Bahamas

Location

The Bahamian islands, also known as “The Country of 700 Islands”, are located in the Atlantic Ocean approximately fifty miles off the southeast coast of Florida and fifty miles northwest of Cuba. This archipelago nation is comprised of 700 islands and 2,400 cays, of which only 40 are populated, Stretching out over 13,940 square kilometers, the Bahamas may seem large, but it is no larger than the state of Connecticut. Of the total area, approximately one third is comprised of water. The Bahamas can be found on an atlas at 24°15’ N latitude and 76°00’ W longitude.

Geography

“Baja Mar” or Bahamas was the name given to this beautiful chain of islands by the Spanish. It means “shallow sea” which is contradictory to what the islands really are. They are mountain plateaus that emerged from the Atlantic Ocean hundreds of years ago. The islands are actually made mostly of limestone. Because there are 700 hundred islands, no one really knows the make up of each island. The islands that are populated are generally long, flat coral formations that are accented by some low, rounded hills. Andros Island is the largest of the island chain and is followed in size by Abaco, Great Inagua, and Grand Bahama islands. Nassau, the capital of the Commonwealth of Bahamas is located on New Providence Island (only 80 square miles). The Bahamas also contains of a set of islands known as the Family Islands: Eleuthera, Exuma, Abaco, Bimini, Spanish Wells, Walker’s Cay, Rugged Island, Berry Island, Crooked Island, Andros, Cat Island, Mayaguana, Long Island, Ailos, SanSalvador, Little Inagua,
and Great Inagua. Mount Alvernia (63m), on Cat Island, marks the highest point of the Bahamas and the Atlantic Ocean (0m) marks the lowest elevation. At the east tip of Andros, the Tongue of the Ocean is home to some of the deepest water in the world. The water depth has been recorded to be slightly over a mile deep. Another aspect of the Bahamas is the surrounding water. The Bahamas are virtually free of pollution and silt, making them among the clearest and most colorful in the world.

Climate

The Bahamas is often referred to as the “Isle of June.” This is due to the mild, June-like climate that can be experienced all year round. Having a tropical marine climate moderated by the warm water of the Gulf Stream, the Bahamas rarely sees snow, sleet, frost, and hail or extreme temperatures. On average, the temperature in the winter season is around 77°F during the day and 65°F in the evening. In the summer, the temperatures generally don’t rise above 90°F and do not drop below 75°F at any time of the day. The northern most islands may experience a cooler winter while the southern islands will experience a much warmer summer. Humidity is fairly high, but is normally lessened by the cool breezes of the Atlantic Ocean. As for rainfall, May through October is the rainy season. In the southern islands, only three inches of rain will fall each month during the rainy season, while over six inches will fall during this season in the northern islands. Nassau is prone to a tropical storm or hurricane about once every nine years. The hurricane season is from July to November, but they can occur any time of the year.

Population

The population of the Bahamas in 1970 was 168,812 people. In 1980, the population
soared up to 237,090 people. This is a 59.2% increase in ten years. Today (2002), the Bahamas is home to 294,982 people and 60% of the Bahamas total population lives on New Providence Island, which is only 80 square miles. This chain of islands is very densely populated. It is similar to the situation in Japan, where the majority of people live in three or four large cities. Luckily, projections suggested a Bahamian population total of 292,000 for the year 2000 and 324,600 for 2010. Approximately 85% of Bahamians are of African American descent, due to the intense slavery history of the islands. The other 15% are comprised of Euro-descent (12%) and Asian Hispanic descent (3%). Nearly, 68% of the population is under the age of thirty. The primary language that is spoken in the Bahamas is English.

**Currency**

The currency of the Bahamas is the Bahamian dollar. The Bahamian dollar is equivalent to and interchangeable with the U.S. dollar. Although, the two are par, Bahamians prefer to receive their national currency, but the U.S. dollar is accepted in tourist areas. Bahamian currency comes in the same denominations as the U.S. dollar (pennies, dimes, nickels, quarters, etc.). The Bahamas is also very notable for their rare coins. For instance, the world’s largest gold coin came from the Bahamas. Citizens are very fond of collecting coins.

**Education**

Bahamian education is under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education and Culture. Two hundred and twenty-eight schools can be found in the Commonwealth of the Bahamas. The government fully maintains 187 of them and the others are independently supported. Free education is available to all citizens who are eager to obtain secondary degrees. College does not mean the same in the Bahamas that it does in the U.S. College in the Bahamas means
education that is paid for. The Bahamas has a 95% literacy rate. There are a couple of popular universities in the Bahamas. Princess Margaret Hospital is one of them and offers a nursing program. The University of the West Indies Center for Hotel and Tourism Management is located in Nassau. It has a program for students interested in tourism (quite obviously). The College of the Bahamas, also in Nassau, is the most popular college and offers a wide variety of programs that would lead to an associate’s degree. Other institutions offer secretarial and vocational courses for adults.

History

The “Lukku-chain” or island people were the first settlers of the islands known as the Bahamas. These people were originally from South America and came to the country in the ninth century A.D. They were later called the Arawaks (or “Lucayans”/“Indians”) by Christopher Columbus when he mistakenly came upon SanSalvador instead of the East Indies in 1492. Shortly following this time period, English settlers left Bermuda in search for religious freedom. They named the journey the Eleutheran Adventures. This is where the Eleuthera Island gets its name. Therefore, the settlers formed the first British colony and began a promising agricultural economy that still thrives today. Bahamian beauty and mysteriousness eventually began to attract the wrong kind of people: pirates. In the mid-1600’s, the pirates took over the chain of islands and dominated them for the next seventy years. A time period called the “Golden Age of Piracy.” In 1670, Britain claimed some of the islands, but they remained powerless to the pirates for fifty years, until the first governor, Woodes Rogers, drove the pirates out in 1718. Britain then recognized the islands as a colony. Privateering, a government-sanctioned form of piracy was used during the war with Spain and the American Revolution. This practice brought
periods of extreme prosperity. In May 1782, Spain retook the Bahama Islands. Approximately one year later, the Treaty of Versailles recognized the Bahama Islands as a colony of Britain. During the American Civil War days, the Union Navy tried to blockade the islands to diminish the Confederacy. Fortunately, the Bahamians benefited from this, because they prospered by taking Confederate cotton to English mills and sending military equipment to the Confederates. The “Roaring Twenties” had a huge impact on the Bahama rum-running industry; demand increased greatly and once again the Bahamians thrived. But, when Prohibition came about, this industry took a drastic downfall. World War II then helped the islands out in the tourism industry, because they served as the major air and seaway station in the Atlantic Ocean. In the 1950’s, Cuba closed its doors to U.S. tourists and since then the Bahama tourist industry has sky rocketed. Finally, in 1964, Great Britain granted the islands self-governance and then it changed its status from a colony to a Commonwealth in 1969. The Commonwealth of the Bahamas became independent within the Commonwealth of Nations in 1973, but retained Queen Elizabeth II as constitutional head of state.

**Important Dates**

The following Bahamian public holidays can be found on calendars: January 1 – New Year’s; Easter – same as the U.S. Easter and Good Friday; seven weeks after Easter – Whit Monday; first Friday of June – Labor Day; July 10 – Independence Day; first Monday in August – Emancipation Day; October 12 – Discovery Day; December 25 – Christmas Day; December 26 – Boxing Day.

Jankanoo is the most famous festival celebrated and is considered the “centerpiece of the Bahamian culture.” The festival is celebrated around Christmas and New Year’s, generally
December 26. It is a time for the people to gather together in the streets and resound with cowbells, whistles, and drums and party the night away. Another very popular festival is the Caribbean Muzik Fest. It is a time for the best musicians to gather together and show off their talent.

Religion

Religion in the Bahamas is quite diverse. Baptists account for 32% of the total population while Anglicans make up 20% and Roman Catholics make up 19%. This diversity is due to the influence of the U.S., Britain, and Spain.

Government

The Commonwealth of the Bahamas is run under a parliamentary style government, which is headed by a Prime Minister. There are also two houses that make up this Parliament. They are the Senate or the Upper House and the House of Assembly or the Lower House.

Agriculture

The Bahamas do not produce a whole lot of one commodity. Farmers devote most of their land primarily to non-perishable crops such as corn, peas, beans, potatoes, and cassava. Fortunately, the production season in the Bahamas is slightly earlier than that of South Florida’s, which is the main competitor for the North American export market. This creates a great potential for export crops from the Bahamas. Agricultural officers, four college-trained officials, are currently trying to find a market in Western Europe for such commodities as: fruit, avocados, green vegetables, okras, mangoes, hot peppers, and pumpkins. Hopefully, in the near future, Bahamian farmers will intensify the level of mutton and swine production.
Trade

The Bahamas main trade partners are: US, UK, Denmark, Italy, Japan, and Switzerland.

Approximately, 95% of all exported goods are mineral fuels, lubricants, and other related materials. Following this major export, the Bahamas also export many chemicals, rum, and crawfish. These commodities primarily go to the U.S., the U.K. and Puerto Rico.

Bahamian imports generally come from Saudi Arabia, Nigeria, and Libya. They primarily import foodstuffs, vehicles and machinery, and manufactured articles.

Food

The art of cooking is highly developed in the Bahamas. Some of the most common native dishes will take hours to cook and will consist of conch, crawfish, whelks, and a variety of food fish.

Fish are an extremely important part of the Bahamian diet, because the Bahamas are known for their fishing industry. Spices, vegetables, and sauces are used quite frequently to prepare meat. Some form of potatoes and bread is also served with the main meat course.

Landmarks

The Bahamas as a whole is a landmark. Two of the most common places to visit while in the Bahamas are New Providence Island and the Grand Bahamas. These two islands are where all of the tourist activities can be found. New Providence Island is the seat of Nassau, the capital.

Bahamians like to pride their country on its natural beauty. They feel that is what attracts all of the tourists. While in the Bahamas you could hike up Mount Alvernia on Cat Island, or dive 1 mile into the Tongue of the Ocean, or even just scuba dive through the marvelous reefs and crystal clear water. The Bahamas are like Mother Nature’s greatest work of art.