

Island-Hopping the Abacos

The joys of chartering the Bahamas' Out Islands



The Hopetown Lighthouse

By Shayne Benowitz

The Sea of Abaco spreads from the Bahamas' Out Islands in pale aquamarine like a sheet of gently undulating blown glass. Beneath the bright sunshine, the shallow water glistens atop a seafloor of pristine white sugar sand. The only color variation is owed to large patches of dark green turtle grass or rocky coral coves. To say that this stretch of sea is a sailor's paradise is an understatement.

elbow is Marsh Harbour, the city center of the sparsely populated Great Abaco. This is the location of the island's one and only traffic light, and locals will tell you that it's one too many. That detail alone encapsulates the spirit and landscape of this charming and remote chain of islands. It's where the Bahamas end and the vast Atlantic Ocean sprawls endlessly. The fact that this otherworldly oasis happens to be only

THE LOGISTICS

Great Abaco Island, shaped like an elbow pointing east in the Atlantic, is approximately 120 miles long and serves as the main hub to its surrounding 100-island archipelago. At the point of that

a 45-minute flight from Fort Lauderdale or Miami, or a 165-mile passage by boat, makes the Abacos an all-the-more-seductive retreat.

In the heart of Marsh Harbour is the Abaco Beach Resort at Boat Harbour, one of the largest marinas in all of the Bahamas with 198 slips accommodating boats of up to 200 feet. Its central location (only a five-minute transfer from the Marsh Harbour airport) and full-service marina make it the ideal expedition point for island hopping to the parallel chain of barrier islands.

If you've made the passage along the Gulf Stream in your own boat, set your GPS for Boat Harbour, where Customs & Immigration clearance can be arranged on site. The marina offers transient, monthly and long-term seasonal rates, along with 24-hour security, electricity, water, cable and Internet access, as well as fuel docks. Arriving by air? Charters are available through Boat Harbour (www.abacobeachresort.com), Sunsail (www.sunsail.com) and The Moorings (www.moorings.com), conveniently located just up the road.

LOCAL CHARACTER

Glance at a nautical chart of the Sea of Abaco and you'll spy virtually unlimited options for exploration, including nearby cays, secluded beaches, national reserves and coral

The writer at the beach at Great Guana Cay





Nippers at Guana Cay

reefs. A pleasure sea for sailors, it's also ripe with opportunity for sport and game fishing in the shallow flats and offshore waters year round.

After picking up your boat, begin with a cruise to Hopetown at Elbow Cay, a small island about five miles east of Marsh Harbour. Here, pastel wooden cottages line narrow streets accessible only by foot or golf cart. Within walking distance of the public marina is a history museum devoted to the early British Loyalist settlers who fled from the American colonies to the Abacos as early as 1783.

To get a true lay of the land, rent a golf cart for the afternoon and cruise the streets. The east coast and its sandy beaches are great for surfing when conditions are right. Be sure to stop at Tahiti Beach, a sprawling sand flat offering yards of shallow, warm, salty water to wade through. It's also an ideal spot to drop anchor and while away the afternoon. Don't leave Hopetown without scaling the famous candy-striped lighthouse for an unparalleled 360-degree view of the surrounding harbor.

FEED THE SOUL

Cracker P's Bar & Grill, about a 10-minute sail from Hopetown, is an ideal lunch spot with lots of local color, and unless you're staying on Lubbers Quarters, it's only accessible by boat. Situated on a 7.5-acre estate,

the restaurant balances atop stilts offering open air dining and a view tucked away amidst the treetops. Sample the smoked fish dip and the marinated grilled conch with generous helpings of the homemade (and much-loved) hot sauce.

Cruise north to Great Guana Cay, home of Nipper's Beach Bar & Grill. Walk up the dusty trail and you'll be greeted with a riot of colorful beach umbrellas, boisterous multi-level, open-air bars, and music dancing across the ocean breeze. The distinctive "anything goes" vibe caters to a diverse cross section of Bahamas' locals and visitors alike. Take this opportunity to sample the Goombay Smash, a strong and sweet concoction of coconut and dark rums, apricot brandy and pineapple juice. It's enjoyed with such abundance here, it might as well be the official drink of the Abacos. Get caught up in the party on the dance floor, find a secluded nook above it all, or descend the steps that lead to a seven-mile stretch of powder soft sandy beach. A coral reef is only a short

swim offshore, and ideal for an afternoon snorkel.

NATURAL WONDERS

Back at Abaco Beach Resort in Marsh Harbour, there is still plenty of natural beauty to discover on land. Arrange for a nature tour with guide Ricky Johnson, who creates customized trips that include birding for the Abaco Parrot, discovering the mysterious blue holes, and kayaking. The blue holes are geological wonders attracting scuba divers the world over who embark on advanced cave dives hundreds of feet below the surface. Diver or not, they're a marvel to see even from dry land.

There's something about the fluid beauty of the clear, shallow Sea of Abaco and the islands it engulfs, along with the friendly humor of the locals that nurtures an easy, sustained contentment. One thing is for certain—after you've experienced the Abacos, you'll soon be daydreaming of a return trip; not to discover more, but to do more of the same at an even more leisurely pace. ~

Shayne Benowitz is a writer, traveler, and occasional deckhand based in Miami Beach, Florida. Her work can be found in both regional and national magazines and on the web. Follow her adventures on Twitter @ShayneBenowitz.

View of the Hopetown Harbor from the lighthouse

