

Subject/Area: Bahamas

We left in June for the Bahamas with the goal to visit all the islands we missed in the past and as in the past, we loved the Bahamas. Luc says so many European cruisers miss the Bahamas hurrying to the States or back to Europe. It would be worth spending a full year there to wait for the next season. A few highlights on some of the Bahamian islands we visited.

Andros: With a shoal draft vessel you'll find few other boats and an unspoiled destination. With directions from locals, we found the famous blue hole in Conch Sound. In 1982, an expedition laid over 3000 feet of line in one of the caves. We entered only a short distance as a strong current was pushing out, then explored the formations at the mouth. As we rounded one corner we thought we entered the Twilight Zone as we saw an eerie silhouette in the gloom --a helmeted figure perched on a rock surrounded by huge gas bottles. As surprised to see us, as we were to see him, the apparition wrote on his slate he had only 20 more minutes of hours of decompression to do then he'd meet us on the surface. Brian works at the AUTECH Base at Fresh Creek and is one of the top cave divers in the world. He'd just finished a 4000 ft. plus penetration and had the '82 Expedition's flag in his bedroom!

If you visit Fresh Creek contact Brian or his friend Brad at Small Hope Bay dive center for information about the blue hole locations and dives. They will advise you as we do never be tempted to dive blue holes without specialized training since they have claimed numerous lives of untrained divers every year. Brad offers specialty dives and instruction for all levels. Fresh Creek is a nice stop. It's a small basin with 23 free moorings (recommended, as swirling currents make anchoring difficult). Inquire of locals about Capt. Bill's Blue Hole, which is really a non-dangerous inland sink/swimming hole.

Long Island has a lot to offer! We visited three areas at different times.

North: Calabash Bay with a shallow draft, you can get up close to land for better protection. For fun take the dinghy into Joe's Sound and explore. There are several blue holes or "boiling holes", called such when the current pushes out. It is safe to snorkel them and they are loaded with fish. Stop at the cement jetty and walk into Seymours. The folks are very friendly and happy to share information. People gave us water from the church cistern and even drove our jerry jugs to the jetty.

One fellow, Neville, showed us a couple of land caves and in one we mounted an expedition, with another couple, crawling many yards on hands and knees through bat droppings and cockroaches dragging scuba tanks to dive the crystal clear water when the caves continued below the water level, but we never found Neville's imagined treasure!

Central The well known land cave is very nice with many places where sunlight filters in illuminating the extensive stalactites and stalagmites and the labyrinth is just complex enough to be exciting and still not get completely lost! To find take the main north/south road of the island. A couple miles south of Deadman's Cay settlement, you'll see a house with a sign ""Cave Tours" where you can get a guide if you'd like. Go back north from the main road about 500 yds. A dirt road

goes up the hill off the east side. Park near the gate across the road and the cave entrance is down in the ravine to the left of the gate.

Be sure to hit Long Island at mango season (July). Many people will give away surplus ripe ones. There is an abundance of other fruits and veggies grown there, unlike the other Bahama Islands. Take advantage!

South You can find a good anchorage in East winds (not SE) with a shoal draft just off the community of Gordon -- watch for shallow bars here and there and find beautiful white sand over 6'-7' of water.

East: Clarence Townworth a visit, just as Ivoire recommended. Picturesque setting with the two unique churches. Great dinghy exploration and snorkeling from a base anchorage at Sandy Point off Strachan Cay. Calm in E winds.

San Salvador This is the SCUBA diver cruiser's ideal island. There are SCUBA mooring buoys (about 40) all along the West and South side, many right along the "wall" giving easy access to some great diving. The dive operators don't mind you using the moorings as long as you defer to them when they want the site.

Club Med dive instructors clued us in on one site in French Bay called "The Crevasses", where towering coral formations formed alleys and tunnels leading out to the drop-off where you suddenly find yourself hanging over the blackness of hundreds of feet of water. Spectacular!

Little San Salvador: From the only protected anchorage, it's a long dinghy trip to the "creek", but it was worth it. Best snorkeling was at the entrance where there's plenty of current. Further in the creek we saw a dark shadow move in the shallow water, an 7-8 ft. Nurse Shark! Suddenly we saw another, then two more, then another. We saw at least 50 nurse sharks, probably many more, in the shallow lagoon over fine sandy bottom, seeming to sleep. Many were in pairs --mating?

We snorkeled over to several pairs, which lazily glided away, but they were all physically the same and very fat pregnant females? Perhaps at this time of year (July 31) the lagoon serves as a giant nursery. NotemNurse Sharks are harmless and the only way to get into trouble is to grab them or put your fingers in their mouth. They will suck your fingers like a vacuum cleaner! Exuma: Georgetown was its usual yachtie's hangout. A nice place for rest and socialization. We had fun at the potlucks and Two Turtle's BBQ. Commodores Crile and Judy (Windstar) and Sharon and Jim (Rage) were very gracious and we thank them again for their recommendation letters for us to become Commodores.

Commodores Stephen and Janet (Ivoire) were enthusiastic about the Jumentos Cays and Ragged Islands, and we were convinced to visit this unfrequented chain.

Jumentos (Ragged Islands) We suspect that the scant coverage in the Cruising Guides, the tricky access to these cays and the stories about swelly anchorages and numerous sharks all combine to keep all but the intrepid from some fine cruising.

The three best anchorages in E-SE winds to 20-25 K were #1 Hog Cay, #2 Buena Vista near the lone palm in the middle of the island, #3 Little Water Cay. These had little or no swell; most times we anchored in 5-7 feet of water, and even though over sand, it's best to dive and help dig the anchor in while the helmsman is setting it. Other good anchorages were Flamingo Cay, Raccoon

Cay, Johnson Cay, near the pass between Ragged and Little Ragged. For these, we used a trick suggested by Rage; rigging a bridle fore and aft and adjusting it along the anchor line till the bow faces the swell. Works like a charm and what a difference.

The cays are great for snorkeling, spear fishing, diving and exploring. All can be done on the protected side without going out of the passes into the rough deep water. With a 4 foot draft we also made it into Duncan Town and down to Ragged Island on the rising tide. Only from Johnson's Cay down would the deeper draft vessels have to go outside.

Ivoire gave us coordinates for "blue hole" they discovered two miles off Little Water Cay which was a giant sink hole and a fantastic SCUBA dive. Over 100 ft in diameter, the reefs around the mouth range in depth from 9' to 25' with a strong current around the hole but none once inside the protection of the walls of the hole which drop off vertically to a thermocline and visibility line at 120' after which the water is warm and cloudy to the bottom at around 140'-150'. In the clear water zone we saw lots of lobster, big groupers, 2 huge Loggerhead Turtles, Reef and Nurse Sharks cruising the cutbacks, overhangs and grottos of the wall. Impressive!

We spotted a shallower sinkhole 3/4 mile from Little Water Cay at 23_01'57N/75_44'65W. The bottom is around 50' and the surrounding reef at 20'-25'. We made our own little Jumentos "Cruising Guide" and sent a copy to Home Base if any one is interested in trying a new chain in the Bahamas, and meeting some very friendly Bahamians. Some fishermen went out of their way to warn us that we were headed for very shallow water on our present course!

Crooked Island: Windsor Point Anchorage, which is mentioned in the cruising guides, should be called Hell's Anchorage in E-SE winds! Don't think that the shallows to the east will protect you. We got 4 ft swells, strong sideways tidal currents and dragging anchors on a hard bottom. We left at daybreak in disgust leaving all those big conchs we'd seen upon anchoring the evening before!

We suggest Windsor Point Light as a better area with better holding in 20'-30' if you need to over night in that area.

Landrail Point is a favorite for many cruisers because of the very nice community there and generous people who gave us fruits, coconuts, well water and a lift to the dinghy with the jerry jugs. The bottom is thin sand over hard rock, near the fisherman's landing, but north of the geodesic dome house is good sand. If the wind goes West, go north to Portland Harbor, watching for coral heads. SCUBA diving along the wall just out from the dome house, and just north of Landrail is great! Beautiful topography with lots of nooks and crannies to explore and just a short dinghy ride from the anchorage. Pittstown Point lighthouse is an interesting visit and a good, and a deep wall dive is right off the light.

Those with polarized glasses and good light can go inside the reef weaving around the easily spotted coral heads all the way past Gordon's Bluff. As is typical with the cruising guides, a cave was mentioned but not how to get there! By quizzing many locals, and crashing through a lot of brush and after many false leads, we found the caves which were quite interesting, not extensive but a lot of light coming through overhead holes. For those interested in taking the big

boat or a powerful dinghy to find the caves, refer to page 54 of the Bahamas Chart Kit. Go Pittstown Point inside the "lagoon." Weave around reefs, pass Gun Point (a rocky point with an octagonal house and remains of a small pier). Go to next big bluff, Gordon's Bluff. (as you approach you can see an old rock wall built on the side). Round this bluff and you see a long white sand beach. Take dinghy to this beach. About 100 yards from the beginning of the beach, turn inland. Look for a path (in '92 there was a "marker", a 5 gallon jug on a stick but was rotted and barely recognizable. The path goes back into the trees, which hide the cave entrance. Good luck and don't give up!

West Plana Cay: Try to go when weather is mild with east winds, for this island is quite exposed, but very nice to visit with white sand beaches, some fishermen shacks and a pretty pond on the bluffs above the exposed south side where we had some pretty fruitful beach combing. As at Landrail, there is good SCUBA diving on the wall a short dinghy ride from the west side. There are conchs galore on the hard bottom of the south end out towards the reefs.

Mayaguana: As others have mentioned, the trip from Plana Cays to Mayaguana was, as cruising guides would say, "lively," (as sailing in a washing machine). Also we witnessed an awesome sight as a convoy crossed our path. Later we found that we had rightly guessed that it was the US forces headed for Haiti!

Our cruising guide gave the impression that the anchorage at the NW Light was maybe good for the night if your landfall was at dusk, but for better, move to Pirates' Well. We found just the opposite. Forget Pirates' Well, you'll run out of water before you get anywhere close, and in an E wind, there's no protection. At NW Light, however, we were well protected from strong E and SE winds; we had a fabulous SCUBA dive on the wall just west of the light; we found conch and a cistern of rain water right at the light. A good day trip and great spear fishing can be had by going on the "inside" to the cays NE of the NW Point.

A hint for those in need of a lot of fuel is to call on VHF "Mayaguana Radio" and get it delivered by truck to the mail boat dock just a stone's throw south of the NW light. Put out lots of fenders and have your own siphon hose. It cost us US\$30 delivery fee but it beats trying to jerry jug with a dinghy through 1/4 mile of choppy water at Abraham's Bay.

Abraham's Bay is not so comfortable in E-SE winds, and it's better away from the town area, go west and get behind the barrier reef. The SE pass near Guano Point is not complicated to negotiate in good light.

Whew! Thus ended our odyssey of the Bahamas. We have a special spot in our hearts for the Family Islands. We'll be delighted when we pass that way again.

May 1995

Luc & Jackie on s/v Sloepmouche