



TURKS AND CAICOS ISLANDS

Rate a 10!

BY MONICA FRIM

The Turks and Caicos Islands offer a high dose of luxury to millionaires with good taste. But along with the swanky hotels, gourmet meals and exclusive resorts come affordable pleasures that find favor with visitors from all walks of life— exquisite corals, forsaken salt ponds, and soft endless beaches surrounded by the clearest turquoise waters imaginable.



For those with high holiday benchmarks or an irrepressible urge to splurge, the Turks and Caicos Islands are hard to beat. If the words tax free offshore investment haven don't signal a Caribbean version of Elysian Fields, then surely the shimmering turquoise waters and near empty, white beaches do. Sure, other Caribbean islands boast similar qualities but, year after year, TCI's beaches are rated among the best in the world. Celebrities unwind in exclusive villas on lushly foliaged cays, moneyed moguls in balconied condos enjoy endless views of sand and sea, and vacationers looking for unspoiled beaches free of touts and hawkers find heavenly reprieve in the opulent resorts and hotels that line TCI's sleepy shores. Crime is possibly the lowest in the Caribbean and, unlike other Caribbean Islands that restrict or forbid foreign ownership of land, TCI has no restrictions on outsiders owning real estate. Anyone can buy a piece of

tropical splendor here. And get this: these islands have no taxes on income, inheritances, properties, capital gains or corporate profits.

Can there be a downside? In a nutshell, this paradise comes at a price. While you don't have to be rich to visit (there's a smattering of clean, modest hotels and beach houses), TCI actively targets a moneyed crowd—although crowd may not be the best word to use in conjunction with a place that is everything but crowded.

I had to see for myself just where the Turks and Caicos stood on the scale of utopian places to unwind. My first peek at the islands came before the airplane landed. "Raise your window shades and get your cameras ready," a flight attendant announced, along with the usual cliché of "fasten your seat belts and raise your seatbacks to the upright position." Suddenly the airplane filled with the natural light of a brilliant tropical sky and buzzed with a



Jojo the dolphin frequently plays alongside the boats that ply the shores of Grace Bay.

crescendo of “oohs” and “ahs” as passengers craned necks or aimed cameras at the scene below.

In the blink of an eye, the ocean changed from indigo to fluorescent shades of turquoise, bursting like fireworks into shards of aquamarine, topaz, sapphire, beryl—all the shades of glistening blue jewels. Here and there, the purple shadows of clouds floated among mottled ripples of yellows, greens and browns that made me wonder if they were renegade islets or if the reef waters were so clear and shallow, and the coral formations so close to the surface, that one could see them from the air. The hues of the sea and the islands swirled like Chihuly glass sculptures, mesmerizing and magical. I would experience similar vistas many more times during my week in TCI as I flew to other islands in small Cessnas that provided even closer aerial views of the wonders below.

Officially the 40 islands—eight of them inhabited—that make up TCI are in the Atlantic Ocean, not the Caribbean Sea. Geologically they are an extension of the southernmost tip of the Bahamas, and lie 550 miles southeast of Miami. The two archipelagos—Caicos on the

west and Turks on the east—are separated by a deep channel known as the Columbus Passage (or Turks and Caicos Passage), a favored route for migrating humpback whales from January to April. If you’re there in season, you might see them from the shores of Salt Cay, Grand Turk or South Caicos, or take a whale watching boat trip for a closer encounter.

While most people visit TCI in winter, there are plenty of things to see and do year round. I visited in June and managed to pack into one week: snorkeling in the third largest coral reef system in the world; exploring mangroves and abandoned Salinas (salt ponds) by golf cart; wandering among the ruins of an 18th century cotton plantation; scrutinizing historical artifacts in museum; exploring a cave; visiting several luxury villas that were still under construction; shopping for island art; partying with the locals in a park during their weekly Thursday night Fish Fry; taking a lesson in conch farming; playing with pot cakes (the name for abandoned dogs in a shelter); and simply driving (or being driven) wherever the roads led on five different islands and stopping at

serendipitous attractions en route. Respite at a pearly white beach was never more than a stone’s throw away.

But if all you want is a quiet space to lay your towel, there are plenty of secluded places, some on privately owned islands that offer world-class amenities and services (so you don’t have to do a thing!) along with spectacular views. On Parrot Cay, exclusive spa treatments, individual butler service and gourmet cuisine are at your doorstep. Everything you need is within reach or will be delivered so all you have to do is relax poolside or at your chosen spot along a stretch of empty coastline. Privacy and anonymity make Parrot Cay a favorite among international celebrities who feel a need to relax and disengage from the norm.

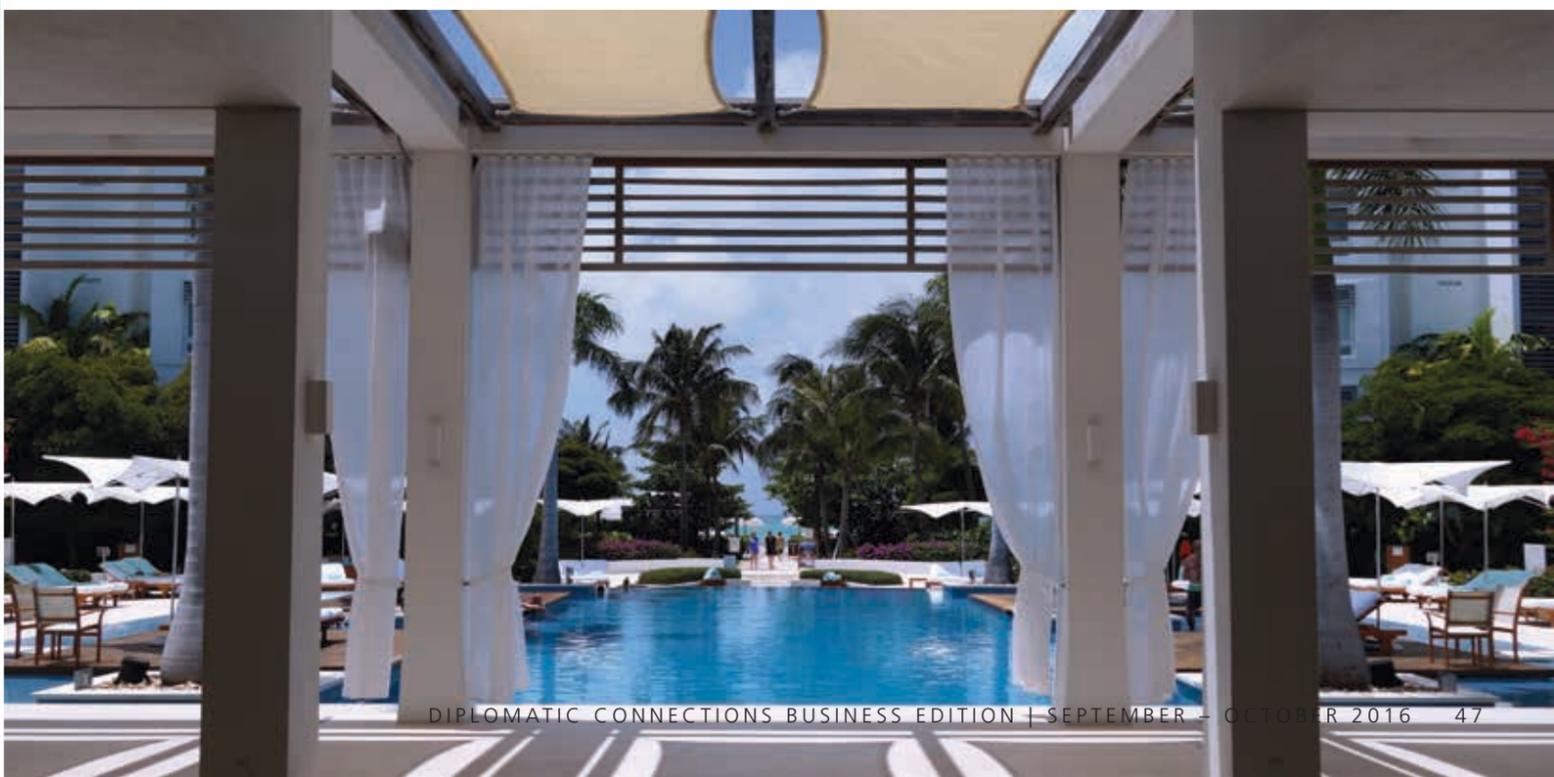
Had I received a hint that during my stay in TCI I just might find myself stretched on a lounge next to Keith Richards, or nursing a tropical drink within slurping distance of Christie Brinkley or Donna Karan—a few of the habitués of Parrot Cay—I might have been tempted to abandon my ingrained hectic pace for at least one day of self-imposed tranquility. Perhaps it was just as well that I didn’t. The whole idea behind celebrities vacationing incognito is to be... well, incognito.

It’s hard to believe that until the 1980s few outsiders, other than divers, knew of TCI’s existence. The turning point came when Club Med Turquoise opened the first luxury resort in Providenciales (Provo to the locals) in 1984, literally placing the Turks and Caicos Islands on the

map. Other developers followed suit and soon turned Grace Bay, Provo’s arcing 12-mile smile of baby-powder-fine sand, into a hub of opulent condo hotels with all the accouterments of an upscale holiday haven: spas, water sports, restaurants and shops. Most visitors to TCI stay on Grace Bay. Few venture to other islands, although divers seem to gravitate more to the simple beach houses and Airbnbs’ of Salt Cay and Grand Turk, which reputedly have the most spectacular coral reefs. (See map on page 40)

Grand Turk is also the only island with a harbor deep enough to accommodate cruise ships, so Carnival Corporation built a specialized Cruise Center with shops, restaurants, swimming pool and beach facilities right at the port. Many cruise passengers are happy to grab a lounge chair at the pool or beach or meander among the shops without so much as stepping outside the center’s gates. Although Grand Turk is the capital of TCI, it remains low key with fewer than 5,000 people and a slow pace of life. Still, it’s worth ambling about in the rustic town of Cockburn with its leafy streets, colonial buildings and a wonderful museum with relics from the islands’ past, including a display related to astronaut John Glenn’s splashdown nearby in the Atlantic Ocean. If you’re not there as part of a cruise, the Turks Head Inne has charming rooms in the renovated 1830s home of a salt overseer that once also served as the British Governor’s guest house and the American Consulate.

A breezy curtained courtyard opens to the pool and the ocean beyond at the Gansevoort, a chic minimalist retreat on Grace Bay.





A conch shell display at Da Conch Shack, a seaside restaurant that serves up its own fresh catch.



The Conch Bar Caves on Middle Caicos.



Conch freshly removed from its shell

Once the stomping grounds of Taino, and later Lucayan Indians, the Turks and Caicos Islands were, for centuries, the object of bickering among Spain, France and England. Bermuda, the Bahamas and Jamaica also joined in the tussle, with each briefly governing the islands for Britain, which had claimed ownership of the islands in 1764. Two hundred years later, Jamaica and the Bahamas separately gained independence from Britain, which led to TCI becoming its own autonomous British Overseas Territory in 1973.

Remarkably, the islands' discovery by Europeans is still somewhat of an unsettled issue, with historians divided as to whether the credit should go to Christopher Columbus who may or may not have gotten there first, or to Ponce de Leon, who documented the islands first. Regardless, it is a sad fact of history that, within a few years of Ponce de Leon's sighting of the islands in 1512, all the native Lucayans disappeared, killed off by conquistadores or European diseases, or hauled off to other islands as slaves.

For many years the islands lay empty and uninhabited, until, in the late 1600s, Bermudians ventured ashore to rake what was then the islands' only marketable product—

salt. The salt formed naturally in the shallow depressions of the archipelago's low islands. The people called it white gold and bartered it up the Atlantic seaboard all the way to Newfoundland, where fishermen used it to preserve fish. When the salt industry finally collapsed in the 1960s due to an inability to modernize and expand, the islands very nearly did too. You can still see the abandoned salinas (salt ponds) on South Caicos, Grand Turk and Salt Cay along with a few vestiges of windmill pumps and the most conspicuous reminders of the industry: free-roaming donkeys who now outnumber the people. There's a standing joke among islanders: wherever you see three donkeys, four of them are pregnant.

The islands have been forced to reinvent themselves. Tiny Salt Cay (at 2.6 square miles and a population of roughly 60) now caters mainly to divers and those looking for quiet tropical simplicity. There are no hotels, but a smattering of beach houses and Airbnbs. Debbie Manos, a transplant from Tucson who came to Salt Cay for the diving 22 years ago and stayed, met us at the airport in her van, one of a handful of vehicles on the island. Here people get around by golf cart, bicycle or on foot. A one-

woman power force, Debbie owns Salt Cay Divers and the Coral Reef Bar and Grill; is the licensed captain of her own diving, snorkeling, touring and whale-watching boats; sells real estate; spearheads a study on whales; and is a fount of knowledge on every aspect of the island. She guided us among salinas, churches, beach houses and historic buildings, enthraling us with their stories, then handed us a map, snorkeling equipment and the keys to a golf cart. "Have fun," she said as she left us to make our own way to mangroves, dunes and beaches. I am happy to report, we did!

Like Salt Cay, South Caicos, was left helpless and broke when the salt industry dissolved (as salt does), but the island is picking itself up more in tune with Provo whose archipelago it shares. An ambitious development is in full swing turning empty sand into a new white gold as almost the entire northern peninsula gets graded, groomed and fitted for luxury villas with tri-level ocean views and all the frills that go with world-class pleasure. Grant Noble, executive director of Sailrock, led us through the construction site where the first phase, known as the Villas at Great House, is slated to open in November, and

explained the anticipated infrastructure that's still needed for the project's long-term development.

At the southern shore of the island, East Bay Resort opened last season as the largest resort development outside of Provo. The buzz was that just over a year ago tourism barely existed on South Island. Now, it seems Sailrock and East Bay are spearheading a resort revolution that just might surpass Provo in terms of exclusivity and swank.

Then again, Provo isn't sitting on any sidelines. New exclusive resorts like the Shore Club (slated to open November 2016) on Long Bay, and Amanyara, an Asian-themed paean to hedonism at the western tip of the island, are outshining the established high-priced condo hotels along Grace Bay. Purchase prices for villas at Amanyara range from \$12 million to \$21 million at the time of this writing. I'm probably safe in guessing that even a penthouse in Grace Bay's ultra modern Gansevoort or in the beautiful colonial-inspired style Point Grace would go for a few million less. And if you're looking to buy on North Caicos or Middle Caicos, both lush out-of-the-way places that lean toward eco-tourism and seclusion, the prices dip well into the six figures—five for something inland.

The fascinating thing about TCI is that, while all the islands are surrounded by soft white sand and turquoise water, each has its own distinct characteristics and charms. There's an island for every budget and every taste—not only in style, atmosphere and activities but also of the culinary sort. From cheap eats in seaside grills to ultra sophisticated restaurants, TCI food is known for its snap, tingle, crunch... and super size. The latter has nothing to do with fast food chains, which, thankfully, have not established a foothold in this part of the world. The fare's piled high everywhere—from international fusion to typical Caribbean dishes like jerk chicken and conch salads. But for a truly signature dish, nothing beats crispy conch fritters or conch in any style—cracked, stewed, curried, fried or raw like a ceviche—served fresh from the ocean at beach side restaurants such as Da Conch Shack or Bugaloos. Islanders swear that the long gelatinous, gummy-bear-like part of the conch packs a powerful punch as an aphrodisiac. You can learn this and a lot of other interesting facts about conch at the Caicos Conch Farm, which may be the only commercial conch farm in the world. After a brief lecture and a walk among fish tanks, conch trays and brewing ponds, you can get up close and personal with the farms trained conch, Sally and Jerry.

The Conch Farm is located next to the TCI ferry at Walkin' Marina, which makes it a convenient place to visit in conjunction with a trip by ferry to North Caicos, Middle Caicos or South Caicos. But to get to Grand Turk or Salt Cay, you need to fly. Don't forget to look down! ■

Emerald Cay: the private island with its own swing bridge is an example of what \$48 million can buy. (This price was later reduced.)



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