism of **obeah** (p212). You're able to canoe around quiet **Turtle Cove** (p210) and find a hermit's work at **Mt Alvernia Hermitage** (p210). **San Salvador** (p215) is a tiny spot where bush medicine and old plantation ruins prevail, and the diving is stunning. Remote and unspoiled, the **Crooked Island District** (p229) offers a remote natural setting with a few splendid beaches, bat caves, birds (especially flamingos) and nesting turtles. **Mayaguana** (p237) is one of the least developed Bahamian islands, as is **West Caicos** (p251), known for fantastic diving, populations of iguanas and flamingos and isolated beaches. Finally, head for semiarid, scrub-covered **Great Inagua** (p235). Nature rules here, with a turtle reserve at Union Creek and the famous **Bahamas National Trust Park** (p237), where a hike takes you into the heart of one of the world's largest flocks of flamingos. A tour through the reservoirs of **Morton Salt Works** (p237), north of Matthew Town, will also put you in touch with the region's past.

Two Months



TAILORED TRIPS

DIVING & SNORKELING

You can't beat diving or snorkeling with whales, which, in season, is best from **Salt Cay** (p266) in the Turks and Caicos. At **Grand Turk** (p263) there's also a myriad of great dive sites that are home to dozing turtles, grinning moray eels and giant groupers. Snorkelers will love **Gibb's Cay** (p263), where southern stingrays flutter. You can venture to **South Caicos** (p256) for massive schools of eagle rays, and on to Providenciales' host of snorkeling spots, beginning in **Grace Bay** (p242). Divers make a beeline for **French Cay** (p252), where hawksbill turtles roam, and the marine life-rich **Northwest Point Marine National Park** (p245). At **West Caicos** (p251) snorkelers and divers can see pelagics, corals and neon-colored fish.

If you're looking for top spots in the Bahamas, dive the deepest blue hole at **Long Island** (p222) and the fantastic wall-dive sites off **San Salvador** (p215), and enjoy the caverns, blue holes and coral reefs in the **Exuma Cays Land & Sea Park** (p204). Also visit the many wrecks off **New Providence** (p79), the **Andros** (p135) barrier reef, and possible remnants of Atlantis at the **Biminis** (p126), where you can also swim with wild Atlantic spotted dolphins. Adventurous types can socialize with sharks at **Walker's Cay** (p151), and with glamorous people at **Eleuthera** (p175).



BEAUTIFUL BALMY BEACHES

For lounging at the dreamiest stretches of sugar-soft sand and sparkling turquoise seas in the region, here are some beaches to tempt you. Grand Bahama's 8-acre stretch **Lucaya Beach** (p106) is loved by families, and is perfect for water sports, or you could try the soft sands of quiet **Churchill Beach** (p106).

The Abacos cays hold the award for several of the most beautiful beaches of this region, with Treasure Cay's gorgeous turquoise and white crescent, **Treasure Cay Beach** (p165), and pretty Elbow Cay's equally tantalizing **Hope Town Beach** (p158). Next is Paradise Island's amusement-filled **Cabbage Beach** (p79) with its snowy-white sand, followed by Eleuthera's famous rosy **Pink Sands Beach** (p178) on Harbour Island and the endless drifts of East Point's **Lighthouse Beach** (p191). Exuma has the stunning beaches of **Exuma Cays Land & Sea Park** (p204) and the miles of talcum-powder fine **Stocking Island Beach** (p200), site of the world's best beach bar right at the water's edge. Long Island has the well-protected **Guana Key Beach** (p226), facing jade-colored seas, and secret stunner **Gordon's Beach** (p231). Everyone loves the tiny **Caicos Cays** (p246), Provo's 5-mile-long, iconic **Grace Bay Beach** (p242) with its extraordinary aquamarine waters and Grand Turk's pine-shaded **Governor's Beach** (p263), which is also a popular site for locals enjoying picnics and partying.



Snapshot

'No Toilet Paper at Nassau International Airport!' screamed the headline in the *Confidential Source*. The real story here wasn't just uncomfortable tourists, but another example of the inefficient, government-owned airport system and debt-ridden airline, Bahamasair, that drives Bahamians mad. Sit for a day in the airport when there are no announcements telling people where their plane, crew or luggage is, and you will understand why this is one of the many topics that get locals fired up.

Another issue is crime control. Although violent crime in the Bahamas is still comparatively rare, numbers of domestic, sexual and gun-related attacks are rising. One former cabinet minister's suggested solution to sexual attacks was chemical castration of rapists, in response to the physical castration advocated by the Bahamian Democratic Movement. Talk radio went bananas.

The continuing involvement of Bahamians in the cocaine trade also worries many. In May 2004 US authorities picked up Bahamians in possession of \$100 million of cocaine, and in the following month a cocaine-smuggling ring of 15 Bahamians and 21 Colombians was broken.

The Family Islands continue repairing villages and infrastructure damaged by 2004's powerful hurricanes. Meanwhile in Nassau, the hot topic is whether judging processes for the popular Junkanoo festival's parade competition could be improved, after the bitterness of 2004's results.

There are a number of issues that the Bahamas and Turks and Caicos share. The depletion of the region's conch and grouper stocks is a major concern in all fishing villages. Locals wonder whether a two-month fishing ban on grouper by the Bahamian government is enough, and, if so, how fishermen are to survive during this time.

Development issues also abound. When the Bahamian prime minister signed an agreement in June 2004 for a Bimini Bay property development on top of reclaimed wetlands, many Bahamians were appalled. Not only could this construction swamp the tiny island, it could also obliterate important bird-breeding grounds. Other announcements in 2004 suggest that northern Grand Bahama may become the site of the world's largest resort.

Meanwhile in Grand Turk, angry rumors persist that an international cruise ship, with government permission, is about to sequester the island's most attractive and popular beach for its passengers. Likewise, developers can now build seven-story buildings around the rim of the island's most important public beach, Grace Bay Beach, where Provo Belongers (locals) are definitely not made welcome.

Bickering also continues within Turks and Caicos political circles about the best way to proceed toward the country's right to self-determination and full independence. Turks and Caicos is a British crown colony; a British governor takes responsibility for the country's internal security and external affairs, as well as certain judicial matters. Local self-government is administered by the 13-member Legislative Council, an elected body headed by the chief minister (appointed by the governor).

As politicians nitpick details of the outdated 1988 constitution, such as changing the chief minister's title to 'premier,' locals believe they are not addressing the fundamental question, namely whether Turks and Caicos people actually want independence at all. Debates in bars therefore continue to ask, 'Do we trust our politician's ability to run an economically successful, honest and democratic government?'

FAST FACTS

Population Bahamas/
Turks & Caicos:
301,790/20,556

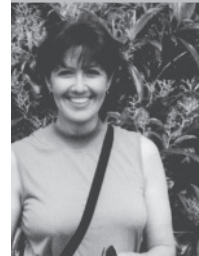
GDP per capita (purchasing
power parity): \$5.495
billion/\$216 million

Inflation: 1.2%/4.0%

Number of islands: 700
(around 40 inhabited)/49
(9 inhabited)

Number of cellular
phones: 121,800/1700

The Author



JILL KIRBY

Having been lucky enough to travel through the Caribbean Islands by fishing boat and ferry, Jill has also taken time over the years to dance at the 'Sun-splash' Reggae Festival in Jamaica, bask on Barbados beaches over Christmas and dive during New Year in St Vincent and the Grenadines, with a little bit of partying along the way. Now living in Australia, Jill jumped at the chance to return to her Caribbean and West Indian adventures. As a journalist and freelance writer Jill also provided the Bahamas, Turks and Caicos chapters for Lonely Planet's *Caribbean Islands*.

My Favorite Trip

The following fought off some tough competition:

Best sights? The Gothic churches of Long Island's Clarence Town (p227), pretty Hope Town (p155) on Elbow Cay and Provo's stunning Chalk Sound National Park (p245).

Best adventures? Swimming with affable wild pigs off the coast of Major Cay (p206), houseboating the other 364 Exuma Cays (p203) and kayaking through Lucayan National Park (p118) in Grand Bahama.

Best diving? Handfeeding wild stingrays at Green Turtle Cay (p167), meeting wild dolphins in North Bimini (p129), cuddling divers' pet groupers off Grand Turk (p263) and watching Salt Cay's (p267) humpback whales.

Best place for beach bumming? Overall, Eleuthera (p178) – you can't beat pink-sand beaches at sunset.

Best fun? A karaoke night in Provo (p249) and a Sunday church service anywhere, for the music and sheer exuberance.



CONTRIBUTING AUTHORS

Jean-Bernard Carillet prepared the Diving chapter (p45). Having been born with restless feet and equally restless fins, Jean-Bernard's journeys have taken him to the ultimate dive destinations in the world, which include French Polynesia, New Caledonia, Egypt and the Caribbean. A more recent addition to this list is his foray into the Seine River in Paris, where he dived with a team of professional firemen. As a dive instructor and incorrigible traveler, Jean-Bernard has written extensively for various French publications, including *Plongeurs International* magazine. Other Lonely Planet titles that he has coordinated and co-authored include two Diving & Snorkeling guides: *Tahiti & French Polynesia* and *The Red Sea*.

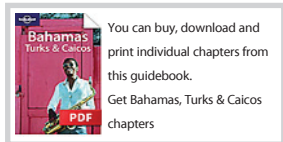
LONELY PLANET AUTHORS

Why is our travel information the best in the world? It's simple: our authors are independent, dedicated travelers. They don't research using just the Internet or phone, and they don't take freebies in exchange for positive coverage. They travel widely, to all the popular spots and off the beaten track. They personally visit thousands of hotels, restaurants, cafés, bars, galleries, palaces, museums and more – and they take pride in getting all the details right, and telling it how it is. For more, see the authors section on www.lonelyplanet.com.

Dr David Goldberg, MD wrote the Health chapter (p296). David completed his training in internal medicine and infectious diseases at Columbia Presbyterian Medical Center in New York City, where he has also served as voluntary faculty. He is an infectious diseases specialist in Scarsdale, New York, and is the editor-in-chief of the website www.mdtravelhealth.com.

LAST EDITION

Christopher P Baker wrote the previous two editions of *Bahamas, Turks & Caicos*.



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