



Cruising the Caribbean

When Canadian group, International Air Rally, took 21 planes to the Bahamas for ten days, they invited Australian Pilot along for the ride. Contributor Kathy Mexted volunteered to represent us. She discovered warm hospitality, beautiful landscapes, and a few funky dance moves.

Denis twisted in his seat and called excitedly, "Kath. Look!" From the right hand seat of the Cherokee 6, he didn't even try to conceal his excitement as the deep blue waters south of Florida turned to a twinkling turquoise around Bimini, the first of the Bahamian Islands, 50nm south east of Fort Lauderdale, Florida.

This was only the second hour of a ten day trip, run by a not-for-profit Canadian group called International Air Rally. What started as a three day fly away for the Canadian Bush Pilots Association in 2000, has now morphed to an annual event which provides pilots with flying opportunities they may not be able to pursue alone. This year's trip to the Bahamas was the group's first foray out of Canada, but there are already plans for next year's event to push further down into the Caribbean. Many participants this time were six or seven year Air Rally veterans.

Rally organiser Catherine Tobenas's love of people and culture is a strong influence in the tone of the Air Rally. Most destinations were closely coordinated with the local tourism authorities.

As Bimini passed beneath us, the Bahamas exploded with spectacular bursts of blue and white, twisting and changing like featherweight silken scarves. Miami-Bimini-Nassau is 160nm, and from Nassau it was another 130nm along the picturesque chain of islands to Exuma.

Miami ATC controls most of the Bahamian airspace. Radio communications were better above 5000ft and flying over Nassau we were on Nassau flight frequency for half an hour. In this busy airspace, the ATC controller didn't have time to draw breath. "It was wall-to-wall talk, and without a doubt, the busiest and most chaotic frequency I've heard in 13,000 hours of flying," recalls Denis. Of the 58 airstrips dotted throughout the Bahamas, about half are controlled.

The Bahamas are well set up for light aircraft, and welcome more than 40,000 private flights a year. At Exuma, the Bahamian Islands Tourism Authority was friendly and helpful with tours and directing queries. Fuel and assistance were on hand, and an aircraft with a flat tire was fixed on the spot.

"We are here to promote the Bahamas as a destination, in a positive light," the jolly young woman with the twinkly eyes told me while offering me advice on where to go on a day trip. The "Peace & Plenty" hotel, named after a ship of the same name, is located on a former slave market. There's plenty to learn if you're interested in history, and the tourism board treated us to a walking tour of Exuma's capital, Georgetown. Back at base camp, welcome drinks inspired the first of the merry makers to brave an ocean dip. The holiday had begun and the beautiful Bahamas was working its magic. Flight planning was done by the pool.



Early arrivals in Santa Domingo were greeted by the Minister for Tourism and entertained by local performers

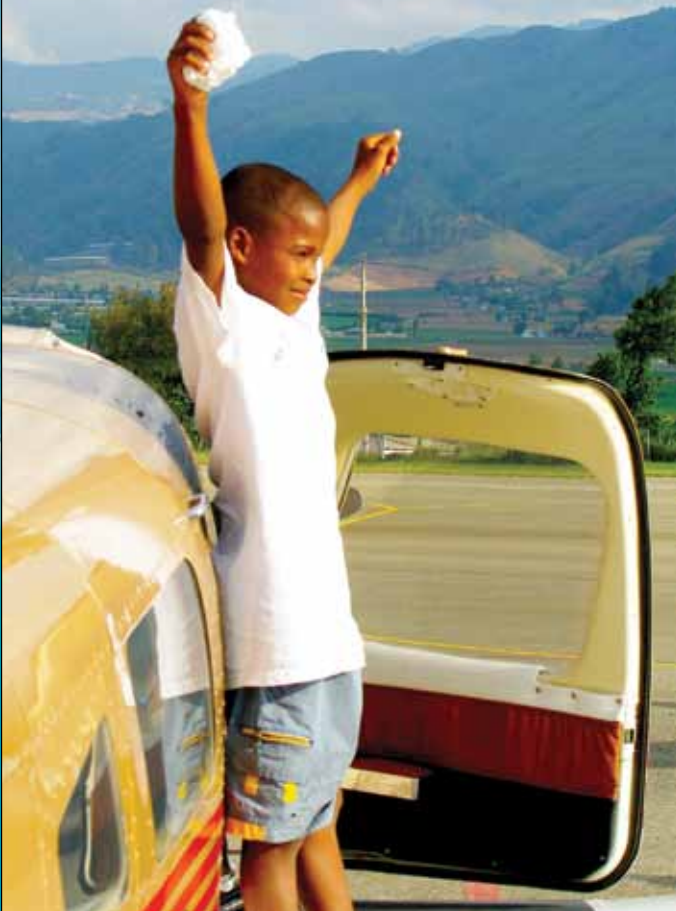


Inspired to dance on Grand Turk Beach



DESTINATIONS *Cruising the Caribbean*

This boy in Constanza met us at the airport. He lives in the park, and seems to have no family. He followed us around for the 3 days we were there, and he scored a new t shirt, a new pair of shoes, and a ride in the plane. He was terrified before the flight, but is seen here after the flight - obviously thrilled with himself (and holding the sick bag he didn't need).



Constanza



Grand Turk Airport

Exuma – Haiti

Tracking 213 nm southeast for a refuelling stop on the island of Inagua, we were met by local tourism authority officials who turned out with lunch and some school children for a performance in the midday sun. One group was in school uniform, and another was in striking, sparkling, colourful show costumes they had made themselves. We loved the dancing, and the kids loved crawling around the aeroplanes. One of the young dancers announced from the comfort of a sheepskin seat "this is so comfortable I could live in here!" Our group then split up, most headed for the Dominican Republic capital of Santa Domingo, while a smaller group of five aircraft diverted to the other side of that island, Haiti.

Arrival communications for Port au Prince kick in 30nm from the field at 2,500ft. While technically the rest of the country belongs to the same air traffic controllers, there is no coverage. The tower, recently manned by the US military, is now back in Haitian hands and communication was easy. On approach, the bright blue tarps of temporary housing leapt out from their surroundings. It's quite a busy airport with a wide range of aircraft, from American Airlines 767, Czech twin turbo props, single engines and a passing parade of US military Blackhawk helicopters.

One of the group, an American businessman, had donated two 28,000 sq ft "Cirque du Soleil" circus tents (just happened to have 'em handy) to the earthquake relief efforts. They were still sitting in containers on the wharf, and so, in order to get them put to use, we went to meet the mayor. We met him on the tarmac that was "as hot as Haiti", and were reassured the donated tents would be used as government facilities until rebuilding was completed. After which it's assumed they'll be used for community and cultural activities

Large cracks scar the Port au Prince terminal, and much of it is still closed off. We went through customs clearance in a corridor at the top of a staircase.

We took off after three hours on the ground, and were amazed by the mountains. They rose 6000ft either side as we flew up a valley, south east from Port au Prince Airport.

They are stark from deforestation but eventually give way to lush green jungle. It was an absolutely beautiful flight.

Birds eye view over Haiti



Kathy & Denis Mexted in Port au Prince



Santa Domingo, Dominican Republic

The Dominican Republic (DR) shares the same landmass as Haiti, (the island of Hispaniola), but offers a choking contrast. The flight took us over two lakes, one below sea level, then up the coast past a DR Naval base. Just on dusk we landed at El Higuero, which is their general aviation airport. It was well equipped and there were lots of turbo props, hangars and activity. Communications were really good, controllers incredibly easy to understand, and procedures straight forward. The capital was no different from many large cities, but with a strong Spanish influence.

In Santo Domingo early arrivees were greeted by the Minister for Tourism.

They got to relax in an air conditioned building, listen to a fantastic band and watch beautiful dancers perform. The airport officials handed then already completed arrival cards to sign, then gave everyone a cold beer.



The photographers on the trip were (L-R): Mark Helseth, Robert Sirdey and Kathy Mexted, shown working in Grand Turk.

Constanza, Dominican Republic

From the seaside port of Santo Domingo, departure was to the n/ ne for a 30 minute flight across the island to pick up the Valle del Cibao, the valley which is the corridor to the Constanza Airport at 4,000 ft. Mountains either side of the valley range from 7,000ft up to 10,000ft. With sketchy cloud cover, Constanza appeared in a patch of blue revealing a 1km sealed runway ringed by hills. "Find the blue and circle down to the airport" they'd advised pre-departure, and I'm told that's what we did. I'm not sure. I might have had my eyes shut. Constanza is the highest airport in the Caribbean, and a place about to launch itself as a tourist destination particularly geared for private flying.

As the engine wound down, I stepped out into the cool air, absorbing the stunning view, and the unexpected sounds of Simon & Garfunkle.

Over in the raised flower garden, the Minister for Aviation, the Minister for Tourism, and a wide assortment of Ministers for many other things had come from Santo Domingo to promote the airport to us. They'd even bought along a band! ■

Notes...

- Next year's rally is also to the Caribbean
- Fort Lauderdale is the third busiest GA airport in the USA where corporate jets arrive as frequently as airliners do at Melbourne or Sydney
- 21 aeroplanes registered for the trip. Two had to drop out however, due to licencing issues. All 19 completed the trip. The smallest was a two seat PA28-140 from Canada, and the largest a Pilatus from Switzerland. Other teams came from Slovenia and Croatia, USA, Australia.

Flying from Canada...

- Canadian Air Transport Ministry <http://www.tc.gc.ca/>
- Mode of transport : "Aviation", "Pilot Licencing". You need to fill out an Application for Foreign Licence and supply a copy of Australian pilot licence, copy of passport and copy of logbook entries showing total hours.
- From Montreal to Fort Lauderdale (FLL): Pre rally, we flew from Montreal to FLL in the Cherokee 6. The trip took us abeam New York, over Philadelphia, through Washington airspace, over Daytona Raceway, past Cape Canaveral, 500' up Kittyhawk Beach from where the Wright Bros launched their historic first flight, and 500' up Palm Beach, Florida

Out the window we saw...

- a couple of F18s within 500ft
- a Hercules
- a pair of 2000' towers.

Websites

- International Air Rally - www.airrally.com
- Bahamas Tourism Authority - www.bahamas.com
- Constanza - www.constanza.com.do

The \$100 Hamburger

NORMAN'S CAY, BAHAMAS



Kathy Mexted's usual reporting duties for Australian Pilot involve her flying around Victoria looking for lunch. Just because she was in the Bahamas, didn't mean she didn't get the chance to fly off looking for food.



On a tiny piece of heaven in the Bahamas, it is a well known secret that the IATA code for Norman's Cay is MYEN, and although it is marked on the charts, it has never been on any GPS data base.

Norman's Cay covers only a couple of hundred acres, but it is dissected by a sealed 3000 ft runway running 03/21 and lined with tall Casuarina trees. The parking bay is on the eastern side, and Normans Cay Beach Club is a few short steps away on the western side. Here the locals greet you warmly. Stefan Paton, is the manager of the Norman's Cay Beach Club. He epitomises the friendly, relaxed way of island life.

Newcomers inevitably bring the conversation around to the man who earned this little haven a place in the history books.

The locals talk about life BC – Before Carlos. From 1979-82 Columbian drug lord, Carlos Lehder, operated the world's largest drug smuggling operation from here, supplying 80% of the cocaine sold in the USA at the time.

The drugs arrived by jet from Colombia and were then distributed by smaller

planes to Georgia, Florida, and the Carolinas. The film "Blow" tells the story.

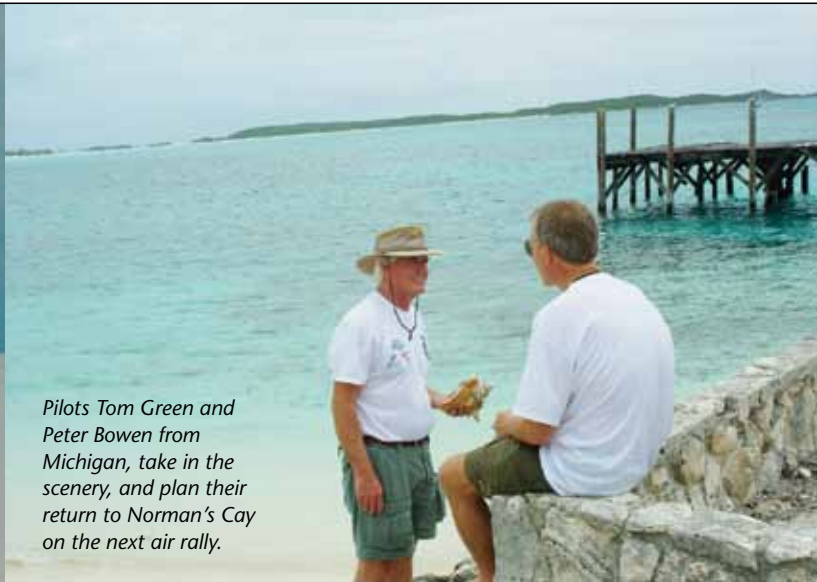
Carlos bought up land, and terrorised most of the locals into fleeing, except for a few.

A small group of decaying huts which face the breeze off the bay are a reminder of those dark years. Oh, and Lehder's DC3 which still sits on the bottom of the bay.

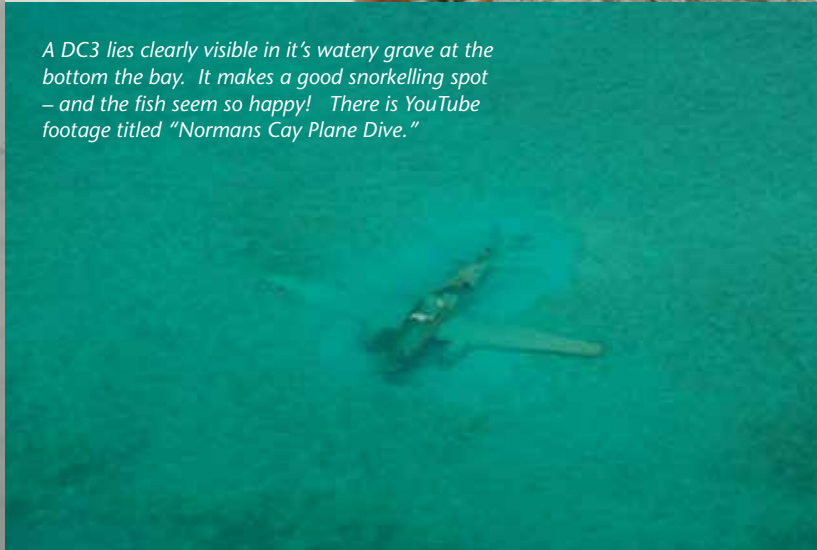
Life has long since returned to normal on the island and new owners have doubled the size of the Norman's Cay Beach Club to include a large, ambient verandah with comfortable chairs. The burgers are fabulous. As are the cocktails.

Norman's Cay lies within the Exumas, the first group of islands you come to, 210 nm south of Florida. It has accommodation at \$250 per night. There is boating, diving and snorkelling. Your fellow diners may include Bahaman workers, wandering yachties, or airborne tourists. Some days there can be 50 people through for lunch. Other days, as when I was there, only a few.

A short walk leads to the beach. It would be hard to find a more idyllic location than Norman's Cay for lunch – or the rest of your life. ■



Pilots Tom Green and Peter Bowen from Michigan, take in the scenery, and plan their return to Norman's Cay on the next air rally.



A DC3 lies clearly visible in it's watery grave at the bottom the bay. It makes a good snorkelling spot – and the fish seem so happy! There is YouTube footage titled "Normans Cay Plane Dive."



Above: The recent extension at McDuff's with it's large comfortable chairs

Above right: The large sealed 03/21 runway is lined with Casuarina trees.

Above far right: McDuff's Bar & Grill. The bottom half of the sign reads "Watch for aeroplanes"

Right: Restaurant and Bar manager at McDuff's Bar & Grill, Stefan Paton serves the burger. \$19 for the burger, \$81 for Pina Colada = \$100.

Left: The locals were friendly, so we stayed for lunch.

