

Flying into the Caribbean

by KENT A. LEWIS

Here's help to plan your trip of a lifetime!
It's actually easier than you think.



Ahhh...the Caribbean. Wouldn't it be nice to languish on beaches of white sand with a rum drink in hand and the cool rhythms of Jimmy Buffet music pouring all around you? Sure, you think, but no way will I make that flight into the Caribbean on my own! Quell your worries of pirates, Castro and that seemingly long open stretch of water (the longest open-water leg – from Turks & Caicos and the Dominican Republic – is actually only less than an hour away for most general-aviation aircraft) because, chances are, if you've got an airplane and a somewhat-valid pilot's license – as well as thorough research and prep work – navigating your way to the Caribbean islands is a breeze.

As with any trip, the first thing you should do is to figure out how many days you intend to spend in the Caribbean – then add seven days. Why? Because additional days of decompression time at the fly-in resorts of the “Out Islands” is one of life's greatest treats and the fun and culture doesn't heat up until you get to Hispaniola. Also, as hard as you might try to make firm plans, island life rules – being on time is not a priority for many in the Caribbean.

For example, during a routine fuel stop on my maiden voyage into the islands, I found myself breaking into the customs office at Great Inagua Airport (Bahamas), rifling through the deserted office desks for a phone book and calling the missing officer's boss at headquarters to declare, “Sir, you need to send someone to arrest me for breaking into your office or stamp my passport and clear me outbound.” The (forgiving) customs officer arrived an hour later and was nice enough to keep me company for the additional hour and a half until the avgas purveyor returned from his route of refueling backup generators at homes and businesses around the island.

Expect to spend an average of one hour shuffling paperwork, and another to fill your tanks on every leg. Reserve, if possible – but don't pre-pay – for hotel rooms because you might not make it there on time. Know the name of a hotel on every island so that you can write it on the immigration card because leaving that question blank forces immigration to reject your request for admission (unless the agent's aunt owns a hotel).

Although it's legal, flying at night is a bad idea. It not only will land you in jail while cops and dogs tear your plane apart looking for drugs, but it's also less scenic. Depart every island immediately after breakfast, not only to avoid invariably late thunderstorms, but also to spend more of your day with a cocktail in hand. An afternoon departure mandates that you decompress with a beer over lunch and that you risk missing “sundowners” on the sand (unthinkable).

Much of your planning should revolve around fuel, yet your best-laid plans will betray you. Never depart a strip with known fuel without topping off. Always call the next port before you take off and ask them two questions: “Do you have gas?” and “Are you the one who fills the

airplanes or are you just making this up?”

Even if you get two encouraging answers, little islands can run out of fuel before you arrive, so try to never fly a leg longer than 40 percent of a tank. Budget for gas will cost you an average of \$2.50 to \$3 per gallon more than it does in the US; Jet-A runs a little less.

Western Jet Center at TJBQ/BQN on the northwest corner of Puerto Rico is very dependable and may have the cheapest gas on your journey. Jose at Northwest Aircraft Maintenance is the FAA-certified mechanic (IA) you've been dreaming about. If your 'craft starts to make you nervous, call ahead (787.597.9360) and have him meet you on the field. There is also FAA-authorized help on St. Thomas, St. Croix and the French side of St. Martin (ask someone to call Maxime over from St. Barths).

Managing communications with island stations is challenging because electricity for most Caribbean radio towers comes from generators churned by goats. Haitian and Dominican accents can be formidable. Bahamian services fade in and out (especially at lunchtime). Antigua's “Byrd Approach” sounds like a speakerphone transmission from a Starbucks during rush hour. There are dead zones north of St. Vincent and Grenada. Keep in mind that those problems exist for all pilots and using your head will see you through. Do your best using WAC charts (25, 26 and 27) and always ask your last contact to confirm the frequency of the next.

Throughout the Bahamas, you can talk to Miami, Fla., from above 10,000 feet at any time. If you're taking in the breathtaking scenery from lower altitudes, know that Nassau Approach to the north and Great Exuma Tower are your go-to channels if you can't reach anyone closer. San Juan (Miami, actually) ATC services will provide the familiarity for most of the eastward leg. When entering the San Juan airspace, contact San Juan radio and make sure that your foreign-filed flight plan is active in the system before calling center. In the Eastern Caribbean, St. Martin, Guadalupe and Martinique have not only strong and stable radio service, but also one of the three will probably have you on radar and will help you with traffic. All VFR traffic in this region is handled similarly to American “flight following” services.

If you're traveling for less than three weeks, contact Survival Products, Inc. (SurvivalProductsInc.com) to buy or rent life rafts. You'll also want to get life jackets for every soul on board (it's mandatory). Of course, no one hopes to ever have to use them, but having a raft and life jacket on board does wonders for your piece of mind.

Before you even think about being wheels-up, make copies of the following: General Declaration, an ICAO Flight Plan Form and a Bahamian Cruising Permit. A General Declaration (Google “gendec”), is the universal document that tells everyone with a badge and a rubber stamp everything

about your plane and its contents. Make six copies per leg: one for customs, one for immigration and one for either the "tower" (hut) or cashier at both your point of departure and point of arrival. The cruising permit (Google "Bahamas C7A") allows you to land at non-port-of-entry airports, including private fly-in resorts; run four copies of this C7A form. Lastly, you will need one copy of the international flightplan form (Google "ICAO"), for each leg. Keep in mind that the more info you can fill into these forms before you make copies, the less time you'll spend sweltering in the heat filling them out for

customs and immigration on the field.

The grumpiest place to

land is on American soil; whether the mainland, Puerto Rico, or the U.S. Virgin Islands. A couple weeks before you leave, log on to DTOPS.CPB.DHS.gov and spend \$27.50 on a decal that U.S. Customs requires for your plane. You must call ahead to U.S. Customs at your port of entry to explain when and whom to expect upon your arrival. If you fail to do so, snarling humans, growling dogs and radiation-sniffing Geiger counters will greet you on the ramp. Beginning May 18, you must log on to a new website called Early Arrival Passenger Information System (eApis – pronounced with a silent "e"),

EApis.CPB.DHS.gov, whereby you will submit by Internet the same info required by phone. If planes can be made safer because of countless redundancies, then perhaps so can our country? Your medical certificate,



Almost every island in the Caribbean has a runway, creating a veritable chain of new places to explore that stretches from Florida to South America.

license and airplane documents will be examined every time you enter from a foreign land.

There is no corruption among police, customs or immigration in these islands, so don't budget for payoffs (Fair warning: I have never experienced Haiti or Cuba). Spend a half hour upon departure and, again, upon arrival running your own paperwork around to avoid expensive "handling fees." Mandatory handling fees in Providenciales (Provo), Julianna Airport in Dutch St. Maarten and Mustique have proven exceptions where someone watching cricket on the idiot box at home will end up with \$50 to \$150 of your money for "handling" everything you just did yourself. Flying on Sundays or holidays (including St. Cecilia's Cousin's Uncle's Forgotten Birthday) invariably requires a \$20 to \$30 customs "overtime" fee for services normally performed for free. Most islands require departure taxes of about \$20 from all passengers; about half the islands require such a tax from the pilot and crew if they stay overnight. Every island has a host of miscellaneous fees to charge you, but unless you get hit with the handling fees discussed above, it's rare to get deeper than \$32 into your pocket to cover the airport charges of visiting an island for 24 hours (based on a Cessna 210).

Sticking your ATM card into a teller anywhere will prove the best exchange rate for local currency. U.S. currency is preferred for all avgas transactions with the exceptions of Guadalupe and Martinique, which use Euros. Plan ahead for this, as you can use your ATM card to draw U.S. currency only in U.S. territories, the British Virgin Islands and the Dutch half of St. Maarten. Credit cards can be used for avgas only in U.S. territories and, just recently, Antigua. If you follow these guidelines and do your due diligence, flying the Caribbean will be not only riotously fun, but also as safe as flying anywhere else.

Got questions or comments? Contact us at Editor@FlyingAdventures.com.



In/on the Airplane:

1. Everything required in the USA plus (except temporary registration not allowed)
2. Rental agreement (if aircraft is not owned) and/or notarized written permission by the owner for the pilot to take the plane out of the country
3. Proof of insurance
4. Radio station license and operator's permit.
5. FAA approved life jackets for everyone on board (required)
6. Life raft with a cover (not required but very comforting!)

The Passengers Need:

1. Passports
2. US visa or citizenship if landing in US territories.

Forms Needed:

1. Bahamas C7A Cruising Permit
2. Average of 6 General Declarations ("gendecs") per leg

Frequencies:

1. Start with frequencies as on WAC charts 25, 26, and 27, (Don't hesitate to confirm next frequency with current controller.)
2. South of area covered by WAC 27:
 - a. Martinique's "Lamentin (pronounced Laa-mon-tah) Approach" on 121.00
 - b. St. Lucia Approach 119.8
 - c. St. Vincent's "Joshua Approach" on 120.8
 - d. Barbados on "Adams Approach" on 129.35
 - e. Grenada Approach on 119.4

On the Pilot:

1. Private pilot's license or above,
2. Valid medical certificate
3. Proof of citizenship.
4. Logbook (not required, but it can't hurt!)

Returning to the USA:

1. File a flight plan at least one hour prior to border crossing (not landing) (The Virgin Islands is a little more lenient in about border-crossing times. Log on to the eApis website, EApis.CPB.DHS.gov, to pre-register plane, crew and passengers.)
2. Call your port of arrival in the U.S. and tell the customs agent everything you just sent online (Make sure they get at least an hour's notice. Ask the agent's name before you hang up and have it on you when you land. **This is very important.**)
3. All required forms will be provided for you upon arrival.
4. Get your CPB (Customs and Border Patrol) decal.

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