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Luxury for Less: Turks and Caicos

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It's easy to see why the Turks and Caicos, specifically the island of Providenciales (Provo), has been experiencing a "boom" in tourism recently: pristine beaches on Grace Bay; crystal, clear waters in varying shades of blue; and sunsets worthy of an episode on "The Bachelor." An 80-minute flight from Miami, just south of the Bahamas, Provo isn't the most budget-friendly destination, but I found a few places to sleep, eat and play on the island that looks like your screensaver photo.



SLEEP



Amongst the many choices of resorts on Grace Bay, **Ocean Club Resorts** will give you the best value. Sophisticated and relaxed, the resort is comprised of two all-suite deluxe beach front properties located one mile (or 15 minute walk on the beach) from each other. The resorts were renovated and outfitted in seaside décor, modern and breezy. The suites are also fully equipped with kitchens and walk-out balcony. Ocean Club West is within walking distance of the **Graceway Gourmet** grocery store (a surprisingly enormous store) as well as popular restaurants and shopping in town.



Free shuttle, bike rental and tennis courts are available. Ocean Club East has one of the best stretches of beach on Grace Bay and should you eat at the **Cabana Bar & Grille**, having conch fritters beach side is a great way to spend the afternoon. This is a great deal for families, groups or couples. Winter rates for a studio suite with an island view at both resorts are under \$320 compared to the regular rates of \$500 or more at other resorts.



The **West Bay Club** is another good value option located on Grace Bay, closer to Turtle Cove for unpretentious luxury. A studio suite, at \$300 in high season, is simple and elegant, outfitted with mahogany accessories and streamlined linens. For a bit of nightlife, you can go next door to the **Gansevoort's Bagatelle restaurant** and bar on a Friday night.



If you are looking for a smaller studio accommodation, **The Sands** studio rooms feature a Queen-size bed, bathroom and separate sitting area and kitchenette with a microwave, refrigerator and sink. This is great for the solo traveler or couple. The restaurant, **Hemingways**, has a variety of breakfast options including huevos rancheros and toasted almond pancakes for under \$12. A studio courtyard rate is \$285 in high season.

EAT



Provo does not skimp on the variety of options for eating to your heart's content. Conch, the seashell creature, is the local specialty and the one place to get it is at **da conch shack**. Though conch is number one on the menu, the jerk chicken here is one of the most flavourful dishes. With a pitcher of Bambarra rum punch and an ocean view that is the envy of the island, this is the ultimate beach bar. The opposite but equally scenic view would be at **Fairways Bar & Grill** overlooking the 18th green of the Provo Golf Club. I had a hearty meal of steak frites here for \$28.



My favourite mid-afternoon snack was the limencello ice cream for \$4 at **Island Scoop**. The outdoor courtyard, complete with mini playground, would interest interior décor geeks. For a special meal, **Opus** can't be beat with its outdoor dining courtyard; its trees wrapped in lights and live band in the background (there is plenty of room to dance!). The chili steak wraps were a spicy highlight. Seafood is another must-order, including the conch ceviche. It was awarded second place dish at the island's **annual 2011 conch festival**.



If you are looking for a romantic meal, your best bet is off the beaten track at **Las Brisas** on Chalk Sound. The restaurant is located in the heart of this national park for some spectacular dinner views. You can also rent a private pontoon boat for two at \$50 each for a scenic ride at sunset. It is a place worthy of a proposal.

PLAY



Despite the lure to laze on the beach for your entire trip, getting out on the water is a must. With over 40 islands and cays, Turks and Caicos is a snorkeler's dream. **The Atabeyra** sails you over to the island's Barrier Reef to dive for your own treasure before heading over to Little Water Cay, also known as the "iguana island." You end the tour with a gorgeous sunset, complete with rum punch and snacks. The half day tour is \$75, much less than its competitors. Other niche tours are available such as the sunset glowworm cruise and the Rackam Jack's pirate cruise, which is suitable for the whole family. Both tours are from \$49.

For the adventurer, **Big Blue Unlimited** is an eco-tour company that offers eco-adventures including stand up paddle boarding tours to the Princess Alexandria nature reserve, custom kayak tours and excursions to other islands like the Middle Caicos.



If you want to relax at the spa, massage therapist Olive at the **Spa Tropique** is highly recommended (\$99 for 50 minutes). If you want to take a day trip, one of the most well known spas is at the **COMO Shambhala Retreat** at the Parrot Cay resort. David Bowen, the island's cultural ambassador, teaches yoga regularly at the **Athletic Club** in the Salt Mills plaza (\$18 drop-in rate).

That said, sometimes the best things in life are free and watching the sunsets or walking along the shores at night with a multitude of stars scattered in the sky are priceless memories.



Constantly on a quest to explore the world, Natalie Taylor seeks the good life without spending a fortune. You can catch her regular posts right here on Sympatico.ca Travel's luxury for less blog.

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