BAHAMAS 2024 SPECIAL

Bountiful Bahamas

Charter options, from bareboat sailing yachts to the grandest crewed superyachts, abound in the Bahamas.

by Lauren Beck



Tourists explore the wreckage of Pablo Escobar's plane on Norman's Cay.

ADOBE STOCK/DRONEVIDEOSDALLAS/WIRESTOCK CREATORS

You don't need to venture far from the U.S. to find paradise—the Bahamas archipelago stretches 760 miles along Florida's East Coast and south. With hundreds of islands and cays nestled among the world's clearest ocean, it's easy to imagine yourself soaking up the sun while sipping a tropical beverage on that picture-perfect white-sand beach.

Forget the hotel ashore. Finding your own personal paradise is much easier on a boat. "You get to see a much larger portion and see parts of the country you most definitely would not otherwise," says Capt. Kelly J. Gordon, who has traveled extensively in the Bahamas.

"Chartering in the Bahamas is a naturalist's and water sport enthusiast's paradise," says Daphne d'Offay, senior charter manager and group director with Ocean Independence in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. "While the three major islands have casinos, nightlife, and shopping, the remaining six hundred and ninety-seven are picturesque, peaceful, and truly make any visitor feel as if they have found an exclusive island or islet of their own."

Don't expect Miami nightlife in this naturalist's nirvana. The perfect guest here loves the outdoors—snorkeling, diving, fishing, swimming, relaxing on the beach, or playing with the water toys.

Popular Sites

The Exumas are a popular destination, especially for first-timers, d'Offay says. You can do it all in this chain of 365 islands, which are broken up into three areas: Great Exuma, Little Exuma, and the Exuma Cays.

The Exumas lie south of Nassau, and a typical week itinerary could include a Nassau start before heading to Highbourne Cay for snorkeling and beach time. Capt. Gordon recommends eating ashore at Xuma, reputedly one of the best restaurants in the Exumas.

Norman's Cay, well-known for its pirate past, entices with its stunning snorkeling options and the opportunity to dive Pablo Escobar's plane wreck. (You could fly in on a private plane and avoid the Nassau chaos, too.) More exquisite nature calls in Warderick Wells Cay, the Exuma Cays Land and Sea Park headquarters. The largest underwater sea park is renowned for its beauty and biodiversity with plenty to do above and below the ocean.

Another Capt. Gordon favorite is O'Brien's Cay, which is tucked away and close to The Aquarium. "It's just gorgeous with the corals and the sea life," she says.

Don't miss Compass Cay, famous for swimming with the nurse sharks, one of Gordon's top three Bahamas experiences. Another is swimming with the pigs at Big Major Cay.

Not to be missed is Staniel Cay. Check out the famous Thunderball Grotto and experience the iconic Staniel Cay Yacht Club for a drink or dinner. "What's really cool about it is that a lot of the time, you're limited to whatever the local catch is that day, but it's guaranteed fresh," she says.



Staniel Cay Yacht Club

D'Offay recommends bookending trips with more "elevated experiences"—casinos, spas, restaurants, and a little boutique shopping.

If you've previously visited, she suggests branching out and exploring Harbour Island and Eleuthera in combination with the upper Exumas. "What's becoming popular for the really experienced Bahamas cruiser is getting to the Out Islands in the southern region, which are very remote, with lots of amazing fishing and deeper water," she says.

And even if you're not an angler, "you should try to fish no matter what because you're getting a fresh catch," d'Offay says. "If you love seafood, it can be your dinner every night."

Those deeper waters present good SCUBA diving opportunities. If you find a boat that offers dive options, grab it quickly, d'Offay suggests. Otherwise, you can arrange rendezvous dives in certain areas. Or you can simply snorkel or SNUBA because much of the Bahamian water is clear and shallow.

It's also a great spot for water sports. While there are numerous land and sea parks to observe, it's possible to use all toys almost anywhere, d'Offay says. More toy companies are supporting yacht charters, too, so if a guest really wants a specific item, you can get it easily.

Having a good tender is key on a larger vessel. It earns its stripes by carrying guests back and forth to shore or to explore while the mothership anchors nearby. "It's important to look when you're chartering a boat to make sure they do have a tender because the waters are so shallow that you need a tender to be able to go explore all the nooks and crannies," Gordon says.

Bareboat Charter

Yacht options abound, catering to various preferences and budgets, from bareboat to crewed yachts, encompassing both monohull and multihull power and sailing vessels of assorted sizes. The Moorings has an extensive fleet, and you can select vessels based on any criteria, including vessel age.

ADOBE STOCK/HAPPYALEX



The 116-foot motoryacht Entrepreneur *charters in the Bahamas through Ocean Independence.*

YACHTING IMAGE/MY ENTREPRENEUR

A bareboat charter puts you in the driver's seat—select your own boat and itinerary, and all provisioning, cooking, and boat handling is on you. A bareboat sailing rental on a 42-foot catamaran can start around $7,900 for six people for a week, plus fees and expenses. A bareboat rental on a 43-foot powered catamaran starts at around $7,700 per week for six. Prices will vary based on season, duration, boat and charter type, base, and more. Guests can also pay for a chef, which can cost a few hundred dollars a day.

Before booking a bareboat, however, the Moorings will review your sailing credentials. You may choose to have a skipper on board for the first afternoon to familiarize you with the vessel. You can also hire a skipper for the duration.

For the crewed charter, which includes a captain and chef, rates can start around $21,000 per week for six people on a 50-foot catamaran. The Moorings has a base in the Abacos and the Exumas, so charterers can customize their itinerary with the captain.

All foreign-flagged charters must pay a four percent Bahamas cruising fee plus an additional 10 percent VAT for a total of 14 percent of the charter rate. You will have to pay any dockage and mooring fees too.

Superyacht Charter

Size up for more luxury and charter a superyacht. Boats can range from 80 feet to as large as 200 feet plus—like the 116-foot motoryacht *Entrepreneur*, which is available for charter in the Bahamas. Most will include a captain, chef, and a



full crew who handle all charter needs like provisioning, cooking, and navigating. A superyacht can also offer an extensive toy chest, including paddleboards, e-Foils, Jet Skis, dive equipment, slides, SEABOBS, and more.

While chartering costs vary depending on vessel size, d'Offay says a five-stateroom yacht with good volume, approximately 110 feet to 130 feet, is likely going to cost an average of $120,000 a week; with tax, food, and drink, it could be up to $130,000 to $135,000. Discretionary service gratuity could also raise the total.

South Florida and the Bahamas are saturated with good options, but some boats based in South Florida—especially smaller ones—may charge a delivery fee for fuel costs to get to the Bahamas. You could select another boat, but d'Offay cautions to make sure the other vessel is the best fit for your charter needs.

Once out on the water, your Bahamas playground beckons. Go wild!

TRAVEL TIPS

- The Bahamas is relatively hassle-free, with minimal red tape. All travelers, including U.S. citizens, require a passport. Nassau's Lynden Pindling International Airport implements TSA PreCheck, and Paradise Island facilitates pre-clearance for U.S. Customs and Immigration Services.
- Private flight options are available through several fixed-base operators (FBO), like Jet Nassau and Odyssey Aviation. For a fee, the Bahamas Ministry of Tourism offers expedited services at the airport when flying commercial or transferring to the FBO from Nassau. You can also fly into George Town, Staniel Cay, Norman's Cay, or Eleuthera.
- A daily ferry runs from Fort Lauderdale to Grand Bahama Island, approximately three hours, but make sure it makes sense for your charter base location.
- The Moorings can help organize travel, and brokers can recommend travel arrangements.
- D'Offay recommends your broker organize transportation to the boat to ensure you get a reliable vehicle and driver. Minimize carrying valuables, check travel advisories, and be aware of your surroundings.

