

# The Family Islands

We turn the typical cruise with the kids into a big adventure on a powerboat charter in the Abacos.

BY JEANNE CRAIG





**H**ere's a story with a happy ending: We figured out how to put the romance back into our cruising life. Years ago, after baby number two joined our three-person crew, boating for our family became less about adventure and more about routine. Like other parents of young children, my husband, Chris, and I found ourselves trading the excitement of traveling to new places for the sheer ease of running to tried-and-true spots that were close to home, safe for little swimmers and within range of a dock-and-dine with macaroni and cheese on the menu. Fortunately for us, all of that was about to change.

This summer, we shook things up with a bareboat charter aboard a 47-foot catamaran in the Abacos, where we happily powered out of a cruising rut. As we discovered, this area in the northern Bahamas is more than just one of the prettiest boating destinations in the world. It's also one of the most family-friendly places around, even for a clan like ours with two school-age children — Lauren, 6, and Kyle, 8. In the Abacos, we found an authentic and accessible island getaway where there's enough surf, sport and fun to keep little ones busy, along with a cruising atmosphere that makes it easy for parents to decompress and really enjoy the ride.

We cast off lines from the Conch Inn Hotel & Marina in Marsh Harbour. This is the base for The Moorings, an international outfit with a long-standing (40 years) reputation for excellent service and well-maintained boats — the company boasts the youngest charter fleet in the business. We were loaned a Moorings 474 Powercat, which was engineered specifically for the company by the naval architecture firm Morrelli & Melvin Design and Engineering in California. (Co-founder Gino



**OUT ISLANDS.** Our Moorings 474 in Hope Town on Elbow Cay (top). The dinghy dock at Sunset Beach on Great Guana near Grabbers Grill (above). On the hook and jumping in at Tahiti Beach (opening spread).

Morrelli was a leading member of the team that designed *Stars and Stripes* for the America's Cup.) With four cabins and four separate heads, it offered much more room than we needed. In fact, this boat has enough space for two families to cruise comfortably (max capacity is 12 passengers). At first glance, we wondered if the \$1,100 per day price for the 474 was a bit steep for the average vacation budget. But when we compared that to the cost of a week at one of the top-end Disney resorts in Orlando, Florida, we discovered it's not uncommon for a family to spend as much as \$6,000 for six days in crowded theme parks.

The Abacos is often described as a place that makes a



**HOT TIP.** Get snorkel sites from Brendal's Dive Center on Green Turtle.

newcomer feel comfortable at the helm. On our first day under way, we started to understand why. Leaving Marsh Harbour, we headed into Abaco Sound, which at two miles wide and 60 miles long is a smooth, protected waterway that's relatively easy to navigate. Along the east side of the sound are more than a half-dozen cays to explore, each a destination unto itself. Yet the cays are also conveniently close together (the most popular stops have about 12 miles between them), so cruisers can get variety without having to make long, open-water passages. That's good news for parents of a young crew.

Most people who charter in the Abacos run a predictable route through the islands, and we were no different. Our first stop was Hope Town on the north end of Elbow Cay, a lovely harbor that's perhaps the most photographed in the Bahamas. The Moorings' staff (who were very helpful throughout the trip) told us Hope Town was one of the few places in the Abacos where mooring reservations are required. We hadn't made one, so we toured the place quickly, making sure to climb up Elbow Reef Lighthouse. Built in 1864, it's one of only three kerosene-fired

lighthouses in the world, but that fun fact was lost on the kids, who were more entertained counting aloud the number of wooden steps (101) that lead to the top.

From Hope Town, we hit the southern tip of Elbow Cay and anchored near Tahiti Beach, a must-stop for anyone cruising here. The name was allegedly inspired by the palm trees that bow to the shore, but the best things about this spot are the white sand (so tempting the kids were in it up to their elbows before Chris had tugged the dinghy onto the beach) and the water. It's just a foot or two deep for at least 100 yards, and the skinny depths make for a stunning shade of turquoise.

Although incredible to look at, the shallow water in the Abacos can give even a confident captain a temporary case of white knuckles at the wheel. The average depth in Abaco Sound is 18 feet, but there are many times you run in 10 or 12 feet. Then there are those pesky reefs and coral heads to watch out for. Fortunately, most are marked, as are the channels you use to go between them. Reliable electronics come in handy here. Our powercat (with a draft of 3 feet 1 inch) had a Raymarine C-Series GPS/chart plotter, a system that made it easier for us to



**THE BIG DIG.** Lauren (center right) gets busy in the white sand at Manjack Cay, where we found a nice anchorage for *The Moorings 474* (above).

## TRAVEL TIPS

**DRIVE.** Rent a golf cart to tour 2.5-mile-long Man-O-War Cay, and don't miss The Narrows, where the island is only about 34 feet wide with water on both sides. Afterward, swim in the ocean beach, one of the prettiest in the Abacos.

**SNORKEL.** Don mask and fins at Sandy Cay south of Elbow Cay. We had to wait out a lightning storm and then pick up from one mooring and move to another when a snaggle-toothed barracuda refused to leave his turf, but the wait was worth it. We were able to moor beside a nice patch of reef, so it was a short swim over to a great view.

**TOUR.** In New Plymouth on Green Turtle Cay there are great history lessons for kids in the town's 18th century buildings. Then head to Pineapple's for lunch — it's a family favorite with a saltwater pool.

**SHOP.** Go to Sammie Boy's Gift Shop on Man-O-War Cay. If Sam Albury is manning the cash register for his daughter, who runs the store, he'll show your kids the right way to blow into a conch shell.

pick our way around the shallower patches.

Because of the depths, we didn't take shortcuts. So it took us a while to get from one place to another, even though the boat cruises at a nice 16-knot clip with a pair of 150 hp Cummins diesels. We've chartered powercats in other locations before, so we knew we could expect great handling. The 474 is particularly easy to maneuver at the dock, which could surprise people who are unfamiliar with this cat and intimidated by that 24-foot beam. We did learn a cat accelerates differently in depths less than 10 feet — it takes a bit longer to come on plane.

That's not problematic; it just takes getting used to.

Our boat was equipped with everything we needed to be comfortable, including a full galley, air conditioning, generator and reliable windlass. Oh, there was a TV in the salon, too, but with so much to do outside, the kids surprisingly lost all interest in it. Suddenly, they wanted to talk to each other rather than listen to *SpongeBob SquarePants*.

We were in for more surprises. In the Abacos, we

discovered some of the most family-friendly places are the restaurants. Many of the outdoor dining spots have pools within eyeshot of the tables, so kids can swim while the grownups discuss the wine list. One of our favorites was Grabbers on Great Guana Cay, where we ended up after Elbow Cay. In addition to a great sunset, there are games like bocce ball and ring toss to keep young, antsy diners happily entertained in between courses.

A better-known place is over the hill at Nippers Bar and Grill. It overlooks a pretty beach and a barrier reef with good snorkeling, so bring fins and masks. We went on a Sunday to check out the famous pig roast, and the place was packed. The kids loved the two pools, the sand floor in the gift shop and the festive decor — table umbrellas are made of the neon-colored streamers that decorate bicycle handlebars.

From Great Guana Cay, we set a course for Green Turtle Cay. Between the two, a section of Abaco Sound is blocked to boats drawing over 3 feet, so cruisers have to make a



**WHEEL TIME.** Kyle gets a driving lesson from Mom at the bridge (top) while en route to Man-O-War Cay and its incredible ocean beach (above).

TOP: CHRIS KELLY; JEANNE CRAIG



**TOURING.** Locals call this section of Man-O-War Cay "The Narrows," where beaches are separated by a slim section of road built into rock.

three-mile run through the Atlantic Ocean around Whale Cay. This stretch of water has an ominous reputation among boaters for the large swells that build in bad weather. The Moorings requires each boat crew to check in with the base when approaching the area and to check in again once past Whale Cay. Fortunately, on the day we traveled, the seas were so flat little Lauren was able to climb up the stairs to the bridge and bring a sandwich to her dad while we were under way. I suspect the stable ride of the boat also had something to do with making that delivery a steady one for her.

Green Turtle Cay is known for its excellent beaches (it's easy to find one all to yourself, as we did at Bita Bay), and good marinas. We were on moorings for most of the trip (\$20 per night), but here we tied up at the Green Turtle Club Resort and Marina (\$1.75 per foot) and took advantage of the amenities. Having rented a golf cart to explore the island (a fun, squeal-inducing ride over bumpy sections of unpaved road), we then found the Bluff House Beach Hotel and Yacht Club nearby, another nice place with transient slips.

At the Bluff House, we met a few boating couples with children. They told us about easy snorkel spots for kids (Mermaid Reef near Marsh Harbour ranks high), relaxing day trips (comb the beach on Shell Island off the north end of Great Guana Cay) and must-see anchorages, including one on Manjack Cay, where we met up with one of those families the following day.

On Manjack, while the kids stood waist-deep in water mesmerized by the movements of a big stingray that joined our party, the dads fished and the moms dished about schools and soccer camps, and then got around to the subject of boating. "We've been coming to the Abacos for years, and we often run into the same people," said

Randy Karpinia of West Palm Beach, Florida. "There are fewer boaters this summer, probably due to the economy, yet I've noticed the people who are here are the ones who have cruising in their blood. They wouldn't think of not making this trip."

Most people who cruise the Abacos put Man-O-War Cay somewhere on their float plan. It wasn't our last stop, but this cay was my favorite. I was familiar with its boatbuilding tradition — the Albury Brothers still craft their seaworthy skiffs here in a shed on the Queen's Highway, a grand name for a very narrow street that runs along the waterfront. And like many newcomers, I also wanted to see the saltshaker-style houses so carefully maintained by the island's 300 residents. Surprising, though, was the realization that Man-O-War is a wonderful, quiet, even magical place to walk at night.

I took Kyle for a stroll in the dark along the crooked road that leads from the marina up and over a hill to the ocean beach. There were the stars and the easy breeze to enjoy, but just as pleasant was the feel of that small hand in mine. He's getting older, I know, but I can still hope he'll let me get this close again, the next time we shake things up and do some real cruising. ❖

» For more information on *The Moorings*, go to [moorings.com](http://moorings.com).



**UNDER WAY.** The Moorings 474 cruises at a nice 16-knot clip.

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**ONLINE EXCLUSIVE.** Check out additional photos of The Moorings 474 Powercat in the Abacos at our website, [motorboating.com](http://motorboating.com).