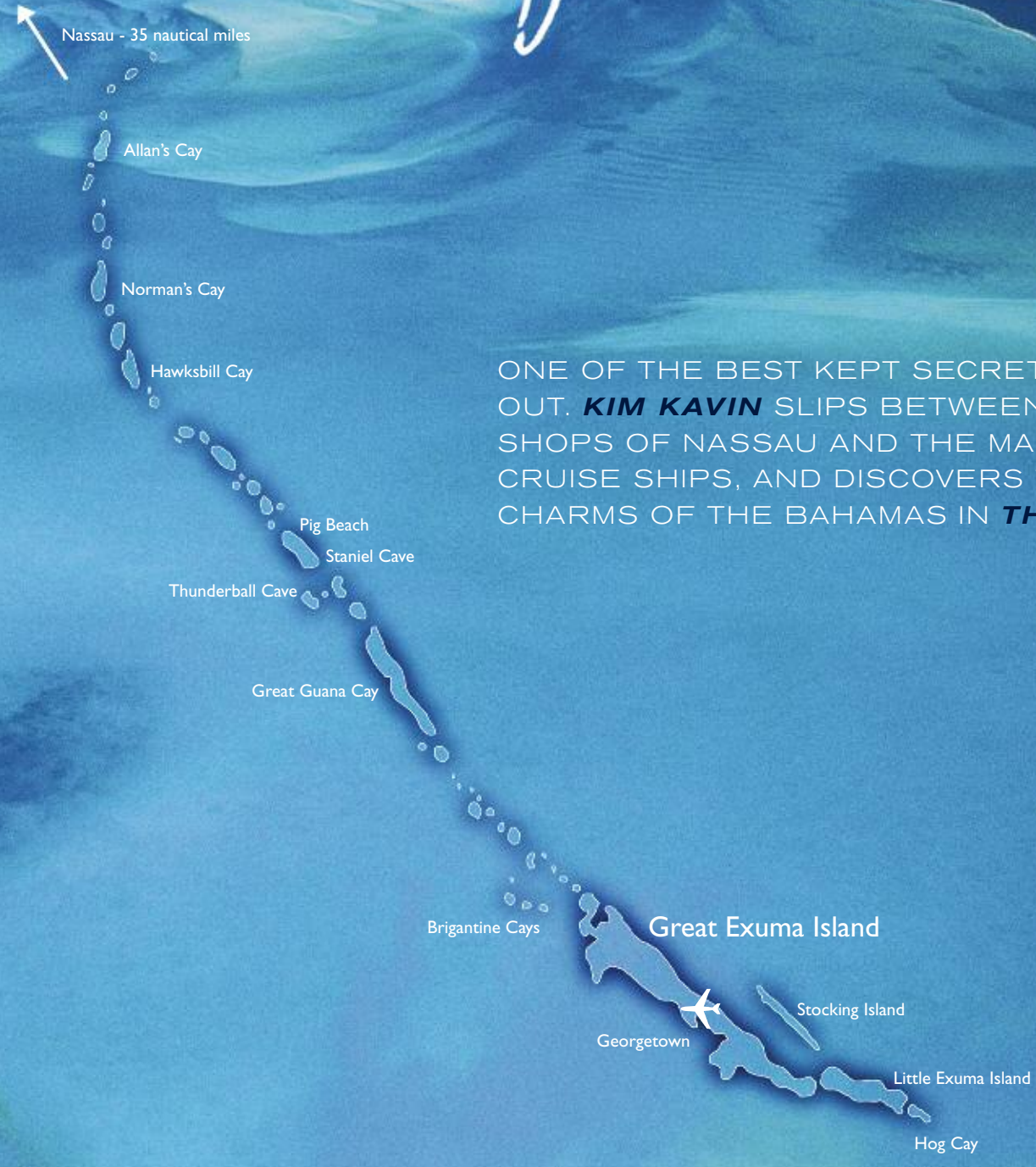


Bahamas Rhapsody



ONE OF THE BEST KEPT SECRETS IN CRUISING IS OUT. **KIM KAVIN** SLIPS BETWEEN THE SOUVENIR SHOPS OF NASSAU AND THE MASS TOURISM CRUISE SHIPS, AND DISCOVERS THE HIDDEN CHARMS OF THE BAHAMAS IN **THE EXUMAS**.



My first cruise in the Bahamas came just a few weeks after I sailed in one of my dream locales: Fiji. I'd been harbouring visions of the South Pacific's white sand beaches, pristine coves and sparkling aquamarine waters for as long as I can remember and Fiji did not disappoint. I was still on something of a high when I packed my bags for the relatively quick flight from New York to Georgetown in the Bahamas and the nearby marina where my superyacht awaited. Based on my previous trips to the Bahamian city of Nassau—where tacky souvenir shops hawk everything a pasty white tourist could ever want—I feared this trip would be a huge letdown after the exotic vacation euphoria of my Fiji cruise.

The Bahamas, quite frankly, have always been cursed with a lack of cachet. They're best known as the home of Atlantis Resort and Casino, a Las Vegas-inspired sprawl of pink that sits on Paradise Island complete with shark-filled aquarium and nosebleed-inducing waterslide. Atlantis also happens to be home to what is arguably the best megayacht marina in the Bahamas, so it serves as a base for most large yacht charters. However, instead of starting out there and cruising round-trip, we began down south in Georgetown and worked our way back to Atlantis and the international

In retrospect, I think the Bahamas may be one of the best-kept secrets in charter. The Bahamas comprise several chains that start due east of West Palm Beach, Florida and run southeast until they merge with the Turks and Caicos Islands, north of Haiti. The closest Bahamian island to the U.S. mainland is Grand Bahama, home to the resort towns of Freeport and Lucaya. East of Grand Bahama is Abaco Island, and south from there are the aforementioned Nassau and Paradise Island.

That northernmost group of islands is where most Bahamian mass tourism occurs and where most day and weekend cruisers from the States end up on their own boats. Luckily, charter yachts that spend the whole season in this part of the world can access quiet, private marinas in those places. Even luckier is that they can also get where the deeper-draft cruise ships can't: east to the skinny island of Eleuthera and the colourful shopping town of Dunmore on lovely Harbour Island, and south to the pristine Exumas, where I cruised.

The contours of the ocean floor make for fantastic dinghy tours,

can't endure a puddle-jumper flight, a helicopter can always be arranged to get you from the smaller islands back to the international airport at Nassau. If you prefer to cruise round-trip from the same port, Nassau is your best option. It does have its benefits as the hub of civilization in the region, if also the distraction of all the tourists who make that civilization thrive and thump into the night.

As refreshing as a juicy lime in a cold Corona



Its bustling, boozing image, to me, is one reason the Bahamas have been underrated as a charter haven for so long. Their close proximity to the U.S. coast makes them seem far less exotic than they really are. The shallow waters are more challenging for captains than deep Caribbean harbours, which simply means you'll find excellent captains paying close attention to navigation during your charter.

In retrospect, I think
be one of the best kept

The Bahamas may
secretly in charter

airport on Nassau, making our way up through the Exumas chain.

I was expecting a so-so seascape, and found a paradise

I have to say, the experience shocked me. Here I'd been, fully expecting a so-so seascape, when in reality I found a paradise that's much easier to get to from U.S. and European shores than Fiji or even the Caribbean. The Bahamian water was even more vibrant than what I'd seen on the other, more marketable side of the planet. Civilization was almost as minimal: a few inns painted bright pinks and yellows, some with food service on their waterfront porches, others offering simple glasses of lemonade. The harbours were downright empty and the beaches were ours alone. Our superyacht was one of only three we saw on the water during the entire week. The islands are close together, so there were no long, uncomfortable days at sea.

You can snorkel in the very waters where 007 Sean Connery escaped from impending doom

kayaking and jet skiing

The Exumas are shallow, for sure, and megayachts with deeper drafts can't always anchor close to shore, but I found that the contours of the ocean floor made for fantastic dinghy tours, kayaking and jet skiing, all part of any great yacht experience. Fishing in the Abacos is a religion, but in the Exumas, beach barbecues and conch chowder can be the order of every day. Then there are the surprises: Pig Beach, with its aggressively hungry inhabitants; the hundreds of iguanas that make Allan's Cay feel like a part of the Galapagos archipelago and the famous Thunderball Cave from the Bond film. You can snorkel in the very waters where 007 Sean Connery escaped from impending doom, then enjoy a Martini shaken not stirred (or a rum punch, if you prefer) at the nearby Thunderball Bar.

My cruise to all of those Exumas highlights happened to be in mid-March, but the optimum weather conditions for chartering in the Bahamas are from April through July.

I do recommend the kind of one-way charter we did, from Georgetown to Nassau. You can see more of the islands and get far away from the crowds during a week-long itinerary. And if you

Having finally been there to explore the outlying islands for myself, I now see the Bahamas in a new light: high-rolling fun, tranquil privacy, spectacular waters, interesting wildlife and quaint bars. To be able to experience all of that, with short day cruises between gorgeous islands, in a sarong instead of uncomfortable heels on some Mediterranean dock, is as refreshing as the juicy lime in a cold Corona.

Yah mon, indeed. I'm singing the Bahamian Rhapsody

Nigel Burgess represents an extensive selection of motor yachts for charters in the Bahamas throughout the year and our brokers will be pleased to assist you in planning your next charter to discover these pristine cruising grounds.

