



A seaplane lands near the Exumas in the Bahamas.

TOM HOFFMANN

Let's Go Island Hopping

How to Turn Your Caribbean Dreams into Reality

Just picture it. Relaxing in the warm glow of the sun, a gentle breeze blows across your face. And with your toes dug down into powdery smooth sand, you let the rhythmic drone of ocean waves and island beats invoke a sense of inner calm and peace.

Ah, yes, the Caribbean. Where the turquoise waters sparkle and the laid-back pace of life attracts visitors from all over the globe. But if the thought of endless security lines, misconnected luggage, and deadline-driven cruise ship itineraries tend to bring your travel plans to a screeching halt, think again. With a pilot certificate in your pocket, this exotic locale may not be as hard to reach as you think. True, you'll need some planning and prep work, but a flight to the Caribbean is certainly achievable — on your terms, at your pace, and with your own plane. On top of that, the sense of accomplishment that comes with this type of trip can be a reward in itself.

Getting Started

Several common questions come to mind for pilots considering a trip to the Caribbean. How difficult is the paperwork? Will I be able to find fuel? Can my airplane even make the trip? While there are a few important items to consider before your flight to ensure your safety and the safety of any passengers, they should in no way impede your ability to enjoy this jewel of a destination. And, oh yes, it may also help to know that even a modestly equipped Cessna 172 can easily make a trip to just about anywhere in the Caribbean.

Depending where you originate, the hardest part of a Caribbean journey may very well be the flight to Florida. Variables like weather, terrain, and airspace restrictions can often be more of a challenge here in the United States.

The next hardest part might be deciding where to go. From Florida, your destinations include everywhere from the Bimini Islands in the Bahamas, less than 50 miles off the coast, to Oranjestad, Aruba, just north of Venezuelan coast. In between you'll find more than 130 different exotic spots to park your plane, 60 of which are in the Bahamas alone. So, whether you're looking for a place to sport fish, scuba-dive, or just relax on a quiet beach, you'll be sure to find something that fits your taste.

Keep in mind that airport restrictions, hours of operation, and landing/exit fees can vary among Caribbean nations, so be sure to check for any special requirements before you leave. If you're thinking of a trip to Jamaica or the Cayman Islands for example, you'll need to obtain a Cuban overflight permit to transit their airspace. And if the Bahamas is on your radar, you must first land at one of the nation's 20 Airports of Entry. However, once you clear Customs there, you are free to island hop the country's 100,000 square miles without having to file additional flight plans.

Your destination research should also include checking the official tourism websites of the countries you plan to visit, many of which have specific information on private flying policies (e.g., www.bahamasaviator.com). Another good place to get your bearings on country-specific travel requirements is the International Flight Information Manual available at www.faa.gov/air_traffic/publications/ifim/. (See this issue's Checklist department on page 27 for more)

What's Required?

Once you've narrowed down the options of where to go, let the planning begin! Although specific equipment requirements may vary between different Carib-

bean nations, there are several basic items both you and your aircraft will need when traveling in this area.

What you need:

- Passport(s) — each occupant must have one
- Pilot Certificate
- Medical Certificate
- FCC Radio Telephone Operator's Permit and Radio Station License for your aircraft. (Both are rarely asked for, but nonetheless, requirements — see www.fcc.gov/forms for more information)
- Aircraft registration
- Cash and credit cards — it's good to have both options for airport fees and fuel, but realize cash is king in these areas

What your airplane needs:

- 12 inch registration lettering
- U.S. Customs decal — currently \$27.50 and you can buy one online at <https://dtops.cbp.dhs.gov/> (a copy of your online invoice will suffice)
- Radio and Mode C Transponder (406 MHz ELTs not required)
- One Coast Guard approved life jacket per occupant. Life rafts are suggested, but not required. You can rent both vests and rafts from several FBOs in southern Florida.

Also check that your insurance policy extends to your planned destination. It is not required, but it may be a good idea to bring a copy of your policy with you.



St. Lucia's Twin Pitons

What's The Plan?

"I understand how first-time Caribbean flyers may be somewhat leery of extended overwater flying," says Jim Parker, an official Bahamas Flying Ambassador and owner of Caribbean Flying Adventures. But with more than 10 years of island aviating experience, Parker says there's really nothing to fear. "Land is almost always in sight in the Caribbean," he says. "Airplanes are within gliding distance of land 95 percent of the time between Florida and Puerto Rico thanks to the 700 islands in the Bahamas."

That's a fact easily confirmed — and hopefully a fear easily assuaged — when reviewing the Low Altitude Enroute IFR and World Aeronautical Charts (WAC), both available at www.faa.gov/air_traffic/flight_info/aeronav. Try Google maps too, for aerial satellite views of your proposed route. You'll also want

to review the appropriate airport information for your destination, like landing distances, runway configurations, approach procedures, radio frequencies, Customs hours, and fuel availability. Don't forget about alternates too, even though weather is rarely an issue in the Caribbean.

That's not to say weather shouldn't also be an important part of your planning process. Hurricane season runs for half the year (June 1 to November 30) and can bring some unexpected and often violent changes in the weather. While you're planning, keep an eye out for activity in the tropics that could affect you. A good site to check is <http://weather.noaa.gov/international.html>. Wind shear is a dangerous phenomenon best avoided, and is also common in these parts, so make sure your crosswind landings are up

A flight to the Caribbean is certainly achievable — on your terms, at your pace, and with your own plane.

Photos courtesy of the Bahamas Ministry of Tourism



**Stella Maris Airport,
Long Island Bahamas**

to par before you start your island hopping. Carrying some extra airspeed on approach might also help with shifty winds.

Don't Sweat the Paperwork

Before your flight, there are a few bits of paperwork, much of which can be completed electronically. First, you'll need to complete an electronic Advanced Passenger Information System (eAPIS) manifest (<http://eapis.cbp.dhs.gov>), a web-based U.S. Customs and Border Protection tool that captures crew, passenger, and flight information for international travel. If you've never used the system, you'll need to enroll first. This information can be submitted far in advance, but no later than one hour prior to departing United States or re-entering from a foreign location. If you're sure of your dates, you can file your return eAPIS before you even leave the United States. Otherwise, you can always file multiple return requests.

An international flight plan (FAA Form 7233-4) is also required when departing from and returning to the U.S. The specialists at 800-WX-BRIEF can help walk you through the whole flight plan. When calling, ask for "briefer," "Florida," then "southern Flor-

Can I Fly to the Bahamas with a Sport Pilot certificate?

U.S. Sport Pilot requesting to operate in The Islands of the Bahamas under the U.S. Sport Pilot rules (14 CFR part 61, subpart J) must meet the following requirements:

- Hold a current and valid U.S. driver's license or a minimum of a third class medical certificate.
- A logbook endorsement certifying the pilot is proficient in accordance with the requirements listed in 14 CFR section 61.325 (a), (b), and (c).
- A logbook endorsement certifying the pilot is authorized to perform cross country flight.
- Operate within the requirements of the Sport Pilot privileges and limitations listed in 14 CFR section 61.315.

Additional information can be found at <http://www.bahamas.com/bahamas/light-sport-aircraft-approval>.

ida.” For more help with flight plan filing, and eAPIS manifest filing, try using www.fltplan.com or reference the Aeronautical Information Manual (AIM) section 5-1-9 (www.faa.gov/air_traffic/publications/ATpubs/AIM/aim0501.html). AOPA also has a free eAPIS course at <http://flash.aopa.org/asf/eAPIS/>.

You will need to present a General Declarations form (or Gen Dec) upon arrival at your destination, often in triplicate. To expedite this process, some countries, like Aruba, allow you to email the Gen Dec ahead of time. Finally, immigration cards are available after you land, often located in the terminal or FBO. There may be different or additional forms if you are visiting more than one airport within the country.

On the day of your departure, activate your flight plan before leaving Florida. If you fly VFR, you can contact Miami Center for flight following and a discrete squawk code. Be sure close your flight plan in the air prior to landing at your destination, or else with 800-WX-BRIEF on the ground. Then it’s just a matter of clearing customs before you kick off your shoes and enjoy the many exciting delights the Caribbean has to offer.

Darn, Do I Have to Leave?

Since nothing good lasts forever, you will eventually need to know how to make your way back to the United States. Once you’ve shaken all the sand out of your clothes, you’ll want to load up, refuel, and start on your return leg. Check the departure procedures in place at your airport, which usually entail settling any parking or departure fees and submitting additional Gen Dec forms to Customs and Immigration officials. File an eAPIS manifest, an international flight plan, and make sure you notify U.S. Customs of your arrival time at least one hour before you land. There are several airport options in southeast Florida with U.S. Customs that are well-suited for GA operations.

Unless you’re on an IFR flight plan, you’ll need to get a discrete squawk code before penetrating the Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) just west of Bimini. After landing, be sure to close a VFR flight plan if you haven’t done so already. Then grab your luggage, queue up for Customs with your passports, and you’ll soon be free to continue to your final destination.

\$100 Mahi-Mahi Burger

If this article has inspired you to start searching for your bathing suit and flip-flops, be sure to heed some important safety factors first. According to Jeffrey Smith, a previous Florida-based commercial pilot and instructor, and now FAA’s Manager of Airmen Certification and Training for General Aviation, a good way to

prepare for a Caribbean jaunt is to spend some time with a flight instructor who’s familiar with this type of flying. “A test run with an experienced CFI can help you brush up on emergency procedures and build confidence before you go it alone,” says Smith. You can also try reaching out to one of the many Bahamas Flying Ambassadors at www.flyingambassador.com, or catch one of the several FAA Safety Team seminars on Caribbean flying held each year at airshows and events.

A trip to the Caribbean may at first seem a bit out of reach for some, but after reviewing what’s involved, you’ll soon see it can be both a fun and educational flying adventure, with plenty of good resources to help you along the way. So what are you waiting for? Your \$100 Mahi-Mahi burger awaits! 

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Learn More

International Flying Overview

http://www.faa.gov/air_traffic/publications/ifim/intl_overview/

Caribbean Flying Adventures

www.CaribbeanFlyingAdventures.com

Pilot’s Checklist for Entering Bahamas

www.bahamas.com/bahamas/enter



Aerial shot of Long Bay and Belmont Point in Tortola, British Virgin Islands