

BAHAMIAN MOORINGS

Phil and Norma Heaton

(Phil and Norma left Northern Ireland at the end of May 2009 aboard their Ovni 395, Minnie B, and completed a circumnavigation in 2016 – see Around by Chance, Flying Fish 2016/2, as well as Indonesian Update in FF 2015/1 and Virgins in the Virgins in 2017/2. And/or visit their blog at www.sailblogs.com/member/philandnorma.)

The very name Bahamas conjures up images of white sand beaches, turquoise waters, reef fish, rays and sharks. In contrast we had been given dire warnings about the area – very busy, expensive, the food is basically American, lightning will strike, the depths can be perilous, and it would be difficult to sail onwards to Bermuda. Not true and true in parts, but it is a bit like referring to Africa as if it is a homogenous entity.

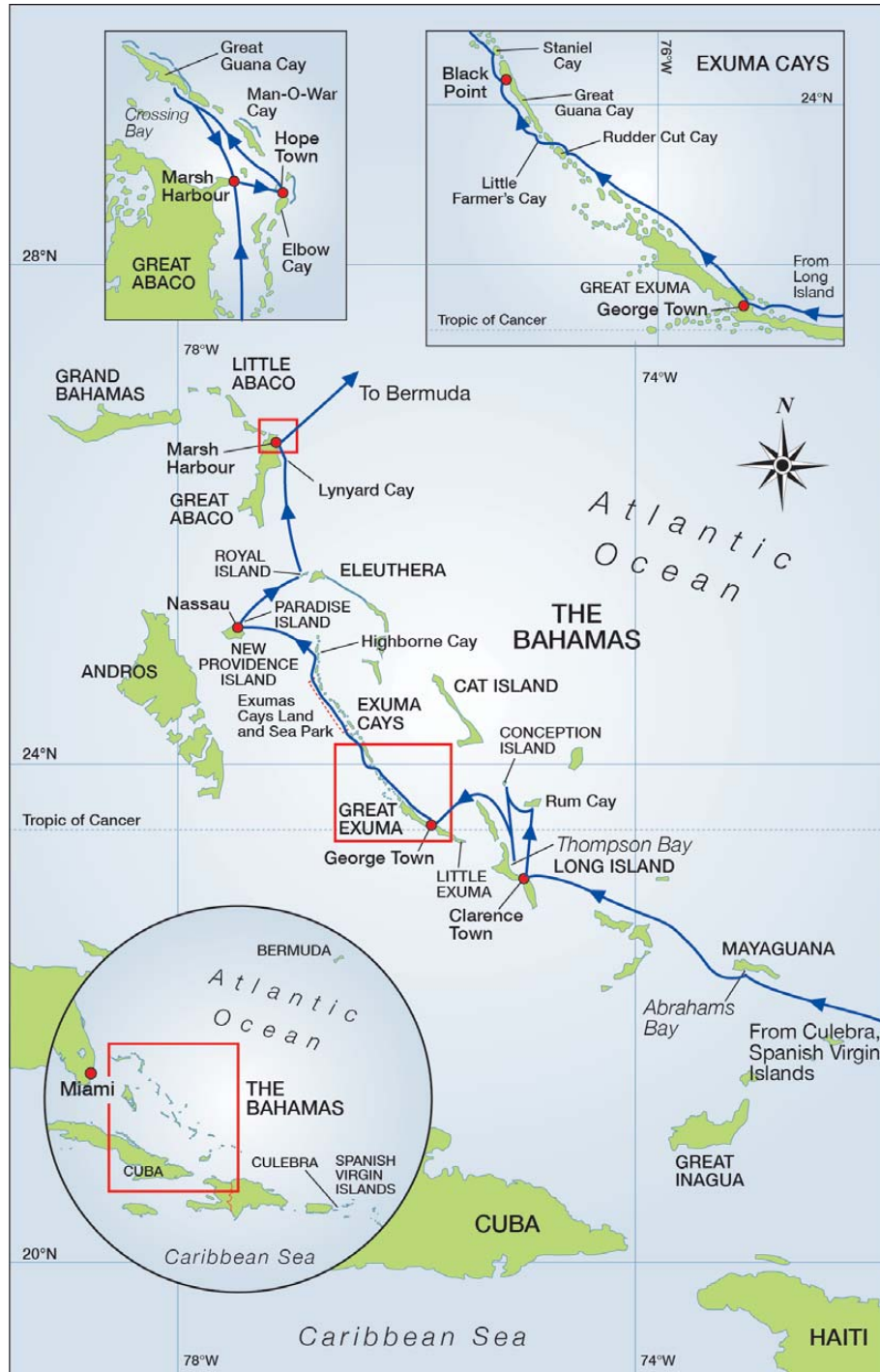
After spending nine years of distant and long-distance cruising we were ready to head for the Mediterranean and be closer to the UK and home. It seemed a shame to bypass the Bahamas, however, particularly having chartered a boat and enjoyed a few days of diving there with our daughter Julia in 2003 ... and an OVNI 395 draws only 70cm (2ft 4ins) with the keel and rudder up.

Landfall Mayaguana

We left Culebra in the Spanish Virgin Islands on 10th March 2018 for the 520 mile passage to Mayaguana, with 18–23 knots of wind from the southeast. Our first noon-to-noon run was 170 miles, the second 159 miles. Then the wind died so we needed some diesel assistance for about 12 hours, but we were sailing again by the morning of 13th March.

*Minnie B anchored off Clarence
Town, Long Island*





Our destination was Mayaguana to clear in, but first we had to cross the lagoon, with depths of less than 3m and strewn with rocks and coral heads. It is 4.5 miles from the western pass to the anchorage near Abraham's Bay, and we motored carefully, threading our way past the many obstacles. It being early afternoon the sun was high in the sky, so we had excellent visibility as we learned to differentiate depths and seabed from the changing colours of the water.

We cleared in the next day with very friendly officials. Mayaguana is somewhat sad, however, in that there are so many boarded up houses,



*The Tropic of Cancer,
Long Island*



*The Columbus Memorial,
also on Long Island*

reminiscent of Niue. We spoke to some local women who reckoned the population was now less than 200 and said that, with few sources of employment, young people were moving to Nassau for work. There were a couple of bars and a shop but opening times seemed haphazard and damage from Hurricane *Joaquin* in 2015 was apparent, albeit the vegetation has recovered quickly.



Cape Santa Maria, Long Island

Long Island – rightly named

On 15th March we made the overnight downwind sail to Clarence Town, Long Island in winds of 10–15 knots varying from northeast to east-southeast. The 132 miles took 23 hours. We were expecting something a bit more substantial than Abraham Bay and it was ... a bit. The anchorage is good in all but northerly winds and the holding in sand is sound. We sought places to snorkel but the reef fish and coral (damaged in storms) were limited.

Travelling by hire car on the 80 miles of main road – the Queen’s Highway – we visited the northernmost point to see the memorial to Christopher Columbus who arrived there on 25th October 1492, possibly his second stop after San Salvador. The views are spectacular. Then to Dean’s Blue Hole – at over 600ft deep the world’s deepest sea-water blue hole. We swam off the beach and snorkelled over and around it. The water goes from light blue and turquoise to dark blue and then black. Remarkable. Next was Hamilton’s Cave, where Leonard took us on a guided tour of the labyrinthine passages with stalagmites and stalactites, which used to be used as a place of refuge during hurricanes. Stunning.

The island is dotted with churches, mostly in very good

Dean’s Blue Hole, Long Island



condition and painted in white, red and green. In Clarence Town there are two prominent and very striking churches, one Anglican and one Roman Catholic, on the rise above the bay. Both were built by the same priest, Father Jerome, who was an architect and arrived in the Bahamas in 1908 to rebuild wooden churches that had not withstood hurricanes.

Hamilton's Cave, Long island



Rum Cay and Conception Island

We had been advised by OCC friends that we should visit Rum Cay and Conception Island, and sailed the 34 miles to Port Nelson on Rum Cay in 12–15 knots of southwest wind. It was set to veer to the north that evening giving us good shelter, and so it did. Ashore there is a derelict marina with no plans to rebuild, a badly damaged wooden government dock currently being rebuilt in reinforced concrete, and Kay's Sand Bar serving beer, rum and food. The island population is about forty-five people, with many spending their days at Kay's. We saw half a dozen nurse sharks and two lemon sharks in the marina cove, waiting for the detritus from a man who was cleaning fish. Then while launching the dinghy from the beach to return to *Minnie B*, a lemon shark swam lazily by seemingly taking a good look at our legs ... hmm.

On 24th March we sailed the 23 miles to Conception Island in 14 knots of northeasterly wind. This uninhabited marine and land park was ours alone – joy. No sooner had we set the anchor than a 1.5m lemon shark arrived and slowly circled the boat before taking up station off the starboard quarter, on the seabed just 3m down. Very shortly it was joined by another slightly smaller lemon shark which settled down immediately astern. Interesting. These are intelligent creatures. They



*Conception
Island*

know the bow from the stern, and they know that boats mean food – some folks had clearly been feeding them.

Deciding to go for a snorkel on the reef, we removed shiny things such as watches and climbed gingerly into the water without splashing so as not to alarm the sharks – apparently lemon sharks can be bad-tempered if they are bothered. They just sat there. Off we went, but the reef was only okay so, back to the boat and, yes, our two friends were still there. We did not feed them – best to let them live more natural lives. Next day another boat arrived and our friends clearly thought they might be a better bet as they moved to take up station off its stern. We dinghied to the creek halfway down the west coast and found lots of skittish green turtles, and then walked the beach and the east coast which was sufficiently dramatic in a Bahamian kind of way – modestly.

Lemon shark – our friend at Conception Island



Shelter island ... and magenta lines

The forecast was for a front to go through with 20–25 knot easterly winds, so we returned to Long Island, heading for Thompson Bay on the west coast. But first a word about magenta lines...

For over 20 miles the passage south along the west coast of the island has only 2–4m depths. We were motoring along around low water and the tidal range is about 0.9m. The electronic charts have very helpful 'control points' and magenta lines that show routes through shallows. It is straightforward to follow the magenta line and change course at the control points, keeping very tight control on XTE¹ ... until the magenta line takes you through a collection of rocks that could rip the bottom out of your boat. They are a good navigation *aid*, but you must jink about to avoid rocks and coral heads – a good lookout at all times is necessary, and recognising the difference between cloud-created shadow and rocks is helpful.

We arrived safely at Thompson Bay, a favourite among cruisers, where there were already about twenty-five boats. We were immediately invited to join the Cruisers' Monday gathering ashore, where we met some very experienced and helpful Bahamas cruisers.

Zooming through the Exumas

We left the shelter of Thompson Bay on 29th March for the 38 miles to George Town, crossing the shallow bank in 3–6m of water with an east-southeast wind of 15–20 knots under genoa alone. The narrow passage at Little Exuma was getting the full 25 mile fetch and the seas were large and very confused, so we took the precaution of turning on the engine and steering by hand. The anchorage at George Town and Elizabeth Harbour is immense and there were more than 300 boats dotted around. It is the cruising terminus for many boats from North America, and indeed some spend months here. We anchored in 1.8m near Kidd's Cove, to be close to the town but with some lee from nearby islands.

We could have participated in beach yoga, beach volleyball, noodling², bocce³, dominoes, poker, choir practice and many other activities that the cruisers use to pass the time. Instead we topped up our provisions, had a drink at Blu, overlooking the harbour, and moved on.

Our first stop was Rudder Cut Cay, where at low water we could stand on the seabed at the stern – we had 0.7m under the keel and the tidal range was 0.9m. We snorkelled the full-size grand piano and mermaid sculpture on the seabed which was commissioned by the illusionist David Copperfield who owns nearby Moosha Cay – curious.

Ten miles further on is small but interesting Little Farmer's Cay, where we anchored off the west side near Ty's Sunset Bar and Grill. On the east side we had a drink at the famous Ocean Cabin, where the owner, Terry Bain, enthusiastically expounded his socio-economic philosophy. As a consultant in Libya during the 1980s it is

1. Cross Track Error, the distance one actually is from one's intended route
2. Noodling is one of several names for attempting to catch catfish with one's hands by reaching inside the creature's refuge
3. Bocce is closely related to British bowls and French boules/pétanque



A squall passes through at Black Point, Great Guana Cay

understandable that his views cause some discomfort to those with a more conservative outlook, but we thoroughly enjoyed our conversation and debate.

Another 10 miles northwest and we anchored at Black Point, Great Guana Cay in 4m. The settlement is famous for its laundry, one of the best equipped in the Bahamas. There is more to it than just washing, however, and we enjoyed nice walks around the island to the east (ocean) side and along the west coast where there were people weaving strips of palm which are sent to Nassau for final assembly into basketwork for tourists. We lunched on conch and watched a large party of MPs and government officials carrying out a development-funding assessment. The local people would like to have a bank – understandable if you have a cash business.

A further 9 miles on is Staniel Cay and Big Major's Spot. The currents around the islands can be quite strong, so picking your anchor spot requires some care. Even so,

A pensive mermaid at Rudder Cut Cay



we saw boats at anchor in places we would never consider – too much current and too exposed. Maybe they are old hands and know a great deal more than we do about these waters ... or maybe they were practicing their Bahamian mooring ?

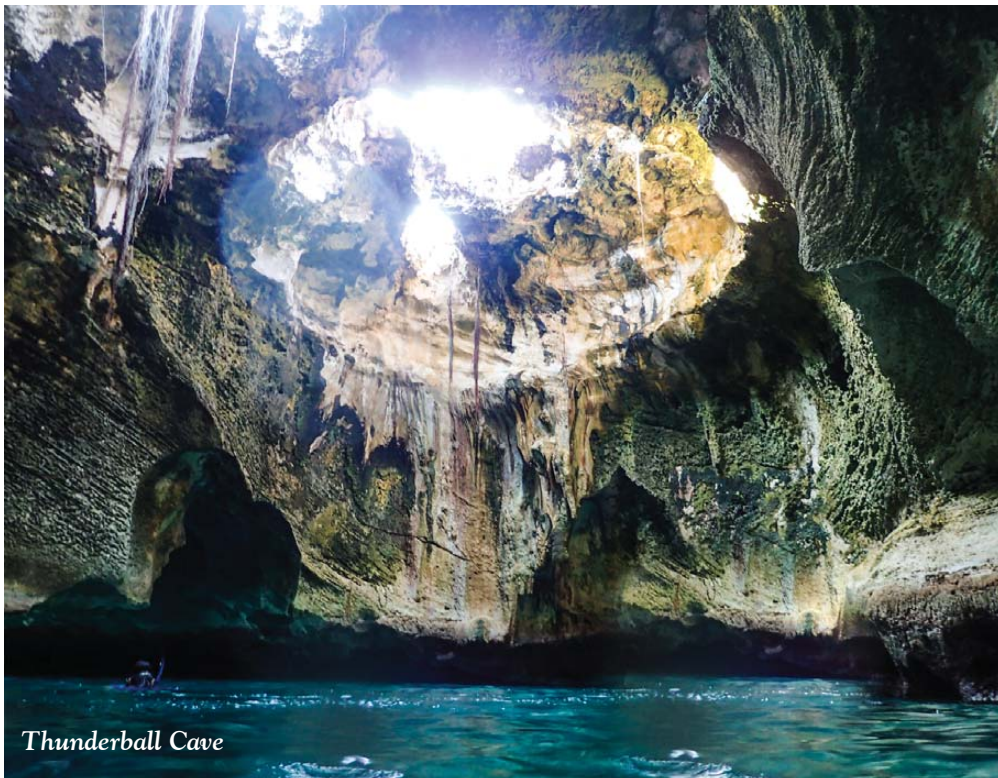
Staniel Cay has a small marina, bars and restaurants, hotel and other shore accommodation, so it is popular. We chose to anchor at Big Major's Spot, which is a longish dinghy ride to Staniel Cay but well sheltered from the prevailing winds – and it has the swimming pigs! (Those who have not been there might think this involves too many rum punches, but no, there is a whole herd of pigs, big and small, on the beach and they love to come in the water and swim, gobbling any food on offer. Holidaymakers come from all over the Exumas and even Nassau to see them.)



The famous swimming pigs at Big Major's Spot

We have now visited three Bond movie locations – Colon, Panama (*Quantum of Solace*), Thailand (*The Man with the Golden Gun*) and now the Bahamas (*Thunderball* and *Never Say Never Again*). There is a limestone cave to snorkel into at low water – or duck through a sump at high water – which has a high, domed roof with holes which let in dramatic shafts of light. It is home to a lot of reef fish quite habituated to people. Our timing was good as a party of people left just as we arrived and we had the cave to ourselves for a while ... magical.

The 176 square mile Exumas Cays Land and Sea Park – created in 1959 and the world's first protected area of its kind – is truly delightful. We picked up a mooring at Cambridge Cay, where a charming American sailing couple were volunteering for the Park, collecting fees, providing maps and organising sundowners on a nearby sand spit.



Thunderball Cave

The Park HQ at Warderick Wells also has moorings, as well as excellent information on places to snorkel and marked paths for lovely walks ashore. The whole Park is archetypal Bahamas with low islands, a few higher outcrops in the limestone, eroded cliffs and shelves, scrub and sub-tropical trees, white sand beaches, coral reefs, and every shade

Sundowners at Cambridge Cay





The Coastguard approach to check Minnie B as she approaches Nassau

of blue and turquoise that one can imagine.

With a cold front on its way we headed the 30 miles north to Highborne Cay as our jumping off point for New Providence and Nassau. We

stayed there two nights, and on 14th April sailed the 45 miles northwest in 14–18 knots of wind which varied from east-northeast to east-southeast – we were on every point of sail to dodge the reefs, especially the rock and coral-head strewn Yellow Bank.

Nassau and the Abacos

Over 70 percent of the population of the Bahamas live in the capital, Nassau, on New Providence Island, or on Paradise Island which dominates Nassau harbour. This island, linked by two road bridges to New Providence, is holiday home to the rich and famous and as well as having the resort/hotel/casino/entertainment centre of Atlantis. A day pass for a non-resident costs US \$160 and children of 12 are classified as adults.

Atlantis resort, Nassau



We moored at Nassau Harbour Club, aiming to get our scuba dive tanks tested and filled, get stainless steel bushes made for the autopilot and a towed generator connection, stock up on provisions ... and do some sight-seeing. The latter took us to the historic part of Nassau, with 18th century forts, colonial administration buildings, the cruise ship area and its inevitable souvenir shops. But on our way back east to our marina we passed through a large area of closed commercial and retail premises – it was clear that between them the shops at the cruise ship terminal and the edge-of-town shopping malls have killed what was once the retail heart of the city. It is sad, but we were told that the government is trying to work with the building owners and developers to revitalise this part of the city.

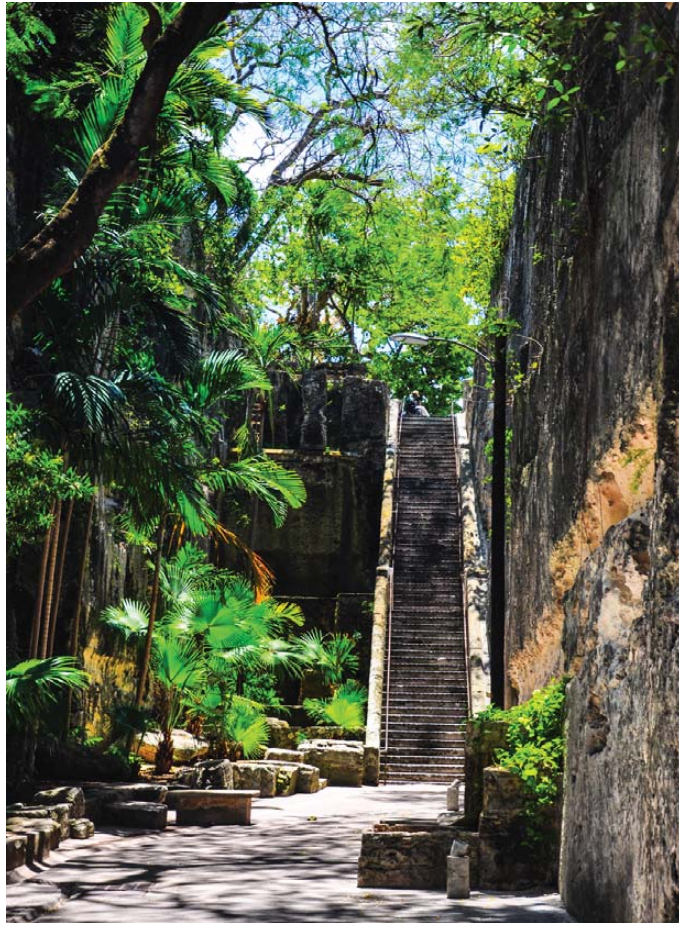
The Queen's Staircase, Nassau

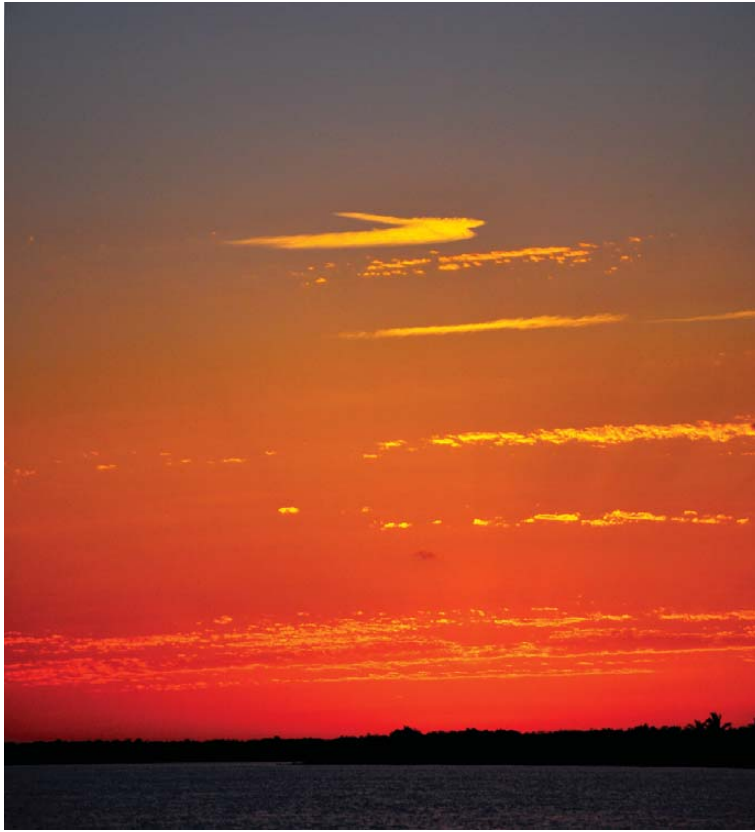
After Nassau, we thought the Abacos would be a good departure point for Bermuda as we could clear out at one of the three ports of entry ... hmm. The clue is in the name – entry. In the Abacos we discover that no-one clears out. It is the same system as in the USA – no clearance *zarpe*, no passport stamps ... so we had not needed to go to there after all. Although all was well and we were not impeded significantly, it could have been a mistake as we failed to consider that in easterly winds the cuts through the fringing reef and cays can be extremely difficult.

Our first stop was Royal Island in northern Eleuthera – we motored the 39 miles on 19th April in a flat calm. A forecast of stronger easterlies kept us in the very sheltered inlet until the 22nd, when we sailed the 63 miles to Lynyard Cay, off Great Abaco. It was a close reach the whole way, with 18–24 knots winds from the east-southeast and a very lumpy sea. Two reefs in the main and two in the genoa kept *Minnie B* comfortable and we averaged 7.3 knots, but with an overcast sky and a cool wind it was not overly pleasant. We moved on to Marsh Harbour, the main town in the Abacos and focused on the weather, but after a couple of days without a favourable forecast we decided to explore, first to Elbow Cay.

This is the home of the famous lighthouse with its red and white hoops and a light that is still fuelled by kerosene – the local people resist all attempts to convert it to electricity. On 26th April we anchored outside the harbour and dinghied in to visit the lighthouse and museum as well as strolling on the Atlantic side of the cay. Hope Town is picturesque with candy-coloured houses, some with elaborate gingerbread (fretwork) embellishments. However, most of the houses seem to be for rent, and there had been massive development since our visit 15 years previously.

On 28th April we motored the 13 miles to Crossing Bay on Great Guana Cay, which has good shelter from winds from northeast to southeast. This was another return visit, and we had to visit the infamous Nipper's. Needing some exercise, rather





*A flying fish above
Great Guana Cay,
Abacos*

than dinghy the two miles down the coast we went ashore in the bay and walked, but soon a local man stopped his golf buggy (the *de rigueur* mode of transport) and offered us a lift. So, Nipper's – the go-to place on Sunday for music and drinking and lots of people, with great views on the Atlantic Ocean side and a lovely beach too ... and loud music and loud drinking

... Our exercise on the return to Crossing Bay was again cut short, when we were offered another lift in a golf buggy by a megayacht crew member.



*Hope Town lighthouse,
Abacos*

*Anchored
at Elbow
Cay,
Abacos*



And so farewell

With a weather forecast that would enable us to leave for Bermuda, we returned to Marsh Harbour. By 6th May, having cleaned the boat's bottom, changed the propeller anode, completed final provisioning, checked the weather forecast for the umpteenth time, and got *Minnie B* in offshore sailing mode, we were ready. North Man O'War pass was in benign mood, and with 12–18 knots from south-southeast we were soon making 7 knots with the 740 mile passage ahead of us. We said farewell to the Bahamas, and thank you for a lovely time.

