

Spring Break – From backwater bonefish to bluewater billfish, The Abaco chain of the Bahamas offers a wide range of spring angling opportunities.

by Jeff Merrill



(From left to right) 1. The spring tournament season attracts all the big guns for numerous events which start in April and run through mid-June. 2. When marlin are scarce you'll often find trophy-sized mahi-mahi willing to inhale baits or lures meant for billfish. 3. It's a short run to the action in The Abacos where you'll find billfish hungry in the spring. 4. The Abacos are home to numerous beautiful marinas offering the same amenities found at the best marinas stateside.

As winter melts away faster than Frosty the Snowman on a warm spring day, prospects for spring angling adventures become a hot topic with many cabin-weary anglers who have been hibernating for months. The Bahamas are a popular spot for many, thanks to its close proximity to the U.S. mainland and its numerous species and variety of techniques which can be employed for catching them. The Abaco chain of the Bahamas, also known as the Out Islands, has something for everyone. Whether you prefer bonefish, blue marlin or something in between, you'll find first class resorts, marinas, restaurants, charter boats and guides on the island.

Skinny water anglers will appreciate the abundance of bonefish that can be found in the Abacos. Whether your forte is the fly rod or spinning gear, many of the secluded coves that surround the island offer excellent opportunities for a shot at the grey ghost of the flats. Poling a flats skiff along a mangrove-strewn coastline or wading a sandy bottom flat are productive methods that will put you into drag searing runs from these bottom

feeding speedsters and an occasional tarpon or permit is also possible. A variety of flies that resemble shrimp and crabs will draw strikes for those using the long wand, while spinning gear with live crabs and shrimp will produce for that. Spring season can be breezy in the Bahamas and casting a fly into a 25-knot headwind is indeed a challenge, so whether you book a guide or use your own craft, it pays to bring both types of gear and adjust to conditions of the day. For a change of pace, try anchoring over near-shore wrecks and reefs which offer an excellent chance to tangle with a variety of species including jacks, snapper, grouper, barracuda, mackerel and sharks. A variety of jigs and weighted bucktails dropped to the bottom will often produce grouper and some snappers though often bottom rigs with live bait are the best bet. For sub-surface species such as barracuda, yellowtail, sharks and mackerel, it's tough to beat a hooked bait drifted in a chum line for light-tackle fun.

The spring season also offers the best shot at billfish in The Abacos and with blue marlin, white marlin and sailfish

abundant at this time of year a Grand Slam is very possible. Beginning in April and continuing through June, all three species can be found and it's rarely longer than an hour ride to the billfish grounds on any given day. Often the ride from the marina through the cut takes longer than the ride to the fishing grounds and within five miles of land you'll find yourself in 5000 feet of water that's home to billfish, wahoo, tuna and mahi-mahi! In fact, running more than 20 miles is often unheard of in these parts, as the area is full of deepwater structure, which holds bait and attracts the billfish to feed each season. Some of the most popular areas include Jurassic Park, the Mushroom, Little Abaco Canyon, Wonderland, the Bridge and Great Abaco Canyon. One of the best charts highlighting these and other fishing hotspots in the area is the Waterproof Chart #120F – Northern Bahamas Fish and Dive chart produced by Waterproof Charts. It can be purchased from their web site at www.waterproofcharts.com. It should be noted fishing regulations for vessels visiting the Bahamas have recently changed and it's a good idea to check

sizes and bag limits of all species before hitting the water. For information on ports of entry, fishing and diving regulations, entry fees and other Bahamas travel information visit www.bahamas.com and for marina reservations contact Marinalife.

Time your trip correctly and you could compete in one of the numerous billfish tournaments held in the Bahamas each year. These events attract the best billfish crews from around the world who make the trek spring to vie for a boatload of cash and "braggin" rights for the year. The *Bahamas White Marlin Open* kicks off the billfish tournament season in April and is followed by *Bahamas Billfish Championship* series where five separate tournaments are held during a 10-week period between Marsh Harbour, Treasure Cay and Harbour Island. Individual event champions are crowned and an overall BBC series championship is awarded based on points tallied at each event. The *Marine Max Billfish Invitational*, *Bertram Hatteras Shootout* and *HMY Billfish Blast* highlight the tournament schedule in May followed in June by the *Treasure Cay*

Billfish Tournament and the *Abaco Billfish Challenge*. All are first class events which not only offer great fishing but provide opportunities to socialize during nightly parties and lay day activities.

The Abacos lie roughly 165 miles from Palm Beach and are home to several first class marinas on Treasure Cay, Green Turtle Cay and Man O' War Cay. Abaco Beach Resort and Boat Harbour is the largest marina in the Out Islands and features a 200 slip deepwater marina which can accommodate vessels up to 180 feet. All slips feature cable television, telephone and electricity. The resort has 72 oceanfront rooms, one-bedroom suites with full kitchen. Two-bedroom villas with two baths and kitchen are also available for those needing extra shore side accommodations for visiting guests. Roughly 17 miles up the coast from Abaco Beach Resort and Boat Harbour lies Treasure Cay Hotel Resort and Marina which has a 150-slip full service marina with restaurant and bar, pool, tennis court and championship golf course. Standard hotel rooms and two or three bedroom suites highlight this 100-room resort.

Though the cruise across the Gulf Stream to the Bahamas is often an enjoyable trip, keep in mind, depending on the

time of year, the weather can change quickly and turn your pleasant ride into a red-knuckle excursion. Keep in mind there are also numerous reefs and shoals to navigate, so if you're making your first trip it's a good idea to either cruise with another boat or have an experienced person onboard who has made the crossing. Should you decide to have the captain run your vessel while you fly in, just about every south Florida airport has numerous daily flights that service the airports at Marsh Harbour and Treasure Cay. Be advised of these airports, both are very small and only aircraft of limited size can be accommodated. Booking flights early is strongly advised especially during busy tournament weeks from April through June.

If you're looking to tangle with bluewater gamefish or shallow water species or prefer to dive or snorkel in a secluded cove or would rather soak up some rays on a sandy beach you'll find it in The Abacos. For those who prefer activities away from the water, championship golf courses, tennis courts, shopping for local crafts and goods and numerous excellent restaurants can be found as well. A visit to the Bahamas is one of the rites of spring you definitely shouldn't miss. [ml](#)