

## Staying in touch in the Bahamas

We've been cruising the Bahamas for 7 seasons. Staying in touch and getting accurate weather forecasts have always been a challenge. As boaters from the US we've been raised with NOAA weather on the VHF. Technology has moved past this but it's reassuring to know it's always there. The problem for the Bahamas is that most of the popular cruising grounds are well beyond the range of NOAA on VHF. A fact of life in the Bahamas in the winter is the cold fronts are coming through regularly, every 3-5 days. When the front comes you want to be able get to a safe harbour.

So the question is, how can you stay in touch. There are a lot of possible solutions and the correct one for you will depend on your cruising ground, type of vessel, budget to name just a few. The most common is Wi-Fi which is available in most marinas and populated areas in the Abacos, Eluthera, and northern Exumas. Wi-Fi used to be virtually free in many places. That has changed since people are becoming more security conscious and fewer places are offering Wi-Fi without paying for it or staying at a marina. The bigger knock on Wi-Fi for those who move around or visit more remote places is that there is no ubiquitous WiFi carrier, especially in far northern Abacos or northern Exumas. What is ubiquitous is Batelco, the Bahamas phone company. Batelco has rolled out a cellphone based data network which supports internet access. The problem here is that though Batelco is ubiquitous their cell towers are not. In the northern Exumas there is one at Highbourne Cay but the next one is the better part of 60 miles away in Staniel Cay. Cell range is in the 10-15 miles range. Enter the cellphone booster. It amplifies a cell signal and therefore effectively increases the cell range. I saw this first hand last year in Cambridge Cay which is approximately halfway between those towers. My cellphone had zero bars. A fellow boater invited me to his boat for a demo of the booster. The booster gave me four bars and my favorite weather site came up very quickly. I was sold! The booster kit isn't cheap at \$400 but it works well and is unobtrusive.

The total solution involves a number of pieces. First, you'll need a smartphone or Wi-Fi hotspot which is capable of accepting a Batelco simm and connecting to the Batelco network. This is the key to getting affordable rates. We're Verizon customers and as such have fewer hardware choices than say an ATT customer. Verizon's underlying cell network has historically been incompatible with Batelco. Verizon does have a few phones and one hotspot which are globally capable. These can accept the Batelco simms and connect to the Batelco towers. We bought a Wilson marine booster kit. It comes with the booster, and inside antennae which your devices "talk to", and outside antennae which finds the incoming cell signal, a power supply and wires which connect the booster to the antennas. We bought the kit from a Wilson distributor, Powerful Signal. Their support team was very knowledgeable and helped me through installation choices. The data plan costs \$30/month for up to 1G of data. You won't be streaming movies but it's more than adequate for email, weather, news, and sports. Diane had a 20 minute phone call with our daughter using Magic Jack and the booster. She said it was as clear as any cellphone conversation. As another example, on our way back to the US

we went by Great Sale and had 4 bars and sent emails and brought up the weather.

Here are examples of parts that you will need. These are based on Verizon but I'm sure all carriers have similar components. The booster is a Wilson AG Soho 60. It amplifies both 800 MHz and 1900 MHz frequencies. These are the two used by most US carriers and Batelco. It also has adjustable gain on both frequencies. You'll need to adjust gain depending how far you are from a tower. Yes, you can get too powerful a signal. The Wi-Fi hotspot we use is a Verizon 890L which is the only one they sell which will work with Batelco. You can use an Android smartphone as your hotspot, but we've found that the performance is poor. Finally, you will need a Batelco simm and a prepaid data plan.

As I said this solution isn't for everyone, but if you move around or like to anchor out in remote places, this might be the solution for you.