

# The Best of the Turks & Caicos Islands

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**F**or years, the Turks & Caicos Islands' considerable natural attributes were known to just a fortunate few—many of them divers and snorkelers exploring the stunning ring of coral reefs and dramatic drop-offs of the continental shelf wall. But the sun-kissed archipelago is undiscovered no more: Overnight, it seems, resorts, restaurants, and tour operators have sprung up like mushrooms after a spring rain. Construction along the beautiful 19km (12 miles) of Grace Bay Beach is fashioning a lineup of sleek condos and resort hotels, and the tourist infrastructure is racing to catch up. Notoriously potholed dirt roads have been neatly paved (sidewalks even!), and a brand-new Hotel School at the Grace Bay Club is helping train a first-generation hospitality community.

Even with all the madcap development the islands have undergone in the last 5 years, the Turks & Caicos Islands (or “the TCI”) have retained their getaway-vacation feel. The islands are best appreciated if you prefer your pleasures laid-back. If your idea of entertainment is 24-hour steel drums on the beach or a superheated nightlife, you may be disappointed (I take that back—there’s always Club Med). The partying is more a sip-a-beer-in-a-beach-shack variety, with shade from casuarina trees and unencumbered views of that incredible turquoise sea.

This is not to say that you can't get your fill of high-adrenaline outdoor adventures. You can scuba-dive a vertical undersea wall where the continental shelf drops a heart-stopping mile deep (*Scuba Diving* magazine named the TCI one of the top 10 best diving sites in the world). You can parasail high over Grace Bay and actually swim alongside humpback whales or velvety stingrays. You can cast a line for bonefish, reef fish, night fish—or free-dive 6m (20 ft.) down to the sea bottom for fresh conch.

Still, what is most remarkable, in even the most heavily toured spots like Grace Bay, is what you *don't* experience. You never hear the roar of jet skis or scores of motorboats (the coral reef is a

protected national park and simply too shallow in spots to allow powerboats and personal water craft to be rented without a captain aboard in most cases). You don't see giant water parks rising up over the horizon or sunbathers packed cheek by jowl. You aren't confronted by an army of pushy hucksters roaming the beach.

And don't even bother coming if you're looking for a shopping spree. The island has one "mall," but chain retailers and superstores have yet to make inroads here—no Gap, no Target. You won't even see those mega T-shirt shops that have become ubiquitous in many seaside resorts. You *can* buy T-shirts, for sure, both of the generic tourist variety and more personalized versions, at boutique shops scattered about in the few retail clusters on the island. You can find good art by local artists in established galleries, but you also have the opportunity to seek out the source yourself, down an unpaved road, perhaps, with "potcake" dogs (island dogs traditionally fed from the bottom of the pot) licking your ankles and bougainvillea blossoms covering the ground.

In fact, you won't find a typical chain-*anything* here, so if you can't go 3 days without a fast-food burger, you may be a little grumpy after a week on the TCI. But you can get more-than-acceptable nonchain burgers, pizzas, and any kind of Western-style grub you desire—as well as some of the best food in the Caribbean. Expect to pay bruising big-city prices for anything you eat, however; it's tough to grow anything in this parched, sandy terrain, and most foodstuffs have to be imported.

Indeed, if you like your Caribbean islands thrillingly lush and mountainous, the dry scrubland terrain of the TCI may underwhelm you. But if you dream of lying on a pristine parcel of sugary sand encircled by a mesmerizing aquamarine sea, or want nothing more than to spend an afternoon happily bubbling about a living, breathing coral reef with mask and snorkel, book a trip now.

For a thumbnail portrait of each island, see "The Islands in Brief," in chapter 2.

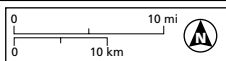
## 1 The Best Beaches

Surrounded by the world's third-largest coral reef, the Turks & Caicos Islands have some of the finest powdery-sand beaches and most ethereal turquoise seas in the world. Most are just minutes away from an airport, and you'll rarely have to vie for beach space with anyone else. Tour boats can whisk you to uninhabited cays where you can play Robinson Crusoe for a day. The waters are

pristine and diamond-clear, and waves rarely rise above a gentle ripple—perfect for young kids and snorkelers of all ages.

- **Grace Bay** (Providenciales): These 19km (12 miles) of pale sands and azure seas are the pride of Provo; *Condé Nast Traveler* has called this one of the world's best beaches. An increasing number of resorts and condo hotels have sprung up along the shore. Like much of the TCI, the beach is fringed by a coral reef system with fabulous snorkeling and diving. See chapter 5.
- **Malcolm Beach** (Providenciales): The traditional way to see this charming cove (often referred to as Malcolm Roads Beach) is with a 4×4 along twisting, bumpy Malcolm Roads. You can also access the beach by staying at Amanyara (the resort is adjacent to the beach) or by getting a tour-boat operator to take you there. Its waters are part of the Northwest Point Marine National Park. See chapter 5.
- **Long Bay** (Providenciales): The calm, shallow waters of this quiet beach on Provo's southeastern shore make it perfect for young children. Take a horseback ride on the beach here with Provo Ponies. See chapter 5.
- **Sapodilla Bay and Taylor Bay** (Providenciales): Part of the Chalk Sound National Park, these beautiful, shallow bays along Provo's southwest coastline have soft silty bottoms and warm water. See chapter 5.
- **Pine Cay** (Caicos Cays): The money shot in *Caribbean Travel & Life's* coverage of the 2005–06 winter season? A pic of this private island's perfect crescent of pale white sand rimmed by azure seas. The island is also home to The Meridian Club. See chapters 3 and 5.
- **Parrot Cay** (Caicos Cays): Another gorgeous private island, this one with a secluded beach graced by beach bums of the celebrity variety. See chapter 3 and 5.
- **Sandy Point** (North Caicos): Up until now, only boaters and those in the know found their way to this crescent of perfect beach, within sight of the Parrot Cay Resort. Ground was broken in 2006 for construction of the Royal Reef Resort, a luxury hotel and condos fronting the beach. See chapters 3 and 5.
- **Whitby beaches** (North Caicos): The coves of Three Mary Cays are prime snorkeling spots. Step into the shallows of the palm-fringed Pelican Point beach (in front of Pelican Beach Hotel) and find conch shells of every size. Lovely Horstable Beach has enjoyed its North Caicos seclusion for years (it's also

# Best Beaches in the Turks & Caicos Islands



- Bambarra Beach **10**
- The beaches of Salt Cay **13**
- Governor's Beach **12**
- Grace Bay **2**
- Long Bay **4**
- Malcolm Beach **1**
- Mudjin Harbor **9**
- Parrot Cay **6**
- Pillory Beach **11**
- Pine Cay **5**
- Sandy Point **7**
- Sapodilla Bay & Taylor Bay **3**
- Whitby beaches **8**

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a prime bird-watching spot); now it's the future home of the \$70-million St. Charles condominium resort. See chapters 3 and 5.

- **Mudjin Harbor** (Middle Caicos): This beach is as stunning seen from the green limestone cliffs towering above as it is in an up-close exploration of the wind-swept coves below. See chapter 5.
- **Bambarra Beach** (Middle Caicos): Casuarina trees fringe this picturesque white-sand beach. Its calm, shallow aquamarine waters are the site of the festive Valentine's Day model sailboat races, and the Middle Caicos Day beach party is held here in August. See chapter 5.
- **Governor's Beach** (Grand Turk): Grand Turk's most celebrated beach has great snorkeling and is a popular picnic spot under shady pines. It's in the Columbus Landfall National Park—more about Columbus's "landfall" later—and within sightlines of the new Grand Turk Cruise Center, which in 2006 began welcoming 2,000-passenger ships 2 days a week. See chapter 6.
- **Pillory Beach** (Grand Turk): The Bohio Dive Resort is set on this handsome stretch of Grand Turk beach. See chapter 6.
- **The beaches of Salt Cay:** This tiny island has some of the best snorkeling beaches in the Caribbean. The calmest waters are usually found on North Beach and Point Pleasant. See chapter 6.

## 2 The Best Outdoor Adventures

The waters here are superlative for all kinds of outdoor adventures, from diving and snorkeling to sailing, kayaking, and fishing. But watersports aren't the only game in town. You'll find prime golf and tennis facilities in Provo—and Rollerblade hockey is all the rage with local school kids. See chapters 5 and 6 for more on outdoor sports.

- **Snorkeling the islands:** Stellar snorkeling opportunities are found throughout the islands, whether the Caicos Cays, North Caicos, Middle Caicos, South Caicos, Grand Turk, or Salt Cay (which some claim has the country's best snorkeling), but you can also snorkel right off Provo's spectacular Grace Bay Beach. The government has established snorkel trails at Smith's Reef and Bight Reef, right in front of the Reef Residences Coral Gardens resort (the hotel even has an on-site dive-and-snorkel instructor).

These reefs are right off the shoreline, providing easy access into a fragile but beautiful world. See chapter 5.

- **Taking a beachcombing cruise** (Caicos Cays): A number of tour-boat operators offer variations on half- and full-day beachcombing sojourns. Your trip may include a stop on **Little Water Cay**, a nature reserve set aside to protect the colony of rare rock iguanas; snorkeling the coral reefs and diving for conch; or combing the beaches of uninhabited cays for sand dollars and other shells. See “Caicos Water Sports Operators: Master List” box on p. 102.
- **Riding horses on the beach** (Long Bay, Provo): You don’t need a whit of riding experience to thoroughly enjoy a leisurely late-afternoon trot on a beautiful beach. The gentle mounts of Provo Ponies are perfect for novices, but they don’t mind kicking it up a bit for proven riders—they love the beach, too. See chapter 5.
- **Strolling Grace Bay before sunset**: You’ll be surprised at the long stretches of beautiful beach you have all to yourself (and perhaps a few friendly “potcake” dogs). The sand is a little cooler, and the water takes on the pink and purple hues of the setting sun. Stop in and sink into an inviting white-cushioned perch at the **Lounge** (p. 67), the wonderful oceanfront bar at Grace Bay Club, and sip a cocktail while you wait for the green flash on the horizon. See chapter 5.
- **Watching the glowworms glow**: Four or 5 days after a full moon, millions of glowworms come out just after sunset to mate—lighting up the shallow local waters with a sparkling green glow. You can see them on a glowworm cruise in the Caicos Cays or off any number of Caicos Bank docks. The show is over after the females devour the males when the mating ritual ends. See chapter 5.
- **Hiking or biking the Crossing Place Trail** (Middle Caicos): This old coastal road, first established in the late 1700s by settlers working the local plantations, has been reopened from the Conch Bar to the Indian Cave field-road section and is now a National Trust heritage site. It has heartbreakingly beautiful sections, some on bluffs overlooking the blue-green ocean shallows and rocky outcrops; others bordered by island brush that includes wild sea-island cotton, remnants of the 18th-century plantations, and elegant sisal. Follow hiking or biking trails; when you get hot, take a swim in the shallow coves below. Be

sure to visit **Conch Bar Cave**, a massive aboveground limestone cave system that was used by Lucayan Indians some 600 years ago. See chapter 5.

- **Diving the Wall off Grand Turk:** You can find great scuba-diving spots throughout the TCI, including spectacular opportunities off Provo's Northwest Point and in West Caicos. But Grand Turk's electrifying dives are just some 274m (900 ft.) offshore, where the continental shelf drops off from the coral reef in dramatic fashion. Along the ledges of this sheer wall is marine life in all its eye-popping plumage. See p. 133.
- **Whale-Watching on Salt Cay:** From January through April, humpback whales migrate along the 7,000-foot trench of the Columbus Passage (which runs between the Turks islands and the Caicos islands) to the Silver Banks to mate and calf. You can actually snorkel and swim alongside these 15m (50-ft.) creatures. See chapter 6.
- **Finding treasures on the beach:** The currents drop off a good amount of flotsam on these windward TCI beaches—much of it worthless junk. But hey, one man's trash is another man's treasure. Nearly every island has a visionary artist or two who finds inspiration (and raw materials) in beach salvage. Of course, you never know what will wash up: In 2006, silver pieces of eight and an 18th-century spyglass were picked up on the Salt Cay beaches. And bottles containing messages have found their way here from all over the world; the Turks & Caicos National Museum even has a collection of messages in a bottle. The water's edge also yields gorgeous shells, from snow white sand dollars to queen conch shells—but remember: Always return a shell back into the sea if it has something living inside. (And shell collecting is not permitted in the national parks.) See chapters 5 and 6.

### 3 Frommer's Favorite Luxury Resorts

Most of the country's accommodations are on Providenciales, where more and more resort/condo hotels are being constructed as this is written. The Northwest Point is a particularly hot area, with Amanresorts' much-anticipated Amanyara opening in 2006 and another luxury resort in the works nearby.

- **Amanyara**, Northwest Point, Provo (☎ 866/941-8133): The Singapore-based Amanresorts' first foray into the West Indies is a hit, deftly marrying unparalleled pampered luxury with a

laidback Turks & Caicos aesthetic; the name means “peaceful place.” The guest pavilions are huge, beautifully appointed in typical Aman teakwood, and completely private. See p. 76.

- **Parrot Cay Resort**, Parrot Cay, Provo (☎ 877/754-0726): Yes, this is the exclusive island resort where Ben Affleck married Jennifer Garner and Bruce Willis owns a home. But it’s also a pretty wonderful place to completely unwind and de-stress, whether you’re stretched out on the secluded beach or thrilling to a treatment by a Balinese masseuse at the world-class COMO Shambhala spa. See p. 78.
- **Grace Bay Club**, Grace Bay Road, Grace Bay (☎ 800/946-5757): One of the Grace Bay pioneers continues to upgrade and reinvent itself, and it just gets better and better. Everything, from the spacious luxury suites to the alfresco beachfront Lounge, is done just right. You can even have a staff chef cook you and your friends a gourmet dinner in your suite’s state-of-the-art kitchen. See p. 66.
- **The Palms**, Grace Bay Road, Grace Bay (☎ 866/877-7256): There are no bad rooms at this voluptuous Miami-style resort, with gorgeous pools and restaurants and a 25,000-square-foot spa with reflecting pools. Try the mother-of-pearl-scrub spa treatment, which uses hand-crushed queen conch shells blended with aromatic oils. See p. 68.
- **The Meridian Club**, Pine Cay, Provo (☎ 866/746-3229): This is luxury of a different kind, where 12 comfortable suites—sans TV, phones, radios, even air-conditioning—on a secluded private island offer the kind of solitude and serenity found in few places in the world. The beach and watersports opportunities are superb. See p. 79.
- **Point Grace**, Grace Bay, Provo (☎ 866/924-7223): Set on a stunning bend on Grace Bay Beach, this resort gets consistent high marks for its spacious, handsomely furnished British colonial-style suites, lovely pool, and ultraromantic restaurant, Grace’s Cottage, one of Provo’s best places to dine. See p. 69.
- **Grand Turk Inn**, Front Street, Grand Turk (☎/fax 649/946-2827): The big, comfortable suites are laid-back luxury personified. The innkeepers, sisters who’ve lived all over the world, are hospitality pros, and their loving restoration of the 150-year-old Methodist manse has created Grand Turk’s best accommodations. See p. 127.
- **Windmills Plantation**, Salt Cay (☎ 649/946-6962): It’s hard to put a label on a place so emblematic of its original owners’

## **Foluso Ladejobi's Favorite TCI Experiences**

British-born Foluso Ladejobi vacationed on the Turks & Caicos Islands 20 years ago and never went home. Over the years she has been a schoolteacher and a resort planner and is now ensconced in the executive offices of The Palms resort—and her knowledge of TCI activities and entertainments is vast. Here are Foluso's favorite things to do on the islands:

- **Taking a sunset cruise on the catamaran *Beluga*** to the Caicos Cays with Captain Tim.
- **Seeing the glowworms light up the water** at Sapodilla Bay. The best place to see the glowworms is right at the dock. Go just before sunset, and take flashlights and coolers with drinks. We like to take driftwood, make a bonfire, and roast marshmallows.
- **Parasailing over Grace Bay.** You can go in threes—perfect for me and my two kids.
- **Drinking a cocktail at Amanyara** at sunset.
- **Indulging in a spa day at The Palms** with a mother-of-pearl scrub followed by a massage—definitely decadent.
- **Taking a beach excursion.** Have a tour-boat operator drop you off at a deserted beach for a beach barbecue or even catch fresh conch for you. I recommend J&B Tours, Catch the Wave Charters, Silver Deep, or Big Blue.
- **Visiting Grand Turk,** not only for the diving but to spend time in the Turks & Caicos National Museum. It's small and personal, but all of the islands' history is there in that old Bermudan building. I was also impressed with the colorful services at Grand Turk's Methodist Church; the choir is fantastic.
- **Dining at the Caicos Café,** especially on Friday nights when it's full of locals. I also love the food at the Sushi Bar, next to the Graceway IGA.

singular tastes and whims. But if you like your luxury lodgings with a distinctly boho flavor and more than a touch of whimsy, head here to tiny Salt Cay's only high-end resort. From afar, the otherworldly setting resembles some dusty island outpost out of *Alice in Wonderland*, the roofs of the inn's fanciful structures splashed in bright blues, reds, and yellows. See p. 142.

## 4 The Best Moderately Priced Lodgings

Let's face it: Bargain hotel rooms in Provo are increasingly few and far between (you can still find affordable lodging on the other islands, however). Keep in mind that one way to save on hotel rates is by taking advantage of the special packages advertised on most hotel websites, offering decreased rates and extra perks with extended stays. You can also find good hotel (and hotel/air) packages on popular travel-booking websites like Expedia and Travelocity, particularly in the off season (mid-Apr to Nov). And don't forget to look into villa rentals (see chapter 2 for more information). Here are my choices for the best of the islands' less-expensive accommodations.

- **Sibonné Beach Hotel**, Grace Bay, Provo (☎ 800/528-1905): This place gives you a room only steps away from the waters of Grace Bay for a steal. Small and charming Sibonné is one of the oldest resorts on Grace Bay, and its rooms—all of which have sea views, by the way—are nothin' fancy but nicely appointed. But the real steal is the oceanfront apartment with full kitchen and two patios—one screened and one open, each with a meltingly lovely view of Grace Bay that many of the more chichi resorts would die for. See p. 75.
- **Caribbean Paradise Inn**, Grace Bay, Provo (☎ 877/946-5020): The owner, Jean Luc Bohic, has a little gem of a B&B here, a 2-minute stroll from prime Grace Bay Beach. All rooms are set around the tropical courtyard and pool. Jean Luc is refreshing all the rooms, and he hopes to open a restaurant on the patio by late 2006. See p. 73.
- **Comfort Suites**, Grace Bay, Provo (☎ 888/678-3483): This is a comfortable place to stay; the pool area is attractive, and the suites are spacious. And the location is prime: 1 block from Grace Bay and just across from the Ports of Call shops. See p. 74.
- **Pelican Beach Hotel**, Pelican Beach, North Caicos (☎ 649/946-7112): The price is right at this small, comfortable spot smack dab on Pelican Point. Rooms are admittedly nothing special, but the beach is grand—and the food, cooked by owner Susie Gardiner, is superb home-style island fare. See p. 80.
- **Osprey Beach Hotel**, Duke Street, Grand Turk (☎ 649/946-2666): You're in the thick of the Duke Street action, yet you're just steps away from the solitude of the island's southwestern beach. Many of the rooms have been newly refreshed with

four-poster beds and cool white linens, and all are large and clean; those in the main section have private oceanfront patios. You'll see lots of familiar faces from all over the island at the Sunday night barbecue around the pool. See p. 128.

- **Island House**, Lighthouse Road, Grand Turk (☎ 649/946-1519): The British-born owner, Colin Brooker, is charm personified, and his small inn perched on a Grand Turk hill has killer views of the sea and the island's gently sloping green bluffs. The freshwater pool lies in a lovely courtyard filled with tropical vegetation. You aren't on the beach, but Colin provides all his guests with a pickup truck to get around the island. See p. 128.
- **Bohio Dive Resort**, Front Street, Grand Turk (☎ 649/946-2135): Set in a prime location on beautiful Pillory Beach, this hotel has big, clean rooms (the suites have kitchenettes) and offers reasonable dive/lodging packages. Its restaurant has one of the few true (read: classically trained) chefs on the island in Zev Beck. See p. 127.

## 5 Frommer's Favorite Dining Experiences

All the major islands offer diving trips, lessons, and equipment, but here are the top picks:

- **Anacaona**, Grace Bay Road, Provo (☎ 649/946-5050): The setting for the Grace Bay Club's premier restaurant is unbeatable: You're seated under the stars, surrounded by flaming torches, on a tiered and lushly planted landing overlooking Grace Bay Beach. The food is up to the setting's challenge—especially anything prepared with fish. See p. 88.
- **Grace's Cottage**, Point Grace Hotel, Grace Bay (☎ 649/946-5096): You'll see plenty of couples holding hands on these candlelit cottage patios (outdoors, amid gorgeous tropical vegetation)—but all hands quickly fall away when the grub arrives. The setting is lovely and charming indeed, but the food is superb. See p. 89.
- **Da Conch Shack**, Blue Hills, Provo (☎ 649/946-8877): Formerly the hugely popular Bugaloos, now with new ownership and a location closer to downtown Provo, Da Conch Shack is one of those blessed spots that has it all: great setting (outdoors on a Blue Hills beach), killer fresh food (conch pulled out of its shell on the beach below and prepared to order), and a joyful, laid-back, barefoot vibe. See p. 84.

- **Caicos Café**, Caicos Café Plaza, Grace Bay Road, Provo (☎ 649/946-5278): This is a popular spot among the locals, and it's easy to see why: The place couldn't be more convivial. Set on a spacious Caribbean-style wooden deck, the restaurant is all lit up for dinner with torches and strings of twinkling lights, and the fanciful gingerbread woodwork and island art covering the walls add to the ambience. The cuisine is French-Caribbean, and the shrimp risotto is a popular choice. See p. 91.
- **Magnolia Wine Bar & Restaurant**, Turtle Cove, Provo (☎ 649/941-5108): The view alone is worth the trek up the hill above Turtle Cove marina, but the food easily stands on its own. Seared rare tuna is a house specialty. See p. 96.
- **Baci Ristorante**, Turtle Cove, Harbour Towne, Provo (☎ 649/941-3044): This Italian restaurant has a great setting, right on the docks of the Turtle Cove marina. Lacy iron doors lead out to terraced outdoor seating on the water. The food is standard Italian—fettuccine Alfredo, lasagna alla Bolognese—but hearty and good, and a refreshing break from all that conch. See p. 95.
- **Hemingway's on the Beach**, The Sands at Grace Bay, Provo (☎ 649/941-8408): With a location this good (right on Grace Bay Beach, at The Sands on Grace Bay resort), this spot doesn't have to be this dependable. But it's packed day and night, largely because the food is consistently tasty and fresh. Everyone serves conch chowder, but few are as good as Hemingway's. And don't get me started on the coconut shrimp. See p. 93.
- **Pat's Place**, Historic South District, Salt Cay (☎ 649/946-6919): Pat taught school on Salt Cay for 28 years. She now serves tasty home-style island cooking on a modest porch behind her home. You'll feel like Mom is behind the stove when she brings out her family-style platters of barbecued chicken, potato salad, and rice and peas. See p. 143.