

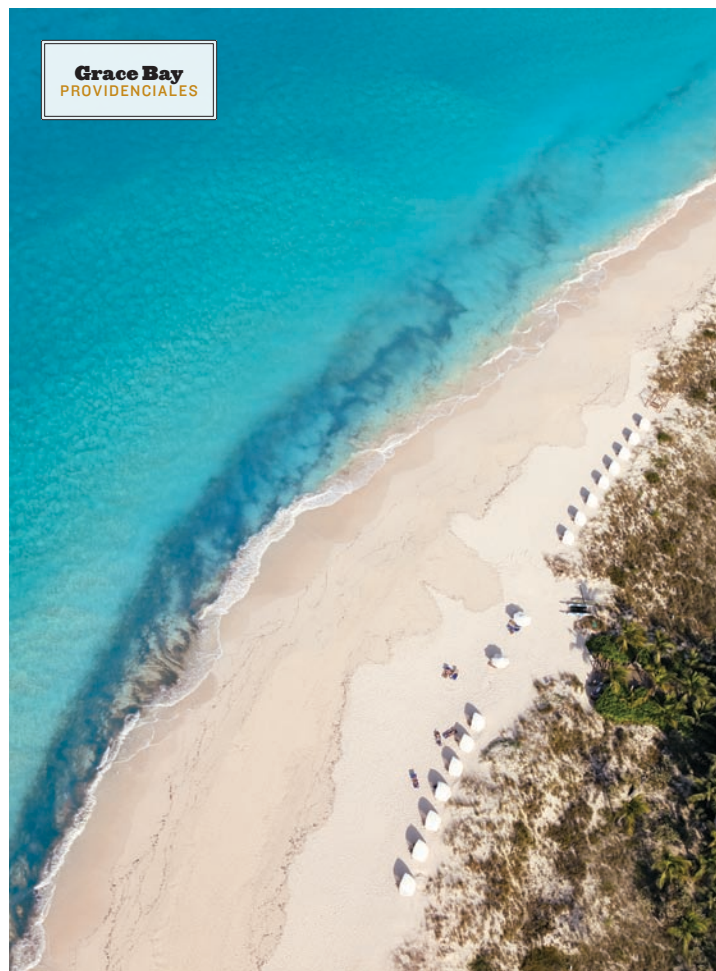
TREASURES OF THE TURKS CAICOS

How much do we love the TCI? Let us count the ways we “heart” this enchanting archipelago. From the ritzy resorts on the islands’ hub of Providenciales to the deserted sands of quirky outpost Salt Cay and all the beguiling islets in between, here are a few of our favorite things about one of our favorite destinations.

BY SARAH GREAVES-GABBADON × PHOTOS BY ZACH STOVALL



**Parrot Cay
Resort**
PARROT CAY



Grace Bay
PROVIDENCIALES



**Mudjin
Harbour**
MIDDLE CAICOS

**Bambarra
Beach**
MIDDLE CAICOS



INCREDIBLE BEACHES

Got a beach blanket? Bingo! Few Caribbean destinations can claim as many pristine strands as the TCI. Every inch of the islands' coastline seems to be dusted with sand as fine and impossibly white as confectioners' sugar, in many spots interrupted by nary a single footprint. A 12-mile-long sunbaked stretch lined with plush resorts, Provo's **Grace Bay** gets all the attention, but it's not the only sandy standout. It's no exaggeration to say that **Bambarra Beach**, on Middle Caicos, will take your breath away: Just one glimpse of its artfully rippled sand, skimmed by crystal-clear water that's only ankle-deep for about a quarter-mile out, will instantly entice you to wade right in. But wait; there's more! Down the road, **Mudjin Harbour** seduces with bathtub-warm aquamarine waters fringed by a smile-like sweep of talcum sand and snorkel-friendly Dragon Cay, just offshore. And on the swanky private-island resort of **Parrot Cay**, the impeccably groomed mile-long sugary strand makes the lofty rates seem completely reasonable.



SCRUMPTIOUS DINING

● **Da Conch Shack** Run, don't walk, to this classic Provo beach bar and restaurant, where the conch is fresh and the rum punch packs a wallop. Everything's cooked to order, so a 40-minute wait is common — but, oh, so worth it. Pass the time with a dip in the sea, then find a perch under a palm tree and enjoy a savory smorgasbord of the islands' ubiquitous mollusk served seven ways: cracked, curried and stewed; in fritters, salad and chowder; and Creole style in a tomato-based sauce. However you try it, you simply can't go wrong.

● **Daniel's Cafe** If you're on Middle Caicos, you'd better be lunching at Conch Bar's popular beachfront spot, where the fried-to-perfection fish special is only \$20. From a perch on the deck, you can watch whales migrate during the January-to-March season; gregarious owner Daniel Forbes is an attraction all year round.

● **Garam Masala** Why would diners visit this authentic Indian eatery (open in Provo's Regent Village since last May) 10 or even 12 times? We bet it's the indulgent *dal makhani* (lentils cooked in butter and cream) and hearty wraps that put food-court pretenders to shame.

● **Parallel 23** The setting oozes classic Caribbean romance: candlelit tables on the coral-stone terrace of a great house overlooking lush gardens punctuated by towering flambeau trees, swaying palms and cascading bougainvillea blossoms. The cuisine at the Regent Palms resort's signature restaurant (named for Provo's latitude) is equally enticing. Try delicacies such as caramelized butternut-squash ravioli with goat cheese, then indulge with the decadent trio of foie gras (pan-seared, a la terrine and creme brulee). And definitely save room for the seven-item chocolate *dégustation* dessert platter.

✦ EASY ACCESS



Tour the TCI on wheels, wings and watercraft. On Provo, rent a car or freewheel it on bikes, which many hotels provide. For other isles, hop the TCI Ferry or sail with Caribbean Cruisin' to outposts including North Caicos. (Middle Caicos is just a quick drive over the causeway.) Air Turks & Caicos flies to Grand Turk; from there, Salt Cay is a short boat ride away.

THE WORLD'S BEST CONCH SALAD — REALLY

"Our conch is as fresh as it's gonna get anywhere in the world," claims Da Conch Shack manager Peter Soltesz. And since the Provo restaurant keeps upwards of 1,500 live mollusks in an ocean pen mere steps from the kitchen, we're inclined to believe him. "As you order them, we take 'em out," he says. "And if you know conch, you come here to get it."

Made with raw meat prepared ceviche style, conch salad is what true aficionados order when a conch craving strikes.

Conch

It all starts with the conch, plucked from the sea and into the kitchen within two minutes. After the mollusk has been "knocked" (the chef pierces a hole in the shell and pulls out the flesh), it is cleaned, vigorously tenderized with a mallet and diced.

Veggies

Then Da Conch Shack chefs add diced sweet peppers, tomatoes and white onions. Their piquant flavors instantly infuse the conch, and their crunchy texture is a perfect complement to the melt-in-the-mouth chunks of glistening white meat.

Stuff You Can't See

Da Conch Shack's conch salad doesn't sit around marinating; the meat's so fresh it doesn't need the extra tenderization. It is simply tossed with lime juice, salt and pepper before being swiftly presented to your beachfront bench — and your eager taste buds.

That gelatinous thread in the conch is called the pistil. Frequently mistaken for the conch's penis, it's actually the spine — a fact that has yet to damage its reputation as an aphrodisiac.



Daniel's Cafe
MIDDLE CAICOS



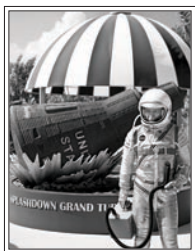


**Porter's
Island Thyme**
SALT CAY

QUIRKY OUTPOSTS

✕ There's nowhere quite like Salt Cay. Its six square miles boast five churches, a 12-student schoolhouse and who knows how many donkeys ambling along dusty and largely deserted byways. A century and a half ago, when the island was the economic hub of the TCI's salt trade, more than 1,000 people lived here; now there are barely 70, and livestock have the right of way. But there couldn't be a more perfect for location for Porter's Island Thyme, the restaurant and bar that has become Salt's de facto hub and a much-loved watering hole for hardy islanders, adventurous expats and tranquility-seeking visitors. Affable Texan Porter Williams is the master of ceremonies, a retired exec who spent 18 months transforming this 19th-century salt raker's cottage into a hybrid bistro/bar/art gallery/town hall/movie theater. Colorful Haitian paintings line Island Thyme's rafters; papier-mache fish and sea creatures are strung from the ceiling; ABBA and Jimmy Buffett Christmas tunes emanate from the CD player; and a sign reads, "No Shoes, No Smoking." While most patrons come to catch up over "the coldest beer on island," an iron-stomached few are here to earn a coveted zookeeper T-shirt, awarded to those who can down a series of four animal-themed shots that starts with Wolf, a secret concoction that reportedly includes "wolf testicles from an Oriental food store in Torrance, California." Like we said: There's nowhere like Salt Cay.

✕ SURPRISING HISTORY



Feb. 20, 1962, was little Grand Turk's biggest day: After his historic orbital flight, John Glenn made a triumphant return here, splashing down in the waters just off the coast (code name: Area Hotel) in the space capsule Friendship 7. The tracking station and Air Force base where John recovered are now defunct, but you can tour NASA's commemorative exhibit — complete with a kitschy life-size replica of the capsule and the astronaut himself — at the cruise-ship terminal.



GIBB'S CAY

✕ CLOSE ENCOUNTERS

We love Grand Cayman's Stingray City, but competing with scores of other eager looky-loos for quality time with the gentle gliders can be a pain. Gibb's Cay, 15 minutes from Grand Turk, is now officially our preferred stingray sighting spot. After Oasis Divers' boat circles a few times ("to wake dem up," Capt. Lazarus proclaims), boatman Lucky jumps in and starts swishing fresh sprat and squid in the water. Suddenly they appear: more than two dozen stingrays, some as big as seven feet across. Lucky begins feeding Freckles, Princess and the tail-less Stumpy, and next thing you know, you're feeding them too, strangely fearless in the waist-high waters, enchanted by the feel of the rays' bellies as they skim your body as sensuously and smoothly as the finest silk charmeuse. It's an incredible adventure made all the more special by its intimacy, since if there's no cruise ship in Grand Turk's port, you'll have Stumpy and friends all to yourself.



PRIVATE PARADISES

✕ What's your private-island fantasy? A plush playground with every convenience? An untamed domain where you can fulfill your Crusoe-esque ambitions? Enjoy both in the TCI. The living is easy on unpretentious Pine Cay, home to the Meridian Club, where 38 moneyed homeowners and a handful of guests live like beach bums in a collection of low-key accommodations spread over 825 rugged acres. The atmosphere is informal (shoes are optional), and there's no A/C, TVs, phones or entertainment ("9:30 p.m. is Pine Cay midnight," says the hotel manager). But that's how guests of the islands' oldest continually operated hotel like it. It's a whole different story on Parrot Cay, the 1,000-acre white-sand cloister where Keith Richards and the Seinfelds have vacayed and Donna Karan owns a two-bedroom, three-pool compound. Its sprawling Asian-inspired villas are secreted behind lush landscaping, and your butler won't blink an eye when you request private Pilates instruction or an ayurvedic massage on the sun deck.



PINE CAY



PARROT CAY



UNCOMMON GOODS

Vacations aren't only about where you've been; what you bring back is important too! Consider these worthy souvenirs.

1 Switch It Up At home or on-island, flying pests are no match for this low-tech mosquito switch made from dried palm fronds.

2 Make It Spicy Da Conch Shack's private-label hot sauce, made with all-local ingredients, has a peppery kick and subtle sweetness we love.

3 Bag It Handcrafted from strips of fabric and dried fanner grass, these distinctive "rag bags" are both festive and functional.

4 Play Rummy There oughta be a law: No one comes back from the Caribbean without a bottle of rum. Bambarra is the TCI brand, available in five varieties, from flavored to 15 years old.

5 Put a Stamp on It Whether you're a hard-core philatelist or just want to send a postcard, these marine-themed stamps make a colorful and practical memento.

6 Check Your Change Crown and half-crown coins (worth \$1 and 50 cents) are still in circulation but hard to find. Look out for these elusive keepsakes.

7 Read All About It With the TCI's more than 80 restaurants, you'll need this free guide to inform your culinary strategy. The recipes inside allow you to create some island specialties in your own kitchen back home.

8 Get Salty Humble sodium chloride first put the TCI on the map. Taste the islands' briny beginnings with crystals harvested from local ponds.



✕ GRACEFUL EXITS

Provo's airport sees droves of celebs, from the Olsen twins to Orlando Bloom. → But until recently, when exiting the island, globe-trotting A-listers had to mix with the masses in the cramped departure lounge. Now there's another option: \$40 gets Orlando — and you — into the new VIP Flyers Club, where A/C, snacks and Wi-Fi await. And for \$200, staff will meet you curbside and whisk you through check-in and security, landing you in the lounge lickety-split. vipflyersclub.com

