

**BEST BEACH:** *The Venetian on Grace Bay*

PHOTO: © TIM LEFFEL



# Paradise Found

Look no further than Turks & Caicos for the best beaches in the world. BY TIM LEFFEL

**A**s I sit in a lounge chair in front of The Venetian Resort in Turks & Caicos, toes in the powdery white sand, it's hard to imagine why anyone needs to keep writing those "top 10 beaches in the world" articles. After 25 years of visiting beaches on five continents, I've found the winner.

Grace Bay beach ticks off all the boxes that matter. Bright blue Caribbean water gently laps the shore where toddlers play. Couples walk for miles on the soft sand in bare feet. Reefs for snorkeling lie close enough to swim to. Beach bars are positioned to get a perfect sunset view. There's never a huge crowd of people bumping into each other, and no vendors hassle honeymooners in lounge chairs.

Turks & Caicos is one of only eight countries in the world with an ampersand in its name, and it seems there's always an "and" to the story here. The name itself derives from the Turk's head cactus that reminded the Spaniards of a fez, plus the word *cayos*, meaning "islands," which ended up as "caicos." The cruise ships and the government stay on Grand

Turk while fly-in passengers go to Providenciales, the commercial heart of the country. In between are 40 or so other islands, most of them sparsely populated and seldom visited.

Most resort guests arrive at their beach paradise of Providenciales, locally known as Provo, and don't get any urge to go further. It only takes a few minutes in the local grocery store, however, to understand this paradise is not for the financially stretched. The islands' unique tax structure, combined with sandy land that's not much use for agriculture, means hefty prices on the all-imported goods. "We don't have income tax, property tax or corporate tax," says local resident Val Kalliecharan. "However," he says with emphasis, "virtually everything you spend money on here has a hefty import tax of 15 to 36 percent. After you factor in shipping from Miami, it adds at least one-third the cost of almost everything."

I've connected with Val to learn about the islands since he is the leading tourism expert for the area. His company, Turks & Caicos

Reservations, handles all the bookings made through the official government tourism website. Where the company really stands apart is trip planning and making arrangements for celebrities and CEOs. “The diving is good here, but it’s even better on South Caicos, so sometimes we’ll book charter yacht trips there. Other times it’s fishing trips, whale-watching or island hopping, but generally we try to find out what will make a trip perfect and deliver it.”

We spend the morning on a snorkeling excursion run by Island Vibes with a wiry, dreadlocked captain and his constantly joking mate. When we stop near the reef to dive in, the mate reminds us, “This reef goes on for 100 miles. Take your time.” There’s a rainbow of color under the clear water: fan coral in lilac and eggplant hues, spindly purple coral looking like small trees blowing in the wind. Green brain coral looks like giant blobs dropped from above. The fish here are also not from the pale end of the color spectrum, the one exception being black ones with a single glowing white spot near their back fin.

We stop at a beach we have all to ourselves — just us, some scurrying crabs and a reef shark that swims near the boat. “He knows we do not eat the whole conch,” says our captain as he demonstrates how to properly dissect what comes out of those big shells. He cuts what we need from four of them, puts that on the boat for ceviche, then tosses the rest to the shark.

We eat ceviche from bowls as we motor back to Grace Bay. Just offshore from where all The Venetian suites look our way, we anchor again for play time. The Island Vibes vessel comes equipped with a slide and a diving board, so everyone takes turns sliding and jumping from the top deck.

To keep the local seafood vibe going, I take the rental car through a few roundabouts — there are no stoplights — to Bugaloo’s Conch Crawl south of the airport. It offers a perfect beach bar vibe, with two seating areas in former fishing boats and other tables under shady trees on a wooden deck. They all face a shallow bay where kids play in the water and adults sit in plastic chairs in ankle-deep water. I order what seems appropriate here: a ginger beer, conch

## LODGING

### AMANYARA

The most out-of-the-way luxury resort on Providenciales attracts those who value isolation (and escaping paparazzi) above all. Impeccably designed and artistic, the property is near Northwest Point. *Providenciales* \$\$\$\$\$

### THE VENETIAN ON GRACE BAY

On the widest sunset-facing beach in the prime tourist section, The Venetian features a large pool and spacious, luxurious condos with full kitchens and panoramic views. *Grace Bay Road, East Grace Bay Beach, Providenciales* \$\$\$\$\$

### WINDSONG RESORT

Part of the Preferred Hotels Group, this intimate but full-service resort features 53 stunning, one- to four-bedroom suites with ocean views, plus a reef right off the beach. *Stubbs Road, Providenciales* \$\$\$\$\$

**BY THE SEA:** *Guests dine inside old fishing boats at Bugaloo’s Conch Crawl (left), and the Island Vibes captain demonstrates how to clean a conch (right).*

PHOTOS: © TIM LEFFEL

## DINING

### BUGALOO’S CONCH CRAWL

Out by itself on a shallow blue bay, Bugaloo’s serves island favorites in an outdoor, Caribbean, family-friendly beach bar atmosphere. *Five Cays, Providenciales* \$\$\$

### COCO BISTRO

The reigning “reserve way ahead” gourmet spot on Provo serves elegant seafood dishes outdoors under coconut palm trees and dramatically lit tropical foliage. *Grace Bay Road, Providenciales* \$\$\$\$

### COYABA RESTAURANT

Named after an indigenous word for “heavenly,” this romantic open-air restaurant in a tropical garden with fountains serves elevated Caribbean cuisine with international twists. *Caribbean Paradise Inn, Grace Bay, Providenciales* \$\$\$\$





**R&R:** Provo Golf Club (top), and dining on the beach at Windsong Resort (bottom)

PHOTOS: © TIM LEFFEL

fritters and cracked conch with black-eyed peas and yellow rice.

I try the other end of the scale that evening at upscale hot spot Coyaba. British executive chef and owner Paul Newman (not the actor) worked his way up in kitchens on Bermuda and five Caribbean islands before opening his own place here. In less talented hands the “New World fusion cuisine” could be a mess, but everything I order is perfectly balanced. With most ingredients that don’t come from the sea being imported, the menu uses the Caribbean as a springboard and rotates in dishes from multiple continents.

At the country’s one golf club here, Provo Golf, I find a huge advantage over most Caribbean courses: The parent company also owns the local water utility. That means a steady supply of desalinated water and good greens conditions throughout the year. The par-72 championship course features visiting bird life — including flamingos — and four sets of tees on each hole. It’s open to anyone visiting and includes a good on-site restaurant and bar. Former pro player and famous TV commentator Dave Feherty recently signed on as an ambassador.

I move down the beach a few miles to Windsong Resort, and it’s tough to leave after I settle in, with dining tables right on the dunes and a stylish pool complex. The resort includes a protected reef starting just a few yards offshore. Guests can grab a mask and snorkel by the pool and swim a circuit around the reef to see tropical fish and coral.

I’m fortunate to be staying near the park hosting the weekly fish fry, scheduled every Thursday 5–9 p.m. at the Children’s Park on Lower Bight Road. A local dining magazine lists 19 dishes popular on the islands. With my time here running short, I try to sample as many as I can at the fish fry before I



get full. It’s easy to do at this event, with more than a dozen stands using fryers, and smoking grills running at full capacity.

While a band plays on the stage, I order crab soup, a small lobster salad and jerk chicken. Since nobody is keeping score, I skip the stewed oxtail and grab a local Turk’s Head Amber beer instead. With a full belly and sunset spreading across the sky, I’m smiling, as everyone else here seems to be.

I take one more spin around the reef in front of Windsong Resort after breakfast my last day and wistfully gaze at the intense blue water as I pack up my things. I’ll laugh even more now at those “top 10 beaches” articles and TV shows. It seems pointless to even look at them after this perfect beach experience.



**ONLINE EXTRA**

Jump to [gtravmag.com/ferry](http://gtravmag.com/ferry) to read about ferrying to other islands.

## INFO TO GO

Four U.S. airlines, two Canadian carriers and British Airways fly to Providenciales International Airport (PLS). Two domestic airlines fly to other islands. U.S. and Canadian passport holders can enter without a visa. Most resorts do not offer an airport shuttle service, but private car services, taxis and rental car companies are available at the airport. To avoid a shuttle to a rental car location, rent with Grace Bay Car Rentals on the airport grounds. You can reach most Provo resorts in 30 minutes or less from the terminal.

### Amanyara

[aman.com](http://aman.com)

### Bugaloo’s Conch Crawl

[bugalooستci.com](http://bugalooستci.com)

### Coco Bistro

[cocobistro.tc](http://cocobistro.tc)

### Coyaba Restaurant

[coyabarestaurant.com](http://coyabarestaurant.com)

### Grace Bay Car Rentals

[gracebaycarrentals.com](http://gracebaycarrentals.com)

### Island Vibes Tours

[islandvibestours.com](http://islandvibestours.com)

### Provo Golf Club

[provogolfclub.com](http://provogolfclub.com)

### Turks & Caicos Reservations

[turksandcaicosreservations.com](http://turksandcaicosreservations.com)

### Turks & Caicos Tourism

[turksandcaicostourism.com](http://turksandcaicostourism.com)

### The Venetian on Grace Bay

[thevenetiangracebay.com](http://thevenetiangracebay.com)

### Windsong Resort

[windsongresort.com](http://windsongresort.com)