

Bahamas Cruising Advice from Keltic Kat

How to get there:

Step one: buy paper Bahamas Charts (Explorer and Maptech) and get your chartplotter Bahamas charts

Step two: get good weather info (NOAA on VHF, Chris Parker on single side band radio 4045 at 6:30 am also internet sources like Windfinder)

The old salts will tell you don't try to cross the Gulfstream unless you get the right weather forecast with "no north and no teen." North waves against the current are ugly. We always thought that a south wind would make for a nice reach but we found that we got salt spray on the stern quarter because of the angle of the current. Southwest wind seems to be the best for sailing. We have decided that a calm "trawler day" makes for the nicest crossing. We have also found that NOAA tends to underestimate the wind and waves. If they predict a 15 knot wind, it will likely be 20. When they predict waves 2 to 4 feet, I will go but a prediction of 5 feet often turns out to be more.

Our plan was always to go to north Lake Worth anchorage by North Palm Beach and wait for good weather to cross to West End on Grand Bahama. This crossing is over 50 miles but easy to do in one day if you leave early. The Lake Worth Inlet is wide, well marked with flashing buoys and easy to leave in the dark. You can anchor at South Lake Worth just past Riviera Beach off the Intracoastal Waterway the night before to get an earlier start. It is also possible to come down the Waterway in the dark from the North Anchorage or one of the marinas but you will have to light up the red and green marks in the dark with a good spotlight. The south anchorage has tidal current. Our longest crossing was 13 hours but usually it takes 10 or 11 at 5 knots an hour. The entrance to Old Bahama Bay Marina is marked with red and green lights but not easy to enter in the dark. Royal Marsh Harbour Yacht Club members get good discounts at this marina so it is worth joining.

The Customs and Immigration office is at the Old Bahama Bay Marina. If you arrive after 5 pm, they may be closed for the day but you can get off your boat at

the marina. The Bahamas Cruising Permit is paid in cash with US dollars. It is \$150 for boats up to 35 feet and \$300 for boats over 35 feet. If you bring pets, you need to find out what is required and get a permit. If you bring guns, it is a big deal with serious regulations. When you fill out the forms, it will ask you how long you plan to stay. It is important to have a definite plan with an exact number of days. Do not be vague. Pick a day that you plan to leave and count the number of days from your arrival. (You should plan to leave well before your Immigration time runs out.) Usually the Cruising Permit is for one year so the boat can be in the Bahamas. People will get an immigration card with a time limit. Some Immigration officers are only allowed to give you 90 days which you can then renew with another senior officer at no cost. It is better to get a long enough time that you will not have the need to renew. There is usually a senior officer at West End who will give you 120 or even 180 days.

Some people will go farther north and go by Memory Rock to Mangrove or Great Sale Cay where they anchor for the night. If you bypass West End, the next Customs Office is at Green Turtle Cay. This Customs office will usually have a junior person who can give you a maximum of 90 days on your Immigration card.

We take the Indian Cay Channel an hour before high tide. This is a shallow shortcut but we usually see 7 to 9 feet of water. (Usually all the boats are leaving together and you can follow using the 3 waypoints.) We go to Great Sale Cay for the second travel day. Depending on the wind, you can anchor on the west, north or east sides. If the weather is looking bad, you may want to go north to Grand Cay and anchor in the harbour. You will need some tide to enter the harbour with confidence.

The third travel day we would get to Green Turtle Cay if we needed a safe harbour. There are lovely places to anchor behind the cays if there is a steady east wind. There is no protection from a northwest wind. Steve Dodge's Guide to the Abacos offers detailed information.

You must use caution to travel from Green Turtle Cay around Whale Cay which takes you out into the ocean for a short distance. You then enter the Sea of Abaco with the Loggerhead Channel at the west end of Great Guana Cay. There

can be big waves in Whale Cay Cut from an Abaco Rage. This may be caused by a storm off Africa sending waves and not by local weather. Strong east winds will also build up the waves and the radical changes in water depth in the cut will affect the waves. You will need to get advice from the local sailors to make a safe passage. Listen to the Cruisers Net on VHF 68 at 8:15 am for weather and cut conditions. Use VHF 68 as a hailing channel in the Abacos to call other boats. Help and advice are usually available. Use VHF 16 to call businesses. It only takes one hour to round Whale Cay in good conditions. Once you are in the Sea of Abaco the various cays are only one or two hours apart and it is easy to travel around in calm weather.

What you need for clothing:

We bring good foul weather jackets that act as our warm jackets. We have polar fleece 200 jackets to wear underneath. Two pair of warm long pants like jeans or cords, socks, and sneakers will likely be enough. If you have fleece jogging pants or stretchy yoga pants, they can act as long underwear. You might want a thin watch cap and gloves and rain pants if you really mind the cold. Usually it doesn't get colder than 50 F in Jan. or Feb. By March the weather will be in the 70's which is beach weather for Canadians. Bring bathing suits, sandals, shorts, and t-shirts like you would for summer sailing. Sun hats and rash or sun shirts are useful too. Some people are allergic to noseums. The best protection is long sleeve shirts and long pants in lightweight fabrics with socks up under the pants. Long skirts are no help as they will go under to bite you. Sometimes there are mosquitoes after it rains but it seldom rains. The noseums and sandflies are bad whenever there is no wind and worse when it is hot and humid. You may not feel any bites until too late. Benedryl creams and capsules are a big help with the itching. These are usually available in stores at villages and marinas.

What you need for provisions:

When you come into the Bahamas, you declare "ships stores" for your own use and you do not pay any duty. You are not to sell anything. The Bahamas has a sales tax of 12% starting in July 2018. Some things are expensive because of import duties. There is no income tax so the import duties support the

government. Things that you would normally have as spares or to repair your boat will cost more. Bring extra small batteries, spark plugs, tubes of 5200. Fix anything you can before you leave the USA. You will need extra jugs for water, outboard gas and diesel if you are going to the Exumas. You should have two propane containers so you always fill the empty one as soon as possible after it runs out. If you only have one large one, then bring some one lb. canisters and maybe an adapter if you need it. (You can get propane in Marsh Harbour on weekdays.)

Beer, wine, liquor can be part of your "ships stores" and they are all cheaper in the USA except for local rum. Toiletries may not be more expensive but they may be scarce or not your brand. Bug spray, cleaning products, laundry detergent and sunscreen are more expensive. Most foods are double the cost in the USA. You will need canned foods and UHT milk when fresh are not available. Chocolate chips, crackers, mixed nuts or junk food items are most expensive. Since the Nonsuch is not a big boat with a lot of storage, you will have to decide on your priorities. Definitely load up your fridge with packaged things that have an expiry date like sliced meat. Bring produce like onions and citrus that don't need refrigeration. Produce like cabbage, carrots and apples will keep a long time in the fridge. Bread that comes packaged in cellophane and a plastic bag (like Pepperidge Farm) will keep for 2 or 3 weeks if not opened. Flour tortillas keep for months so you can make wraps when you have no bread.

What is different cruising the Bahamas:

There are no pumpouts at the marinas. You need to be able to pump overboard with a macerator pump when you are out of the harbour and passing one of the cuts to the Atlantic Ocean.

There are very few banks with ATM's (Marsh Harbour, Abaco and George Town, Great Exuma, also Nassau and Freeport) and it may be hard to get cash. The cash from the ATM will be Bahamian and there will be fees. At small banks with no ATM it may be possible to get a cash advance on a credit card. Having a credit card used only for this purpose will save on interest charges. Prepay the credit card and then get the cash advance. Because there are no banks, many islands do

not take credit cards. Businesses may charge extra fees when you use a credit card. (I have seen 7%.) US dollars and Bahamian dollars are at par and used equally. Your change will often be a mixture. When you are heading back home, you can mention that you would appreciate US cash as you are going to the USA.

Batelco was the local phone company but now there are a few newer ones. You can get a \$15 sim card and have a pay-as-you-go account or a monthly plan. Data is \$10 for 1 GB. Many places have free wifi which often works. It is possible to top up online or buy phone cards at stores. The cell towers are every few miles and service is quite good across the water for several miles. (I don't think that there are any cell towers in the Exuma Park.) You may be able to roam using your phone package from home so it is worth checking and comparing prices.

Mooring ball and marina fees vary a great deal. You need to ask what is included and what is optional. Many marinas have a flat rate for power. This is a bad deal for sailboats. Big power boats use a lot of power, many use as much power in one day as we use in a month. Some marinas charge more for the power than the dockage. There is very little free water in the Bahamas. It is usually metered but it can have a flat rate which is unfair to smaller boats. Some places include showers, laundry, buses to shopping. Other places charge separately. Laundry starts at \$4 a token and goes up. One token will do a wash load but it may take two tokens to dry a load. Even when mooring balls are part of a marina, the mooring ball fee may not include the same amenities as the dockage. Monthly rates are much cheaper than daily rates and a few places have weekly rates. Someone may come around in a speedboat to collect the mooring ball fee very early in the morning and wake you. It is possible to reserve ahead for dockage and sometimes mooring balls by phoning or emailing the business. Other places mooring balls are "first come." If you have friends in a mooring area, they can reserve for you by putting a RESERVED jug on a mooring ball. You need to save an empty milk jug or water jug and write your boat name with permanent marker. As in RESERVED FOR Keltic Kat, then tie the floating jug onto the mooring ball with a floating line. Many mooring balls are private and not available for rent. You need to ask questions and look around.

Most marinas do not have a dinghy dock fee but some will sell showers and laundry tokens to transients. Usually they will sell gas, diesel and water at their gas dock.

Most towns and villages have public dinghy docks for cruisers. There is often a trash dumpster handy for getting rid of your garbage. If there is nowhere to leave your garbage, then you need to save it until you get to a bigger place like George Town on Great Exuma. A Space Bag in the cockpit locker will keep the smell to a minimum. Most cruisers get rid of all the packaging that they can when they are provisioning in a larger town or village. This keeps garbage to a minimum. There is almost no recycling in the Bahamas.

The Royal Marsh Harbour Yacht Club does not have a building. They have membership cards and a club burgee, they have social functions, they lobby businesses to give their members discounts and special marina rates. They have a floating dinghy dock in March Harbour for everyone.

Your Cruising Permit includes a fishing license. There are some restrictions as to fishing seasons for lobster and Nassau grouper and maximum catch per day. You are only allowed to free dive for lobster and not use scuba gear or other air sources. Coming from Nova Scotia where a lobster license costs a million dollars, this is a wonderful place to visit. Lobster season ends March 31.

Many of the Bahamians are religious and find public nudity offensive. It is not considered polite to go around town in a bathing suit. People should wear a shirt or a coverup. Visitors are welcome at church services and the music is usually wonderful because of all the local talent.

Like many warm countries people are often laid back and service can be slow. They call it "Island Time" and encourage visitors to relax. We have found the Bahamians to be warm and friendly when treated with respect. They are often kind and helpful well beyond what is expected. Since they live on small islands with little access to emergency services, they are used to coping by helping each other. They have volunteer fire and rescue and a community clinic with a nurse. When you have a problem, you just have to ask around and somebody will have

good advice. For boaters there is also BASRA which is made possible by volunteers and donors.

If you need to repair something on your boat, there will be import duties on the shipping charges as well as the cost of the part. Sometimes it is cheaper to fly back to the USA and get a part than have it shipped to the Bahamas. It is possible for friends and relatives to bring parts if they are visiting you.

Taxis are very expensive because cars have big import duties and there are no buses in Abaco. You must pay with cash. Set prices are listed in the local paper the Abaconian at the back.

Ferries from Marsh Harbour leave from the ferry terminal to Hope Town and Man-o-War Cay or the Conch Inn to Great Guana Cay. You must pay with cash. There is usually a cheaper return fare price.

The local paper The Abaconian comes out at the beginning of the month and the middle of the month. It has a very extensive list for tourists with prices and schedules for ferries, phone numbers for doctors, government offices or other information for travelers.

What about coming to the Rendezvous without a Nonsuch:

You can fly to Marsh Harbour and Treasure Cay airports from the USA or Nassau. I recommend Bahamasair from Nassau. Delta flies from Atlanta and Silver flies from Fort Lauderdale and West Palm Beach. There may be more airlines. You could charter a boat from the Moorings/Sunsail base in Marsh Harbour. There are other charter companies that you can find online like Cruise Abaco. You could stay at a hotel, inn or Airb&b. There are also cottages, condos, and houses for rent. You can check the internet by searching Abaco Bahamas and VRBO. I can recommend the Conch Inn and Abaco Beach Resort in Marsh Harbour. I can recommend the Hope Town Inn and Marina and the Hope Town Harbour Lodge in Hope Town on Elbow Cay. I can recommend Treasure Cay Beach, Marina, and Golf Resort. I can recommend contacting Maria at Dive Guana to find places on Great Guana Cay. You do need to be careful as places can deteriorate very quickly if they are not well maintained. March is high season so places will be expensive

compared to Canada and the USA. They are likely to be booked a long time ahead as they are small hotels so reservations are needed.