

# IFR TO THE BAHAMAS

*Launching under VFR to this Caribbean paradise offers little utility since you're required to file a flight plan and communicate with ATC.*

Story and photos by Fred Simonds



One of the most rewarding and beautiful flights I've ever made was with my friend Tom, on an Angel Flight from Fort Lauderdale Executive airport to Governor's Harbour in Eleuthera, Bahamas. Not only was the mission for a good cause, but I learned how valuable the instrument rating can be when traveling to this Caribbean paradise even though the weather there is severe clear most of the time.

Before we departed Florida, I filed an international (ICAO) flight plan online using DUATS. You can also download a paper version of the form at [www.faa.gov/library/forms](http://www.faa.gov/library/forms), and then call Flight Service at 800-WX-BRIEF to file. Wise pilots also note in the Remarks section the quantity and color of the life vests on board, and whether they have a raft. This will make it easier for search and rescue to locate you, in the unlikely event of an emergency water landing.

A VFR or IFR flight plan must be filed when entering and leaving the Bahamas, but no flight plan is needed while flying there locally during daylight. An IFR flight plan is required

at night, however. Since only Freeport and Nassau have instrument approaches, you must land there or return to the U.S. at night.

### Cleared As Filed

With the engine running on the ground in Fort Lauderdale, I copied a conventional IFR clearance. The routing took us to WIERS intersection and then to the Bimini VORTAC (ZBV), a modest 56 miles over water. From there we flew Bahamas Route BR57V to Nassau VOR/DME (ZQA), another 113 miles. From Nassau it's a short 64-mile hop to Governor's Harbour.

Much like domestic routing, what we flew proved more direct than what we filed. Having a GPS in the Bahamas makes life much easier since ground-based nav aids, with the exception of NDBs, are practically nonexistent.

The MEA along BR57V is 2,000 feet from the Florida coast to Nassau, thanks to the offshore positioning of the Bimini VORTAC. Pilots launching from the Florida Keys, however, should note that the MEA on BR53V, which begins as the 108-degree radial

of the Virginia Key VOR/DME in Florida, rises to 11,000 feet at the 80-mile mark, WOOZE intersection.

While the Miami Sectional and L-23 low-altitude enroute IFR charts cover the northwest portion of the Bahamas island chain, the CH25 and CJ26 WAC charts are the smallest scale charts that cover the entire chain.

We were in radar contact throughout the flight, cruising high in Tom's Bonanza at 10,000 feet or better. As we climbed eastward over the Atlantic Ocean, Miami Departure handed us off to Miami Center, and finally to Nassau Approach, who stayed with us all the way to Governor's Harbour.

You may have read about the "automatic rough" that engines seem to develop over water. I was too busy working the radios for Tom, enjoying the incredible view and getting used to a new set of geography to notice anything untoward.

With 700 islands forming the 400-mile Bahamian archipelago, we had visual contact with at least one island at all times during the entire trip. Still, if our single engine quit, we'd be out of

# FLIGHT PLANNING

gliding range to land.

Each person on board had a Coast Guard approved life vest at the ready—and I mean ready as in easy-to-reach-in-a-heartbeat. Vests are a Bahamian government requirement. Tom went further, carrying a life raft, survival knife and a personal 406 MHz ELT. Bahamian regulations also require 12-inch tall tail numbers and a Mode C transponder.

With great VFR weather all around us, we began our descent for Governor's Harbour. We canceled IFR with Nassau Approach and made an uneventful visual approach. (See photo, below.)

## Local Considerations

With telephone service at each of the 60 airports you can fly into, cancellation on the ground is possible. Not all of the telephones work, however, so it is best to cancel while airborne. Throughout the Bahamas, altitude makes radios work better. The VFR flight planning chart for the Bahamas (distributed by their government) suggests being at least 1,000 MSL when communicating with Nassau Radio, or, add 80 feet for each mile distant from the nearest remote site (RCO) of 124.2, Nassau Radio. The chart lists six by name, and they are easy to find.

In most areas your cell phone will work just fine on the ground, though.

CDMA service is disappearing however, and GSM phones as used in Europe will serve you best. Some airports have Internet access.

All traffic patterns in the Bahamas are flown at 1,000 feet MSL and to the left. There are no taxiways or ASOS/AWOS/ATIS facilities except in Nassau and Freeport. Communicate on Unicom 122.8.

While Bahamian regulations closely emulate FAA rules, VFR in controlled airspace requires at least a 1,500 foot ceiling, 3 miles visibility and clear of clouds. In uncontrolled airspace, the ceiling requirement is 1,000 feet, 1 mile visibility, clear of clouds and in sight of land or water.

Since it is breezy in the Bahamas, there can be a little wind shear when crossing from water to land. Smart pilots carry a little extra speed on final and don't try to land on the numbers. The runways are relatively long there, and the reason is density altitude, which on a warm day can exceed 2,500 feet even though the field is at or near sea level.

Fuel is available at nine of 60 airports. The Bahamian tourist agency says that from any airport in the Bahamas you are never more than 20 minutes' flying time away from fuel. Call the airport to confirm availability of the kind of fuel you need or call Nassau Radio in the air. Top off immediately upon arrival.

Some private airports charge a landing fee as high as \$80. You may also need to tip the line crew \$20 in advance if you want gas in a timely way. Paying cash is best.

## Bittersweet Departure

Though flying to the Bahamas is not inherently difficult, leaving the solace of a warm, sunny beach to return to your cramped, noisy cockpit can be a painful experience. Tom and I eventually washed the sand from between our toes and

## Trip Planning

Start your planning by obtaining the Bahamas Private Pilot Guide and the VFR Flight Planning chart by calling 1-800-BAHAMAS.

Jeppesen's Caribbean Airway Manual Trip Kit includes charts and instrument procedures covering the Bahamas, Bermuda, Puerto Rico, Cuba, and Caribbean area islands.

For general flight planning information and details about Bahamian airports visit [www.bahamas.com/vacation-planning/pilots](http://www.bahamas.com/vacation-planning/pilots).

headed back to the airport.

You must depart the Bahamas from an airport of entry. They will need one copy of the Bahamas Customs General Declaration Outward Form (C7) and your Bahamas Immigration Cards. You will pay a departure tax of \$15 per person.

When you get there, call FSS to get a briefing and file an international flight plan. Call and advise U.S. Customs of your ETA at least one hour prior. This notice must include the pilot's name, ETA, citizenship of each person aboard, N-number, point of departure and landing. Get the initials of the person you speak with as verification that you made the call.

Once airborne, it is imperative that you contact ATC at least 15 minutes before penetrating the ADIZ unless you want a personalized military escort.

So, are you ready for a mid-winter vacation in your airplane? With a little preparation, flying to the Bahamas is simple and a lot of fun. The IFR route is the safest, and as long as you plan to arrive during daylight hours, chances are you won't even have to fly an instrument approach. And why would you want to, anyway, with views like this?

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