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How to be a traveler not a tourist in these idyllic islands

By Diana Ballon



The holiday begins midair, with that first glimpse of neon turquoise. Turks & Caicos Islands (TCI), located south of the Bahamas and east of Cuba, are famous for those azure tones – providing the perfect contrast to powdery white sand beaches.

Here, it's like you're swimming in a cloudless sky.

Easy and affordable for North Americans to fly to, TCI are a luxury destination once you arrive – thanks to the cost of importing virtually everything to this island oasis.

But don't let that deter you. These islands were mostly undeveloped until the 1980s, and now offer a tranquility – and a feeling of remoteness – that you can't find in more populated Caribbean destinations. Providenciales (or Provo, as they say here) is the main island, with its world famous 12-mile long Grace Bay Beach. And other islands like Salt Cay, and Middle and North Caicos (only a half-hour ferry ride away), seem even more removed from life as we know it.

WHERE TO STAY

Many accommodations here are low-rise luxury condominiums, often with full kitchens, balconies and living rooms, with amenities like pools, fitness centre and WiFi. Two standouts on Grace Bay are Alexandra Resort (<http://www.alexandrasort.com/>), which is perfect for families, and Beach House Turks & Caicos (<http://www.beachhousetci.com/>) – a romantic 21-suite boutique resort that's ideal for couples.

You can also rent private villas quite reasonably in Chalk Sound, Turtle Cove, Sapodilla, Taylor or Long Bay – but you will need a rental car, as taxis are pricy.

TCI has just two all-inclusive resorts – Beaches Turks & Caicos (<http://www.beaches.com/main/tc-home/>), which has the second-largest waterpark in the Caribbean (day passes are available), and the adults-only Club Med (http://www.clubmed.ca/cm/resort-turquoise-turks-caicos_p-61-I-US-v-TURC-ac-vh.html).

WHAT TO EAT

If you have a kitchen, buying groceries for breakfast and lunch can be a good way to economize.

Provo has an IGA, a more upscale Graceway Gourmet, and a low-budget Quality Supermarket near the airport.

Provo's weekly Thursday night Fish Fry is crowded and noisy – and super fun! Sample conch in all its forms and other island delicacies from local vendors. Then grab a Turks Head beer and watch a traditional Junkanoo, a parade with dancing, costumes, drumming and other handmade instruments.

Some local foodie favourites are Bugaloo's Conch Crawl (<http://bugaloostci.com/>), da Conch Shack (http://daconchshack.com/Conch_Shack/Home.html), Mr. Grouper's Restaurant (<https://www.facebook.com/MrGroupersRestaurant>) and Island Scoop (<http://www.islandscoop.tc/>) (for local ice cream). If you want to splurge, try Stelle Restaurant (<http://www.gansevoorthotelgroup.com/hotels/gansevoort-turks-caicos/dining/stelle-restaurant/>) at the Gansevoort.

WHAT TO DO

With the third largest coral reef in the world, snorkelling and scuba diving are top-notch here. Caicos Dream Tours (<http://caicosdreamtours.com>) offers a half-day snorkel and conch cruise where you can explore an uninhabited beach, get up close and personal with parrot fish, and take home your own freshly caught conch shell – but only after eating its insides in a delicious ceviche.

Silly Creek Water Sports (<http://www.sillycreekwatersports.com/>) is a Canadian-owned tour operator that can tailor four- or six-hour private excursions to visit the less travelled parts of south Provo: climb through a pirate's cave and check out carvings from the 1800s; feed broccoli to rock iguanas; and savour a conch lunch on your own private beach.

To learn more about the area's favourite seafood, visit the Caicos Conch Farm (<http://www.caicosconchfarm.net/>), the only commercial conch farm in the world. They also stock their waters with various species of warm-water fin fish and will happily showcase them on your visit too.

For more information about Turks and Caicos, click here (<http://turksandcaicostourism.com/>).



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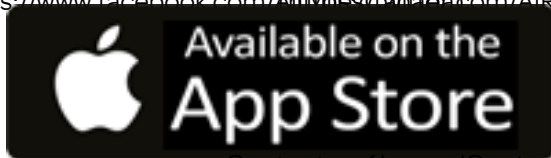
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