

FAMILY TIME IN THE EXUMAS

By Sharon and Vince Burkhardt



The normal preparations for our family's annual Bahama's cruise were more exciting than usual. Not only were we planning to cruise further south than we had ever been in the islands, we were going to be cruising on our new Fleming, SHARON ANN (55-187).

From our home port in West Palm Beach, FL we were going to island hop down to Georgetown, Exuma. We would be visiting Freeport, Great Harbour Cay, Nassau, and a half dozen other islands in the Exuma chain before arriving at Georgetown.

We departed Lake Worth Inlet in the predawn hours and, at a relaxing ten knots, enjoyed a beautiful sunrise and a smooth Gulfstream crossing, arriving at Grand Bahama Yacht Club in Freeport at noon. The Gulfstream is one of those ocean currents that you quickly learn to respect. It is a warm water current that originates in the Gulf of Mexico, wraps around southern Florida and flows north up the east coast of the United States at almost 4 knots. Any breeze with a northerly component will kick up this stream to an uncomfortable and often dangerous condition. Our timing was perfect for the crossing as the winds were light out of the south.

After our arrival, a short ride on the water taxi was required to reach the Bahamian Customs and Immigration office to clear

into the country. Only the captain could leave the boat while the crew stayed aboard, as required. After clearing customs, down came the yellow quarantine flag and the Bahamian courtesy flag was hoisted. We shopped and dined at Port Lucaya and returned to the air-conditioned comfort of the Fleming to relax and watch a movie on the large flat screen.

We had planned to spend two days at Freeport, but the crew voted to move on to Great Harbour Cay after only one day. We were anxious to get there also as it was one of our favorite islands—one that we had visited many times prior to starting our family 27 years ago.

With a sunrise departure and a flat calm crossing of the Northwest Providence Channel, it was one of those unforgettable days where the ocean and sky become one and it was difficult to distinguish the horizon. We passed thru miles of floating seaweed and our shaft cutters really did their job! It was great fun to again visit the Beach Club and have the opportunity to eat at the private Tamboo Club. At first there

were not enough of us for the club manager to open the club for dinner, so we made quick work of rounding up another dozen dock mates and with that, Quanswalla, the manager, went grocery shopping, opened the club and bar for us and prepared a fabulous meal for the whole gang. This hospitality was repeated several times during our stay on this island. We played another day at Great Harbour swimming, fishing and exploring in SHARON ANN's tender.

Our departure to Nassau the following day was much later in the morning as we all needed some recovery time! We turned the corner at Great Stirrup Cay to a heading of 130 degrees and had 25 knots of wind and 4-6 footers right on the nose. The crew had been over-served at the Beach Club bar the previous night and so, needless to say, they layed low as we crossed the Northeast Providence Channel while watching a DVD in the comfort of the salon. What we thought was our first sighting of the hotels at Nassau turned out to be the conning towers of two surface-running submarines making their way into the Tongue of the Ocean. The Navy uses this 5000 foot deep trench for underwater weapons testing. Fifteen minutes later we spotted the buildings, and the crew was happy land was in sight. In contrast to the true out-island atmosphere we had enjoyed the previous two days, we arrived at Hurricane Hole Marina, played tourists at Atlantis Resort, and enjoyed the hustle and bustle of Nassau. Atlantis Resort is spectacular in a Disney-like sort of way. It was fun playing in the glitzy casino and we all lost our pre-set limit in short order. We especially enjoyed the fabulous aquarium with all varieties of tropical fish, huge rays, and sharks all set in and among the ruins of The Lost City of Atlantis. The next morning we were off to our real goal—the beautiful islands of the Exumas.

Following a three hour cruise southeast from Nassau, we arrived at Highborne Cay and docked at the clean modern marina in a sheltered harbor and, with the available wi-fi, all caught up on our e-mail. It was a short walk across the island to a peaceful and deserted beach facing Exuma Sound—a wonderful place to sit in silence and count your blessings. The next day we made the short hop back north and anchored between Allens and Leaf cays. When you approach the beach on Leaf Cay in the tender, the rock iguanas run out of the brush to greet you and find out what snack you brought to them. After

a dozen iguanas had gathered around and ate all the bread and lettuce we had, we thought it was a good idea to get back in the tender as they were still hungry! This is the only place in the Bahamas where these iguanas are found.

After enjoying another quiet evening at Highbourne Cay, we departed the next morning to continue our southbound cruise. We visited Norman's Cay to get a look at the former Medellin cartel's drug smuggling "hotspot" from the 1970's and early 80's. Carlos Lehder, a Colombian and co-founder of the Medellin cartel, had purchased the old Norman's Cay Yacht Club with its dock and airstrip. After spending over four million dollars in renovations and upgrades, Norman's Cay became the center of the Bahamian drug trade between Colombia and the United States. The dock was built like a commercial wharf and all looked quite industrial. A cargo plane sits on the bottom in the shallows and is awash at low tide. Lehder slipped through the fingers of United States drug enforcement in 1979 when he got a tip from a Bahamian official that a raid was imminent. When the raiding party arrived, the island was drug free! Carlos Lehder was finally captured by Colombian authorities in 1987 and extradited to the U.S. He remains in jail to this day.

The next two nights found us on a mooring at the Exumas Land and Sea Park at Warderick Wells Cay. This 176 square mile park established in 1959 by the Bahamian Parliament is one of 25 national parks and protected areas within the Bahamas. This park provided a beautiful setting for snorkeling and kayaking. It was good exercise to hike to the top of Boo Boo Hill where for years boaters have painted or inscribed their boat names and ports of call on everything from varnished boards to driftwood to plastic bottles. The Bananaquits (small finch-like birds) would land right in the cockpit and wait for a sugar treat. With sugar in your hand they would fly over and land on your fingers and eat from the palm of your hand. The jacks would lie under the boat and rush out to devour the scraps left over from our meals. The skeleton of a 52' sperm whale was reassembled on the beach near the park headquarters. The place was simply enchanting. All too soon we had to move on.

We spent one day at Compass Cay, where the nurse sharks lay on a submerged dock and enjoy it when you scratch their backs. At Staniel Cay, our next destination, we enjoyed more



snorkeling at the Thunderball Grotto where some scenes from the James Bond movie of like name were filmed. We spent the morning wandering the island until early afternoon when the tide was just right, as we were told that slack tide was the perfect time to see the grotto. Of course, this was also the time of day when the sky would be overtaken by those ominous thunderheads filled with lightning. We didn't let that stop us and after a short trip arrived at the cave's entrance, a dark hole in the limestone wall that led to the unknown. After swimming underwater through a narrow passage we surfaced into the grotto. Rays of light shining through holes in the cave's high ceiling pierced the water and created a mesmerizing display on the rocky cave floor. It was one of those marvels in nature that seemed too beautiful to be real. After taking it all in, we ventured out of the grotto's other opening where we were greeted by a curious school of fish that were so accustomed to people feeding them they would swim right up and look in your dive mask. Another fun activity was feeding the swimming pigs on Big Majors Spot just to the northwest of Staniel Cay. The pretty pink pigs would swim out from the beach to meet you as you approached in the tender and gladly consume any offering brought to them. Later in the day, a rented golf cart made quick work of touring the island and finding pristine and deserted beaches. The meals were delicious and the partying was lively

at Staniel Cay Yacht Club.

After several days of beach combing, fishing, snorkeling, pig feeding, and just relaxing, we untied our lines and headed to Georgetown. The calm winds we had been enjoying the last couple of days gave way to strong breezes. What would have been an uncomfortable cruise, was made enjoyable thanks to the Fleming's active fin stabilizers. The winds stayed with us for several days in Georgetown and kept us at the dock most of our visit. We rented a car and enjoyed visiting several villages on Great Exuma Island and were happy to find fresh fruit and vegetables at the local grocer.

Elizabeth Harbour at Georgetown is a large bay protected from the prevailing southeast winds by Stocking Island. Exploring the beaches of Stocking Island yielded all sorts of treasures and it was fun imagining the old sailing ships that so often anchored here.

It was time to leave the southern Exumas, point the bow toward Florida and head home. We all had a wonderful time and our Fleming proved once again to be safe, reliable, and very comfortable. On our cruise home, we were already making plans for our next adventure on the SHARON ANN. 

