



*Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.*

## BACKGROUND

### Land and Climate

*Area (sq. mi.): 5,359*

*Area (sq. km.): 13,880*

The Commonwealth of the Bahamas consists of roughly 700 islands and 2,500 cays spread across more than 100,000 square miles (259,000 square kilometers) of the western Atlantic Ocean. The nation's total land area is about half the size of Haiti, or a little larger than the state of Connecticut.

Only about 30 islands are inhabited. New Providence Island, just 21 miles long (34 kilometers) and 7 miles wide (11 kilometers), is home to the capital, Nassau, and a majority of the nation's population. All other islands besides New Providence are collectively known as the Family (or Out) Islands.

Most islands are flat with low rocky ridges; the nation's highest point, Mount Alvernia on Cat Island, is only 206 feet (63 meters) above sea level. The islands are surrounded by coral reefs and clear, shallow water. The islands' wildlife includes flamingos, parrots, iguanas, and a variety of exotic underwater animals.

Situated in the trade wind belt, the Bahamas experiences warm temperatures year-round. From June to September, the hottest months, the average daily high temperature in Nassau is 88°F (31°C). During the coldest months of January and February, the average is 77°F (25°C). Summer is the rainy season. Climate is fairly uniform throughout the islands, although northern islands receive more rainfall and are

sometimes subject to winter cold fronts from North America.

### History

#### *Indigenous People and Colonization*

The Lucayans (the word means "island people"), a branch of the Arawak tribe, settled the islands now known as the Bahamas between AD 600 and 800. Columbus met them on his first landing in the New World in 1492. The Lucayans soon became victims of Spanish slave raids, and they had no resistance to the influenza and measles the Spaniards brought. The entire Lucayan population was wiped out by 1515.

The islands remained uninhabited until 1647, when English religious dissidents from Bermuda settled on Eleuthera. Britain established the Bahamas as a colony after a larger settlement was founded on New Providence Island during the mid-1660s. Pirates flocked to Nassau because of its proximity to the routes of Spanish treasure ships. When Britain restored control in 1718, many pirates accepted the amnesty that was offered and became citizens of the fledgling colony.

The Bahamas remained loyal to Britain during the American Revolution, after which many loyalists moved to the Bahamas to stay under the British flag. The new colonists brought their slaves with them, increasing the number of people of African ancestry from one-half of the total population in 1770 to three-fourths by 1800. In 1834, Bahamian slaves were emancipated along with slaves throughout the British Empire. However, with no land provided to the newly-freed population, and without political rights or access to education, they continued to work for whites and lived in a form of pseudo-slavery after their

emancipation.

### ***Ties to the United States***

For most of its modern history, the Bahamas has been significantly affected by social, political, and economic developments in the United States. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, the colony prospered mainly during times when political and economic conditions in the United States allowed it to use its location to engage in the smuggling of illegal goods (such as Confederate cotton during the U.S. Civil War and liquor during Prohibition).

Experiments with tourism were only moderately successful until after World War II, when greater accessibility from the U.S. mainland led to the rapid growth of the industry. Hotels were built, new jobs became available, and U.S. dollars flowed to the islands. However, the minority white population—which controlled the government and the hotels, restaurants, and stores—received most of the new prosperity.

### ***Independence***

The Progressive Liberal Party (PLP), formed in the 1950s to champion the cause of the black majority, gained control of the government in 1967. Under the leadership of Sir Lynden Pindling, who served as prime minister, the new government improved educational and economic opportunities for the black majority. The PLP also began working to secure the colony's independence, which Britain granted in 1973.

### ***Tourism***

As tourism continued to grow and an increasing number of people shared in the new nation's wealth, a black middle class gradually emerged. During the 1990s, the government encouraged greater foreign investment, spurring further development of the tourism infrastructure. Now, as annual tourist visits outnumber the native population by several times and are responsible for over half of the country's GDP, tourism remains the dominant sector of the nation's economy and a powerful influence on Bahamian society. The Bahamas faces rising unemployment, crime, and murder rates.

### ***Recent Events and Trends***

- **Oil exploration:** One of the issues in the 2012 elections, in which the opposition Progressive Liberal Party (PLP) won, was whether to open up oil exploration in Bahamian waters; critics of the plan worry that doing so could harm the tourism industry. The PLP expects to hold a referendum on oil exploration in 2015.
- **Refugees:** In April 2013, the Bahamas deported 24 Cuban refugees seeking asylum in the United States and elsewhere. The Bahamas is a frequent transit point for Cuban and Haitian refugees and has been criticized for the condition of its refugee detention centers and its regular deportations.

## **THE PEOPLE**

### **Population**

*Population:* 321,834

*Population Growth Rate:* 0.87%

*Urban Population:* 85%

Some sources estimate that 85 percent of the population of the

Bahamas is of African descent, 12 percent is of European descent, and the remainder is of Asian and Hispanic descent. However, the Bahamian government does not track this information, because many Bahamians do not view themselves in terms of one ethnic category.

Immigration from Caribbean nations, particularly Haiti, has swelled in recent years. Roughly 80 percent of Bahamians live on New Providence Island, with the balance scattered throughout the roughly 30 other inhabited islands of the archipelago. Following Nassau, the largest urban center is Freeport, on Grand Bahama Island.

Because of the nation's small size and population—as well as a socioeconomic homogeneity brought about by a large middle class—many Bahamians know each other or share mutual acquaintances. This creates a small-community atmosphere throughout the entire nation.

### **Language**

Bahamians speak English, often with distinctive Bahamian accents or in dialects that include unique idioms or expressions such as *He done reach* to mean “He has arrived.” The Bahamas' proximity to the United States has resulted in a significant influence of American English phrases. Upper-class urban Bahamians sometimes speak with a British accent. Immigrants from Haiti speak Haitian Creole, a unique mixture of French and African languages.

### **Religion**

Most Bahamians are Protestants. Evangelical denominations, such as the Baptists and the Church of God, are growing the fastest. The Catholic Church has also grown in recent years due in part to the influx of Haitian migrants. Today, 35 percent of Bahamians are Baptist, 15 percent are Anglican, 14 percent are Roman Catholic, 8 percent are Pentecostal, 5 percent belong to the Church of God, 4 percent are Methodist, and 15 percent are adherents of other Protestant religions. The remaining 4 percent belong to other religions or have no declared religion.

Most Bahamians are serious about their religious beliefs, and the churches play an important role in their members' lives, with several services each week and frequent social activities, such as picnics at the beach on Sunday afternoons. Church leaders regularly comment on, and often influence, government decisions.

### **General Attitudes**

Bahamians are generally happy people who enjoy the simple pleasures of social contact. The atmosphere of the islands is laid-back, and people take time to talk to friends and strangers, even if doing so diverts them from their schedule. People love to throw parties and are typically gregarious and spontaneous. Bahamians value a good sense of humor, are not easily upset, accept both adversity and good fortune calmly, and do not get overly anxious about circumstances over which they have little control.

Bahamians, particularly younger people, value education and hard work. The desire to improve one's financial circumstances through education and employment is sometimes countered by pressure from others not to act above

one's station in life. This tension is often described by the phrase *Crab in a crab bucket*, meaning "Like a crab trying to escape from a bucket but being pulled down by the other crabs."

### Personal Appearance

Bahamians wear Western-style clothing appropriate for the warm climate of the islands. Styles are casual. Shorts predominate on the Family Islands, but clothing is typically more formal in Nassau. Men who work at Nassau's banks, businesses, and government offices wear business suits; women wear dresses, stockings, and high heels. School children wear uniforms, which typically include pants for boys, skirts for girls, and white shirts for both. On Sundays, everyone wears their best clothing, including suits for men and elaborate hats and brightly colored dresses for women.

## CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

### Greetings

Exchanges of greetings are often casual and informal but can follow more formal British and American patterns among those in the middle or upper classes. Greetings are important to Bahamians, and it is considered rude not to extend a greeting, even to a stranger on the street. Bahamians may exchange a nod instead of a verbal greeting.

*Hey man, what's happ'n* is a common greeting and is used informally by both black and white Bahamians. A typical casual black Bahamian response to a greeting is *okay* (with the emphasis placed on the last syllable). To show respect, one uses the greetings *Good morning*, *Good day*, and *Good afternoon*, accompanied by the proper form of address and surname, as in "Good day, Mr. Thompson." On some of the Family Islands, it is more common to use the proper form of address with the given name rather than the surname, as in "Good day, Miss Mariah." This form of address is used with older, respected people throughout the Bahamas.

### Gestures

Bahamians are generally unreserved when greeting or talking. They expect enthusiastic smiles and warm body language, including hugs, handshakes, and pats on the back. People frequently gesture when engaged in conversation, and facial expressions are animated. Those who cross their arms, avoid physical contact, or look too serious generally give a negative impression. A common gesture is to *suck teeth* (making a sucking noise with parted lips) to express contempt or disgust. To add emphasis, one will tip the head back slightly once or twice while making the noise.

### Visiting

Bahamians tend to arrive late to scheduled visits, often by an hour or two, and will stay as late as possible. Conversation is usually jovial. Bahamians love to discuss religion and politics, especially during election years. Sunday is an important day for visiting family. Extended families often get together, generally after church, to eat a large meal. Many Bahamians enjoy a leisurely Sunday afternoon drive, which

offers an opportunity to drop in at friends' homes. Arranging such visits beforehand is rarely expected. Guests who visit enjoy the custom of taking leftover food home after a meal.

### Eating

Although mealtime is an important occasion for family interaction, traditional sit-down family meals are reserved mainly for Sundays. Home cooking is still generally preferred, but U.S. influence has brought fast food into the average household at least twice a week. Bahamian food is generally high in cholesterol and calories; over a third of the adult population may be considered overweight. International fare is available at restaurants in Nassau and Freeport. Tipping is customary and a 15 percent gratuity is generally automatically added.

## LIFESTYLE

### Family

The Bahamian family has traditionally been large (averaging between 6 and 10 children), but in recent years the trend has been toward smaller families. Today, most women have only two or three children.

Many households are headed by single mothers, due primarily to the practice of *sweethearting*, in which a man fathers children with multiple women. It is common for men to cheat on their spouses, and the majority of births are out of wedlock. These children are referred to as *outside children*, though there is no stigma associated with the title. Men often fail to provide financial support for their children after the relationship with the mother has ended, and women frequently have *sweetheart* relationships to secure financial support. Because so many women raise their families alone, grandparents usually play an active role in caring for children.

### Housing

Bahamian architecture has not changed much from the colonial styles preferred by the first North American and European settlers. Brightly painted single-family dwellings with sloping roofs to protect against heavy rain are still common. Houses are made of wood or concrete blocks. Wood is prevalent in older and low-income residences. Concrete blocks are popular in newer homes because concrete homes hold up better in the face of severe hurricanes.

Bahamians tend to build their homes themselves, and it is not uncommon to take four or five years to finish a home. A growing trend among first-time homebuyers in New Providence is to build a house bigger than they need and rent out the extra space. Government programs aim to provide affordable housing.

### Dating and Marriage

#### *Dating and Courtship*

Relationships between young Bahamians often develop through school interaction. Most Bahamians espouse conservative religious values. In practice, however, society is much less rigid, and teenage pregnancy is common. The practice of *sweethearting* is less widespread among

upper-class couples, who typically court between one and three years before marrying.

### **Weddings**

Marriage ceremonies are held in churches. Those attending the wedding wear tuxedos or elaborate gowns. The event is usually preceded by a bridal shower, in which the bride receives gifts to set up the new household. A reception or party is held after the wedding. Because most couples today marry later in life than people of previous generations, couples tend to make all wedding decisions and finance the event themselves, rather than rely on family members.

### **Life Cycle**

Rituals marking new stages in Bahamian life tend to vary by religion. Baptists are generally baptized into their church as adults, while Anglicans and Catholics undergo baptismal ceremonies as infants.

Children who go to Sunday school receive the Eucharist by the age of 13. Confirmation marks the beginning of young adulthood. No formal rituals are associated with the passage into adulthood, and children often live with their parents until at least their mid-twenties or until they can afford to buy their own home. Most couples become members of a church before getting married.

When a person dies, Bahamian families hold a wake a night before the funeral. During the wake and at another get-together following the graveside service at the cemetery, mourners commemorate the deceased.

### **Diet**

The Bahamian diet is rich in flavor and calories. For breakfast, Bahamians often eat grits with a main dish of eggs, fish, corned beef, or sausage. Lunch and dinner are typically heavy meals consisting of steamed or fried meat served with *peas n' rice* (rice combined with *pigeon peas*, a type of legume), coleslaw, potato salad, or macaroni and cheese.

The local delicacy is conch (a large mollusk; pronounced “konk”), which is eaten uncooked but called scorched conch (partially diced and marinated with lime juice). Conch can also be used to make conch salad (diced and marinated with citrus juice, and mixed with chopped tomatoes, peppers, and onions), cracked conch (tenderized by a mallet and fried), or a spicy chowder.

A wide variety of local fish (including snapper, margate, grouper, and wahoo) are baked, fried, broiled, grilled, or stewed. Chicken, the most popular meat, is fried, grilled, or used to make a spicy soup called *chicken souse*. Poultry, meat, and fish are the main ingredients in a *steam* or *smudder*, in which the meat is cooked in a thick sauce. Other favorite dishes include *pea soup and dough* (dumplings), crab and rice, and crab stuffed with a variety of ingredients. Many dishes are accompanied by *Johnny cake* (a round, pale bread). Favorite desserts include potato bread, coconut and pineapple tarts, guava and coconut *duff* (pudding), and fresh coconut pie. *Peanut cake* (a form of peanut brittle), *benne cake* (sesame seed candy), and *parched* (roasted) peanuts are common snacks.

### **Recreation**

The sailing of workboats is the national sport. In the past, these boats were used primarily for fishing, and races were held as a means of raising money for their upkeep. Now the boats are maintained only for racing. Although most people do not participate directly in the sport, races are popular spectator events. Food, music, and dancing accompany the races, and large crowds flock to beaches for competitions. For many of the Family Islands, an annual regatta is the year's premier social and economic event. Soccer, basketball, track-and-field, volleyball, golf, cricket, and baseball are also popular.

The islands' beautiful beaches and clear water make fishing, water sports, and beach picnics favorite activities. People also enjoy listening to music and dancing. Going to the movies is popular in Nassau. Movie theaters do not exist on many of the Family Islands, so people rely on satellite dishes or personal copies of films. Dominoes, often enjoyed outdoors under a shade tree, is a popular game among men of all ages.

### **The Arts**

Although pop music from the United States is listened to most frequently, traditional Bahamian music is still popular. Goatskin drums, saws, and maracas provide a blend of island rhythms known as *goombay* music or *rake n' scrape*. Caribbean calypso and steel drum music is also common. *Soca* music—which combines calypso with U.S. soul music—and *meringue* from the Dominican Republic are the most popular styles of dance music. Music played during the New Year's Junkanoo festival has a heavy beat and utilizes percussion instruments such as the goatskin drum, cowbells, maracas, and the tambourine, punctuated by blasts on the whistle and horn. Many Bahamians enjoy singing in evangelical church choirs.

### **Holidays**

Public holidays include New Year's Day; Good Friday; Easter Monday; Whitmonday (seventh Monday after Easter); Labour Day (first Friday in June); Independence Day (10 July); Emancipation Day (often called August Monday, celebrated the first Monday in August), which commemorates the end of slavery; Discovery Day, or National Heroes Day (12 Oct.); Christmas; and Boxing Day (26 Dec.), a traditional British holiday.

One of the nation's most important cultural events is the festival of Junkanoo. Originated by slaves as a New Year's celebration, Junkanoo was discouraged and sometimes banned by the white colonial governments. Since the advent of black majority rule in 1967, Junkanoo has been promoted as a manifestation of black Bahamian culture. The holiday is celebrated with music and Mardi Gras-style parades on Boxing Day and New Year's Day. Parade participants walk along Nassau's Bay Street in colorful, elaborate costumes.

## **SOCIETY**

### **Government**

*Head of State: Queen Elizabeth II (U.K.)*

*Head of Government: PM Perry Christie*

*Capital: Nassau*

The Bahamas is an independent member of the Commonwealth of Nations, with Queen Elizabeth II as its nominal head of state. The governor-general acts as the official representative of the queen and is appointed by the prime minister. The prime minister must command a majority in the House of Assembly. The 38 members of the House are popularly elected to five-year terms. General elections are called by the prime minister, and they must be held at least every five years. Members of the 16-seat Senate are appointed to five-year terms by the governor-general in consultation with the prime minister and the opposition party leader. The voting age is 18.

### **Economy**

*GDP (PPP) in billions: \$11.4*

*GDP (PPP) per capita: \$32,000*

Tourism is the engine of the Bahamian economy. The sector employs half of the workforce and supports a per capita gross domestic product (GDP) typically exceeded in the Western Hemisphere only by the United States and Canada. Most tourist infrastructure is located in Nassau, but tourism is also strong in the Family Islands, where smaller hotels and resorts predominate.

This has brought good jobs and middle-class lifestyles to remote parts of the nation. Because the industry is dependent on U.S. visitors, it sometimes suffers during slumps in the U.S. economy and did so in response to the 2008 global financial crisis.

Financial services comprise the second largest economic sector. Fishing is also important, particularly on the Family Islands.

The Bahamian dollar (BSD) is pegged to the value of the U.S. dollar. This simplifies currency exchange for U.S. tourists as well as for Bahamians, who make frequent shopping trips to the United States to buy goods unavailable in the Bahamas or to buy items that are cheaper in the United States, such as clothing, household goods, and automobiles.

### **Transportation and Communications**

*Internet Users (per 100 people): 72*

*Cellular Phone Subscriptions (per 100 people): 76*

*Paved Roads: 60%*

Residents of Nassau commute to work by car, so most main thoroughfares have bumper-to-bumper traffic during rush hours. A system of *jitneys* (privately-owned, small buses holding up to 25 passengers) is reliable but has not alleviated the congestion. Outside of Nassau, traffic jams are rare.

A system of mail boats provides transportation for mail, freight, and people between Nassau and the other islands on a weekly, bi-weekly, or (for the distant and less-developed islands) monthly basis. The national airline links all major islands. As with mail boats, air routes radiate from Nassau, making it necessary to change planes in Nassau when traveling between Family Islands.

The postal system is efficient, with post offices in almost every small settlement throughout the islands. There is no delivery to homes or businesses; mail is picked up at the post offices. The national telephone company provides phone service to all major islands. Cellular phones are increasingly common, and internet use is rising, particularly among the youth. The government-owned radio networks and television station can be received on many of the islands. Some privately owned radio stations operate as well, and cable television is common. The two principal newspapers circulate primarily in Nassau, but copies do find their way to the other islands. Regional papers have been established on several other islands.

### **Education**

*Adult Literacy: 96%*

*Mean Years of Schooling: 10.9*

Bahamians have access to free public education at the elementary and secondary level, as well as subsidized tuition at the College of the Bahamas. Students are required to attend school through age 16. Churches run private schools, many of which offer scholarships to underprivileged children. Students from private schools attend colleges and universities at a higher rate; many go abroad to the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom. Teachers are often imported to compensate for a shortage of qualified local teachers; many come from other Commonwealth countries in the Caribbean, such as Jamaica and Guyana.

Increasing numbers of young Bahamians seek higher education and have ambitious personal goals. A university degree is now a prerequisite for high-income jobs, giving educational achievement greater importance. Bahamian women tend to be more willing than men to pursue higher education. The College of the Bahamas is currently transitioning to full university status.

### **Health**

The Bahamas has two major public hospitals, in Nassau and Freeport, in addition to a private hospital in Nassau with state-of-the-art facilities. Government health clinics are located in many communities throughout the nation. Healthcare professionals provide home care for specific needs. Residents of the Family Islands who require hospitalization are transported to Nassau by air.

Lack of medicine and modern equipment are the most significant deficiencies in the public sector. The Bahamas has one of the region's highest rates of AIDS per capita. AIDS awareness programs have been implemented, with education beginning in high school. Many of the islands' chronic health problems—such as high blood pressure, heart disease, and diabetes—result from the rich Bahamian diet.

## **AT A GLANCE**

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### **Contact Information**

Embassy of the Bahamas, 2220 Massachusetts Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20008; phone (202) 319-2660. Bahamas

Ministry of Tourism, phone (242) 302-2000; web site  
www.bahamas.com.

**Country and Development Data**

Capital	Nassau
Population	321,834 (rank=175)
Area (sq. mi.)	5,359 (rank=159)
Area (sq. km.)	13,880
Human Development Index	51 of 187 countries
Gender Inequality Index	53 of 148 countries
GDP (PPP) per capita	\$32,000
Adult Literacy	95% (male); 97% (female)
Infant Mortality	13 per 1,000 births
Life Expectancy	72 (male); 78 (female)
Currency	Bahamian dollar