

# ISLAND

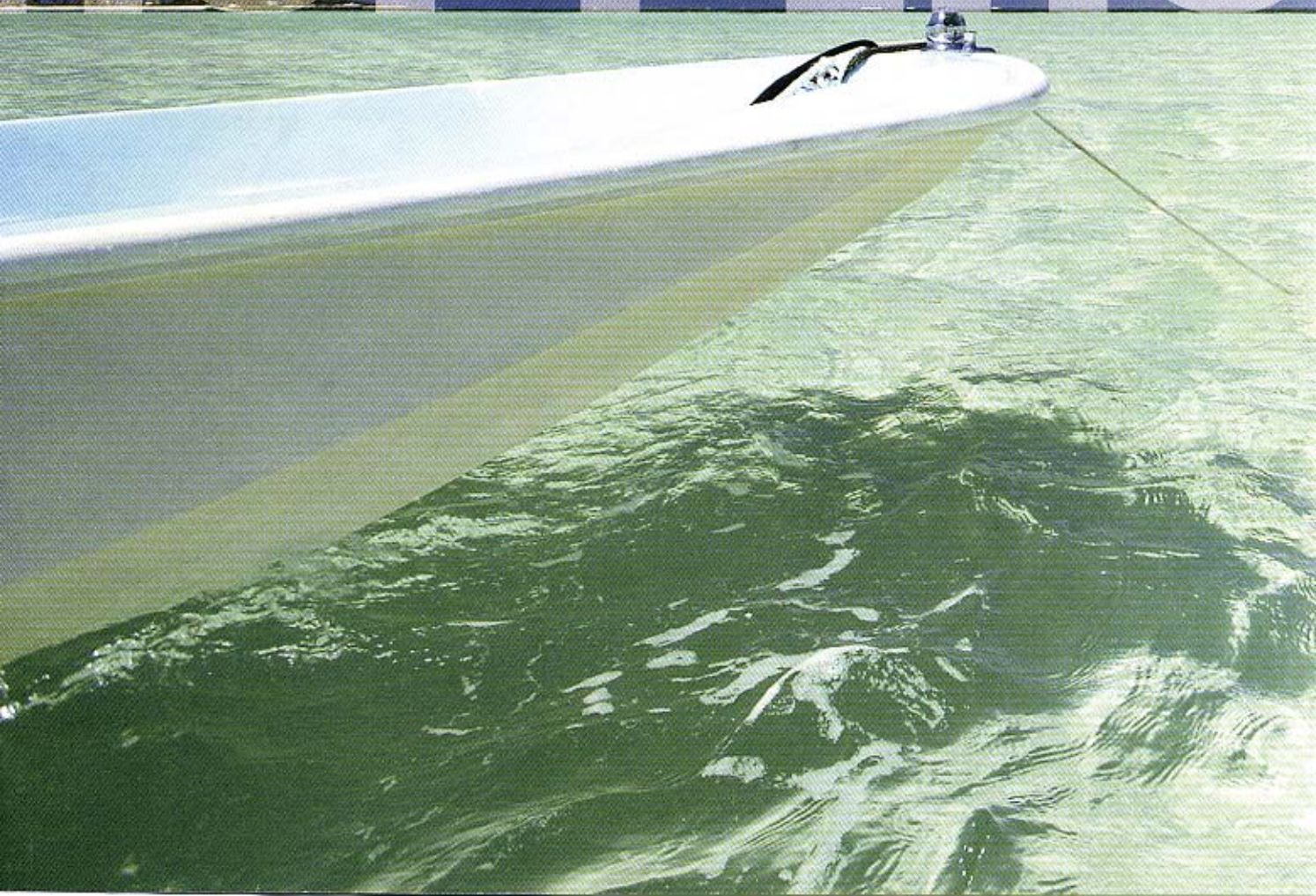
STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY JAY COYLE





By large boat or small, the Abacos have some of the best cruising grounds in the Bahamas.

# HOPPING





I subscribe to the popular notion that it's better in the Bahamas. Gin-clear water, friendly people, cold Kalik and cracked conch are among the simple pleasures to be found in this

island nation. There's great boating, too. More specifically, there are excellent opportunities for island-hopping. The Bahamas are big. The Magic Kingdom of cruising destinations, there are about 700 islands and nearly 2,500 cays, all spread across 10,000 square miles of ocean. Within that area, is there one place that's best for jumping from one island gem to another? At the risk of instigating a dockside brawl, I contend it's best in the Abacos.

Located in the northern Bahamas, Great Abaco is a large island that's protected from the open ocean by the Sea of Abaco and a jewel-like chain of outer islands, some of which have small settlements—New Plymouth on Green Turtle Cay, Hope Town on Elbow Cay and Man-o-War among them. Each town can be reached by small boat from Marsh Harbour, which is the largest settlement on Great Abaco. While the outer islands share a common history, each has a unique atmosphere and charm that has lured me back to cruise the area time and time again.



ILLUSTRATION BY STEVE STANKIEWICZ







**DOWN TO THE SEA:** On an island, all roads eventually lead to water, as does this lush byway at Man-o-War, just one of the charming towns to be found in the Abacos.



## ADVENTURES IN SMALL BOATS

ABACO WATERMEN ARE MASTERS of small-boat seamanship as small boats have always been the vehicle of choice for getting about. Given this fact, the ideal platform for island hopping here is a 20-foot Albury, a local-built boat, although I've managed to get around in lesser craft. Both Man-o-War and Hope Town are about five miles from Marsh Harbor, a distance I have traversed in my 13-foot Boston Whaler tender on many occasions. Green Turtle Cay, about 19 miles to the north, and Little Harbour, approximately 14 miles south, are a bit more of an adventure but very doable if the weather is agreeable.

If you cruise without a suitable tender, small boat rentals, including 20-foot and 23-foot Alburys, are available. And if you'd rather not be captain for the day, there's regular ferry service to and from each settlement.

club's bar has been papered with a curious mixture of autographed currency and yacht burgees, the calling cards left behind by cruising yachtsmen. There's a marina at the club and accommodations ashore. Dining is by reservation only.

The Bluff House Beach Hotel and Yacht Club is across the harbor. If your timing is right, you'll beach the tender in time for the Bahamian barbecue and a performance by the Gully Roosters, who call themselves the "number one band in the nation."

New Plymouth is on the south end of Green Turtle Cay and has the salty feel of its New England namesake. The island is a mile wide and three miles long, so rent a golf cart. For a quiet retreat, try Black Sound Marina or the Other Shore Club—both are a short walk from town. A Goombay Smash at Miss Emily's Blue Bee Bar is a must.

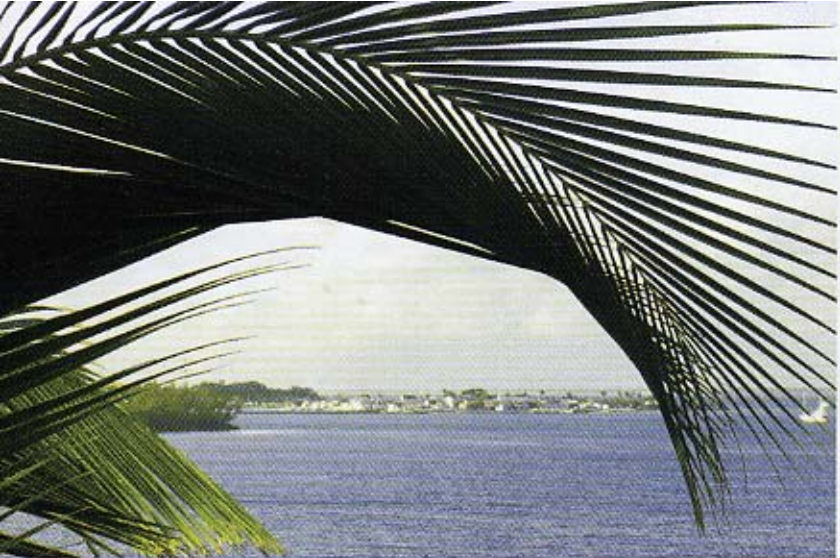
Hope Town on Elbow Cay is easily identified by its signature

The Lucayan Indians called the Abacos home for about 800 years prior to the arrival of the first Spanish explorers in 1500. Suffering slave raids and bouts with European diseases, they all but vanished, leaving the islands a haven for pirates. British loyalists and freed slaves settled the Abacos following the American Revolutionary War. To survive, they tried their hand at farming, but the thin soil gave up little more than they could eat. Their fortunes would come from the sea, particularly since passing ships were regularly running afoul of the offshore reefs. Wrecks became a lucrative business. A sponge industry came and went, as did sales in shark oil and skins. Today, scale fish, crawfish and conch are still harvested, but it's tourism that drives the economy.

## Abacos Gems

When experienced boaters think of the Abacos, most recall the Green Turtle club, which was founded in 1964 on Green Turtle Cay. Over the years the





red-and-white-striped lighthouse, which was built by the British Imperial Lighthouse Service in 1863. The light's rotating kerosene-lit Fresnel lens is still in service. The surrounding settlement's gingerbread-trimmed structures, laid-back atmosphere and superb beaches have made Hope Town a popular destination for boaters and tourists in search of a charming vacation rental home. Given this, there are a variety of good restaurants and bars to explore. The Hope Town Harbour Lodge is worth a visit. You can expect to see a swarm of tenders there, as well as at Cap'n Jack's when food and drink are served. In fact, Hope Town Harbor is often a busy place, so call ahead if you're interested in finding dockage here. A good alternative is Sea Spray Resort & Marina. The tidy facility is located 3.5 miles south of the settlement at White Sound. It has 40 slips, a restaurant, shoreside accommodations and beach access. While in Hope Town, don't miss the oceanfront dining at the Abaco Inn.

Man-o-War Cay is smaller than both Green Turtle Cay and Elbow Cay but it's populated by very industrious residents whose work has drawn attention to the entire Abacos region. The people who live on Man-o-War are kind, friendly and honest. Alcohol isn't served on the island, but some of the best cracked conch and home-baked bread is. Man-o-War Marina is neat as a pin and benefits from the natural protection that the island's excellent harbor affords. There's a well-stocked dive shop (although sources say it could be torn down sometime in the future) and several casual restaurants are steps away from the marina. The island's hardware and grocery stores are well-stocked and Edwin's boatyards (there are two of them) serve the local fleet as well as knowledgeable yachtsmen from the U.S. Don't forget to stop by Albury Brothers Boatbuilding shop to drool over the beautiful skills.

### Routes Less Traveled

In addition to New Plymouth, Hope Town and Man-o-War, the area's touchstones to the past, there are other places to explore by small boat that while lesser known, are just as charming. Given its great seaside hangout (Nippers Beach Bar and Grill) and excellent marina

## WHERE TO STAY

### MARSH HARBOUR

Abaco Beach Resort & Boat Harbour,  
(242) 367-2158. [www.abacoresort.com](http://www.abacoresort.com)  
Conch Inn Hotel & Marina,  
(242) 367-4000. [www.conchinn.com](http://www.conchinn.com)  
Harbour View Marina,  
(242) 367-3910. [www.harbourviewmarina.com](http://www.harbourviewmarina.com)  
Marsh Harbour Marina,  
(242) 367-2700. [www.jibroom.com](http://www.jibroom.com)

### GREEN TURTLE CAY

Green Turtle Club, Hotel, Resort & Marina,  
(242) 365-4271. [www.greenturtleclub.com](http://www.greenturtleclub.com)  
Bluff House Beach Hotel & Yacht Club,  
(242) 365-4247. [www.bluffhouse.com](http://www.bluffhouse.com)  
The Other Shore Club,  
(242) 365-4226. [www.othershoreclub.com](http://www.othershoreclub.com)  
Black Sound Marina,  
(242) 365-4531. [www.oil.net/blacksound](http://www.oil.net/blacksound)

### MAN-O-WAR CAY

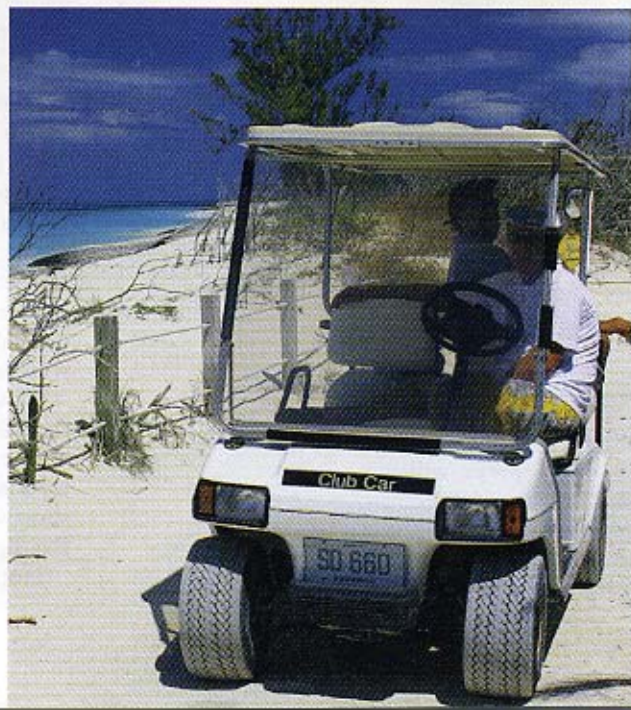
Man-o-War Cay Marina,  
(242) 365-6008. [www.oil.net/mowmarina](http://www.oil.net/mowmarina)

### ELBOW CAY

Club Soleil Resort (Hope Town),  
(242) 366-0003 [www.clubsoleil.com](http://www.clubsoleil.com)  
Light House Marina (Hope Town),  
(242) 366-0154. [www.htlighthousemarina.com](http://www.htlighthousemarina.com)  
Hope Town Hideaways Marina (Hope Town),  
(242) 366-0224. [www.hopetown.com](http://www.hopetown.com)  
Sea Spray Resort & Marina (White Sound),  
(242) 366-0065. [www.seasprayresort.com](http://www.seasprayresort.com)

### GREAT GUANA CAY

Orchid Bay Yacht Club & Marina,  
(242) 365-5175. [www.orchidbay.net](http://www.orchidbay.net)  
Treasure Cay Hotel, Resort & Marina,  
(242) 365-8250. [www.treasurecay.com](http://www.treasurecay.com)







**SITE LINES:** If you climb to the top of the famous red-and-white-striped lighthouse at Hope Town on Elbow Cay, you get an amazing view of the water, white beaches and gingerbread-trimmed buildings in town.

The resort occupies one of the nicest stretches of beach in the Bahamas, the very spot where the first loyalist settlers set up camp. Treasure Cay can also be reached by car from Marsh Harbour and has a small airport. If you follow the Sea of Abaco south you'll discover Little Harbour and Pete's Pub and Gallery. Like his father, Pete Johnston casts bronze sculpture. His beach-front bar serves food and beverage and it's worth a trip.

## Getting There

When I first visited the Abacos in the early 1960s, just getting there was a big adventure. Electronics were not what they are today, so most boaters made educated guesses to figure out where they were on the chart. At that time, wise yachtsmen often solicited the services of a local pilot. Reading the water was an important skill back then, and it still is today. I'd also recommend carrying a copy of Steve Dodge's brilliant "Guide to Abaco." The book will enable capable boaters to cruise these waters confidently.

To reach the Abacos from the U.S. mainland you must first cross the Gulf Stream. If it's your first time, I suggest crossing from Palm Beach to Grand

(Orchid Bay Yacht Club & Marina) a visit to the small settlement on Great Guana Cay is a must. Nipper's Sunday pig roast should not be missed. For a taste of the resort lifestyle, which would include a round of golf, consider a visit to the Treasure Cay Hotel Resort and Marina.

Bahama, a distance of approximately 55 nautical miles. Old Bahama Bay at West End is a great place to clear customs and a great Bahamas destination in its own right. Remember to bring passports and your vessel's registration/documentation. From Old Bahama Bay, boats with less than five feet of draft can transit Indian Cay Channel, others will have to enter the bank a bit farther north. Remember, this is the Bahamas and the term "channel" is more concept than reality, so take care.

After crossing the Little Bahama Bank and rounding the northern tip of Little Abaco Island, you'll find Spanish Cay, a great stop for good food, fishing and diving. Heading south you'll enter the relatively protected waters of the Sea of Abaco and discover Green Turtle Cay. While a small boat with a draft of less than three feet can pass over the sandbar that crosses the Sea of Abaco just south of Green Turtle Cay, larger boats must pass offshore around Whale Cay. In the wrong conditions, this roundabout can be dangerous, so read the cruising guide.

Farther south you will find Man-o-War Cay, Marsh Harbour and Elbow Cay. Marsh Harbour on Great Abaco is an excellent base for exploration. It offers a selection of marinas and restaurants, shopping and an airport with daily flights to and from South Florida. For a full-blown resort atmosphere the Abaco Beach Resort & Boat Harbour is a great retreat.

Having spent a lot of time exploring these waters, I rate the Abacos as one of the best places in the Bahamas to cruise to by boat and explore by skiff or tender. If you're wondering which of these islands is my favorite, I confess I have yet to decide, but it's sure fun doing the research. ☺

