

The Bahamas



KEY FACTS

Joined Commonwealth:	1973
Population:	342,000 (2009)
GDP p.c. growth:	1.1% p.a. 1990–2009
UN HDI 2010:	world ranking 43
Official language:	English
Time:	GMT minus 5hr
Currency:	Bahamian dollar (B\$)

Geography

Area:	13,939 sq km
Coastline:	3,540km
Capital:	Nassau

The Commonwealth of The Bahamas is a coral archipelago of around 700 islands and more than 2,000 rocks and cays in the West Atlantic south-east of the coast of Florida, USA, and north-east of Cuba. It straddles the Tropic of Cancer and stretches 970km.

Main towns: Nassau (capital, pop. 238,100 in 2009) on New Providence; Freeport (47,100), West End (13,000) and High Rock (3,800) on Grand Bahama; Cooper's Town (9,100) and Marsh Harbour (5,700) on Abaco; Freetown (4,200) and Spanish Wells (1,800) on Eleuthera; Andros Town (2,300) on Andros; and Clarence Town (1,700) on Long Island.

Topography: About 30 islands are inhabited, the most important of which are New Providence, in the middle of the group, where the capital Nassau is situated, and Grand Bahama, the northernmost, with the city of Freeport. The other islands are known collectively as the Family Islands or Out Islands. The islands lie on a submarine shelf which rises steeply from deep waters in the east; to the west lie the shallow waters of the Great Bahama Bank. The islands, built of coralline limestone to an undersea depth of about 1,500m, are low-lying. The highest, Cat Island, rises to 62m at Mount Alvernia; Grand Bahama barely reaches 12m. The limestone rock of the islands is permeable and there are no streams. The water supply is taken from wells or collected from rainwater.

Climate: The climate is cooler than other countries in the Caribbean region but still pleasantly mild in winter. Winter temperatures average 21°C, summer temperatures 30°C. Most of the rain (averaging 1,100mm p.a.) falls in May–June and September–October and there are frequent thunderstorms in summer. The Bahamas islands are subject to hurricanes during June–November.

Environment: The most significant environmental issues are coral reef decay and solid waste disposal.

did you know?

Robert Antoni, born in The Bahamas in 1958, was winner of the Commonwealth Writers' Prize Best First Book award with his novel, *Divina Trace*, in 1992.

The country is a coral archipelago of about 700 islands and more than 2,000 cays and rocks.

Vegetation: The soil is thin, and generally infertile, but cultivation has produced exotic flowers (as well as subtropical fruit and vegetables) on the more developed islands. Some islands have large areas of pine forests.

Wildlife: Animal life is restricted to small species, such as agouti, frogs, iguana, and bats. The Inagua National Park on Great Inagua Island is the home of more than 50,000 flamingos, the largest flock in the world and The Bahamas' national bird.

Transport: The total road system extends to some 2,700km, about 60% of it paved. There are almost 1,000km of roads on New Providence (some of which are privately owned), 209km of roads on Eleuthera, 156km on Grand Bahama, and more than 885km on the Out Islands.

Main ports are Nassau (New Providence), Freeport (Grand Bahama) and Matthew Town (Inagua). The Out Islands are served by a mail boat that leaves Nassau several times a week.

The principal airports are Lynden Pindling International (16km west of the city) and Freeport International (5km from the city), and some 50 airports or airstrips in all.

Society

KEY FACTS 2009

Population per sq km: 25
 Life expectancy: 74 years
 Net primary enrolment: 91%

Population: 342,000 (2009); 67% lives in New Providence, 84% in urban areas; growth 1.4% p.a. 1990–2009; birth rate 17 per 1,000 people (31 in 1970); life expectancy 74 years (66 in 1970).

Bahamians are largely of African (85%), Afro-European and European origin, as the indigenous Arawaks were wiped out.

Language: English is the official and first language; a French-based Creole is spoken by Haitian immigrants.

Religion: Mainly Christians (Baptists 35%, Anglicans 15%, Roman Catholics 14%, Pentecostals 8%, Church of God, Methodists; 2000 census).

Media: Daily newspapers are *The Bahama Journal*, *Freeport News*, *The Nassau Guardian* and *The Tribune*; *The Punch* is published twice weekly, and there are several weeklies. *The Bahamas Tourist News* and *What's On* magazine are printed once a month and international newspapers are available.

The Broadcasting Corporation of the Bahamas provides public radio and TV services, comprising one TV channel and several radio stations; there are several private radio stations. Cable TV is widely available.

There are 123 personal computers (2005) and 339 internet users (2009) per 1,000 people.

Education: There are 12 years of compulsory education starting at age five. Primary school comprises six years and secondary six. Some 91% of pupils complete primary school (2007). The school year starts in September.

The College of The Bahamas, the country's leading higher education institution, provides a diverse curriculum with courses

leading to bachelor's degree level. The Eugene Dupuch Law School opened in September 1998, as a part of the University of the West Indies. It offers the same curriculum as the Manley and Wooding Law Schools. Students are eligible for places at the University of the West Indies, which also has an extra-mural department in Nassau and campuses in Barbados, Jamaica, and Trinidad and Tobago. Other government-assisted higher technical and professional schools and private colleges provide clerical, secretarial, accounting and computer training.

In 2012 The Bahamas will host the 18th Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers (18CCEM). Commonwealth education ministers meet every three years to discuss issues of mutual concern and interest.

Health: New Providence has the Princess Margaret Hospital, mental hospital and rehabilitation unit, geriatric hospital, private hospital, with an emergency facility, and private clinic which undertakes plastic surgery. Grand Bahama has a general hospital and the Out Islands cottage hospitals. In addition there are medical centres and clinics, and a flying doctor and dentist service covers the islands. Infant mortality was 9 per 1,000 live births in 2009 (51 in 1960). In 2009, 3.1% of people aged 15–49 were HIV positive.

Communications: Country code 1 242; internet domain '.bs'. Coin- and card-operated phone booths on all the islands; phonecards can be purchased at shops and post offices. Mobile phone coverage is mainly good; it is patchy in some of the more remote islands.

There are 377 main telephone lines and 1,050 mobile phone subscriptions per 1,000 people (2009).

Public holidays: New Year's Day, Labour Day (first Friday in June), Independence Day (10 July), Emancipation Day (first Monday in August), National Heroes' Day (12 October), Christmas Day and Boxing Day.

Religious and other festivals whose dates vary from year to year include Good Friday, Easter Monday and Whit Monday.

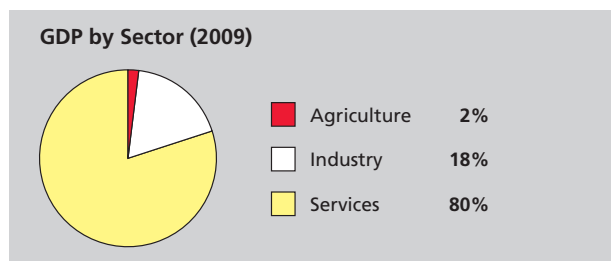
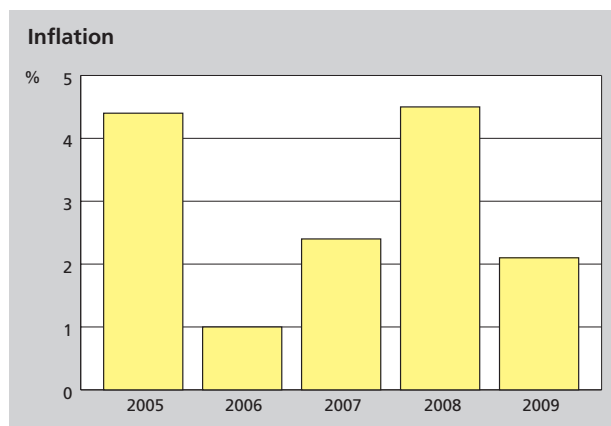
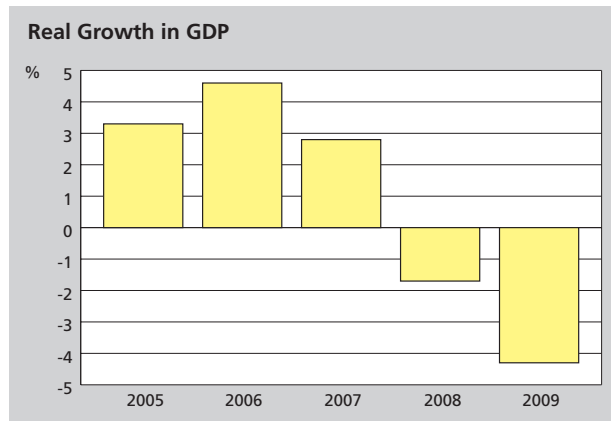
Economy

KEY FACTS 2009

GDP:	US\$7.2bn
GDP p.c.:	US\$21,052
GDP growth:	2.2% p.a. 2004–08
Inflation:	1.8% p.a. 2004–08

Overview: The Bahamas is among the wealthiest countries in the Caribbean region. With independence in 1973, the country freed itself from the UK's exchange-control legislation and set up an offshore banking and investment industry; it is now a significant financial centre and ship registry, the third largest in the world in terms of gross tonnage registered, after Panama and Liberia. Since 1717 there has been virtually no tax on individuals or companies. Government revenue is raised through a range of excise duties and fees.

Though agricultural and forestry production and commercial fishing expanded from the 1990s, and the country is an exporter of fruit and vegetables as well as seafood, it nevertheless imports most of its foodstuffs and consumer goods, and is strongly influenced by the economic climate in the USA, not least because the majority of its tourist visitors are from that country.



From the early 1990s, facing severe recession, the government introduced an economic reform programme which emphasised fiscal responsibility, privatisation of government-owned hotels, investment promotion, infrastructure development and diversification of the economy. From the mid-1990s, as the USA came out of recession, this resulted in a long period of good growth with modest inflation, becoming strong growth in 1999 and 2000.

The economy stalled in 2001–02, reflecting the downturn in the USA and consequent fall in tourism. Good growth and modest inflation resumed from 2003, with growth of 2.8% in 2007, until the world economic downturn caused a sharp fall in tourism and offshore financial services (accounting together for more than half of GDP in 2007) and the economy moved sharply into recession during 2008.

Trade: Main exports are chemicals, machinery and vehicles, minerals (especially salt), crawfish, fish and rum.

Constitution

Status: Monarchy under Queen Elizabeth II
Legislature: Parliament of The Bahamas
Independence: 10 July 1973

The Bahamas is a constitutional monarchy recognising Queen Elizabeth II as head of state. She is represented by a governor-general chosen on the advice of the cabinet. The country is a parliamentary democracy with a bicameral legislature. The Senate has 16 members, nine appointed on the advice of the prime minister, four on the advice of the opposition leader, and three after joint discussions. The House of Assembly (presently of 41 elected members, 40 before the 2007 elections and 49 before the 1997 elections) is directly elected on a district basis for a term not exceeding five years; elections are on the basis of universal adult suffrage.

A commission meets at intervals of not less than five years to review the constituency boundaries. The constitution allows for three distinct types of legislation: the ‘specially entrenched’ provisions relating to parliament itself and the judicial system require a three-quarters majority in both houses and a popular referendum; ‘entrenched’ provisions require a two-thirds majority in both houses; and other legislation a simple majority vote.

Politics

Last elections: May 2007
Next elections: 2012
Head of state: Queen Elizabeth II, represented by governor-general, Sir Arthur Foulkes (2010–)
Head of government: Prime Minister Hubert Ingraham
Ruling party: Free National Movement

The Progressive Liberal Party (PLP), led by Sir Lynden Pindling, won each general election from 1967 until 1992. Then his party, having had to deal with a recession and allegations of corruption, was ousted by the Free National Movement (FNM), led by Hubert Ingraham, a former PLP minister, the FNM winning 32 seats to the PLP’s 17. Subsequent investigations gave the FNM another seat, taking their total to 33.

Concern over crime related to drugs trafficking underlay the government’s decision to reinstate the death penalty, and in March 1996 a murderer was hanged, the first for 12 years. However, the UK’s Privy Council then commuted a death sentence to life imprisonment, and there were no further executions until October 1998, when two convicted murderers were executed. Public support for capital punishment had increased after two tourists had been murdered earlier in 1998.

Another issue of concern to Bahamians is the level of illegal immigration, mainly from Cuba and Haiti (with an estimated 60,000 Haitians involved). Heavy fines are imposed on those attempting to smuggle immigrants, and repatriation agreements have been negotiated with Cuba and Haiti. Between 1995 and 1998 some 13,000 Haitians and at least 840 Cubans were repatriated.

A series of events prior to the March 1997 elections led to a troubled campaign. A commission of inquiry found Pindling to

have acted improperly during his period of office in accepting loans of US\$750,000.

The elections were held on schedule in March 1997: the FNM, led by Ingraham, gained 58% of the votes, winning 34 seats, the remaining seats being taken by the PLP. The turnout was 92% of registered electors. After the elections Pindling, who had led the PLP for 32 years, stood down and was replaced by Perry Christie, former minister of agriculture and trade.

In May 2002, the PLP won a landslide victory, taking 29 seats and Christie became prime minister. The FNM took seven and independents four.

Tommy Turnquest, who had succeeded Ingraham as FNM leader before the elections, lost his seat, but was subsequently appointed to the Senate. The PLP had promised to help poorer Bahamians, stimulate investment in the archipelago's less-developed islands, and encourage the financial services industry.

Three years after stepping down as leader of the FNM, Hubert Ingraham returned to head the party in November 2005, subsequently leading it to victory in the general elections of May 2007 – FNM taking 23 seats and PLP 18.

On the retirement of Arthur Dion Hanna in April 2010 Sir Arthur Foulkes succeeded him as governor-general.

International relations

The Bahamas is a member of the African, Caribbean and Pacific Group of States, Association of Caribbean States, Caribbean Community (though not the CARICOM Single Market and Economy), Non-Aligned Movement, Organization of American States and United Nations.

Traveller information

Local laws and conventions: The Christian Church has a strong influence on local life and islanders place much emphasis on traditional values. Visitors should dress modestly in towns; beachwear must never be worn outside beach areas.

Visitors must always seek permission before taking photographs of locals or their property.

Penalties for possession or trafficking of drugs are severe and can lead to a heavy prison sentence.

Handshaking is the usual form of greeting for both men and women.

The exchange of business cards is customary when conducting business. Conference facilities are good, with some venues seating up to 2,000 people. Office hours are Mon–Fri 0900–1700.

History

The Bahamas was one of the few areas in the region in which the Arawak people were not displaced by the more warlike Caribs. When, in 1492, Christopher Columbus made his first landing in the New World in The Bahamas, the people who met him were Arawaks who, he wrote, 'have opened their hearts to us. We have become great friends.' Columbus is believed to have landed at Watling's Island (Amerindian: Guanahani; Columbus's designation: San Salvador). But within some 20 years, the Spaniards had enslaved or transported the Arawaks; some 40,000 were transported to Hispaniola where they died working in mines. British pirates also used the islands, and in 1629 the islands were given their first constitution as part of the Carolinas (USA). The first British settlers were refugees from religious persecution under Charles I, in Cigatoo in 1648. The island was renamed Eleuthera, meaning freedom. The settlers introduced the plantation economy and African slave labour.

An early form of democratic government, with a bicameral parliament and elected lower house, developed but was abolished in 1717, when the Crown resumed government. Although the other colonial powers did not formally dispute possession, the settlers were at times harassed by the French and Spanish as well as by pirates. Fortunes fluctuated. The population soared in the late 18th century with the arrival from America of Loyalist families and their slaves after the American Revolution. In 1783–84 the population was 4,058; by 1789, it was more than 11,000, with the white settlers forming a significant minority. The abolition of slavery in 1834 caused major economic changes as the islands

had been used as a centre of slave-trading.

In 1861–65 the islands enjoyed prosperity as a depot for ships running the blockade against the Confederate States during the American Civil War. Decline followed, however, compounded by a severe hurricane in 1866.

Prosperity returned in the 20th century, when the islands became an entrepot for the American bootlegging trade during prohibition. More conventional industries also developed, supplying sisal, conch shells for cameo brooch-making, pineapples and sponges. The sponge industry reached a peak in 1901 during generally lean years but collapsed in 1939 as a result of fungal diseases. In the early 1950s the islands again prospered; the success of tourism, and later offshore banking, produced phenomenal growth. In 1953, the Progressive Liberal Party (PLP) was founded to represent black interests in a system till then still dominated by whites.

In 1964, a new constitution set up a ministerial system of government, and the legislature was reformed to represent majority interests. After the subsequent general election in 1967, the United Bahamian Party (the so-called 'Bay Street Boys') was forced into opposition for the first time in the assembly's history. Lynden Pindling, leader of the PLP, formed a government with the support of the Labour Party. The PLP won the next two general elections outright, and Pindling led The Bahamas to independence under a new constitution on 10 July 1973.

Immigration and customs: Some nationals will require a visa to enter the country and current visa requirements must be checked well before travel. Passports must be valid for six months from the intended length of stay. It is recommended that visitors carry a copy of their passport and travel documents, and keep the originals in a safe place.

Lone parents coming into the country will need documentary evidence to show parental responsibility for accompanying children.

A yellow fever vaccination certificate will be required by all those arriving from infected countries.

Firearms and fireworks, plants, flowers and fruit are all prohibited imports.

Travel within the country: Traffic drives on the left and car hire is available on the larger islands to drivers aged 25 or over. A national driving licence can be used for the first three months of stay. The wearing of seat belts is mandatory.

Air-conditioned ferries run daily from Nassau to North Eleuthera and Harbour Island, and there is a twice-weekly service to Governor's Harbour in South Eleuthera. The mail boats that deliver mail and provisions between the islands will also carry passengers, who share facilities with the crew.

Domestic flights are available and are operated by Bahamasair; a number of charter services also run inter-island flights.

Minibuses (*Jitneys*) operate in Freeport and Nassau, and are an inexpensive way of travelling around. Paradise Island is served by a bus service which stops at every hotel. Taxis are the main form of transport on the smaller islands, where there is no public transport. Most taxis are metered and rates are government-controlled.

Travel health: Medical facilities are good but expensive. Emergency health care is limited, however, and visitors should have comprehensive health insurance that includes air evacuation.

Tuberculosis and Hepatitis B vaccinations are sometimes recommended, and visitors should check the most up-to-date inoculation requirements well before travel.

Although there have been no reported cases in The Bahamas, dengue fever is endemic to Latin America and the Caribbean, and visitors may wish to take insect repellent to protect against mosquito bites.

Tap water is safe to drink; bottled water is widely available. Milk is pasteurised.

Money: American Express, Diners Club, Mastercard and Visa are widely accepted, and there are ATMs on the major islands and at the airport. Travellers cheques should be taken in US dollars to avoid additional exchange rate charges. Banking hours are Mon–Thur 0930–1600 and Fri 0930–1700.

There were 1,327,000 tourist arrivals in 2009.

Further information

Government of The Bahamas: www.bahamas.gov.bs

Commonwealth Secretariat: www.thecommonwealth.org

Commonwealth of Nations: www.commonwealth-of-nations.org/Bahamas%60_The

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