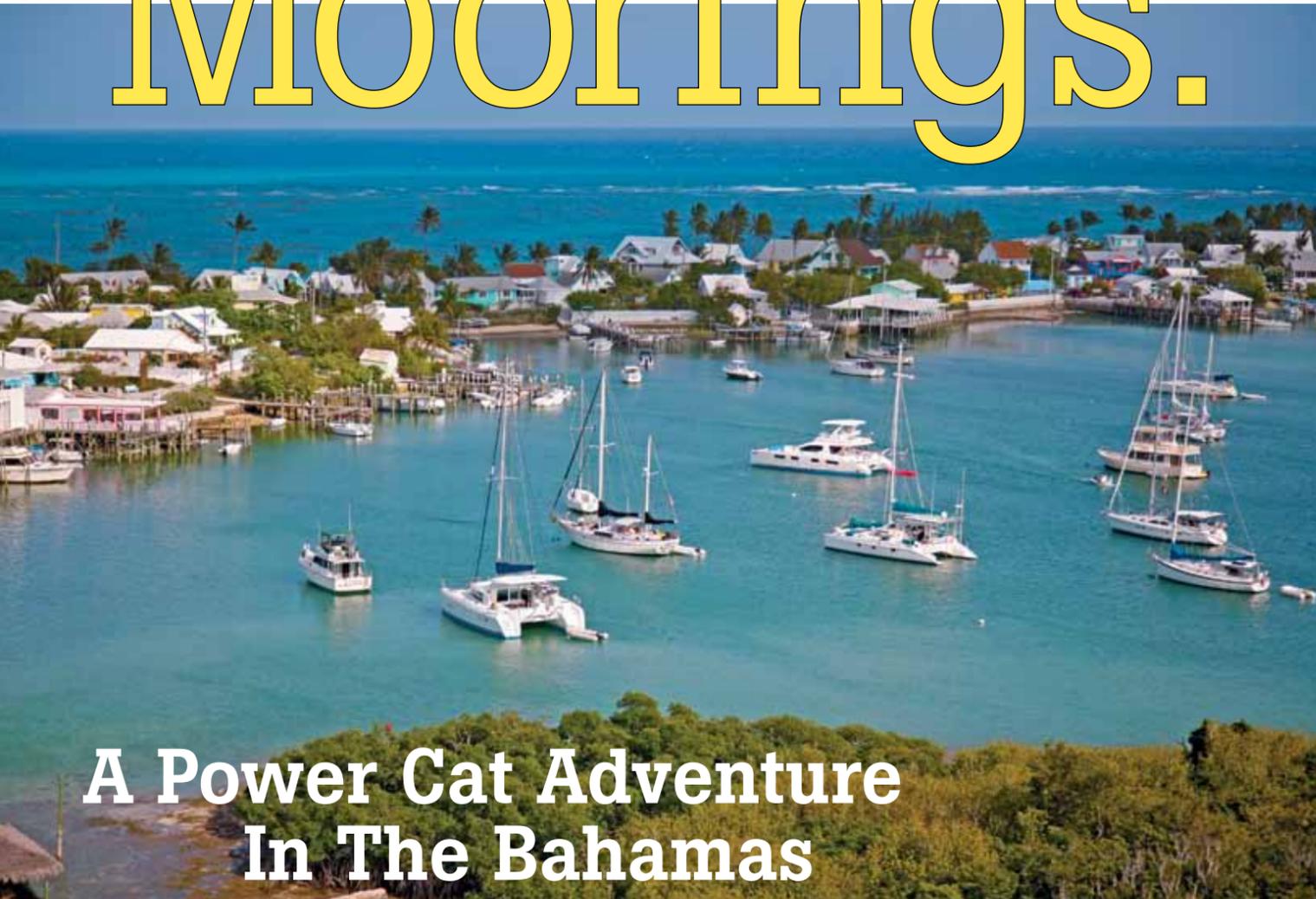




Chartering With The Moorings:



A Power Cat Adventure In The Bahamas

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hey claim “it’s better in the Bahamas.” By January I figured it’s better just about anywhere other than in New England. I’m not alone with my desire to head south to find some warm salt water to cruise on. My three boating-crazed brothers, Andy, Dan, and Tom, our adventurous wives, significant others, and assorted kids have enjoyed several memorable bareboat charters together with The Moorings in the British Virgin Islands.

Escaping the icy grip of winter to spend a week cruising in the sun is a great way to reconnect with family and recharge the batteries of the soul. Collecting warm salty memories and some local treasure remind me of these adventures when I’m back home watching the snow pile up outside.

Cruising boats moored in the protected anchorage at Hope Town Harbour viewed from the top of Elbow Reef Lighthouse.

Maybe it was the belt-tightening economy or simply the increased popularity of chartering in the BVI, but this year the demand for Caribbean-bound airline seats seemed to have far outpaced the supply of anything remotely resembling an affordable flight without multiple connections through Timbuktu. I was about ready to toss in the towel when I remembered that The Moorings had a base in the Bahamas. I had been through the Abacos on assignment a couple of times and loved it, so I was willing to bet the family would, too.

After exhausting the last minute airline and air taxi options to Marsh Harbour, I figured I had nothing to lose by checking air charter operators. Bingo! The third call was the charm. The cost per person was roughly equivalent to the scheduled air carriers, but without all the airline hassles and schedule restrictions.

vessel and the cruising area. All nine of our crew arrived by late afternoon, so we opted for the “Early Start” night aboard. After sorting out the bunks and stowing the bags on our 474 Power Cat, we enjoyed a welcome Kalik (Bahamian beer) with a dinner of grilled dolphin sandwiches and conch chowder before turning in for the night.

The layout of the 474 PC provides spacious accommodations for up to 10 in four doubles, each with its own head and shower, plus two single bunks located in the forward section of each of the catamaran hulls. My daughter Kelsey claimed the forward port double that had a bulkhead door connecting it to the forward single occupied by her 16-year-old brother McKenzie. Since interior access could be closed off at any time we nicknamed this forward bunk “the box” after the solitary



Our crew relaxing at Pete’s Pub Little Harbour, Sea of Abaco, Bahamas.

If you haven’t enjoyed the pleasure of traveling via private aircraft, I highly recommend it. We’re living proof that you don’t have to be a 1-percent jetsetter to enjoy the experience. Arriving at the National Jet FBO at Ft. Lauderdale Airport, we were greeted by friendly staff, a comfortable passenger lounge, and fresh coffee—not endless security lines. As the ramp agents pulled our luggage from the shuttle van and loaded it, we were invited to board the aircraft. Within minutes we were taxiing out for takeoff. Wheels up at 15:15. Next stop: Marsh Harbour and a week cruising on the bright blue Sea of Abaco.

ABACO AWAITS

Arriving at Marsh Harbour, it was evident that The Moorings runs a tight ship. From base check-in to boat checkout, their first-class operation has been fine-tuned over years of experience to provide everything a charterer needs to be safe and comfortable with the

confinement box in the Paul Newman film, *Cool Hand Luke*. The single bunk could also be accessed through a deck hatch whenever Kelsey opted for some privacy by securing the bulkhead door. Traveling solo this time, Tom occupied the starboard forward single accessed only by deck hatch. With everyone aboard and settled in, it was lights out. Eight in the bunks, one in the box.

Following the boat checkout process the next morning my brothers and I headed over to the captain’s briefing presented by Tony Knowles while my sister-in-law Judy, our appointed galley wench, directed the storing of provisions that had just arrived at the boat in large plastic tubs. We’ve found from experience that it’s best to have one person in charge of the galley. There’s nothing worse than finding you are fresh out of cold Kalik and peanuts when you’re miles from the next island supply opportunity.

Safety briefing completed—all hands stood by as

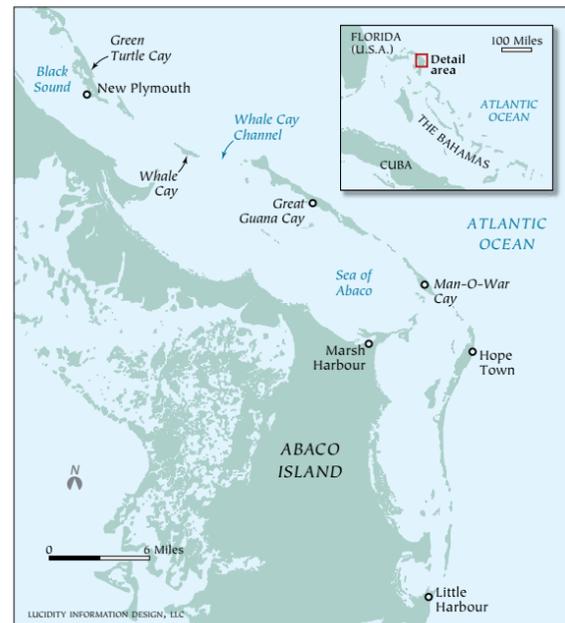


we dropped our lines and motored off the dock. The PC 474 maneuvers easily in tight quarters due to its wide beam and the widely spaced twin Yanmar diesels. Departing Marsh Harbour at 13:15, we picked up our heading to Great Guana Cay, a short 6nm run to the north. With the galley squared away, Judy popped up on deck to take in her first view and remarked, “The water color is surreal—I want to bottle it and bring it home.”

GREAT GUANA CAY

The anchorage in the settlement at Great Guana was small and shallow. After a bit of “dinghy re-con” by Dan and Andy, we opted for a mooring around the corner at Fishers Bay where we had more open space to swing and swim off the boat.

Great Guana Cay is home to several colorful and entertaining beach bars situated on both the Sea of Abaco and the Atlantic Ocean side. It also boasts arguably the finest golf course in the Caribbean farther up island at Baker’s Bay Golf and Ocean Club. We tied up to the dinghy dock at Grabbers and made the short trek across the island through the colorful settlement to Nippers Beach Bar and Grill on the Atlantic side. Catering to a decidedly younger and louder crowd, Nippers sits high above a broad coral sand beach where we met frequent island visitor Tom Dyer sporting a faded red Mount Gay cap and a broad smile as he maneuvered his big training kite in the Atlantic breeze above the beach. Tom invited one and



Robert Cronan

A Moorings 474 Power Cat hanging on a transient mooring, Man-O-War Cay.

all to take a turn with his kite. While Kelsey gave it a try, McKenzie and I checked out a couple of beached Portuguese man-of-war that could still deliver a powerful sting to any unsuspecting feet that happened to encounter its long blue tentacles.

Back on the boat Judy and the galley crew were whipping up a potato salad while burgers sizzled on the grill. Rain was approaching as the wind picked up, but the 474 PC was equipped with roll-down side curtains ready to protect the aft

deck from the occasional rain squall. After dinner some of us dove into rounds of gin rummy while others sank into books, all simply relaxing into good family time riding secure on the mooring for the night.

The next morning dawned bright, clear, and calm. Our ace galley team turned out a scrumptious breakfast while Andy and Tom on the navigation side worked on the float plan for the day. Off the mooring we headed to Hope Town on Elbow Cay, a tiny gem of a settlement complete with a candy-striped lighthouse built by the British in 1863. Motoring south through calm seas, we passed Man-O-War Cay to port and angled around to the channel entrance that is flanked by shallows. The Moorings supplies a good chart as well as *The Cruising Guide to The Abacos* to supplement the Raymarine chart plotter. With four willing navigators aboard, it was easy to maintain an ample lookout at all times.

Tucked inside the protected anchorage, we picked up a mooring for \$20 per night directly across from Cap’n Jack’s, a dockside restaurant and bar and a Hope Town institution; Jack’s conch fritters are some of the best you’ll find in the Abacos. Hope Town moorings can be reserved in advance with a call on VHF 16. There are also several marinas offering transient slips. The settlement of Hope Town is a delightful walking experience, one beautifully painted cottage after another, some with

gardens, gingerbread trim, colorful Bahamian shutters, and unique hand-crafted signs. It’s a visual treat, so be sure to toss the camera in your day bag. From boat rentals, fishing, and diving, to the historical museum and a self-guided tour of the Elbow Cay Light, Hope Town offers cruisers an

array of things to see and explore. There are a variety of restaurants from the village to the oceanfront. Hope Town Coffee House promises to get your morning going right with an assortment of breakfast sandwiches, baked goods, and coffee fresh roasted on the premises. The two grocery stores, Harbour View and Vernon’s, stock just about all your galley needs. And for sweet electives there is the Sugar Shack serving 12 flavors of ice cream.

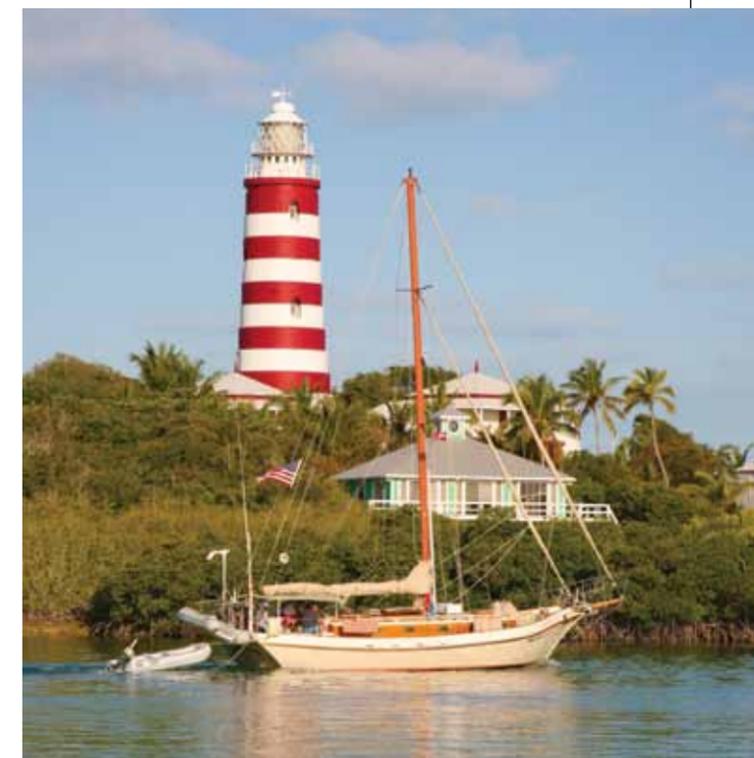
By the time we covered most of the settlement we had walked our way to the Atlantic side. We wandered into the Hope Town Harbour Lodge, a small resort with an inviting pathway that leads to a terrace restaurant and pool-bar sitting on the beach soaking up the sun and the fresh Atlantic breezes. Our server Jeanise brought crab cakes, shrimp, conch chowder, conch fritters, and talked us into a round of their famous “Goombay Smash,” a dangerously delicious concoction of coconut rum, dark rum, and fruit punch; umbrellas are optional.

Following our fabulous lazy lunch it was time to work it off with a climb up the 100-plus steps to the top of Elbow Reef Lighthouse. One of the few remaining manually operated lights in the world, a spectacular view of Hope Town Harbour rewards the effort of the determined climber. Looking out over this charming harbor village to the ocean beyond, my crew thought they had died and gone to Bahama heaven.

Elbow Cay is also home to spectacular Tahiti Beach. With island transportation from JR’s Golf Cart Rentals we were off and running, McKenzie at the wheel.



Above: Fishing boats tied to the dock in the anchorage at the settlement, Great Guana Cay. Right: A cruising sailboat passes Elbow Reef Lighthouse departing Hope Town Harbour, Elbow Cay.



Navigating instructions were simple: “Keep going 'til you get to da beach, Mon.” The road ends at an expanse of sugar-fine sand edged with the exceptionally blue-green Bahamian water. Tahiti Beach is the ultimate sand bar reaching out for hundreds of yards from the southern tip of the cay; it’s a tropical location right out of Central Casting.

The next day, after taking on water and gas for the dinghy at Light House Marina, we motored out of the narrow channel past Eagle Rock and settled in for a smooth passage south to Little Harbour. From sunlight reflecting off the shallow, sandy bottom for the three-hour run to Little Harbour, we were treated to every imaginable shade of blue and green in the spectrum. With



Top: A Moorings 474 Power Cat alongside the dock at Lighthouse Marina, Hope Town Harbour. Above: Arriving at Pete's Pub & Gallery, on the beach in Little Harbour.

the depth gauge reading between 7 and 14 feet, it was shallow, but no worries with 4.5-foot draft. The raised helm and seating area located on the covered flybridge was the perfect perch, providing a 360-degree view of the vivid sea colors and a great location for keeping a watch for coral heads. Andy said, "I didn't realize there were at least 63 shades of turquoise, but now I know."

LITTLE HARBOUR

The entrance to Little Harbour is well marked and easy to spot in good light. Within minutes of picking

up a mooring, Dan struck up a conversation with fellow cruiser Lee Adamson, owner of the 47-foot sailing catamaran, *World Wide Traveler*, hanging on the next mooring. An instant party began. Lee and his two friends joined us aboard for drinks and boat talk. Lee entertained with stories from the 25,000 miles that had passed under his keel.

More company approached. Our swim platform began to resemble a dinghy dock as we welcomed Chris and Vanya aboard, armed with a bottle of dark rum. A couple from Chicago, they had just sailed into the anchorage aboard a tiny 22-foot compact sloop from Man-O-War Cay. Even with 14 aboard, the 474 PC was uncrowded and comfortable.

The party moved ashore to Pete's Pub and Gallery, a landmark at Little Harbour. A sandy walk down the beach brought us to the gallery and foundry with an impressive collection of bronze creations, as well as delightful local jewelry, art, and photography. Later we checked out the caves on the west side of the anchorage but came away empty handed—any treasure having long since been liberated. McKenzie decided to swim back to the boat. Following slowly in the tender we noticed boats in the anchorage hailing from local and distant ports as far flung as Texas and Maine. Dan was impressed with the number of cruisers who had come from the States and Canada in not only modest sailboats but also modest powerboats as well.

MAN-O-WAR CAY

Morning brought a wind shift to the west. After a lazy start we were off the mooring heading north for Man-O-War Cay at 8-9 knots. The cut into the anchorage at Man-O-War is tight but once inside, a turn to starboard takes you to the quiet end of the inlet while a turn to port leads to the village docks and waterfront activity of this historic settlement. We picked up a rental mooring opposite the dock leading to the Albury Brothers

Boat Shop, and a short walk to the Sail Shop with its colorful display of canvas bags made on the premises. With a history of boatbuilding dating back to the 1800s on Man-O-War Cay, the Albury family continues the boatbuilding tradition today, turning out the famous Abaco Dinghies as well as finely crafted model boats and half hulls. Their workshop is a must-see. Andy Albury gave us a history lesson of the place then cordially agreed to sign the half hull model that is now proudly displayed in Dan's home. Man-O-War Cay continues to maintain a strict adherence to their "no alcohol" policy. It can neither be sold nor served on the island. Lucky for us that drinking aboard is allowed and we had replenished our supply of Kalik at Little Harbour that was now nicely chilled back on board. Our day at Man-O-War finished with a dinghy cruise exploring the length of the anchorage in the late afternoon light.

At sunrise, with a cup of Judy's hot coffee in hand, the morning ferry activity was under way and the west wind continued as we headed out of the cut and set a northwest course for Green Turtle Cay and the settlement of New Plymouth. The passage required a run outside around Whale Cay. We placed a radio call to The Moorings base and were confirmed the "OK" to transit the Whale Cay channel.

GREEN TURTLE CAY

Entering Black Sound just after noon, we confirmed dockage at Black Sound Marina and local transport with T & A Golf Cart Rentals on the VHF. New Plymouth is home to about 400 people. Many are able to trace their heritage back to the Loyalists who relocated there from New York in 1783. Over time, seafaring and boatbuilding skills developed and by the mid 1800s Green Turtle Cay had become the wrecking (salvage) capital of the Abacos. Later, sponge diving was plentiful until that industry was decimated by a blight in the mid 1930s. The devastating Hurricane of 1932 was the final blow for many islanders leading to a decline in the population. Overall exporting rock lobster to the United States remains the longest running industry and mainstay of income for many islanders.

A collection of small islands with quaint settlements, each with their own charm and personalities, the Abacos offer a relaxing destination full of history, local color, peace, and quiet, and arguably some of the most beautiful beaches and water in the world.

Another local industry throughout the Abacos is

conch fishing. The making of conch salad is an art form in the Bahamas, and no one serves up a better bowl than Uncle Lionel at his conch stand on the New Plymouth town dock. Sporting a Boston Red Sox cap, Uncle Lionel chopped and mixed fresh conch, green and red peppers, onions, lime juice, and a splash of his special concoction of unknown origin. The line of hungry locals and sailors was long and worth every minute of the wait.

McKenzie had gotten quite adept at handling the golf carts, which was a good thing given the narrow paths and tight turns along the harbor are some of the more challenging cartways in the Abacos. We cruised around the settlement's narrow streets passing a variety of shops, cozy B&Bs, and the museum. Vert's Model Ship Shoppe was another must-see for the brothers. We spent an enjoyable time chatting with owner/artist Vertrum Lowe who had created an assortment of brightly painted folk art half hulls and full models on display in his tidy gallery/workshop.

The sun was pressing the yardarm as we rolled up to Pineapple's Bar and Grill to sample their legendary pina colodas, which are served up with a big welcoming smile by the lovely Yvonne—a most talented bartender. Pineapple's also sports a pool, beach, and a small dock where conch fishermen off-load their catch. Kelsey was intrigued with a live conch; its

foot sticking out of the large shell. Not wishing to become the guest of honor in the next batch of conch salad, it worked its way across the dock in search of escape.

The best spot for sunset on Green Turtle Cay is Sundowners Bar perched on the west-facing shore near the settlement center. According to Bob Bryson, a veteran visitor from Ohio, "It's just the best bar for hanging out and meeting people—period. Formerly known as Mike's Bar, Sundowners has been in continuous operation for nearly 40 years. As we talked with fellow travelers our bartender Jeremy kept the cold Kaliks coming until the sun was nearing sea level, signaling it was time to find a good spot for dinner.

We had noticed a number of interesting restaurants on our earlier cart cruise around Green Turtle. Several posted the evening's menu on a signboard outside the door and from this prompt we decided on the Wrecking Tree. With a group of nine hungry sailors it's a good idea to make a reservation. Just as we were seated McKenzie and Kelsey came blasting in the door, excited and insisting that we not miss the sunset. As the



Uncle Lionel working on a batch of his famous conch salad at the town dock, Green Turtle Cay.



big orange ball dropped below the horizon, the clouds were streaked with all flavors of red and purple—it was worth the rush to the top of the hill.

Our waitress, Crystal, a shy, lovely young island woman, brought grouper, mahi mahi, and conch fritters, served simple and fresh. The service may have seemed slow but here there was no pushy wait staff trying to rush us through our meal to turn the table. Dinner at the Wrecking Tree was a delight and well worth the wait for fresh seafood. Back to the boat. Night comes quickly in the islands, there isn't much twilight so it tends to be early to bed and early to rise.

The next day was Tom's day to captain the vessel. Easing out of Black Sound on an incoming tide he headed back around Whale Cay taking it every inch of the way from start-up to shut down. Along the way he commented, "I am surprised at how shallow the water is. It is like motoring around in a big pool, each Cay has its own feel. Hope Town is as different from Green Turtle as it is from Man-O-War."

HOPE TOWN

We spent our last night at Hope Town. I could spend a week in that place. The run was smooth with our crew settled into favorite spots reading, dozing off, messing with the chart plotter, and just watching the beautiful Bahamian water and islands slip by as we passed local fishermen diving for conch.

Tom eased up to a mooring in the now familiar Hope Town anchorage. McKenzie, our designated dinghy driver, ran us all ashore in the tender, the crew fanning

The Moorings

<http://www.moorings.com/>

Treasure Air Charters

www.treasureair.com

Baker's Bay

<http://www.bakersbayclub.com>

Hope Town Information

<http://www.visithopetown.com>

Cap'n Jack's

<http://capnjackshopetown.com>

Hope Town Coffee House

<http://hopetowncoffeehouse.com/>

General Information

<http://islands.thebahamian.com/abacos.html>

Man-O-War Heritage Museum

http://mozwmuseum.com/Our_Island_History.html

Abaco History

<http://www.bahamas4u.com/abacoshistory.html>

Kalik Bahamian Beer

http://www.bahamasgateway.com/kalik_beer.htm



Flamingo Villas' waterfront vacation rental cottage at the entrance to Hope Town Harbour, Elbow Cay.

out around the settlement on a final hunt for the perfect souvenirs to haul back to the frozen north. We had one more night and we intended to make the most of it, a last chance to soak up the Bahamian sun and warm salt air. The crew straggled back to the boat for our final meal aboard. Judy cranked up the galley, enlisting my friend Jayne to grill up the remaining burgers and fish, while my sister-in-law Rhonda prepared an enormous salad.

Dressed for dinner, Tom and Dan appeared to be in serious competition to win the prize for "most mismatched tropical shorts and shirts combination." Tom got my vote. Kelsey looked island chic in a long green dress, Judy, always the island princess, was decked out in a tropical skirt and top adorned with island jewelry and the obligatory flower in her hair, while Rhonda and Jayne seemed to have been easing back into "normal" stateside attire. McKenzie, Andy, and I appeared to have accidentally coordinated a khaki shorts with a dark evening-wear T-shirt look, Andy with the ever-present New York Yankees ball cap. It was a fine last supper aboard, a fitting feast to celebrate the end of our Abaco adventure. At oh-dark-thirty, we were off the mooring heading out of Hope Town past Eagle Rock. The sun was climbing out of the sea off to starboard at 07:00 as we made the short run to Marsh Harbour. Soon we were easing onto The Mooring's fuel dock, our bags packed, ready to clear out.

The process ran smoothly. The Moorings staff printed out boarding passes for our continuing flights from Ft. Lauderdale and wished us safe travels and a speedy return to the Abacos. We cabled it to the airport to meet our charter flight back to Florida. A wide climbing turn of our plane gave us a parting view of the Sea of Abaco, and it occurred to me—it really is better in the Bahamas. 🇧🇸



For a complete history of the Abacos, visit our Web Extras at www.passagemaker.com under the community tab for more information.