

Gotta Go to Abaco

**Sip cocktails at sunset, dine on
freshly caught fish, and dance
into the night to live music**



WRITTEN AND PHOTOGRAPHED
BY
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The barrier reef that protects the Bahamas is the third largest in the world, Leroy Grant, our pilot told us. We were 2,000 feet up, flying in a twin-engine nine-passenger Britten-Norman Islander aircraft. Below us, the islands in the outer chain of the Abacos sparkled in the turquoise sea like gemstones in a necklace worn around the neck of Great Abaco, the main island. What better introduction could you get to your new cruising ground than a flight right over the top of it?



We had flown into Nassau International Airport where we transferred to Millionaire, the small private executive terminal on the other side of the airfield used by private and charter aircraft. Our small airplane was operated by Abaco Air Ltd. (www.abacoaviationcentre.com), which runs a scheduled air taxi flight to the country's capital from Marsh Harbour, their base on Great Abaco. "That's Elbow Cay down there," said Leroy, as he banked to make his final approach. "Be sure to go see the lighthouse when you get there," he gestured toward the pretty candy-striped tower dominating our view that stood sentinel at the entrance to Hope Town Harbour. "The British built it in 1863," he continued.

Our touch down was as smooth as our flight and our transfer to the Nautic Blue base was equally well handled. Once there, we became acquainted with the yacht that was to be our home for the next week. The 37 foot Fountaine Pajot trawler yacht uses catamaran hulls, each housing a double sleeping cabin and heads, and, of course, an engine, in this case a 125hp Yanmar. Up one deck is a saloon, home to the galley seating area, an indoor wheelhouse, and sliding glass doors to the aft deck where a stair leads to a spacious sun deck with fly bridge controls. The yacht is clean, tidy, and extremely well equipped, having everything you need for the voyage including a GPS and chart plotter mounted on the fly bridge. For those who like doing it the old-fashioned way, down below are charts, table rules, and dividers; these guys have thought of everything.

Nautic Blue is part of the Moorings Group and shares their base in Marsh Harbour. It's here in their briefing room that we were given the low-down – all the tips and local advice – on our cruising ground by George who, as dockmaster-in-chief, seems to know and do a great many different things.



Fountaine Pajot ◀

Our home for a week. The 37 foot Fountaine Pajot trawler yacht uses catamaran hulls, each housing a double sleeping cabin and heads, and, of course, an engine, in this case a 125hp Yanmar



The Lighthouse ▲

We climbed the spiral stairs to the top at sunset to watch the lighthouse keeper wind the clockwork mechanism and light the kerosene lamp, still in use today just as it was when first erected by the British Imperial Lighthouse Service.



The next morning, after a very efficient explanation of everything we needed to know about the boat, we set off toward Elbow Cay. The depth of water throughout the area is relatively shallow and therefore the tidal range of 3 feet can be significant. Once clear of Marsh Harbour, Elbow Cay is just 7 miles away, but the course to be steered involves a dogleg to avoid the shallows in the final approaches to the island. Fortunately the excellent pilot book, *The Cruising Guide to Abaco* written by Steve Dodge, has all the courses and waypoints marked on the chartlets and, rather helpfully, Nautic Blue has transferred all of these to the chart plotter located on the fly bridge. Navigation, therefore, is not difficult. Knowing that the sea is shallow and reef infested calls for a vigilant eye when navigating; the task is made a great deal easier if the helmsman wears a good pair of Polaroid sunglasses that not only reduce the glare from the surface but also has the added advantage of making reefs below the surface appear more clearly, something not achieved with ordinary lenses. The approach to Hope Town Harbour puts all these cautions to the test and it's important to remember buoyage rules: when leaving the harbor the port (red) should be passed on the boat's starboard (right) side. Upon entering the harbor, the port (red) mark should be passed on the boat's port (left) side. Get it wrong and you are hard aground in this narrow entrance.

Hope Town is one of the most picturesque settlements in the Abacos, a quaint town of pastel-colored weatherboard houses, many of them beautifully restored. They surround the large expanse of harbor that opens up after the narrow channel. Founded by loyalists who fled the emerging American Republic and declared allegiance to the British crown, the town's history is told in the Wyannie Malone Historical

Museum, which has many interesting artifacts, documents, and photographs.

There are three marinas and a selection of mooring buoys that offer safe haven; the Lighthouse Marina proved to be the most suitable for us. We docked there overnight and used its proximity to the lighthouse to undertake a visit, climbing the spiral stairs to the top at sunset to watch the lighthouse keeper wind the clockwork mechanism and light the kerosene lamp, still in use today just as it was when first erected by the British Imperial Lighthouse Service. That night we dined at the Hope Town Lodge on the other side of the harbor, using our tender to get there and mooring at the hotel's jetty. At the Lodge we ate freshly made conch chowder followed by blackened wahoo with rice and peas.

Leaving Elbow Cay next morning we headed north toward Man 'o War Cay, a small island very different from others in the chain. Here live God-fearing folk who prohibit the sale of alcohol and the opening of shops on Sunday. The all-white population even insist that black workers, who arrive each morning by ferry to toil in the boat-building shops, leave the island before sundown each day. Everyone here seems to have Albury as a surname. The Albury Brothers boatyard is famous for the line of Albury boats it produces; the 29 foot half-decked boat is built by hand and powered by an outboard motor, but so strong is the brand that there are boats built by Albury all over the world. Further along the street is Albury's Sail Shop, where a group of five ladies, all called Albury, create canvas ditty bags and all manner of other canvas-made goods that are snapped up by visitors. You won't be surprised to learn the supermarket is called Albury Stores and the Man 'o War Marina is run by a pair of brothers by the name of ... you guessed it.

Heading northwest we passed Scotland Cay and on up to Great Guana Cay. Now if Hope Town is inhabited by friendly folk and Man 'o War by slightly strange, then Great Guana is home to a host of hostile folk. The 95 inhabitants of this settlement have become wary of strangers because they fear what outsiders are doing to their island sanctuary – building a huge village resort of holiday homes and a golf course. Clearly it will change the island, but feelings are very much divided as to how that change will ultimately affect the island. We spent the night on a mooring buoy leased out for the nightly fee of \$15 by the local scuba dive shop. The marina has recently been enlarged to offer 66 slips and is owned by a family called, can you believe it? Albury! Great Guana boasts miles of unspoiled beaches that run along its entire five and half mile eastern shore. Perched high above it on top of a huge sand dune is Nippers, a beach bar

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Nippers ▲

Nippers, a beach bar constructed from what appears to be brightly painted driftwood. This is the place to sip cocktails at sunset, stay for a bar dinner of freshly caught fish, and boogie well into the night to live music brought to you by local artists and reggae bands

constructed from what appears to be brightly painted driftwood. This is the place to sip cocktails at sunset, stay for a bar dinner of freshly caught fish, and boogie well into the night to live music brought to you by local artists and reggae bands. It's a favorite hangout of the Barefoot Man, whose CDs can be purchased there.

Getting to Green Turtle Cay involves passing through the only stretch of water that demands that permission be sought from the base before attempting it. The Whale Cay passage is one of the few passages not protected from the wrath of the Atlantic by a reef and can, as a result, be subject to bad weather. During the winter months the pass can be a little uncomfortable and in severe conditions is closed to charter boats by Nautic Blue, which asks each boat to check in by VHF before making the trip. Abaco Yacht Services on Green Turtle Cay monitor the stretch of water and can be contacted using VHF channel 16 for a situation report.

White Sound is an almost totally enclosed lagoon in the north of Green Turtle Cay while Black Sound is its almost mirror image in the south. Their entrances are just one mile apart. Either makes a superb overnight stop or a base from which to explore this pretty island and hire a golf cart. There is enough to see and do here to make it worthwhile, but be sure a member of the crew is allotted the task of designated driver because, deceptive though they may sound, the Goombay Punches made at Miss Ellie's Blue Bay Bar are as lethal as they come, but very moorish! To the north and west lie Manjack Cay and the Crab Cays, which make

a great anchorage in which to spend a day just enjoying the beach, swimming off the boat, and snorkeling on the reefs. It gets fairly shallow around the land and calls for the gunkholing instincts that lie in every cruiser.

This probably marks the most northerly point of a week-long charter and the only way back is using the Whale Cay passage, where southbound the rules remain the same. At this point we chose to head toward Great Abaco Island and home to the Treasure Cay Resort. It started out some years ago as a small upmarket resort hotel and marina and has grown, without losing its charm, into a medium-sized holiday community with many homes occupied by Europeans wintering out their retirement. The main attraction here is a stunning beach three miles long and selected by the National Geographic Magazine as one of the top 10 beaches of the world. The marina is well staffed by cheerful and helpful dockmasters who cannot do enough to help visitors. The Tippy Seagull Bar is a great way to start or even finish an evening, and the resort's many restaurants offer a selection of cuisines to suit every taste and pocket. A well-stocked supermarket allows you a refueling stop for the galley, and a trip to the bakery will put inches on your waistline just looking at the cakes. It takes a lot of willpower to turn down the carrot cake and I am so glad I lack what it takes to do so.

Marsh Harbour is just an hour and half away at this point, so you can afford to dawdle in this well-run resort. If golf is your bag, then the course is not one you can afford to miss.

Heading back is always the sad part of any cruising holiday, but turning south at this point does not necessarily mean the end of the voyage. Beyond and to the south of Marsh Harbour are more enchanting anchorages and island retreats to visit, yet more beach bars to prop up, and more fish suppers to enjoy. Snake Cay, Little Harbour, Cherokee Sound, and Schooner Bay are just a few of the evocative names that lie in wait for those who have more time. For us it was time to tie up in Marsh Harbour and to thank the Mooring Base Commander Samantha Cornish and her staff for making our cruise around the Abacos such a memorable one. **ME**

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How to Get There

From Miami or Fort Lauderdale many carriers offer flights to Nassau and a few offer a direct service into Marsh Harbour on Great Abaco Island. Among them: Continental Connections and Vintage Props and Jets. Once in Nassau flights can be arranged with Air Abaco, which offers scheduled air taxi services twice a day for around \$90. The marina where the boats are kept is just five miles from the airport and the short taxi ride costs around \$20.

Information

To charter this trip or any yacht you see in this issue of YV&C, please contact any of the recommended charter brokers listed on page 8