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Review of Ocean Club Resort in Grace Bay, Turks and Caicos

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Grace Bay: Voted Best Beach in the World - *Karen Berger*

These comfortable vacation condos offer Turks and Caicos visitors a location on one of the world's best beaches, and convenient access to Grace Bay.

As a scuba diver with a non-diving partner, I'm always looking for a sort of "holy grail:" a tropical vacation spot with both great diving and interesting over-water vacation activities. Some of the world's best diving destinations are pretty spare on things to do for the landlubbing crowd. So divers often face an unenviable choice: sacrificing diving for the family, or the family for the diving. At Ocean Club in Grace Bay, Turks and Caicos, divers can have their cake (or conch) -- and eat it, too.

The Turks and Caicos Islands, located just north of the Caribbean and southeast of the Bahamas, are known as one of the world's top diving destinations because of clear water and gentle wall diving with plenty to see. They also offer plenty of above-the-ocean entertainment. There are other water sports, of course, everything from para-sailing to relaxing on a catamaran. And there is also high-end shopping and fine dining.

Grace Bay is the epi-center of Turks and Caicos tourism; the ideal home base from which to explore the island of Providenciales. (Added bonus: It's only half an hour from the international airport.) The Bay is a long arc, edged with a beach that *Travel and Leisure* and *Trip Advisor* readers, among others, have voted "the best in the world." Just in case your vision of the world's best beach differs from theirs, let me describe it: It's a wide,

relatively flat swatch of white sand edged by palm trees and fronted by one low-rise hotel or resort after the other. The hotels are set back, and the beach is not jam packed with people: There's plenty of room for privacy, quiet for reading a good book, shaded resort chairs for relaxing, and room for walking. In the somewhat sleepy town of Grace Bay, fine restaurants and shops cater to tourists.

Ocean Club Resorts: An Overview

I stayed at Ocean Club Resorts. (The sister resort, Ocean Club West, is located about a mile down the road, closer to the main town.) Ocean Club is a condominium complex where individual owners participate in a rental management program. My condo was an enormous two-bedroom spread, with two and half bathrooms, a full kitchen, flat screen TVs, and a spacious screened porch. I was lucky: My unit overlooked the ocean. Most units do not, so if an oceanside location is important to you, inquire when booking -- but note that prices are commensurate with the view.

Many of the units overlook the pool area (which is not usually noisy at night). During the day, though, there can be a fair amount of sound bleed from one unit to another, especially if windows are open. The units have both fans and AC, so you can control this to some extent.

The property itself is a bit retro, with the concrete-block construction that is typical of many older tropical hotels. (It's not contemporary luxury design.) An attractive series of curved swimming pools runs down the center of the property, and the units, ranging from studios to large two-bedrooms, are arranged along either side -- a nice touch, because if a bunch of kids are playing cannonball at one end, a lone adult seeking solitude, can escape to the other.

And speaking of kids: Ocean Club appeals to a mixed crowd: The different condo configurations make it flexible enough to accommodate multi-generational family groups, families with small children, couples, honeymooners, and groups of friends. During school vacations, expect more families (and kid noise).

Onsite amenities include free Internet, a (very) small spa, a smallish fitness room, tennis courts, and a watersports center that can arrange SCUBA, catamaran trips, sailing, kayaking, para-sailing, snorkeling, boogie boarding, an island beach retreat, and more. Golf is available practically next door.

Ocean Club offers two choices for dining: The Cabana beach front grill is an informal, sit in your bathing suit under the umbrellas place, where you can have fish tacos, several kinds of conch (the local specialty), and other light meals. Adjacent to the main complex is the more formal Opus restaurant, which offers fine dining (with lots of local fish as part of a varied menu), entertainment -- and a kid menu. Ocean Club West operates the informal Seaside Grill.

Ocean Club West is arranged very similarly to Ocean Club; the main difference is that the former is closer to Grace Bay's main shopping and dining areas. You can walk along the beach from one to the other in about 20 minutes, although it might seem longer if the tide is uncooperative and you get stuck wading through soft sand. Walking along the beach from one Ocean Club property to the other brought me past the considerably more energetic party atmosphere of a Club Med, where my female companion and I were immediately greeted by a drunken chorus of "hi ladies." Ocean Club was quieter: I was grateful to be able to relax in the pool late at night without having to wrangle with enthusiastic revelers.

Of course each tropical vacationer is looking for different things: beach sitting, scuba diving, water adventures, dining and shopping, or simply doing nothing at all. What I treasure about tropical vacations is combining diving with sheer relaxation in a beautiful environment. relaxation, and I certainly found that in Turks and Caicos. Ocean Club proved a well-located, comfortable, low-key place to use as a base of operations.

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