

MOTOR BOATING

Bahamas Bound

Thanks to the right boat, a Maritmo 48, and an experienced crew, we find a dream adventure on a cruise to the western Bahamas

By Chris Caswell

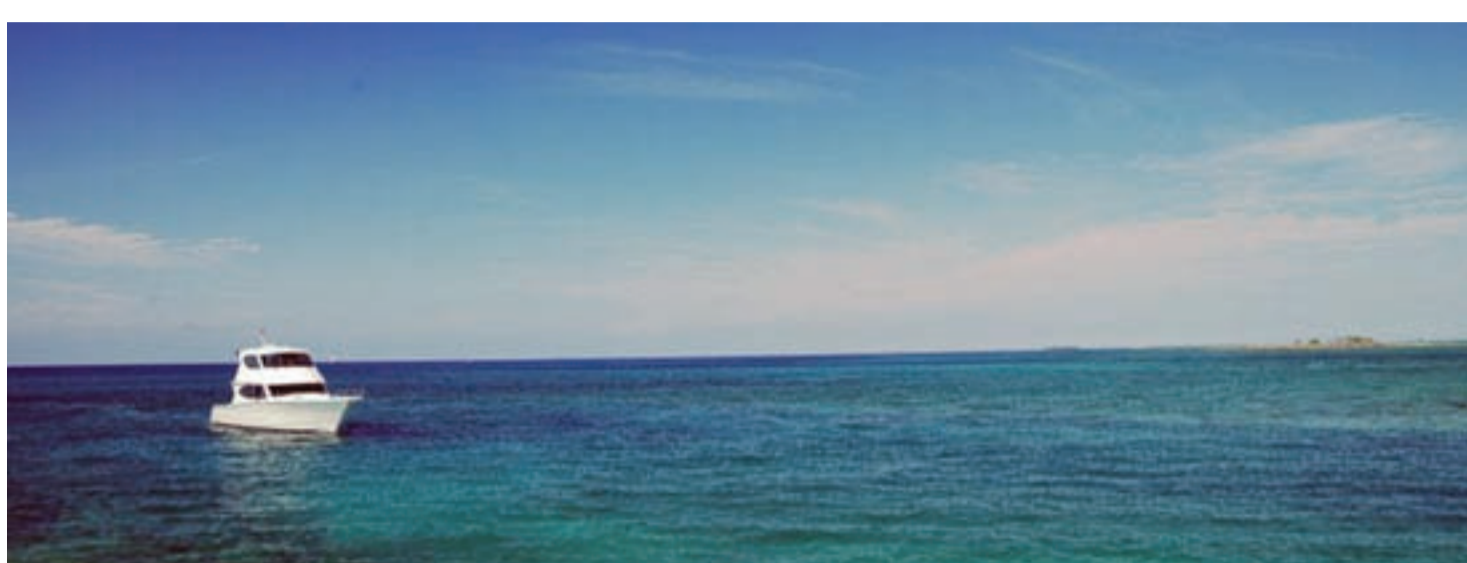


Photo: Gary John Norman

He cocked his head to examine me closely with one liquid brown eye, looking first at my mask and snorkel, then at my bright swim trunks. His lips curled in a faint grin and, as he turned his back on me, I heard a soft clicking noise. I had just been laughed at by an Atlantic spotted dolphin.

This was day two of a truly marvelous dream cruise, so his attitude didn't even faze me. After all, I was just a tourist in his realm and, if I looked in a mirror, I would have seen his exact opposite. Where the dolphin was sleek and trim, I wasn't. Where he was gray and creamy, I was red from sunburn and vivid in my attire. I'd been told to keep my arms at my sides, so we cruised along companionably like two people walking on a narrow sidewalk. He kept one eye on me, speeding up or slowing down to hold his position.

I've always been fascinated by the myths and legends of dolphin, so it was pretty cool to swim with one in its natural habitat. You can see dolphin in many ocean locations, but there is one place where you are almost assured of being able to swim with them: White Sand Ridge in the western Bahamas. This slice of nautical heaven is just what it sounds like, a gleaming sand bar that rises up through gin-clear waters. Best of all, it's a short hop from Florida.

This cruise to adventure started at Jupiter Yacht Sales on Florida's East Coast, where a Maritmo 48 was berthed. Just 60 miles away, White Sand Ridge is close to Grand Bahama Island, which was the boat's first destination. A direct course would have been 110 degrees magnetic, but the Gulf Stream would set the boat north at more than four knots. The mightiest river in the world (1,000 times greater than the Amazon or Mississippi), the Stream carries warm water around the Atlantic. If diverted, Western Europe would have arctic conditions. With that much water moving that fast, the Stream can be incredibly rough when the wind stirs the swells to a froth. For this crossing, seas were mild and there was a moderate breeze, but the Maritmo could easily have handled worse. Her deep-V hull was designed and built in Australia, where rough seas are the norm. At a speed of 30-plus knots, the 48 ate up the miles to West End.

The Bahamas are a geographic oddity. If you lowered the ocean by 30 feet, you'd have a huge plateau dotted by low ridges and hills that are the islands. The name, in fact, came from Ponce de Leon, who proclaimed this area "*Bajamar*," or shallow sea. Because of this thin-water "tabletop" not all boats can cruise here. The Maritmo, with a draft of just 4'4", is the right boat for this locale. Not only that, its innovative layout, with a galley opening to the big cockpit, is ideal for the alfresco Bahamian lifestyle.

Some boaters who haven't cruised here before get nervous about picking out the entrance at West End, but not this crew. Sandy Cochran is a knowledgeable yacht broker and delivery skipper. Anna Bennett literally knows the dolphin here by first name because she spent years running charters to the Bahamas. With their experienced eyes and a GPS, the boat was soon tied alongside at Old Bahama Bay, where the slips are good, the water is pure and boaters have access to the resort's restaurant and pool.

We were up and away early the next morning, with the big Cummins diesel engines purring and the crew gathered in the skylounge to admire the colors of the water that we created with our white wake. It wasn't long before Memory Rock hove into sight, a lonely and isolated islet about 15 miles north of West End. It's a turning point for boaters entering the vast Little Bahama Bank, an expanse of shallow water (14 feet or less) that covers more than 6,000 square miles. It's protected by one of the longest barrier reefs in the Western Hemisphere. The bank is so large it can create its own massive thunderstorms in summer, so skippers beware. The guidebooks provide a subtle warning about the Memory Rock navigation light: "Lit at night, most of the time."

Memory Rock is a popular dive spot, but we were in a hurry to see our dolphins, so the throttle stayed down. Standing in the bow pulpit watching sea gardens sliding past just a few feet under our keel, it seemed as though we were suspended above the sea floor, with only the racing shadow of our hull as a reminder of reality.

"There!" Anna shouted, pointing off the port bow. A trio of grey fins sped toward us like benevolent torpedoes, splitting away at the last second to spin into our bow wave. Several others joined them, and soon we had a dozen dolphins playing around the boat. We slowed to a stop and then took advantage of the big cockpit to wiggle into fins and put on our masks. After the bubbles from my plunge disappeared, the water was clearer than most aquariums, and I could see the dolphin circling the Maritmo like Indians around a wagon train. It was then that I had my encounter with the laughing dolphin.

Anna had given us a briefing on dolphin etiquette beforehand. First and foremost, it's illegal to touch a dolphin. Most of the activities are up to them, so simply go with their flow. Atlantic spotted dolphin (*Stenella frontalis*) are found mostly in the Gulf Stream, where they feed on small fish like herring or anchovies, as well as squid. At birth, they are about three feet long, and they grow to seven feet six inches and a weight of 300-plus pounds. They get their name from the small white or gray spots on their sides and back, with the number and size of spots increasing with age, and they are known as gregarious and fun creatures.

Anna told us that this was one pod of about 15, and it included both adults and juveniles. She knew the names of a few, including one youngster that had been "introduced" to her by a parent dolphin.

Back in the water, my laughing friend returned, but this time he wanted to play the seaweed game, for which Anna had prepared us. He swooped down to the bottom and picked up a strand of seaweed on his nose, carried it a short distance and dropped it at my feet. Now it was my turn. I picked up the seaweed and flippered a few yards away, dropping it on the sand bottom. After a few back and forths, it turned out to be a fun game for the dolphin, but just a bit tiring for the human.

I'd been warned against touching the dolphin, but hadn't been alerted that they might touch me. As we swam back toward the boat, my friend moved close and gave me a grazing nudge with his flipper, as if to say, "You didn't do too badly for such a poor swimmer." With that, the entire pod turned in formation and zoomed out of sight. We rinsed off in the cockpit, lit off the engines and headed slowly back toward Grand Bahama Island, weary but elated.

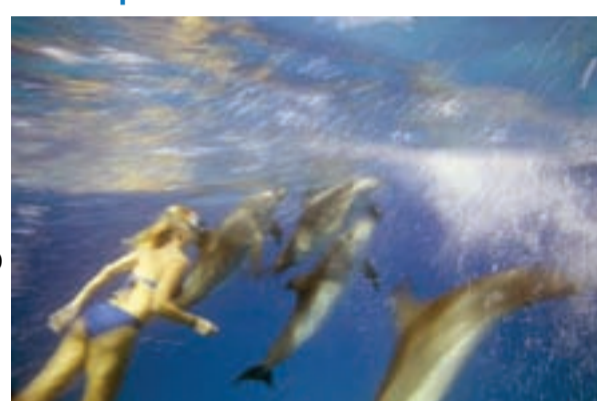
The next morning, we went snorkeling around Memory Rock, which has amazing walls for scuba divers and healthy reefs filled with brilliant fish for snorkelers. We were even visited by a huge loggerhead turtle that cruised casually past.

During this whole adventure, our Maritmo 48 proved to be the perfect companion. The open layout and huge windows gave everyone a great view of the beautiful water, whether we were in the skylounge or seated in the salon. With three comfortable staterooms, we also had our own floating luxury resort. The 1,000-hp Caterpillar C-18s gave us the speed and range we needed to zip across the Gulf Stream in short order.

When it was time to turn the bow of the Maritmo back toward Florida and the marina at Jupiter, the crew was happy to have had achieved a goal: to swim with wild dolphins in their own surroundings. But we had also been touched by the intelligence and friendliness of these creatures. We promised to return often to see the youngsters grow into adults. It had been a dream cruise, one that will linger in my memory for years.

Contact: Maritomo USA, (425) 614-2628. www.maritimo.com.au

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