

CRUISING THE BAHAMAS

IS MY BOAT READY?

Make sure she's in good shape – the Gulf Stream is a test (and you do want to make 100%). Have a mechanic check the engine before you leave home. Have the USCG Auxiliary do a safety check. Have redundancies for vital parts. Is your fuel tank clean? Is your fuel clean? Do you have spare oil/water separators? How do your sails look? Do you have plenty of chain for your anchor rode (coral will chafe through rope rode)?

AM I READY?

This is supposed to be fun, so stay within your comfort zone. But maximize your comfort zone. Learn about the routes, the weather, the anchorages. Have a plan B, then a plan C, or more. Go crazy with waypoints in your GPS, so if you need to change course or plans, you're already set up.

Read the cruising guides and study the charts. Recommended: Explorer Charts, Steve Dodge's Cruising Guide to the Abacos, Bahamas Cruising Guide. Web site: explorercharts.com. For electronic charts, Garmin (and only Garmin) uses the Explorer charts, which are the best.

HOW DO I GET THERE?

- Okeechobee Waterway - mast height under about 49 feet
- Keys via Florida Bay – draft less than 5 feet
- Keys via Hawk Channel – daylight passage recommended
- Keys via offshore – no restrictions, but it's open ocean

WHERE DO I CROSS?

For the Abacos, try not to cross north of Lake Worth Inlet, due to Gulf Stream influence. You can stop at West End, Grand Bahama Island if you like. There's Old Bahama Bay marina and customs/immigration office. Then proceed onto the Little Bahama Bank via Indian Cay Passage or Memory Rock (who could ever forget that?) and go to Great Sale Cay anchorage. Or if you don't mind a longer run, skip West End. Cross onto the Banks at Memory Rock and go to Great Sale Cay anchorage.

For Exumas on south, cross from the keys, Miami, Ft. Lauderdale. Any of those is OK for the Abacos as well. For the Exumas, you can stop at Cat Cay, Bimimi, Chub Cay before going on to Nassau.

WHEN DO I GO?

It depends on the weather. NEVER cross the Gulf Stream when wind has ANY northerly component. The elephants are marching!

If crossing from Lake Worth Inlet to the northern Bahamas, go when the wind is south of southeast, with the next cold front at least 36 hours away. If crossing from Keys, Miami, Ft. Lauderdale, look at trajectory and Gulf Stream flow and judge best wind direction. Remember that the stream will set you north so you'll need to account for that.

Waiting for weather.

If you arrive at your jumping off point and the weather isn't ideal, wait.

Lake Worth Inlet: north end of Lake Worth for longer term wait; just inside and south of inlet for short-term wait.

Ft. Lauderdale: not much in the way of anchorages, but plenty of marinas. Expensive.

Miami: anchor at No Name Harbor or on lee side of Key Biscayne for exit at Cape Florida; Dinner Key Marina or mooring field; Coconut Grove Sailing Club mooring field; Marine Stadium anchorage; various marinas

Keys: sheltered anchorages inside Angelfish Creek; anchorage at Channel Five; mooring field in Boot Key Harbor; on Hawk Channel, anchor at Rodriguez Key or Tavernier Key

WHAT DO I TAKE WITH ME?

There are grocery stores in the Bahamas, but they may not have what you want when you want it and the prices may not be what you want to spend. Julie's recommendation: take beer, wine, soda, snacks, toilet paper, any special foods you really want. There are pharmacies, but best to take any prescription meds you need. Keep a copy of the written prescription. Rum is cheap. So is butter. Fresh veggies may be available at farmers' market. Conch meat also is available from vendors on the side of the road. Coconut bread is not to be missed. Water is safe and available, but you will likely have to pay for it, especially if not paying for a marina slip. You get a fishing license with your cruising permit, use it! A sailboat moves along at perfect trolling speed.

WHAT DO I DO WHEN I GET THERE?

Once in Bahamian waters, fly a yellow Q (quarantine) flag until you have officially checked into the country, then take the Q flag down and fly the Bahamian flag from your starboard flag halyard above all other flags. Fly US flag from stern flag staff or on backstay.

Clear customs and immigration before anyone goes ashore. Try to time it so you clear during normal working weekday hours. Paperwork you need is ship documentation or registration, passports of all passengers, pet import permit if travelling with a pet, firearms info (make, model, serial number, # of rounds of ammo) if any firearms other than a flare gun are on board. Only the ship's captain may go ashore. If you clear at a location with both customs + immigration office, you get a 6 month cruising permit; 3 months if just customs. Get your fishing license at the same time as the cruising permit.

COMMUNICATIONS

VHF from US is not likely except at West End. However, there are plenty of VHF channels within the Bahamas. Channel 16 is for commercial use, channel 20 is for Bahamas Air/Sea Rescue, most areas use channel 68 for cruisers. There are daily cruisers nets in the Abacos and the Exumas. These usually provide weather info.

SSB/HAM. If you have an SSB/HAM radio, you can get weather broadcasts or set up to get weather faxes. You also can get weather info from Chris Parker, a forecaster for the Caribbean.

Cell phone. If you have an unlocked cell phone, get a SIM card when you arrive in the Bahamas. If your phone is locked, you can buy a cheap phone in the Bahamas. WiFi is widely available, but you may need a signal booster if you're at anchor.

Satellite phone. Works anywhere.