





◀ 42  
N 23 24 50 W 76 33 04  
BC = 22 ng/m³

Reefs in the Caribbean Sea  
west of the Exumas in the  
Bahamas.

■ 44  
S 02 32 59 W 43 02 50  
BC = no data available

East of São Luís in Brazil lies  
the Lençóis Maranhenses  
National Park with its sand  
dunes and freshwater  
lagoons.

# THE CARIBBEAN

Natal - Cayenne - Sebring distance: 6677 km ■ flying time: 25:37

Measuring seven million square kilometres, the Amazon Basin is the largest river basin in the world. Its waters flow into the second longest river in the world, the Amazon, which is only a few kilometres shorter than the Nile. These vast stretches of water constitute as much as one-fifth of all the surface water in the world. I was looking forward to flying over the 150-kilometre mouth of this great river, but fate had other ideas in store.

I left the sunny Natal and flew along the Brazilian coast, meandering in the turbulent air between the low clouds, all the way to the wonderful sand dunes of the Lençóis Maranhenses National Park near São Luís. The park’s pools were quite dry, making for a much less exciting view than the bright turquoise water I had been expecting based on the promotional materials I had seen. Some 100 miles from Belém, I flew into a bank of thick grey tropical clouds that shrouded the view of the mouth of the Amazon River. Torrential rain began to batter the aircraft, and water was leaking into the cabin from everywhere. The Stormscope reported a malfunction and left me without any information about the storms hidden in the clouds. I stayed above the sea, where the weather usually clears up sooner. I called Domen in Slovenia, who searched for satellite and radar images of the area in front of me on the internet and guided me around the most intense storm areas. Unfortunately, the weather in French Guiana was not much better. Just over 100km from Cayenne, an air traffic controller informed me that the cloud base was at 1500ft, so I descended low above the jungle and continued above it all the way to the airport in the vicinity of the capital, which was also being pounded by tropical downpours.

Luckily, I was able to find a dry spot under the roof of an open hangar, where I drilled holes into the hull of the luggage compartment to drain the “Brazilian” water out of the aircraft.

Back home, I would never even consider opening the hangar door in this weather, but here in Guiana, it was normal for this time of the year and it could therefore take a while before the weather cleared up. After talking to the air traffic controller, who mentioned that the storms were less intense above the open seas and that open corridors usually formed between the thick layers of clouds, I quickly decided to submit an IFR flight plan and head out directly to the open sea and straight to Puerto Rico. Horizontal rain showers were being blown around the airport. Domen’s text message informed me that the region in front of me was completely red on online radar images what with the storms, and the clouds were so low as to almost touch the surface, but I trusted the local experts and took off on a rather gut-wrenching flight, or escape, from French Guiana.

Devil’s Island, one of the three Salvation Islands, lies just over 10 kilometres off the coast of Kourou. For a good 100 years, the island served as a controversial French penal colony, whose inmates included the famous French officer Alfred Dreyfus and the writer Henri Charrière, the latter of whom managed to escape from the island and penned a novel about it entitled Papillon. Sadly, the islands, which are now occupied by the Guiana Space Centre, also remained hidden behind the rain clouds.

Just over an hour from Barbados, the clouds thinned out, revealing patches of blue sky interspersed with towering localised cumulonimbus storm clouds, which I was easily able to avoid. At this time of the year, the weather above the Caribbean is mostly nice – quite a contrast to the hurricane period in the summer and autumn months.

To avoid having to go through complicated customs procedures for entry into the United States, I planned to land at San Juan, the capital of Puerto Rico, which is officially part of the US. Ever since 9/11, the US bureaucratic system has been extremely rigorous, often involving degrading procedures to check the obscurest of details about individuals. Puerto Rico awaited me in beautiful evening colours, and I was greeted by a very friendly member of staff at the airport. I had definitely made the right decision, as I had been warned on several occasions to avoid landing in Miami, Florida, because of the bureaucratic procedures.

What followed was an unforgettable day above and among the vibrant colours of the Caribbean, which changed from one hour to the next. The vistas were so amazing that I simply could not keep the plane straight. I went up, down, left, right, round and round again, flying just above the surface. Simply incredible. The hours flew by much too fast, and when the Bahamas disappeared behind me, the air traffic controller in Miami began to give me trouble, insisting that I land at the very busy Miami airport to take care of some customs formalities. The harder I tried to explain to him that I had already taken care of the formalities, the more he insisted on my changing course for Miami. I demanded to get the direct phone number of the customs office and called them on the satellite phone. The man at the customs office was even more hostile, so I finally relented and left the wonderful scenery of the great wetlands of the Everglades National Park, which were any photographer's dream, and headed for the overpopulated capital of Florida as per the air traffic controller's instructions. Very busy airports usually vector aircraft, meaning that they guide them in terms of altitude and direction on the basis of the radar. After a long series of turns, they finally instructed me to land on runway 08L.

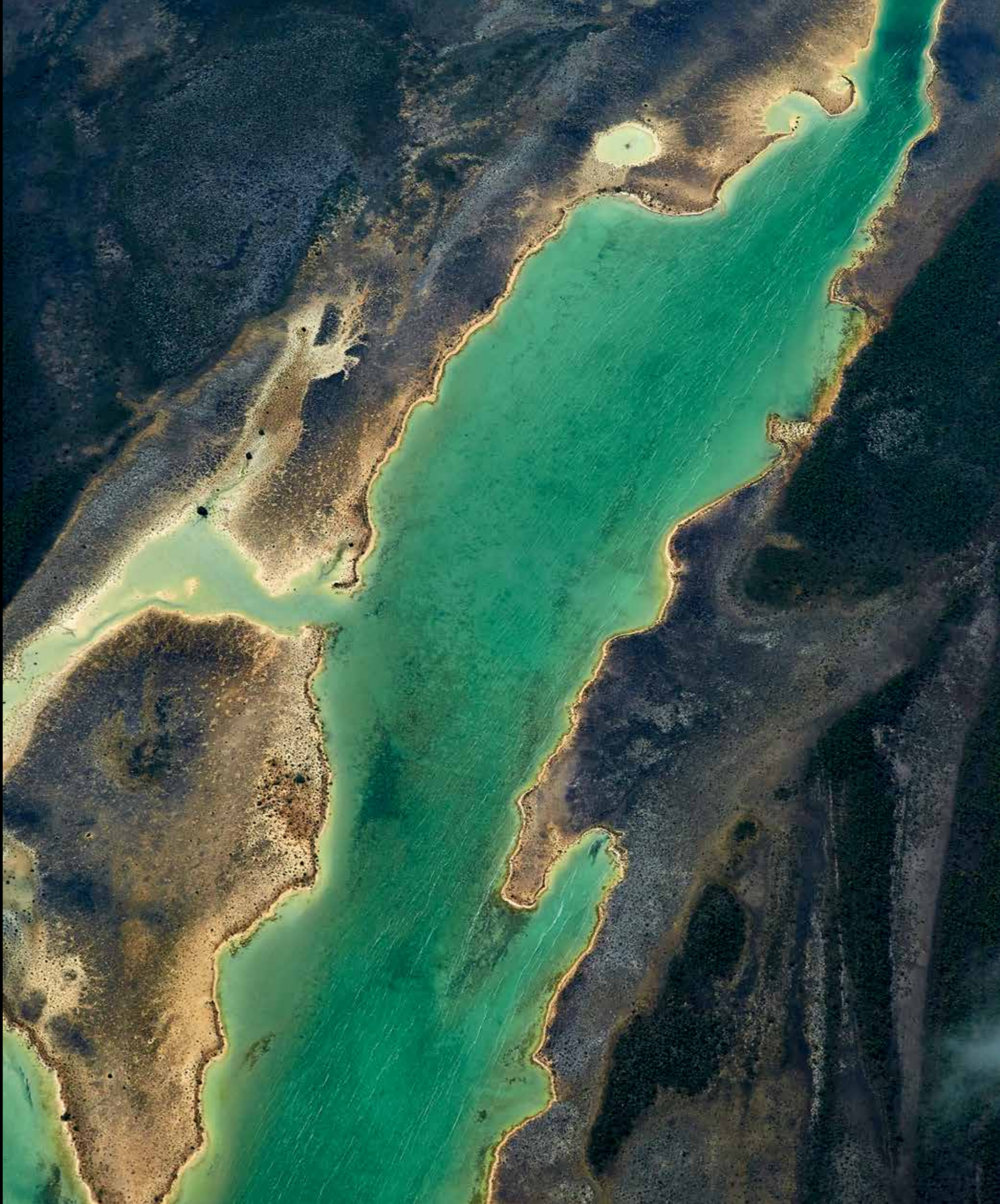
Despite my protests, the unfriendly staff carried out a thorough and lengthy customs procedure. When they finally looked at the passport and the customs documents from Puerto Rico, they felt embarrassed and began to apologise for the unnecessary landing. They had thought that such a small aircraft could not have flown directly to Florida and had been certain I had landed somewhere on the way. I was already aboard the plane and had got taxi clearance when the air traffic controller remembered that I had to pay the landing fee. Of course, I strongly protested and proposed that they charge it to the bureaucrats at the customs office. After requesting taxi clearance several times, I finally got the green light and took off into the sunny sky, continuing low above the horizon directly towards the Everglades National Park and onwards to Sebring, where I was awaited by Michael Coatest, Pipistrel's representative for Australia and the US.

47 ■  
**N 23 56 13 W 77 38 51**  
**BC = 12 ng/m<sup>3</sup>**

South Andros, which is part of the Bahamas, is covered by salt marshes, brackish waters and blue holes, openings to underground or underwater cave systems.

48 ►  
**S 02 54 20 W 41 23 00**  
**BC = no data available**

In north-eastern Brazil, by the outfall of Lago da Santana to the Atlantic, lies the town of Barrinha.







■ 50  
S 05 05 52 W 37 33 17  
BC = 1140 ng/m<sup>3</sup>

Apart from the Antarctic, the Brazilian state of Rio Grande do Norte boasts the cleanest air in the world.

► 52  
S 02 44 15 W 41 59 43  
BC = no data available

At 1,700km, the Parnaíba River is the longest entirely Brazilian river. Before emptying into the Atlantic, it forms one of the largest deltas in the world, with lush mangrove forests.

► 54  
N 01 07 03 W 49 42 33  
BC = no data available

One of the many branches of the vast delta of the second longest river in the world, the Amazon River.







■ 56  
**N** 11 56 59 **W** 58 50 38  
**BC** = 5 ng/m<sup>3</sup>

The tropical heat causes the humid air above the Caribbean Sea to rise, causing frequent storms.

► 58  
**N** 14 34 21 **W** 60 49 03  
**BC** = 9 ng/m<sup>3</sup>

Coral reefs in the Vauclin Bay in the south-eastern part of the island of Martinique.

► 60  
**N** 22 34 54 **W** 74 10 01  
**BC** = 40 ng/m<sup>3</sup>

Underwater coral reefs in the lagoon of the Crooked Island in the Bahamas.







■ 62  
N 22 12 52 W 74 13 59  
BC = 32 ng/m<sup>3</sup>

Blue holes on Acklins Island in the Bahamas.

► 64  
N 24 01 43 W 77 49 28  
BC = 9 ng/m<sup>3</sup>

The West Side National Park on Andros Island in the Bahamas.

