


A vibrant tropical beach scene. In the foreground, a large, woven straw hat with a red band and a pair of red sunglasses with reflective lenses sits on a pile of driftwood. The sunglasses reflect the tropical landscape. The background features a white sandy beach, turquoise water, and several palm trees under a clear blue sky. The title 'FLYING THE ISLANDS of the bahamas' is overlaid on the top half of the image.

FLYING THE ISLANDS *of the bahamas*

By KRISTY BOLINGBROKE



A pilot's license provides us with so much freedom and the ability to explore many places that others only dream of. As a pilot in Florida, the white beaches and amazing clear water of the Bahamas are only a short flight away! The Islands of the Bahamas consists of a chain of 700 islands strewn over 5,000 square miles of beautiful turquoise waters and often clear skies with excellent visibility. The Pilatus PC-12 is my favorite way to get to the Islands of the Bahamas.

I started dabbling with flying to the Bahamas back in the day when I was Chief Pilot of a flight school in Tampa, FL. Many of my customers were curious about flying to the Bahamas, but they found the procedures to be a little intimidating. I found a solution – I taught a ground school class to teach my customers what they needed to know about flying to the Bahamas. Not too long after, we set out on a group day trip with a handful of school airplanes and owner airplanes to the Island of Bimini.

Bimini is located only 50 miles off the coast of FL and is the closest Island of the Bahamas. We flew to Bimini and had a fun group lunch with Bahamas staples such as conch chowder and conch fritters; obviously we had to try some conch. The only disappointment with the trip was... you got it, our darn 8hr rule bottle to throttle. We were at the restaurant and watched trays go by with yummy looking tropical drinks.

We had some time to do a little exploring on this quaint and tiny island and even put our toes in the sand and ocean. Since we were flying a group of small Cessnas and Pipers with cruise speeds of a blistering 110kts, to make it back home at a reasonable time we had to get our act together and start back to FL in the afternoon. Gosh, how a Pilatus would have made this trip so much quicker – but back then I only dreamed of flying a Pilatus.

So, our group trip to the Bahamas was a massive success and word spread like wild-fire! Now my customers were encouraging me to run an overnight trip to another fun island. Okay, okay, fine I would do it – twist my arm. A “work weekend” with a bunch of cool customers/ friends in the Bahamas and now drinking tropical drinks – definite-



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ly seemed like a terrible idea ;-)

The group consensus was to fly to Treasure Island which is located in the Abaco Islands. Treasure Island is a popular favorite for pilots due to the fact it has a descent airport (Airport of Entry) which is not too far from the main resort and there are plenty of out islands for travelers to explore nearby. I was of course the Instructor leading the troops and going over the procedures once again as reminder for my second-time participants and my new participants as well.

Once we got to the Bahamas I put on my second "hat" as the tour guide/co-ordinator and made sure we had various group and free time activities to keep us busy for a few days. Gosh we kept busy: an out-Island trip to Green Turtle Cay and we tried the famous Miss Emily's Goombay Smash, out Island trip to Hope Town for a Sunday Pig Roast at Nippers, exploring the lighthouse on Hope Town, endless beach days at various remote beaches, and more!

Only a few years later I picked up a gig flying a Piper Malibu Mirage and the vast

majority of our trips were to the Bahamas – good thing I knew these procedures very well. After a few years of flying the Mirage, this customer moved up into a Pilatus PC-12 NG, and we continued flights to the Bahamas and lots of other countries but that's another story. Gosh, in the Pilatus we have flown to so many Islands in the Bahamas that it would be a long laundry list of airports to even add to this article.

Over the years, the procedures have changed and even paperwork and fees for the Bahamas so it's a constant learning process. With the addition of eAPIS that has added another layer of complexity and rules. eAPIS is basically a passenger manifest submission including flight info: departure airport, arrival airport, times, etc. These paperwork submissions are not difficult whatsoever but information needs to be filled out correctly and procedures followed or you risk the potential for large fines up to \$5,000.

There are a lot of procedures and rules with flying to the Bahamas – too many and too boring to mention all of them in this article but let me highlight a few of

the major ones:

- Bahamas Customs operating hours are typically sunrise to sunset but always call to figure out times in advance if you are operating close to the sunrise/sunset time of the day.
- AOE (Airport of Entry) – You must initially land at an AOE and if you fly to another airport you must depart the Bahamas from an AOE.
- Cruising Permit – If you are planning to island hop (highly recommended) you must get a Cruising Permit.
- eAPIS Submission – Make sure you check and double check all the info on your eAPIS submission this is very important. Also, you must submit this manifest at least 1 hour before departure and make sure you receive and email permitting you to depart on the flight.
- Night Flying – Only Nassau and Freeport permit night operations. Some of the other airports do have emergency lighting for night operations but this requires a special costly permit to land and let me tell you the

lighting is very basic and spotty – I do not recommend.

- USA Customs – All of these AOE Customs Ports vary in their operating hours and procedures. Let me say, some of them are a lot more friendly and doable than others. Some AOE I avoid all together because the Customs Agents are grumpy, borderline rude, and difficult. Make sure you call to let Customs know your arrival time (be accurate and on time) and get the officers initials for confirmation that you called.
- Overflight Permit – I strongly recommend if you are doing multiple trips to the Bahamas every year to go ahead and obtain an overflight permit. The rules require that you land at the nearest AOE in USA which would mean an airport on the east coast of FL. With an Overflight Permit and the ability to get up to

the flight levels in a Pilatus it only makes sense to overfly the east coast if continuing onto another farther final airport destination ex. Tampa or Orlando.

As you can see, there are a lot of procedures when flying to the Bahamas. However, once you have these procedures mastered, flying to the Bahamas in a Pilatus is a breeze! A Pilatus can fly to the farthest remote Island of the Bahamas in just a couple of hours. Our short field landing capabilities combined with huge tires designed for grass strips makes it fun to land at these small unimproved runways. Just make sure if you're landing at private strip that is not in the GPS database to turn off the terrain warnings. You will hear "terrain pull up! Pull up!" as the airplane clearly thinks you're landing off-airport and it's super annoying (obviously, I'm not telling you from previous experience).

After all your hard work with trip planning and a busy day flying over Islands of the Bahamas, it's time to enjoy all that the Bahamas has to offer. First and foremost, a necessary must is sharing the pictures you took during your flight on social media. Pictures of the beautiful island chains surrounded by turquoise blue waters, just to make all friend and family jealous! Finally, you can officially kick back and relax on an amazing beach with some island tunes and a tropical drink in hand. Just make sure it has one of those cute little umbrellas as well – it helps for the full experience!

*Pilatus pilots looking for Bahamas education and training – I do provide these services. Please feel free to shoot me an email at kristyleighllc@gmail.com or give me a call 941-720-4650. **P***

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