



The Bahamas



KEY FACTS

Joined Commonwealth: 1973

Population: 377,000 (2013)

GDP p.c. growth: -0.3% p.a. 1990–2013

UN HDI 2014: World ranking 51

Official language: English

Time: GMT minus 5 hrs

Currency: Bahamian dollar (B\$)

Geography

Area: 13,939 sq km

Coastline: 3,540 km

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 970 km.

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 1,500 metres, are low-lying. The highest, Cat Island, rises to 62 metres at Mount Alvernia; Grand Bahama barely reaches 12 metres. 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 1,100 mm 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.

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. Forest covers 51 per cent of the land area and there was no significant loss of forest cover during 1990–2011.

Wildlife: Animal life is restricted to small species, such as agouti, frogs, iguanas 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.

Main towns: Nassau (capital, pop. 241,200 in 2010) on New Providence; Freeport (44,300), West End (13,100) and High Rock (3,900) on Grand Bahama; Cooper's Town (9,300) and Marsh Harbour (5,800) on Abaco; Freetown (4,300) and Spanish Wells (1,800) on Eleuthera; Andros Town (2,300) on Andros; and Clarence Town (1,700) on Long Island.

Transport: The total road system extends to some 2,700 km, about 60 per cent of it paved. There are almost 1,000 km of roads on New Providence (some of which are privately owned), 209 km of roads on Eleuthera, 156 km on Grand Bahama, and more than 885 km 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 (16 km west of Nassau) and Grand Bahama International (5 km from Freeport), and some 50 airports or airstrips in all.

Society

KEY FACTS 2013

Population per sq km: 27

Life expectancy: 75 years

Net primary enrolment: 98% (2010)

Population: 377,000 (2013); 67 per cent lives in New Providence, 83 per cent in urban areas; growth 1.7 per cent p.a. 1990–2013; birth rate 15 per 1,000 people (31 in 1970); life expectancy 75 years (66 in 1970).

Bahamians are largely of African (85 per cent), 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 per cent, Anglicans 14 per cent, Roman Catholics 12 per cent, Pentecostals nine per cent, Methodists four per cent, Church of God two per cent, 2010 census).

Health: Public spending on health was three per cent of GDP in 2012. New Providence has the Princess Margaret Hospital, Sandilands psychiatric hospital and rehabilitation unit, as well as a geriatric hospital, a private hospital with an emergency facility, and a 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. Some 98 per cent of the population uses an improved drinking water source (2012). Infant mortality was ten per 1,000 live births in 2013 (51 in 1960). In 2013, 3.2 per cent of people aged 15–49 were HIV positive.

Education: There are 12 years of compulsory education starting at the age of five. Primary school comprises six years and secondary six. Some 89 per cent of pupils complete primary school (2009). 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 Norman Manley Law School in Jamaica and the Hugh Wooding Law School in Trinidad and Tobago. The University of the West Indies has an extra-mural department in Nassau and main 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.

Media: Daily newspapers are *The Freeport News*, *The Nassau Guardian* and *The Tribune*; *The Punch* is published twice weekly, and there are several weeklies.

The government-owned 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 per 1,000 people (2005).

The Bahamas on the international stage

Compass Point Studios in Nassau became a popular place for international artists to record music in the 1970s and 80s, when American producer Alex Sadkin was head engineer there. The studios, built by Chris Blackwell from Island Records, recorded AC/DC's *Back in Black*, one of the biggest selling albums ever, with a long list of other international artists using the studio including U2, Duran Duran, the Thompson Twins, Spandau Ballet, David Bowie, Talking Heads, Bob Marley, Grace Jones and the Rolling Stones. Sadkin tragically died in a road accident in Nassau in 1987. The facility saw a resurgence in 1990s with the likes of Celine Dion, Mariah Carey, Lenny Kravitz and Shania Twain recording albums there, but has now closed permanently.

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.

On the sporting front, Debbie Ferguson broke the Commonwealth Games Women's 100 Metres record in 2002, with The Bahamas Women's 100 Metres Relay team setting a new record in the same year.

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.

For every 1,000 people there are 360 landlines, 761 mobile phone subscriptions and 720 internet users (2013).

Public holidays: New Year's Day, Labour Day (first Friday in June), Independence Day (10 July), Emancipation Day (first Monday in August), Discovery 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 2013

GDP: US\$8.4bn

GDP p.c.: US\$22,312

GDP growth: 0.0% p.a. 2009–13

Inflation: 1.8% p.a. 2009–13

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, among the largest in the world in terms of gross tonnage registered. 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, the country experienced a long period of good growth with modest inflation.

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, until the world economic downturn caused a sharp fall in tourism and offshore financial services and the economy moved sharply into recession, shrinking by more than four per cent in 2009, then recovering from 2010. There was growth of 1.0 per cent in 2012 and 0.7 per cent in 2013, continuing at over one per cent p.a. in 2014–15.

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.

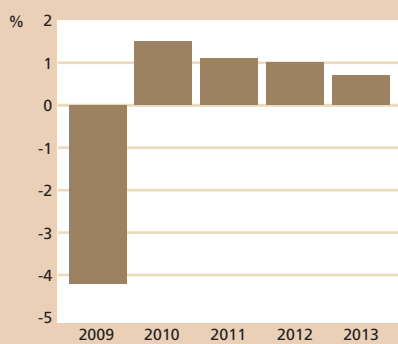
In 1861–65 the islands enjoyed prosperity as a depot for ships running the blockade against the Confederate States during the American Civil War. Decline followed, however, compounded by a severe hurricane in 1866.

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 that was till then still dominated by whites.

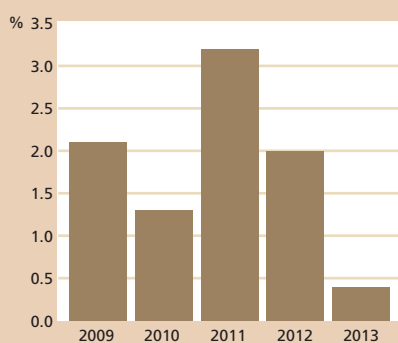
In 1964, a new constitution set up a ministerial system of government, and the legislature was reformed to represent majority interests. After the subsequent general election in 1967, the United Bahamian Party (the so-called 'Bay Street Boys') was forced into opposition for the first time in the assembly's 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.

Pindling and the PLP continued in power until 1992, when they were ousted by the Free

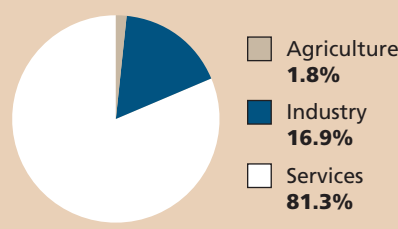
Real growth in GDP



Inflation



GDP by sector (2013)



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.

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 38 elected members, 41 before the 2012 elections, 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.

In January 2012, the government introduced changes in the Bahamas Parliamentary Elections Act that allowed limited overseas voting for nationals and permitted independent observers to observe the election process.

Politics

Last elections: 7 May 2012

Next elections: 2017

Head of state: Queen Elizabeth II, represented by Governor-General, Dame Marguerite Pindling (2014–)

Head of government: Prime Minister Perry Christie

Ruling party: Progressive Liberal Party

Women MPs: 13%

The March 1997 elections were won by the Free National Movement (FNM), led by Hubert Ingraham, securing 34 seats, the remaining seats being taken by the Progressive Liberal Party (PLP). After the elections Sir Lynden Pindling, who had led the PLP for 32 years, stood down and was replaced by Perry Christie.

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.

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. The turnout was 91 per cent of registered electors.

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

In the May 2012 general election the PLP won 29 seats and the FNM nine, and PLP

leader Perry Christie was sworn in as Prime Minister. After the election Ingraham resigned as leader of the FNM.

Governor-General Sir Arthur Foulkes retired on 8 July 2014 and was succeeded by Dame Marguerite Pindling, the widow of the country's first Prime Minister, Sir Lynden Pindling.

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, and has observer status at the World Trade Organization.

Traveller information

Immigration and customs: Passports must be valid for at least six months from the date of departure. Visas are required by most Commonwealth nationals. Prohibited imports include plants and fruit.

Further information

Government of The Bahamas:	www.bahamas.gov.bs
Department of Statistics:	statistics.bahamas.gov.bs
Central Bank of The Bahamas:	www.centralbankbahamas.com
Ministry of Tourism:	www.bahamas.com
Commonwealth Secretariat:	www.thecommonwealth.org
Commonwealth of Nations:	www.commonwealthofnations.org/country/Bahamas_The

Media

<i>The Freeport News:</i>	freeport.nassauguardian.net
<i>The Nassau Guardian:</i>	www.thenassauguardian.com
<i>The Punch:</i>	nassaupunch.com
<i>The Tribune:</i>	www.tribune242.com
Broadcasting Corporation of The Bahamas:	www.znsbahamas.com

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 foreign driving licence can be used for the first three months of stay. The wearing of seat belts is mandatory.

Air-conditioned ferries and scheduled flights run between the principal islands, and air charter services are available.

Minibuses (*Jitneys*) operate in Freeport and

Nassau. 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: Prevalent diseases where appropriate precautionary measures are recommended include dengue fever, hepatitis A and hepatitis B.

There were 1,363,000 tourist arrivals in 2013.



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