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BAHAMAS GUIDE

wordtravels



Graced with extensive beaches bleached white by the year-round sun and surrounded by sparkling turquoise waters filled with varied and colourful sea life, the islands of the Bahamas are a major destination for divers, sailors and sun-worshippers. Although often thought to be part of the Caribbean, the Bahamas is actually an archipelago of 700 islands with thousands of small 'cays' strung out in the ocean, starting 55 miles (89km) from Miami in the Atlantic Ocean.

The islands' first inhabitants were the Lucayan Indians who lived here from the 9th century until after Columbus discovered the islands in 1492, making his first step into the New World. The resulting exploitation led to the native population being virtually wiped out. For two hundred years, until independence in 1987, the Bahamas was a British Crown Colony and a strong British influence can still be seen in the architecture and culture.

The population of the Bahamas now consists mostly of Bahamians of African descent, who are mainly descended from freed slaves. The strong African cultural influence is evident in everyday life, and in events like Junkanoo, a traditional street festival held every year on Boxing Day. There is also a strong American cultural influence, particularly in the capital, Nassau.

Due to its proximity to the US, the Bahamas has become an offshore banking and financial centre. Tourism, however, remains its most important industry. The long stretches of empty beaches, clear waters and excellent facilities have made the Bahamas a popular destination throughout the year and the multitude of attractions on each of the islands ensure that there is something for everyone.

THE BASICS

TIME

Local time in the Bahamas is GMT -5 (GMT -4 during daylight saving).

ELECTRICITY

Electrical current in the Bahamas is 120 volts, 60Hz. Two-pin flat blade plugs and flat blade plugs with round grounding are standard.

LANGUAGE

English is the official language of the Bahamas.

TRAVEL HEALTH

All travellers should remain up to date with their routine vaccinations when travelling abroad. These vaccines would include those for measles-mumps-rubella (MMR), diphtheria-tetanus-pertussis, varicella (chickenpox), polio, and flu. Travellers to the Bahamas should ensure that they are vaccinated for hepatitis A and typhoid, as there is a risk of contracting this from water supplies and contaminated food. Whether visitors will need to take other vaccines will depend on their length of stay and the areas which they will be visiting. Additional shots may include Hepatitis B and rabies, while a yellow fever vaccination is required by travellers aged more than one year, arriving only from areas with yellow fever risk.

However, many of these vaccinations are considered cautionary measures, as food and water sources are typically safe and well managed in the Bahamas. Visitors should steer clear of fruit or vegetables unless peeled or cooked, and note that some types of fish, including tropical reef fish, are poisonous to eat even when cooked. Visitors should also use mosquito repellent to avoid bites. Medical facilities are good in Nassau and Freeport, but expensive, and usually require payment in cash on treatment; as a result, comprehensive medical insurance is advised.

TIPPING

Many hotel and restaurant bills in the Bahamas automatically include a service charge of about 15 percent; if this is not included a 15 percent tip is expected for most services, including taxi journeys. Hotel bellboys and porters usually receive about BSD 1 per bag.

SAFETY INFORMATION

Most visits to the Bahamas are trouble-free, though care should be taken in the major cities of Nassau and Freeport. Visitors should take sensible precautions and not carry large amounts of cash or jewellery on their person or wander away from the main tourist areas, especially after dark. In light of several fatal accidents and serious injuries that have occurred using rented watersports equipment, it is

advisable that only those experienced on jet skis consider renting them on New Providence and Paradise Island. The watersports industry in the Bahamas is poorly regulated and visitors should only rent equipment from reputable operators and make sure that they have received adequate training before going out onto the water. Hurricane season is from June to the end of November and visitors should monitor weather forecasts before making travel plans.

LOCAL CUSTOMS

A vital part of Bahamian custom is their dialect of English which is characterful and descriptive, and, while it may take some time to come to grips with, it will only add more colour to travellers' experiences of the Bahamas. Handshakes are the norm for greeting people and visitors should default to addressing locals by their surnames, as the use of first names is reserved for incredibly close friends. Visitors should also act in a humble and accepting manner while in the Bahamas, as the locals will treat you in this way; however, Bahamians also have a wicked sense of humour and they have great fun teasing others as a sign of affection. Visitors should note that some of the islands and resorts are very upmarket and require a certain standard of dress. Beachwear should be confined to the beach and smart-casual dress is usually expected in the evenings.

BUSINESS

Nassau is the business centre of the Bahamas, whose economy is heavily dependent on tourism and offshore banking. Business protocol is fairly relaxed, although appropriate business attire is expected. Meetings are usually held in conference rooms, they begin punctually, and business cards are customarily exchanged and should be treated respectfully by being placed in a card case. Handshakes on introduction are the norm between both men and women and women are treated as equals in the business environment. Moreover, colleagues and business acquaintances should be addressed by their professional or academic title and surname. Always be punctual for meetings and do not try to hurry others in an effort to end meetings more quickly as this is perceived as rude. Office hours are generally 9am to 5pm, Monday to Friday.

COMMUNICATIONS

The international access code for the Bahamas is +1, in common with the US, Canada and most of the Caribbean, followed by 242. The outgoing code is 011 followed by the relevant country code (e.g. 01144 for the United Kingdom). Calls from the Bahamas can be expensive, so use a calling card when and where possible. VOIP services are a much cheaper and more popular means of communication. Mobile networks operate on the GSM 1900 band and internet cafes are widely available.

DUTY FREE

Travellers to the Bahamas over 18 years do not have to pay duty on 200 cigarettes, or 50 cigars or 454g of tobacco; 1 litre spirits and 1 litre wine (all imported beer is subject to duties); and other goods to the value of US\$100. Prohibited items include firearms and ammunition without a police permit. Pets and dogs from countries with rabies infections are strictly prohibited from entering the country.

CLIMATE

In general the weather is good all year in the Bahamas and the trade winds ensure that the temperatures remain relatively mild. Seasonal changes are minor. The rainy season extends from May to November, when there is a slight chance of hurricanes. Peak season is between December and April, when average temperatures range between 75°F (24°C) and 85°F (29°C). Generally the northern and western islands are cooler, while the southern islands can get very hot in summer.

ENTRY REQUIREMENTS FOR SOUTH AFRICANS

South African nationals must hold a valid passport, but no visa is required for a stay of up to three months; however, visitors can extend their stay for up to eight months.

PASSPORT/VISA

All visitors must be in possession of a return or onward ticket, plus proof of funds, and a passport valid for period of intended travel. As part of the Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative (WHTI), all travellers travelling between the United States and Canada, Mexico, Bermuda, and the Caribbean region are required to present a passport or other valid travel document to enter or re-enter the United States. We recommend that passports are valid for six months beyond travel to any country.

MONEY

The official currency is the Bahamian Dollar (BSD), which is divided into 100 cents. The Bahamian Dollar is equal in value to the US Dollar and both currencies are accepted throughout the islands. Currency can be exchanged at banks, bureaux de change and many hotels. There are ATMs in the main tourist centres and credit and debit cards are widely accepted in all the big resorts. Banks' opening hours may vary, but tend to be from 9.30am to 3pm (Monday to Thursday) and 9.30am to 04.30 pm (Fridays).

THE ISLANDS

With a subtropical climate, pristine beaches and top-class tourism infrastructure, it's no surprise that the islands and cays of the Bahamas archipelago are some of the world's top tourist destinations. The Bahamas is comprised of an astonishing amount of islands of varying sizes and each one is sure to enthrall travellers.

Andros Island is the largest of the Bahamian islands, and sits next to the third biggest barrier reef in the world, making it a haven for snorkelling and scuba diving. New Providence offers energy and culture in the form of the capital city, Nassau, and provides easy ferry and car access to the expanse of upscale resorts at neighbouring Paradise Island. The northernmost islands of Bimini are the closest to the US, and their wealth of marine life draws serious fishermen after the catch of a lifetime. Eleuthera Island is named after the Greek

word for freedom by English pilgrims seeking religious autonomy, and is largely considered to be one of the most beautiful islands in the Caribbean, filled with lush vegetation and pink sand beaches.

ATTRACTIONS IN THE ISLANDS

Bimini Islands



The Bimini group of islands in the Bahamas is 50 miles (80km) east of Miami and spans an area no larger than 10 square miles (26 sq km). The main island, North Bimini, is barely seven miles long (11km) and no more than 1,200ft (366m) across at its widest point. The islands are best known for the excellent fishing opportunities, with visitors from around the world coming here to test their skills in the hunt for tuna, sailfish, mako shark, barracuda and, above all, blue marlin. This was exactly the goal of the islands' most famous fishing enthusiast, Ernest Hemingway, who lived in Bimini for two years in the 1930s. The small hotel (and bar) where Hemingway lived burnt down tragically in 2006 after it was converted into a Hemingway museum.

Almost all the action on the Bimini islands happens in Alice Town, a laid-back town on the main island of North Bimini where fishermen gather to swap stories. However, the town is known to change its tune during April spring break when crowds of raucous college students descend on Alice Town. Scuba divers too are lured to Bimini by mysterious stone blocks in the waters off the island of North Bimini, known as the Bimini Road, which islanders claim are part of the lost city of Atlantis. The Bimini Biological Field Station, located on South Bimini Island and commonly called the Shark Lab, is one of the world's top marine research and conservation centres, and is a major contributor to our understanding of life in the ocean.

Berry Islands



The Berry Islands are among the least busy in the Bahamas, and the perfect destination for those looking for the ultimate escape. In part because of the difficulty involved in getting to the islands, and their lack of infrastructure, the resorts in this archipelago are extremely exclusive, catering mostly to wealthy travellers, big game fishermen, and yachters. The largest island is the Great Harbour Cay, home to a multi-million dollar resort which once hosted the likes of Cary Grant and Brigitte Bardot.

The beaches in the Berry Islands are known as the best shell-collecting spots in the Bahamas, while the game fishing is some of the best in the world, offering billfish, tuna, grouper, tiger fish, yellow snapper, wahoo, king mackerel, to name a few. Every May the islands, nicknamed the 'world's fishbowl', play host to one of the world's top game fishing tournaments. The islands are largely privately owned, and wealthy owners use the islands as occasional holiday homes. This has resulted in the Berry Islands having more resident millionaires per unit area than any other place in the world.

Paradise Island



Connected to New Providence Island by a bridge, Paradise Island, formerly known as Hog Island, is one of the most popular destinations in the Bahamas. The island used to be privately owned until it was bought by developers in 1959 and turned into a resort haven. Since then, Paradise island's owners have changed several times, including a stint of ownership by Donald Trump.

It offers a variety of beaches to suit almost any taste, while most of the island's hotels and resorts can be found along Cable Beach, Paradise Beach, or Cabbage Beach. The miles of white sand host outstanding watersport facilities, including swimming, snorkelling, diving, jet skiing, sailing and more. Perhaps Paradise Island's most famous resort is Atlantis, nicknamed 'Vegas by the Sea', where gambling mingles with waterslides, beaches and a host of restaurants. Thanks to excellent weather and the popularity of its resorts Paradise Island is busy year-round and the young and energetic are often to be found at resorts' bar and parties at any time of year. Those travellers wanting to escape the crowds can head over to the secluded Caves Beach or Love Beach.

Grand Bahama Island



Approximately fifty miles (80km) from Miami, Grand Bahama is an idyllic island of white beaches and aquamarine seas beneath which vivid coral reefs teem with life. Most visitors to Grand Bahama stay in Freeport, a few miles inland, or at the seaside suburb of Lucaya on the south coast of the island. Here you can sail, play golf or simply relax by the pool at one of the many all-inclusive resorts. In Freeport there are plenty of boutiques and bazaars to tempt shoppers, and evenings can be spent at one of the many restaurants. Following on from this, travellers with cash left in their wallets can head to one of the island's casinos.

Outside of Freeport nature lovers will find themselves in their element. Between Sweeting's Cay and Pelican Point, are seven blue holes inviting exploration, and a little further west is Deadman's Reef, accessible from the powdery white beach at Paradise Cove. East of Freeport is the Lucayan National Park which is home to the largest underwater cave system in the world and an experience coveted by those seeking new thrills. Visitors can enjoy the island's natural flora and fauna, or hire a kayak and explore the mangrove creeks. Owing to its beauty and variety, Grand Bahama has become one of the most popular stops for Caribbean cruise liners, so visitors can expect a constant coming and going of tourists on the island.

Andros Island

Andros is the largest island in the Bahamas and is a favourite for scuba divers and fishermen. The island is largely undeveloped, so the atmosphere is very casual and hotels tend to be small and unpretentious. Much of the island is covered with palm savannahs, primeval forest and huge mangrove wetlands, which make it a wildlife fanatic's paradise - some of these even include their infamous include orchid hunters.



seafood festival.

However, it is the underwater life that really makes Andros unique: it has the world's third largest barrier reef running along its east coast for 167 miles (269km). Andros' most famous attractions are the Blue Holes, a network of water-filled caves, both inland and in the ocean, that draw scuba divers from all over the world. The colourful and unique marine life that lies below the tranquil surface makes Andros a fantastic spot for divers, snorkellers, and fishermen. Some of the world's first dive-dedicated resorts are located on the island, both running regular scientific research dives as well as purely recreational ones. Recreation is to be had on land as well, with Andros hosting several festivals throughout the year, including an annual regatta, a conch festival, a pirate festival, and a

NASSAU

Known for its warm breezes, sunny skies and sugary, white beaches, Nassau's turbulent past is quite different from the serenity its imagery brings to mind. The capital of the Bahamas, and the largest city, part Nassau's allure comes from its notorious inhabitants of old. Once a lair and refuge for pirates, Nassau was home to famous plunderers such as Blackbeard. However, by 1720 most of the pirates were ultimately killed or driven out by the British. In the following years Nassau would burn to the ground three times at the hands of the Spanish.

Today, the island's close proximity to the US gives Nassau a distinctly American flavour. This bustling hub of a city is a delightful and colourful blend of old world and colonial architecture juxtaposed with a busy, modern port. Nassau draws attracts visitors with its beautifully preserved Victorian buildings, 18th-century fortresses and the Queen's Staircase, the 66 steps of which lead to the most breathtaking view over the whole of Nassau - a must for any visitor! Plant enthusiasts should visit the Royal Victorian Garden, which has more than 300 species of tropical plants and exotic creatures. Enthusiastic shoppers, on the other hand, would be well-advised to look out for great bargains at the Straw Market on Bay Street. Alternatively visitors can relax by spending an idle afternoon watching a cricket game at one of the many local sports grounds. After dark, Nassau comes alive with a rowdy bar and club scene, and the scent of fresh seafood permeates the air in the Fish Fry district.

This stunning city can also add at least four famous supporting roles in the movies to its resume, as the setting in three James Bond pictures, as well as the Beatles film 'Help!'. With the bright lights of casinos, posh resort hotels and cruise liners, Nassau is overflowing with variety, colour, and entertainment. A favourite holiday destination for active adventurers and beach bums alike, Nassau has something to offer everyone.

ATTRACTIONS IN NASSAU

Aquaventure at Atlantis Paradise Island



Aquaventure, in the Atlantis resort on Paradise Island, is one of the Caribbean's largest waterparks, featuring dozens of thrilling water slides and a mile-long river ride with rapids and special effects. The 97 acre park has a network of interconnected rides which means guests can go from one attraction to the next on rivers and water escalators without ever leaving their inner-tubes.

Some of the rides include the Leap of Faith, a nearly vertical 60 foot drop through a clear tube that runs under a shark-filled lagoon; the Abyss, a 58 foot near-vertical drop through darkness followed by many twists and turns; and the Surge, an inner-tube ride that mimics a flash flood. For young children, there is the Jungle Slide, a simple twisting slide featuring jungle-like scenery, and the Splashers, a Mayan-themed set of pools and water-based playgrounds. When visitors get tired of the water, there are other activities available like rock climbing, with instructors present to guide and teach. The park is accessible to guests of the Atlantis resort as part of their resort fees, and guests of the adjacent Comfort Inn have access as well.

AIRPORTS

GRAND BAHAMA INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT (FPO)

LOCATION

The airport is situated four miles (6.4km) outside Freeport on Grand Bahama Island.

GETTING TO THE CITY

Taxis and airport shuttles are available, and many hotels offer courtesy buses.

TIME

GMT -5.

CONTACTS

Tel: +1 242 352 6020.

CAR RENTAL

Most major car hire companies operate from the airport, including Avis, Hertz and Dollar.

FACILITIES

Airport facilities include an outgoing duty-free shop, 24-hour ATM, post office, restaurants and bars.

DEPARTURE TAX

LYNDEN PINDLING INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT (NAS)**LOCATION**

The airport is situated 8 miles (13km) west of Nassau.

GETTING TO THE CITY

There is no public transport from Nassau Airport into the city. Taxis are available and many hotels offer courtesy buses.

TIME

GMT -5.

CONTACTS

Tel: +1 242 702 1010. Email: feedback@nas.bs

CAR RENTAL

Most major car hire companies operate from the airport.

TRANSFER BETWEEN TERMINALS

The two terminals are within walking distance of each other.

FACILITIES

Airport facilities include a duty-free shop, a restaurant and bar, Internet facilities and tourist information desks. ATMs, banking and foreign exchange facilities are also available. The terminals are fully accessible to disabled visitors. Note that Nassau Airport is non-smoking; however, there is a smoking lounge in the Graycliffe Lounge and Divan section.

DEPARTURE TAX

Departure tax is typically included in the cost of visitors' tickets.

WEBSITE

<http://nassaulpia.com/>

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