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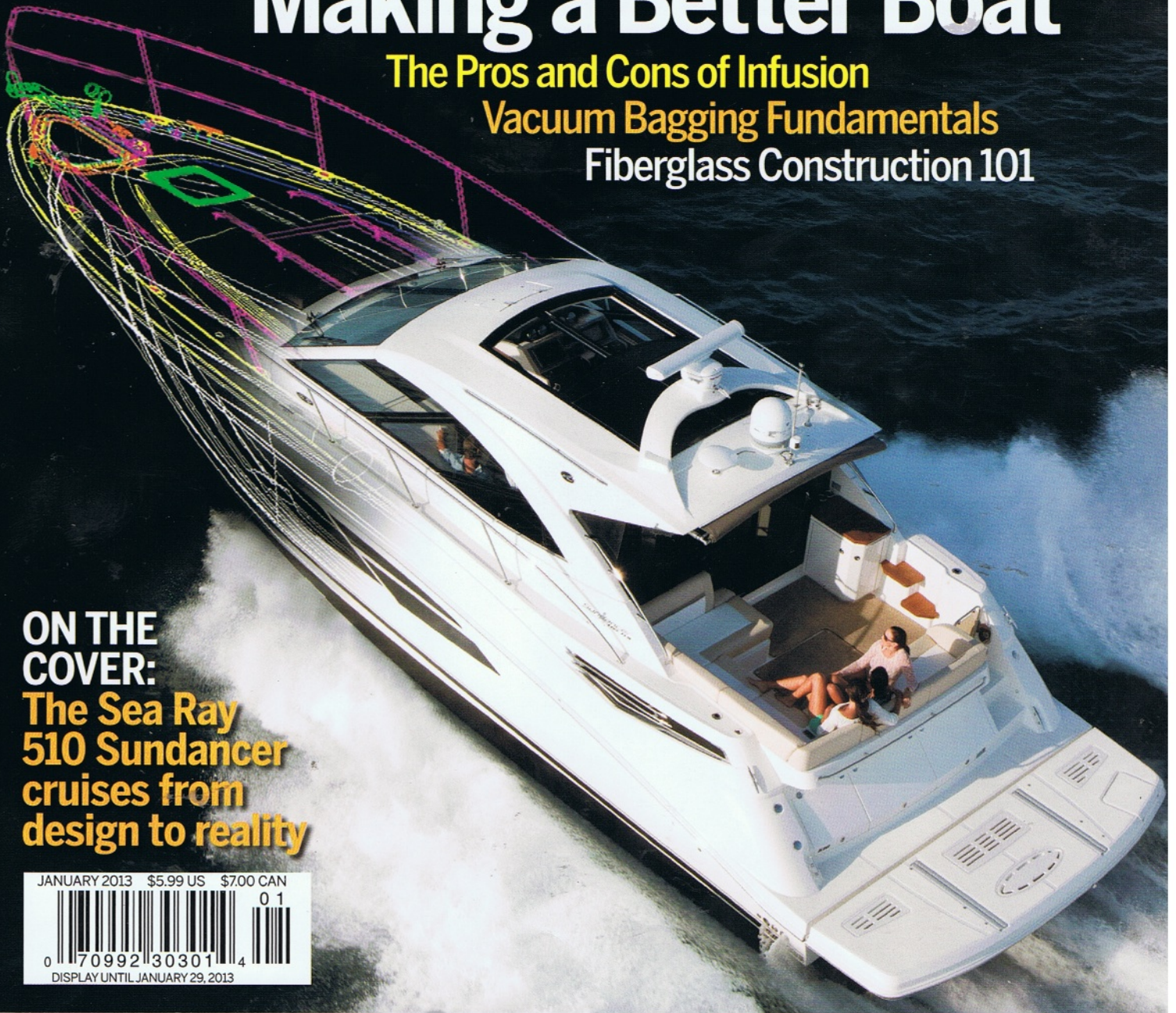
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Colorful homes dot the shoreline of Hope Town (top). With water this beautiful, who can help but smile? The Moorings 393 at the Green Turtle Club (bottom).



ERIN KENNEY

Yeah, it's scary. At first.
But then you get really, really, really used to it!

Abacophobia

Story and photography by Chris Caswell

Strangely enough, there is no word for "fear of shallow water" in the dictionary. There is acrophobia, the fear of heights, and bathophobia, a fear of depths such as deep lakes, but no skinny-water fear.

So let's create a new word: Abacophobia.

It's what first-time bareboat skippers in the Abacos experience when they first glance at the depthsounder and are shocked that the bottom is just a few feet below the hull.

Trust me on this one: It is a very unsettling feeling, especially for those of us who spend most of our boating time with the depth-o-meter reading well into three-digit numbers. Bahamian waters are gorgeous and as clear as gin (something I know intimately), but you may never see anything much deeper than 15 feet. At one point during a recent Moorings charter I took with family and friends, I actually wondered if Raymarine might make a special sounder just for the Abacos that only reads to 20 feet.

You see, the Abacos Out Islands form the edge of a vast underwater plateau called the Bahamas Bank, so the water depth is uniformly shallow around them. Think heavy dew on your car in the morning. In fact, the very name "Bahamas" comes from the Spanish phrase *baja mar*, meaning shallow sea.

But after a few hours of watching the starfish go past on the bottom, I relaxed. Our Moorings 393 powercat drew just over 3 feet so, even when we were entering some of the shallow passes into harbors and the depth got down to six feet, my grip on the throttles never wavered. Well, mostly never.

The good news is that Abacophobia is easily curable by time spent on (and in) these waters as well as by the daily application of something cold and rummy at happy hour.

The Abacos are what most bareboaters see from their airplane windows as they rush, lemming-like, toward the British Virgin Islands. This corner of the Bahamas somehow remains off the usual charter radar, in spite of being closer, less expensive, and just as interesting as the BVIs.

We caught a 45-minute flight from Florida, breezed through customs, and were soon settled in a comfortable villa at Abacos Beach Resort and Marina, a thoroughly delightful way to launch our adventure. Not only is it a short walk to the Moorings base, but arriving a day early allowed us to get the charter briefing out of the way and then have a superb meal at the Angler's Restaurant on the resort grounds.

The next morning, the female members of our crew taxied to Maxwell's Grocery (apparently to empty the shelves), while the guys got checked out on the boat. As already noted, we'd chosen a Moorings 393 powercat for our Out Island explorations, and we were given hull number 15: a boat so new she hadn't even been named.

Designed specifically for The Moorings, our 393 had the "owner's layout," with the entire starboard hull dedicated to one stateroom with en suite head, while two more staterooms in the port hull share a head. It's the perfect layout for two couples, plus kids.

Anxious to be away, we were soon motoring out of Marsh Harbour, headed for "de islands, mon." Our first stop would be at Man-O-War Cay, where we tied up at Man-O-War Marina. We could have dropped the hook in either of the two harbors there, but we opted for shore power and easy access to explore this little settlement.

Though inhabited by the Lucayan Indians when Columbus arrived, the first European settlers of the Abacos were Loyalists fleeing the American Revolution in 1783, and they have remained through many generations. They survived first by salvaging wrecks, then by building boats and, more recently, by catering to the tourist trade. Man-O-War, unlike the other islands in the Abacos, is dry: No booze is sold or served, though you are welcome to drink aboard or take a bottle to a restaurant.

We had several goals at Man-O-War, with the first being to get some of Miss Lola's famous cinnamon rolls. But we were too late and, when she arrived in her golf cart, the octogenarian had only her fresh bread. That was just fine by us though, since it has the texture and flavor of cake (and makes incredible French toast!).

Our second goal was to visit some of the local sights, most of which are within walking distance of the marina, but we decided to explore farther afield and rented a golf cart from Tommy Albury, the marina dockmaster. Albury's Sail Loft was a must, where chatty seamstresses turn out colorful duffels and totes, and then Joe's Studio, where Joe Albury (yes, there are a lot of Alburys on Man-O-War!) handcrafts models of Bahamian boats.

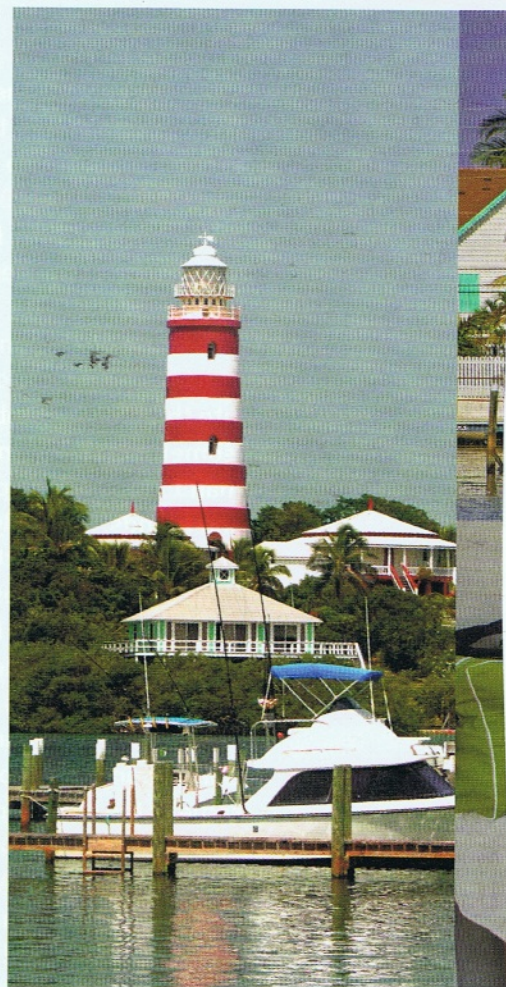
The next day, after recovering from the aforementioned French toast, our plan was to mosey northwest to Green Turtle Cay. But, before that, nearby Fowl Cay provided the perfect stop for the first snorkel of the cruise. Anchoring in nine feet of water here, you can practically walk ashore to the perfect curve of beach with sand as soft as powdered sugar on your toes.

We had listened to the Cruiser's Net, the morning chat room on VHF channel 68 that kicks off at 8:15 am every morning. Skippers share everything from weather conditions to tips on great garage sales in the islands. We were going through the Whale Cay passage that afternoon, which can be dangerous in a "rage sea," when waves from distant storms break mast-high in the channel.

But today was calm and we were soon tiptoeing into White Sound, headed for the Green Turtle Club. It was a special place for one of our crew members, who'd spent many happy vacations here, and all the



The iconic lighthouse in Hope Town, on Elbow Cay (clockwise from right). Colorful houses line the water in Hope Town. Clear water and pristine beaches are just some of the treasures you'll find in the Bahamas. A signpost points the way on Green Turtle Cay. Sturdy tote and duffel bags are handy keepsakes you can pick up at Norman Albury's Sail Loft.





Abacos Chartering Tips



GETTING THERE: Several airlines fly direct from Miami, Ft. Lauderdale, and Palm Beach, Florida, airports to Marsh Harbour in the Bahamas. Once there, taxis seem to be \$12.50 pretty much anywhere you want to go.

COST: The season is the key, with the most expensive times falling during the Christmas/New Year's holidays and into April. The low seasons are the warmer summer months from May to October. Our six-day Moorings charter in August for the 393PC was \$4,560. You should consider Yacht Security Insurance at \$66 a day (for peace of mind and a greatly reduced deductible) and our fuel cost for the week was about \$230. If you want to tie up in a marina rather than anchoring, expect to pay about \$1 per foot per night plus electricity and water.

WHAT TO BRING: Everyone takes too much, so pare down. In a soft-sided, easy-to-stow duffel, pack a couple of swimsuits (so one can be drying), T-shirts, deck shoes, and a light jacket for cool days in the off-season. Reef runners are useful foot protection around the water and on coral. In the Abacos, you'll live in a swimsuit, but bring a nice shirt and shorts if you want to dine ashore. You'll need a good hat, polarized sunglasses to see into the water, and strong sunblock to prevent burns. Take cameras, a good book, and some tunes for relaxing. Don't forget a canvas tote to carry cameras or gear ashore.

PROVISIONING: If you don't want the charter company to provision for you, take a taxi to Maxwell's Grocery, a U.S.-style supermarket in Marsh Harbour.

THE MOORINGS: Three powercat sizes are in their Abacos fleet: the older, two-stateroom 372PC, our 393PC with three cabins, and the 474PC with four en suite staterooms. 888-952-8603; www.moorings.com





Cruising Resources

ABACOS BEACH RESORT AND MARINA,
877-533-4799; www.abacobeachresort.com

MAN-O-WAR MARINA,
242-365-6008; www.manowarmarina.com

JOE'S STUDIO,
242-365-6082; www.joesstudioabaco.com

GREEN TURTLE CLUB,
866-528-0539; www.greenturtleclub.com

MISS EMILY'S BLUE BEE BAR,
www.missemilysbluebeebar.com

TREASURE CAY MARINA,
242-365-8250; www.treasurecay.com/marina

HOPE TOWN MARINA, 242-366-0003

The pier at the Green Turtle Club is a welcoming sign for cruisers in the area (left). Conch shells on the beach are a common Bahamian sight (right).

memories came flooding back as we tied up in its marina. The Green Turtle Club has also recently joined the Guy Harvey Outpost chain of resorts.

The village of New Plymouth is at the other end of Green Turtle, so a golf cart was once again in order. Our quest on this island was twofold: find fresh conch and visit Miss Emily's Blue Bee Bar, which lays claim to having originated the Goombay Smash. The locals scratched their heads about finding conch, directing us to several places including the hardware store, but we finally found fresh conch being sold out of a garage.

Miss Emily's was easier to find, with its bright blue exterior and an interior lined with business cards. A word of warning: A couple of Goombays under your belt can cause you to forget you're on a British island where people drive on the left.

Nevertheless, the golf cart was perfect for exploring the narrow lanes of Green Turtle, lined by cheerfully bright cottages and the more expansive homes of part-time residents. Back at the boat, we ended up at The Yacht Club Pub, surprised to find it was papered with signed dollar bills as well as yacht club burgees.

The following day we headed south, once again transiting Whale Passage without seeing a ripple, and turned west toward Treasure Cay on the main island of Great Abaco. Started as a hotel and marina, it has developed into a self-sufficient vacation community around a harbor lined with townhouses and private docks. We tied up at the Treasure Cay Marina, which is part of the resort, getting a prime slip right in front of the swimming pool. While the resort offers all the amenities, the Treasure Cay beach is the drawing card: a picture-perfect crescent of white sand that stretches for three miles. Named one of the top ten beaches in the world by *National Geographic*, it has to be walked, and splashed, to be believed.

Half the crew departed for the pool, while the others explored the small shopping district with its grocery, bakery, and gift shops. For golfers, Treasure Cay has an 18-hole championship course, and fishermen can challenge the bonefish on nearby flats.

Being hedonists, we chose to visit the aptly named Topsy Seagull Bar in preparation for a lovely dinner ashore (chef's night off) at the Spinnaker Restaurant.

From Treasure Cay, we lollygagged southeast to Elbow Cay and the harbor of Hope Town. Even with a chartplotter, the entrance here is challenging and we got down to 5 feet of water (and at least ten white knuckles!) before we slid into the pretty harbor marked by the red-and-white-candy-cane-striped lighthouse.

There are ample mooring balls in the harbor (no anchoring is allowed) but we chose a stern-tie at the Hope Town Marina. They have a boat service that ran us across to Hope Town on the opposite side of the harbor, so we didn't even have to launch the tender.

Our ferry driver called ahead for a golf cart, and we spent the afternoon cruising the streets, marveling at the brilliantly painted clapboard houses that somehow managed to survive the 155-mph winds of Hurricane Floyd in 1999.

Dominating the landscape on Elbow Cay is the aforementioned candy-cane lighthouse. The iconic, 148-year-old light is one of the few in the world that is still hand-wound and kerosene-burning, and it is seen on everything from postage stamps to Bahamas currency. That evening, the steady sweep of the light hypnotized us into a deep sleep.

Our last day was bittersweet, because we didn't want to leave these islands. It had been a relaxing charter. Indeed, the comfortably protected Sea of Abaco hadn't challenged our skills even once, meaning I suppose that novice charterers can safely, truly, and literally get their feet wet here.

Whether your interests lie in snorkeling through turquoise waters among squadrons of brilliant tropical fish, hunting conch shells on beaches where yours are the first footprints, or simply relaxing at anchor with a trashy novel, the Abacos have just what you want.

Just be ready for a mild case of Abacophobia on the first day. □