

Bimini Islands:


Tiny Islands full of

From the first moment I laid eyes on Bimini, I was hooked. It was (and is) a beautiful, tranquil spot of white sand surrounded by water in every spectacular shade of turquoise. This is truly paradise, I thought... here one could totally “unplug.”

We checked in at the Customs office in Alice Town, a short walk from the Bimini Big Game Club where we docked our catamaran, *Siyaya*. During our stay, Stephen and I quickly fell into the laid-back Bahamian way of life that included swimming off the beach, snorkeling on the reefs, trolling for fish, eating lobster and conch galore, and tossing back more than a few Kalik beers and rum cocktails with the locals at the “End of the World” bar. According to a character in Hemingway’s novel “Islands in the Stream,” all there is to do in Bimini is: “Swim, eat, drink, work, read, talk, read, fish, fish, swim, drink, sleep.” Yep, that’s Bimini. This charming and romantic, if slightly scruffy, Bahamian paradise has done its magic on us. We have returned every year since then to get our fix.

Character(s) and Legends

By Estelle Cockcroft

A photograph of a man in white and blue patterned shorts wading in shallow, clear turquoise water. In the background, a white motorboat with a canopy is anchored. The horizon shows a clear blue sky and distant landmasses.

Bimini is located about 50 miles due east of Miami, the closest point in the Bahamas to America. This western most district in the Bahamas is actually a set of three tiny islands, the largest of which is North Bimini that is frequently referred to as just Bimini. The island sits on the edge of the continental shelf that falls thousands of feet into the indigo blue ocean. The north flowing Gulf Stream nurtures Bimini's delicate coral reefs while the migrating sea life including marlin, giant tuna, dolphin, manta rays, and turtles skirt the island feeding in the rich waters of the Atlantic Ocean.

First discovered by Ponce de Leon in the 1500s, Bimini served as a pirate hideout in the 1600s and 1700s for guys like Sir Francis Drake and Blackbeard, and was a port of call for the rumrunners in 1920-1933 during the Prohibition Era in the USA. In the 1930s it became the playground and fishing destination of the rich and famous which cemented Bimini's reputation as the "Big Game Fishing Capital of the World," luring all kinds of characters from celebrities to industrialists and philanthropists to the island.

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The most famous amongst them is probably Ernest Hemingway (1935-1937). Here he wrote his famous novels “The Old Man and The Sea” and “Islands in the Stream.” Martin Luther King (1964), President Richard Nixon, and the lesser-known Miami “cocaine cowboys” also made their appearances. Today it is still a favorite destination for water sports enthusiasts like Guy Harvey, a legendary artist, fisherman, and conservationist, as well as Jimmy Buffett and others.

There is an “international airport” (too grand of a word really, since it’s a mere landing strip) on South Bimini, but mostly visitors arrive by boat or float plane. North Bimini is only about seven miles long and a few hundred yards wide with two dusty little roads running parallel to each other named the King’s Highway and Queen’s Road. Alice Town, Bimini’s main settlement that dates back to 1848, has a laid-back, somewhat rustic feel with its very own collection of intriguing and shady characters.



Big game fishing, bone fishing, or just plain old fishing is great even in the shallower waters around the island. We often take the dinghy out to troll for a few hours and we always come back with at least a fish or two. Conch and lobster are protected in the Bahamas so make sure that you have all permits in order before harvesting your supper.

There are easy day sails from Bimini with short distances, like 10 miles to Gun Cay and 14 miles to South Cat Cay. Honeymoon Harbor on deserted Gun Cay is where the stingrays bid you a friendly “hello” upon arrival. As the story goes, fishermen stopped off here for years to clean their catch, discarding the bits overboard, attracting the stingrays. Nowadays the stingrays live off the charity of visiting boaters, much to the delight of cruisers.

Anchoring here is sometimes a challenge because of the grassy bottom, so be careful. The two islands of Cat Cay are another favorite amongst cruisers. Cat Cay is privately developed by Cat Cay Yacht Club that offers resort style living to its members. Even though exclusive, there is a marina that offers a fine dining restaurant, dock bar, a store for provisions, and gift shop.

Entertainment on Bimini consists mainly of little bars that outnumber restaurants two to one. The classic Bimini bar is a shack somewhere on a beach, named after the proprietor, like Sherri’s Beach Bar, Stuart’s Conch Stand, Big John’s, and the like. The liquor store has pride of place in Alice Town, further adding to its somewhat “boozy” reputation from way back when. Sherri’s Beach Bar on the west side of the island is the best place to watch the sunset. The best conch salad and laid-back local vibe is definitely at Stuart’s Conch Stand located near Porgy Bay Park in Bailey Town. There are many other such small bars and



The main street is lined with colorful little Bahamian style buildings that house restaurants, bars, grocery stores, one bank, and liquor stores. The preferred transport is golf carts (no golf courses though) and more often than not, the locals will stop right in the middle of the road to have a chat while traffic behind them lines up, patiently waiting for a good time to pass. Yep, these guys are laid back and it’s easy to slip right into that frame of mind.

If you get bored of all the relaxation, there is much to do for antsy sailors. Diving is spectacular at places like the mysterious Bimini Road off Paradise Point, the Sappona shipwreck on the north end, or Tuna Alley off South Cat Cay with deep caverns and crevasses in the coral. Dolphins, turtles, and stingrays are constant companions in the waters off the beaches and reefs.

“night clubs” where one can dance the night away. The little restaurants (mostly family affairs) serve up some amazing fresh seafood like conch salad, cracked conch burgers, spiny lobster, and grouper fish fingers. The “Taste of Heaven” bakery will have you moan with pleasure once you taste their Bimini bread, a slightly sweet, buttery, yet fluffy and light bread. People come from far and wide to taste this heavenly bread!

We spent a few idle hours at the very swanky Bimini Bay Resort’s spectacular infinity pool, looking out across the Atlantic Ocean. To be honest, this place looks a little out of place on Bimini. The huge resort, marina development and casino attract the Miami fast crowd, but unless you go in high season it’s not too much of a bother. They are very welcoming to cruisers. Their marina is a very modern facility best suited for mega yachts, but smaller craft are welcome.

Our personal favorite is the Bimini Big Game Club for its quaint, colorful island atmosphere and its Internet connection that’s fast and free. We seem to always be busy when we are in Bimini, consulting for boat owners or doling out advice about yacht charter management in between diving, fishing, and cocktail hour. The bar and restaurant serve up great views, cold drinks, nice food and it has the usual eclectic mix of interesting characters ready to regale with legendary fishing stories.



When we are in Florida, we usually set sail across the Gulf Stream starting from No Name Harbor in Cape Florida State Park on Key Biscayne (a fantastic anchorage teeming with manatees, dolphins and game fish). We head east to Bimini, approximately 125 degrees magnetic heading. It is an easy five-hour sail to our favorite rum cocktail, the “Bahama Mama” at Sherry’s Beach Bar on the west side of Bimini. Then we are tasked with watching the fiery sun fall into the Atlantic Ocean.

Even though Bimini is still a sleepy little plot of sand in the big ocean, change is coming quickly with fast ferries from Miami and the opening of the swanky Bimini Sands Resort Casino. So be warned, make the trip as soon as you can!

Top Ten Things to Do in Bimini

There are so many things to do in Bimini and it is so close to the US! The three tiny islands of the district are North Bimini, South Bimini, and East Bimini. Its history is full of characters and legends, from Ponce de Leon’s search for the Fountain of Youth to whiskey-running bootleggers during US Prohibition to Ernest Hemingway’s enjoyment of its tranquility and beauty. These historic characters knew what we know. Bimini may be tiny, but it is full of unique and wonderful experiences. Here is a top 10 list of what to do in Bimini:

1. Two highways - no traffic lights: North Bimini, the primary and largest of the three islands, has two dusty little roads, the King’s Highway and Queen’s Road running parallel along its seven-mile length. Even though there is the odd car or two, golf carts are the preferred mode of transport. Strolling leisurely down the now slightly scruffy King’s Highway in Alice Town, you won’t find a traffic light but you will find an interesting mix of little shops, a few ruins, bakeries, grocery stores, restaurants, bars, a bank and liquor stores, all housed in colorful little



Bahamian buildings. The locals will quickly engage in a friendly back and forth with tourists and extend an invite to eat or drink at their favorite watering hole somewhere along the route. The pace is leisurely, the atmosphere friendly and the scenery is breathtaking.

2. Bimini Bread, a heavenly indulgence: Taste of Heaven, the local bakery across from the Bimini Big Game Club, has the best Bimini bread according to the locals I met during my quest for this slightly sweet white bread similar to Hawaiian bread but much better. They start the baking process at 4:00 am and by 8:00 am, when they open their doors, locals line up for their daily fix. If you happen to miss out at the bakery, Miss Barbara will fix you up! She bakes it right in the kitchen in her home. Ask any local where Miss Barbara's house is and they will send you up to the little yellow house. Just knock on the door. This bread is literally "heavenly!" It is melt-in-your-mouth good, light, buttery and slightly sweet and best enjoyed warm from the ovens. It will melt any resistance you might have to this calorie-laden guilty pleasure!

3. Diving: SCUBA diving in Bimini is like exploring in an aquarium. The water is so clear, the sea life so abundant and the coral reefs so colorful, one can easily lose oneself in this wonder world. Dive spots in Bimini range from shallow reefs and shipwrecks to deep wrecks and walls dropping into the abyss of the Gulf Stream waters. The corals are healthy and vibrant. It's not uncommon for visitors to see wild spotted dolphin, Loggerhead turtles, Southern stingrays, reef sharks, nurse sharks, and barracudas, along with many game fish and tropical fish. Divers also come to Bimini to explore the fascinating limestone formations, called Bimini Road that some believe to be the Lost Continent of Atlantis.

4. Fresh Conch salad, a Bahamian delicacy: The Bahamian Islands are known for their wonderful fresh conch salad. It is made with Queen Conch, a large, edible sea snail that tastes kind of like calamari. It is a little chewy

and on its own does not have any distinct taste, but prepared properly with the right ingredients, it's the ideal dish. Stuart's Conch Stand located near Porgy Bay Park in Bailey Town serves up the best conch salad. This machete-wielding conch man serves up a wonderfully fresh mixture of diced



up raw conch, tomatoes, green peppers, onions, a splash of orange and lime juices, spiced up with some hot peppers. The gorgeous pink conch shells litter the beach in front of the restaurant where they are harvested, a gold mine for shell collectors like myself.

5. Stingrays at Honeymoon Harbor: Accessible only by boat, Honeymoon Harbor is a small anchorage on the

north end of Gun Cay. This deserted island is inhabited by literally hundreds of live pink conchs strewn across the powdery white beach waiting for the tide to come in. We were most often the only boat anchored off the beach. The waters in the harbor are teeming with life! Expect to see stingrays, colorful starfish, conch, and even a nurse shark or two. Feeding the wild stingrays is such a great experience with nature. These gentle creatures accost you the minute your dinghy hits the shore, coming in for a greeting like tame puppies, waiting for their treats.

6. Fishing and Conservation: Bimini has an unbelievable marine population and is well known as the "Big Game Fishing Capital" of the world. The seasonal runs of giant bluefin and yellowfin tuna, monstrous



wahoo, king mackerel, blue and white marlin and sailfish will excite any angler. However, sports fisherman and marine conservationists work hand in hand to preserve this marine paradise for future generations. It is the site of choice for many tournaments and most of them now employ tag-and-release and limit the amount of fish caught per boat. The fish are bountiful and make for an awesome

fishing experience.

7. Lobster galore: We happened upon a local fisherman one day on one of our excursions in the dinghy. He had just come back from diving and his boat was laden with his catch of fresh-caught Caribbean spiny lobster. He immediately traded us a shopping bag full for a bottle of

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rum and some US dollars. He has been our guy ever since. We grilled those lobsters that night on the coals with a little garlic butter and a splash of lime. It does not get any better than that. Truth be told, one can dive for one's own lobster or get it at one of the local restaurants, but nothing beats the smile that our local supplier flashed whenever he could unload his catch to some very appreciative sailors!

8. Sherri's Beach Bar: It's right on the beach on the west side of the island in Alice Town. This is the place to watch the sunset on the beach, sip a cocktail, and reminisce. While Sherri gets ready for the evening service after dark, she plies her patrons with her special "Bahama Mama" rum cocktail and if you're brave enough, you may try two. But be warned, the third one will kick your butt! Sherri is no stranger to having fun and will very quickly get even the most shy of her visitors to engage in the fun, dancing to the beat of her screechy sound system. One visit to Sherri's and you will be going back again and again like we did every day!

9. Bimini Museum: Exhibits at this pink-hued two-story frame house explore the colorful history of the Biminis and visitors from around the world enjoy

Biminis' historical significance. Ernest Hemingway called Bimini his summer home. Jimmy Buffett spent time here while writing his book, and Martin Luther King, Jr. is believed to have composed parts of his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech while sailing with local boat builder



Ansil, who still lives on the islands today. Pirates like Blackbeard in the 1700s, as well as the notorious rumrunners in the 1920s and 30s and the modern day cocaine cowboys of Miami all made this a port of call at one time or another. Photographs and maritime artifacts chronicle the history of the island. Quite a treat!

10. Beaches and sunsets: Bimini has some of the most beautiful clear blue water in the world and the white powdery beaches are littered with pink conch shells. It is truly a site to behold. The beaches are never crowded and one can often find oneself completely alone on the beach with only a few crabs as company. Words can simply not describe the beauty and tranquility of this beach paradise.

While there are many things to do in Bimini, sometimes it is best to do nothing at all. 🇧🇸

