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## Uncrowded Turks and Caicos is for those who crave relaxation

BY ANNE DESBRISAY, FOR THE OTTAWA CITIZEN





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Ocean Club's pink umbrellas in Turks & Caicos.

Photograph by: Anne DesBrisay, for Postmedia News

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Miles of cream-coloured beach, postcard turquoise seas and a lightly beaten tourist trail: this is Grace Bay, Providenciales, Turks and Caicos Islands, and I its resident for one happy week.

Content to work hard at the business of doing not much at all, the "Provo" tempo suited me fine. As Caribbean holidays go - and I've been blessed with a few of them - this one was an easy pleasure.

The Turks and Caicos Islands are about 900 kilometres southeast of Miami, due east of Cuba, north of and sheltered by the island of Hispaniola (Haiti and the Dominican Republic). Its 40 islands and cays climb out of the Atlantic Ocean - just low-lying clumps really - at the southernmost tip of the Bahamian chain. So technically, the TCI are not part of the Caribbean - though no one seems to pay that much mind.

What Turks and Caicos might have been a part of (and judging from the ongoing campaigns I saw, may still one day be part of) is us. Us, meaning Canada. As in the 11th province.

I must say I've returned home a fan of this wacky perennial of an idea. The notion that this British Overseas Territory - tiny islands measuring just 948 square kilometres, with 389 kilometres of coastline, and a population (45,000 souls) smaller than Belleville's - should become a part of Canada has been batted about since Robert Borden was PM. Sixty years after Borden's brilliance, ithe idea was re-introduced by the NDP in 1974. And again in '83 by the Tories. In 2005, then with Canadian Alliance, now "Civil Libertarian" Edmonton MP Peter Goldring pressed again for TCl as the 11th province. A win-win situation!

Polls at the time showed 90 per cent of islanders were all for it; Nova Scotia suggested helpfully it might become part of that province, thus bypassing the dizzying constitutional revision thing.

And how should we Canadians view it? A delightful little piece of sand and sea and warmth, safe and secure, where temperate trade winds keep the typical winter temperature between 27 and 33 Celsius, where they boast an average of 350 days of sunshine (hear that, Vancouver?) and the third longest coral reef system in the world ...

For reasons passing reason the idea continues to fail to fly. But that didn't prevent my happening upon a disproportionate number of Canadians on my travels around Grace Bay - tourists, and full-and part-time residents. Some have even connected (as chefs or owners) with some remarkably good restaurants in the region. For an island this small to have managed to attract a good number of great chefs is quite something. Perhaps they read about the 350 days.

Mind, I didn't come to the Turks and Caicos expecting to find interesting dining. So I was pleasantly surprised by the quality of its restaurants. And when I focused on conch - which became something of a healthy obsession during my week here - and what the Grace Bay chefs were doing with it, I found the flavour of the island.

I cursed my luck when I learned the T & C Conch Festival had ended the week before I arrived. But it became the start of the hunt. One early goal was to seek out the Provo restaurant that brought home The Conch Cup at the annual Conch Festival, and to sample the winning dish.

Chef Alix Saimpha of Hemingway's at the Sands Resort obliged. His entry, the dish that won the hearts of the international judges the week before, was conch empanadas - spunky beach food with lively flavours that lingered the whole walk home. After that, it's always good to have a mission on a vacation and mine became to seek out every iteration of conch cookery on the island. The game was on! Cracked conch, conch fritters, conch chowder are everywhere. I kept looking: conch ceviche, wontons, stew, conch crêpes, conch gumbo, creole, spring rolls, conch stuffed ravioli, smoked conch, jerked conch, even conch Bolognese, a sauce that begins to make sense when you learn conch meat is an impressively high source of lean protein, is low in fat and carbohydrates and high in iron and B12. Bring it on!

According to CITES, the international organization that monitors endangered species - and conch is that - the Turks and Caicos Islands have a very well managed conch fishery. The celebrated mollusc comes from local waters, but also from the world's only commercial conch operation, the Caicos Conch Farm, a bit banged up and behind in production thanks to a recent hurricane, but still well worth a visit, with a fascinating tour of the rearing ponds.

Other than conch, of which I never tired, we tucked into the local lobster, grouper, snapper, mahi mahi. But with only two per cent of this island considered arable, chefs can't look locally for much of a larder, reliant instead on the catch of the day to showcase Provo's flavour, and increasingly to Yorkshireman Ian Richardson's hydroponic farm where he grows salad greens, cucumbers, tomatoes and magnificent arugula.

As a bonus, TCI has managed to keep out American chain eateries, clever people. You won't find a Pizza Hut, Burger King, Starbucks, leaving more room for a lively local dining scene.

It's astonishing how far and how quickly tourism has developed on Provo. And yet, walking the beach in early December, I felt the eight-kilometre stretch of sand belonged to me (and maybe a few other smart tourists). It may be because the sunseeking world hasn't yet discovered these islands. And TCI is certainly a late bloomer to accommodating the trade. The first hotel wasn't built until the 1960s. The first wheeled vehicle didn't show up on the islands until 1964. There wasn't a single resort until Club Med built Club Turkoise in 1982. The dirt landing strip then became a paved runway, and the stage was set for the recent boom in high-end resorts, most of which are clustered along Grace Bay.

Other islands and cays are accessible via boat or commuter plane, and island hopping is certainly an option, encouraged by everyone we spoke with. Mostly in gloating terms: "Hah! You think this place is quiet."

How quickly the islands will get busy is anyone's guess. I was told they occasionally still get mail redirected from Turkey. But that's happening less and less, as Turks and Caicos more and more shows off its assets.

One of those assets making waves is the coral reef system that rings these islands - one of the most extensive on the planet, and more and more tourists clamber on the commuter planes and boats with diving and snorkelling gear in tow. Or they bring binoculars - for the birds and the Caribbean humpback whales that migrate through the Turks Head passage - or they have an interest in the history of salt, of pirates, of architectural ruins.

Or they seek to be utterly alone: many of the islands are still deserted. Or home to some rock star. Or to the endangered Rock Iguana, as in the case of Little Water Cay, one of the three cays in the Princess Alexandra Nature Reserve. Hurricane Irene (in August of 2011) was not kind to its boardwalk, its lookout and sign. Possibly for this reason, or because we were there just before the season really heats up, we had the place to ourselves. There were, we learned, more than 2,000 Turks and Caicos Iguanas on Little Water Cay. We spied one, moving at a pace more impressive than ours.

Other than a snorkelling trip to the reefs off Little Water, and an hour spent exploring the sanctuary, we stayed with our toes curled in the sands of Grace Bay, marvelling at the peace of the place, content to read and snooze and stare at the ocean. I've returned home with 200 shots of it. Not one does the colours justice.

"Actually," countered Tom Lewis of Ocean Club Resorts (we were having lunch at the resort's Seaside Café and I had been gushing about the seawater) ". I'd give that water a 'C' grade right now." I need to return in June to witness the 'A', he tells me.

Well, thanks, but I'll take it in December. It was the most magnificent 'C' sea I'd ever seen.

I was a guest of Ocean Club West, the younger sister of the original Ocean Club, which was the first operating condominium resort on Grace Bay Beach. Its 103 guest suites are scattered in a horseshoe formation of seven pinktrimmed, white-roofed, three-storey buildings, each with full kitchen/ kitchenette, washer-dryer, screened balcony and white wicker furnishings. Great care has been paid to the garden's design and all paths from tennis courts, lobby and guest units lead to the pool which winds around bougainvillea and beneath arched bridges, and on to the café, beach and ocean.

Limiting your activities to a peaceful few would be an important factor in choosing this property - this part of the world, actually - for the pace of life is gentle. Staying at one Ocean Club Resort buys you full access to both properties. If you plan to golf, I'd suggest staying at the original Ocean Club, across from the Provo Golf Club. A shuttle service ferries you between east and west, or else take the 20-minute walk (longer in flip-flops) between resorts.

. . . .

Ocean Club West is more centrally located on Grace Bay beach, closer to shopping and restaurant options. It is, in fact, pretty much in the middle of the eight-kilometre stretch, where the beach is widest and the umbrellas pinkest. We were told the resort was 80 per cent occupied during our week, but there was no shortage of space to spread out, no lack of chairs, 'brollies, or kind and accommodating staff. I spent some time in the hammock, and the deck chairs they've tucked into the tall grasses - private nooks for reading and napping in the shade, my only companion the odd gecko and, once, the resident cat. Amenities at Ocean Club West - beyond pool, sea, beach, chair - include a dive shop, two tennis courts, a seaside café, a small fitness room and spa, and a good crop of bikes for borrowing. The stress is clearly on those who seek to do not much.

That pod of pink umbrellas wobbly on the sugary sand marked home when we walked the miles of Grace Bay Beach, and it was always a welcome sight.

Anne DesBrisay is the Ottawa Citizen's restaurant critic.

## IF YOU GO

Getting there: We flew US Air from Ottawa, via Charlotte, North Carolina, to Providenciales (PLS). Air Canada has direct flights from Ottawa on Mondays; from Toronto on Wednesdays, Saturdays and Sundays; from Montreal on Thursdays. WestJet has direct flights from Toronto Monday, Wednesday and Saturday from November through May.

Where to Stay: Ocean Club Resorts, P.O. Box 240, Providenciales, TCl, 1-649-946-5880/ 1-800-457-8787 for reservations www.oceanclubresorts.com Winter rates are currently \$289 U.S. pernight (island view studio suite) to \$989 U.S. (three bedroom beachfront condo) Check the resort's "winter deals" for discounts. Must do:

The Caicos Conch Farm, Heaving Down Rock, Leeward Highway, Providenciales (www.caicosconchfarm.com) The only commercially raised conch farm in the world, located in the eastern end of Provo.

Provo Golf Club (www.provogolfclub.com). This 18-hole, flamingo flanked golf course designed by Karl Litten, hosted the 2009 Caribbean Amateur Golf Championship and has a very handsome clubhouse, with an excellent steakhouse.

Little Water Cay, one of the uninhabited Caicos Cays, reachable only by boat, a sanctuary for the T & C rock iguanas.

Sun Charters: The SV Atabeyra is a traditionally rigged retired rumrunner, refit as a charter vessel. www.suncharters.tc

Stand-up paddle boarding/ kayaking: These leisurely modes of transportation between cays and through mangrove forests were part of our plan, but the day was too windy and we abandoned it. We were to go with the Big Blue group. www.bigblueunlimited.com/kayaking.shtml Caution: Bring bug spray for your ankles, especially in the evening. The sand flies are about the only bothersome thing here!