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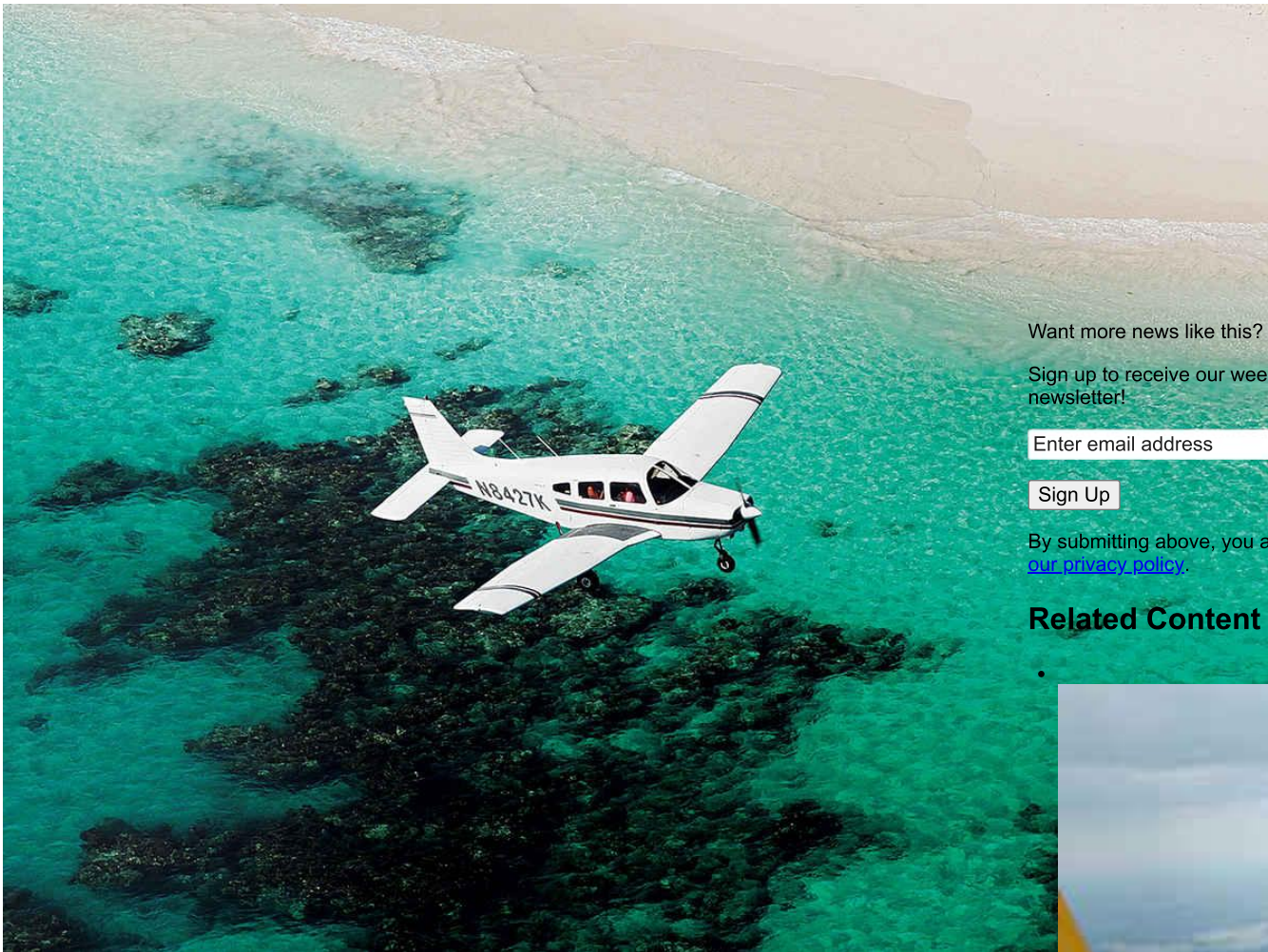
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## Pilots in Paradise: Flying the Bahamas' Out Islands

A winter-weary pilot and his friends explore the Bahamas' Out Islands.

By [Sam Weigel](#) Posted December 28, 2015



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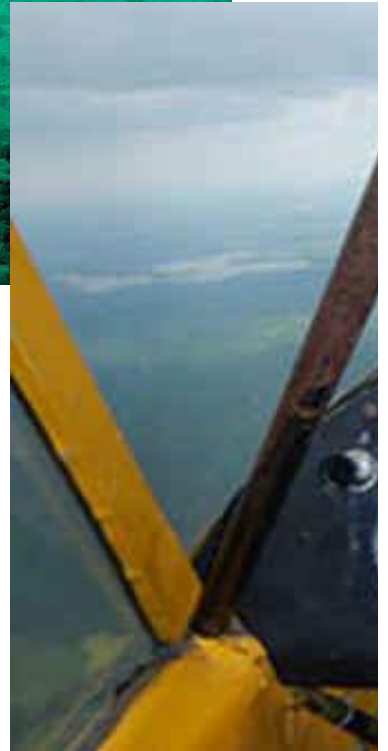
### The Great Blue Beyond

I'm not proud to say it, but last winter got the best of this northern aviator. The face-numbing cold and monochromatic gloom wore at me until I just couldn't take it anymore. The breaking point came on a brutally raw January morning as I attempted to preheat and start my Piper Pacer after it sat outside overnight in a minus-30-degree windchill. A frigid hour and a jump-start later, I shivered in the cold-soaked cockpit as Dawn and I winged our way home across a snow-swept Minnesota landscape.

"Why the hell do I do this to myself?" I muttered angrily. Stony silence was my long-suffering wife's only answer. I suddenly realized that as the new owner of a vintage but reliable 105-knot airplane, I had little excuse for frostbitten misery. Only the week prior, on descent into Nassau for work, I had looked down on a lovely stretch of deserted beach in the Bahamas' Berry Islands, noticed a nearby airstrip, and daydreamt of flying the Pacer there. What exactly was stopping me?

Two months after this frozen epiphany, I gazed down upon a glittering turquoise sea a thousand feet below, window vents open and warm tropical air wafting through the Pacer's cabin. Dawn clutched my arm in wonderment as she surveyed the Exuma Cays' aquamarine patchwork of cuts, reefs and sandy islets. My brother Steve snapped away busily from the back seat with his Canon, occasionally opening the rear door for a clear shot of the Piper Warrior following close behind. Our friends waved back from the other airplane, then resumed their own study of the otherworldly seascape passing beneath our wings.

"It doesn't even seem real," Dawn said, and I knew she wasn't just talking about the scenery. Flying our own airplane to a tropical foreign country was an improbable dream only a year ago — yet here we were on a 3,200-mile expedition involving two airplanes, seven islands, a herd of swimming pigs, a 46-foot catamaran and a literal boatload of friends.



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The tropical waters of the bahamas' out islands afford an abundance of spectacular photo backdrops.



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Whether you're flying above them or relaxing in the surf...

### A Plan Takes Shape

The Bahamas have long been a popular vacation spot, but relatively few tourists venture beyond the luxury resorts of Nassau, the duty-free shopping in Freeport, or the cruise lines' handful of rum-soaked, faux-paradisiacal private islets. Yet just beyond the madding crowds lie what the Bahamians fondly call the "Family Islands," a spectacular archipelago of some 700 isles and cays sprinkled across 590 miles of sparkling sea from the Abacos to the Inaguas. Only 29 of these are considered inhabited; the rest form a pristine watery wilderness visited by relatively few tourists because — lucky for us — one generally needs a small boat or light airplane to go there. These are the Bahamas I wanted to explore.

My Pacer, though 62 years old and strictly VFR, was well suited to the voyage. The Out Islands are peppered with more than 50 landing sites ranging from busy international airports to short crushed-coral private strips. Fuel is scarce, requiring decent range and careful planning. It goes without saying that any trip to the Bahamas involves a lot of time over open water, but one can reduce the exposure by following the island chains. Besides the FAA-mandated life vest for each passenger, it's customary to carry a life raft as well; with many Florida FBOs renting them at reasonable prices, it would be silly not to.

One of the best ways to increase overwater safety is by traveling in a convoy of two or more airplanes, which also makes for pleasant company and spectacular aerial photography opportunities. I looked for a second airplane to rent in South Florida, but found that many FBOs there no longer allow their airplanes to go to the Bahamas. I had better luck farther north in sleepy Sebastian, where I discovered Xena Aviation, a friendly mom-and-pop operation that specializes in Bahamian rentals. Its 1981 Piper Warrior would prove to be the Pacer's perfect companion.

My younger brother is an adventurous soul who was on board from the moment I sketched out my island-hopping plan. He soon recruited his freewheeling friend, Jacquie Martin, to accompany us. I had a couple of pilot friends signed up to fly the Warrior, but both fell through the month prior. I scrambled to find replacements but had trouble finding anyone who could make it on short notice. Then I called Kevin Heine, a former simulator training partner and a captain at my airline. He and his fun-loving wife, Jeannie, were sorely tempted, but Kevin hadn't flown a small airplane in a long time and reluctantly passed. After a night to sleep on it and some gentle prodding from Jeannie, though, he changed his mind. "It's too good of an opportunity to miss," he told me. "I'll just do whatever it takes to get current. It's like riding a bike, right?"



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Steve Weigel

My 1953 Piper Pacer proved to be an ideal companion for exploring the Out Islands.

### **Southbound and Down**

Kaboom! The Warrior slammed into Sebastian's Runway 10, weaving drunkenly across the centerline until Kevin poured on the coals and lifted off for another lap around the pattern. "Awright buddy, not too shabby ... but next time you're gonna want to flare a bit lower and use those funny-looking pedals on the floor!" From the back seat, I chuckled at laid-back CFI Jerry Baker's laconic advice. I didn't think it was such a horrible dismount, considering it was Kevin's first single-engine landing in 27 years.

Faced with a 1,200-mile wintertime cross-country, I chose to pre-position the Pacer to Florida a few weeks early. Kevin's home near Atlanta made a convenient stopping point after a long first day circumnavigating low ceilings south of Chicago; the next morning we bucked headwinds to Sebastian and started Kevin's checkout in the Warrior. Fortunately, his landings rapidly improved and he was soon flying the PA-28 like an old pro. Meanwhile, Xena Aviation's friendly co-owner, Stacey Hennessey, plied us with information on border crossings, paperwork and Bahamian flight procedures.

Our chosen date of departure a fortnight later was belatedly moved up by one day thanks to a Presidential golf outing and the associated TFRs. Unfortunately, I arrived late from Minneapolis (via airline), and we had to scramble to make the Saturday afternoon crossing before Freeport customs closed. I hate rushing in — airplanes — least of all when doing something new and unfamiliar.

When I called Lockheed Flight Service to activate our pre-filed international flight plans, they put me on, apparently, indefinite hold. We finally decided to just depart and call airborne — but as we climbed out over the shoreline, Miami Radio wouldn't answer any of its published frequencies. An active flight plan is a hard-and-fast requirement for crossing an air defense identification zone (ADIZ); thankfully, we were finally able to raise Miami just before reaching it. Only then did I breathe a sigh of relief, look around, and notice a lot of deep blue water in every direction. Gulp.





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Steve Weigel

Warm light bathes the tranquil protected anchorage at Hope Town.

### **A Rock-Star Arrival**

The next afternoon, I watched the Warrior peel away to overfly New Providence Island while Nassau Approach vectored the Pacer for the sequence. Our early departure from Florida meant that Dawn missed the previous day's crossing and was instead taking Delta directly to Nassau. I saw no reason why the Warrior's crew should tarry, so we sent Kevin, Jeannie and Jacquie to Norman's Cay for a relaxing afternoon on the beach. Nassau called out traffic to follow to the airport — Dawn's flight — and I banked to follow the lumbering Airbus to Runway 32.

Dawn hadn't really missed much in Freeport, but that morning's 50-mile hop to the Berry Islands was something special. On descent we wheeled over two mammoth, smoke-belching cruise ships disgorging hundreds of passengers onto a couple of small private cays that would have been really lovely if not completely overrun with beach chairs and Tiki bars. We quickly left them behind and, a short distance beyond, flew low down miles of gorgeous, deserted coastline, including the sandy crescent whose high-altitude sighting inspired the trip in the first place. This cove turned out to be the picturesque setting for Carriearl Boutique Hotel and Restaurant. We came to Great Harbour Cay for Carriearl's famous Sunday brunch, but lingered for the lovely views and the peaceful sound of waves breaking on the empty beach.

Dawn emerged from Nassau customs to find Steve and I waiting to whisk her away to her own private airplane. The little yellow Piper looked a bit homely sitting in the shadow of sleek Gulfstreams and Citations — but we were headed to a place these multimillion-dollar machines could only dream of going. As the heavy-laden Pacer lifted off and turned toward Exuma, Dawn exclaimed at the brightly colored coastal waters that gave way to the deep royal blue of the New Providence Channel. Though disappointed she had missed a day of the trip, Dawn admitted that the rock-star treatment on arrival made up for it — and the best was yet to come.

### **Piglets in Paradise**

"There they are!" Jeannie called out, and I cut the engine to let the Boston Whaler drift toward a palm-fringed beach. Sure enough, a large herd of spotted pigs was burrowed in on the water's edge; several had already heard our approach, dived into the crystalline water, and were enthusiastically paddling out to meet us. They swam circles around the boat, oinking noisily. When Jacquie offered one a piece of fruit rind, he hoisted himself up on the gunwales and greedily begged for more. The girls squealed with delight and Steve jumped into the shallow water, leading the grunting boar back to shore.

The famous swimming pigs of Staniel Cay, legend has it, were deposited here in the 1970s by passing sailors who intended to return for a pork roast that never transpired. Instead the enigmatic oinkers went feral, learned to swim, and rooted out a luxurious beachfront existence begging scraps from tourists. They have honed their craft well, for they quickly polished off our leftovers and goaded us into feeding them expensive fresh fruit as well. Apparently pleased with our offal offerings, the photogenic swine gamely hammed it up for our cameras. Jacque fell hard for one particularly winsome piglet; when she scratched his belly, he rolled over in the sand and promptly fell asleep. "I'm sure he'd fit in the Warrior," she pleaded.

From the air, the Exumas are a spectacular riot of otherworldly color, making a low flight down the chain an unforgettably scenic experience. Lying southeast of Nassau, the islands form a porous border between the warm, shallow Grand Bahama Bank to the west and the cool depths of the Atlantic to the east. A huge variety of sea and bird life converge upon these rich waters, and many of the cays are protected national park land. The only signs of human life for miles on end are sailboats and trawlers slowly negotiating the byzantine waters and the rare marooned house on a half-drowned islet. Halfway down the chain, Staniel Cay's isolated settlement and 3,000-foot airstrip materialize out of the watery maze. A popular stopover and resupply point for boaters, Staniel Cay also makes a convenient base for aviators wanting a closer look at the eye-popping beauty below.

We stayed in Staniel Cay for two nights and had one full day to explore by boat. After playing with the pigs, we checked out desolate sandy cays, leaped into Thunderball Grotto, waded with nurse sharks and stingrays, and visited friendly, endangered Exuma iguanas — and yet we never ventured more than a couple of miles from Staniel Cay. "Two nights here really weren't enough. You could easily spend a week," noted Kevin at dinner that night. "Or two." Like piglets in paradise, I suspected we could gorge ourselves endlessly on Exuma's many charms. But we'd have to content ourselves with a small sampling this time, for other adventures beckoned just over the horizon.



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Steve Weigel

Meeting the friendly swimming pigs of Staniel Cay is likely one of the most unique wildlife experiences in the world.

### The Abacos Afloat

"What's the wind speed up to now?" called Andy Peterson, walking aft from the foredeck and slapping me on the back as he slipped onto the helmsman's bench beside me. "Mostly over 20 with gusts to 25 knots," I replied. "Boat speed's pretty steady around 8." Andy laughed, reaching out into the flecks of green spume being kicked up by the starboard hull. "We're moving! Funny, the forecast was for calm wind. I think this is just shore breeze from Great Abaco." He pointed at the Bahamas' third-largest island looming to our left. "Let's stay inshore and scoot!"



It seems strange that a couple of airline pilots would find 8 knots a thrilling pace, but on a sailboat it's practically flying. We chartered this 46-foot Leopard catamaran, Tack-A-Cardia, from The Moorings in Marsh Harbour and would spend four days exploring the Bahamas' most popular cruising ground, the Sea of Abaco. Five additional crew members flew into Marsh Harbour to join us for the excursion afloat: Andy, a good friend and accomplished sailor; Ivy Rivera, also an airline pilot and frequent sailing companion; and Steve's easygoing Californian pals, Jeff, Sarah and Hailey, whom I'd never met but liked as soon as they stepped aboard.

The previous day the Pacer and Warrior had winged their way from Staniel Cay to Marsh Harbour with a stopover on Eleuthera for lunch at Harbour Island. We climbed high for the afternoon crossing to Abaco, then descended for a closer look at our new maritime environs as we made landfall near the rocky outpost of Little Harbour. We flew northbound in close formation over a series of long, skinny cays and imposing barrier reefs that protect the Abaco Sea from the ocean's pounding swells. The sea is quite shallow, with large banks and narrow cuts denoted by variegated swirls of cyan, jade and sapphire that form a picturesque contrast with the deep steady blue of the Atlantic. There were boats everywhere; Abaco, like Exuma, was clearly a place to experience on the water.

Three spirited hours of sailing after leaving Marsh Harbour, we approached the cut into Treasure Cay. Andy dropped the sails, I started the engines, and we slowly wound our way through the narrow, shallow channel. After anchoring, we went ashore at the most intensely stunning beach I've ever laid eyes on, with powdery white sand flowing under electric-blue Bombay Sapphire water, melting into a cerulean horizon dabbled with serene puffs of floating cotton. Onward snorkeling plans were soon forgotten as we lingered late into the afternoon.

Over the next few days we sailed the breadth of Abaco, explored quaint settlements and uninhabited isles by foot and dinghy, snorkeled the reefs with sea turtles and grouper, toasted landfalls and sunsets in salty sailor bars, accidentally trespassed on private land and got invited to a party, and shared convivial meals around the catamaran's big stern table. All too soon, we were gliding into picturesque Hope Town for our crew's last night together. We climbed the iconic candy-stripe lighthouse to watch the sun sink into the Abaco Sea one last time, then dinghied across the harbor to Cap'n Jack's for dinner, drinks, stories and laughter that flowed late into the night.

### **An Adventure Ends**

The next morning we motored across a glassy sea to return the boat to The Moorings' base. After saying goodbye to Andy, Ivy and the California gang, the rest of us took a taxi to rejoin our airplanes at the Marsh Harbour airport. Leaving the Bahamas turned out to be the most stressful part of the entire trip. Kevin and I had a long checklist of steps to accomplish with customs, flight service and the FBO. It wasn't entirely clear where or how to complete each item, but the lovely ladies at Cherokee Aviation guided us through, and soon we were climbing out over the beautiful, now-familiar cruising grounds of the Abaco Sea. Miami Radio was much more responsive this time and not only opened our flight plans, but also gave us our transponder codes for crossing the ADIZ right away.

We followed the far-flung Abaco chain all the way west to Walker Cay where our eight-day adventure ended, and the crossing back to Florida and reality began. "I can't believe we did all that with our own airplane," said Dawn with a shake of her head and an appreciative squeeze. "Dude, it was just one amazing thing after another," added Steve from the back seat. That it was, and yet I knew that we'd barely scratched the surface. Over the next few days, as Steve and I ferried the Pacer back to Minnesota, we talked about what we'd do on our next Bahamas trip. I'm sure we'll be back at some point, though it may be a while, because I also want to fly the Pacer to Idaho, Baja and Alaska. Our world is chock full of beautiful and awe-inspiring places, and we pilots are exceptionally blessed to be able to access and experience them in such a unique way. If you have a pilot's license — and especially if you own an airplane — the adventure of a lifetime is never far away.





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Steve Weigel

Flying the Bahamas' Out Islands

## Practicalities in Paradise

### The Plane

Nearly any well-maintained airplane can fly safely in the Bahamas, although those with limited range will want to plan their fuel stops carefully, calling ahead to confirm availability. The Bahamas welcomes both LSA and Experimental aircraft. International operations require an FCC Aircraft Station License, available online at [fcc.gov](http://fcc.gov). Also, the U.S. requires that aircraft crossing an ADIZ must display 12-inch registration markings, even if not required domestically (i.e., on vintage aircraft).

### The Pilot

The minimum requirement to serve as PIC in the Bahamas is a Private Pilot license or appropriately endorsed Recreational or Sport license. Additionally, you must carry an FCC Restricted Radiotelephone Operator's Permit, also available at [fcc.gov](http://fcc.gov). If you intend to fly at night, both pilot and aircraft must be IFR capable, and the flight must operate on an IFR flight plan. Day flight seldom requires IFR capability, as weather conditions are notably good most of the year, with the exception of afternoon thunderstorms in the summer and cold front passages in the winter.

### The Crossing

By crossing from Fort Lauderdale to Bimini, overwater exposure can be limited to as little as 50 nm. Most pilots coming from farther north, however, take the 107 nm route to Walker's Cay or Grand Bahama. Both routes cross the warm but fast-flowing Gulf Stream, with heavy marine traffic and relatively close emergency services. Life vests are required for each occupant, though a life raft and means of signaling (EPIRB, PLB or SPOT tracker) should be considered essential equipment. After the initial crossing, flights within island chains can usually be conducted within gliding distance of land, while channel crossings may involve overwater stretches as long as 50 nm.

Crossing the ADIZ requires an open IFR or international VFR flight plan; additionally, returning to the U.S. requires squawking an assigned discrete transponder code. Both requirements are best handled through FSS: 800-WX-BRIEF on the ground and Miami Radio or Nassau Radio in the air. VFR flight following is available from Miami Center, though in the eastern and southern reaches of the islands they do not have much radar service below 6,000 feet.

The Airports

The largest Bahamian airports are built and maintained to U.S. standards, but are busy and fairly expensive. The Out Islands airports sometimes feature rough or unfamiliar surfaces (crushed coral was once common), nonstandard signage and lighting, and incessant crosswinds due to many runways being at right angles with the prevailing easterly trade winds. That said, the public airports are being improved, and most are perfectly acceptable for aircraft up to and including cabin-class twins. Private airports require much more caution because their quality and degree of upkeep varies wildly. Landing and parking fees are charged at most of the busier airports.

The Book

Your best source of information when planning a trip to the Bahamas — or if you're merely curious — is *The Bahamas Pilot's Guide*, published and revised annually by Pilot Publications ([pilotpub.com](http://pilotpub.com)). It is particularly useful as a source of information on the sometimes-complex customs and immigration procedures and paperwork.

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