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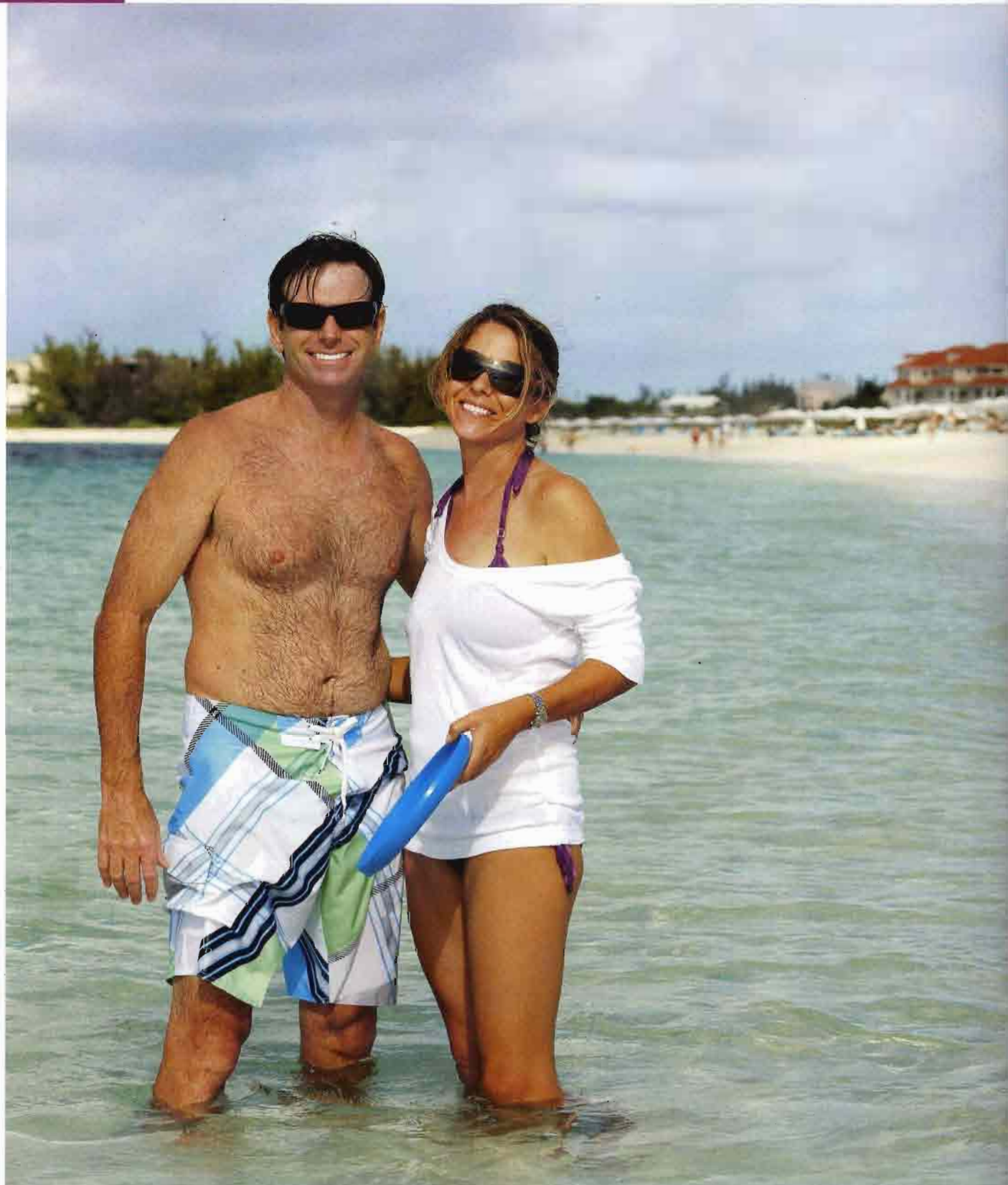
*"The reality is, I like
imperfection."*

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Travel
**MEET CANADIANS IN PARADISE
YOUR DREAM DESTINATIONS THIS WINTER**



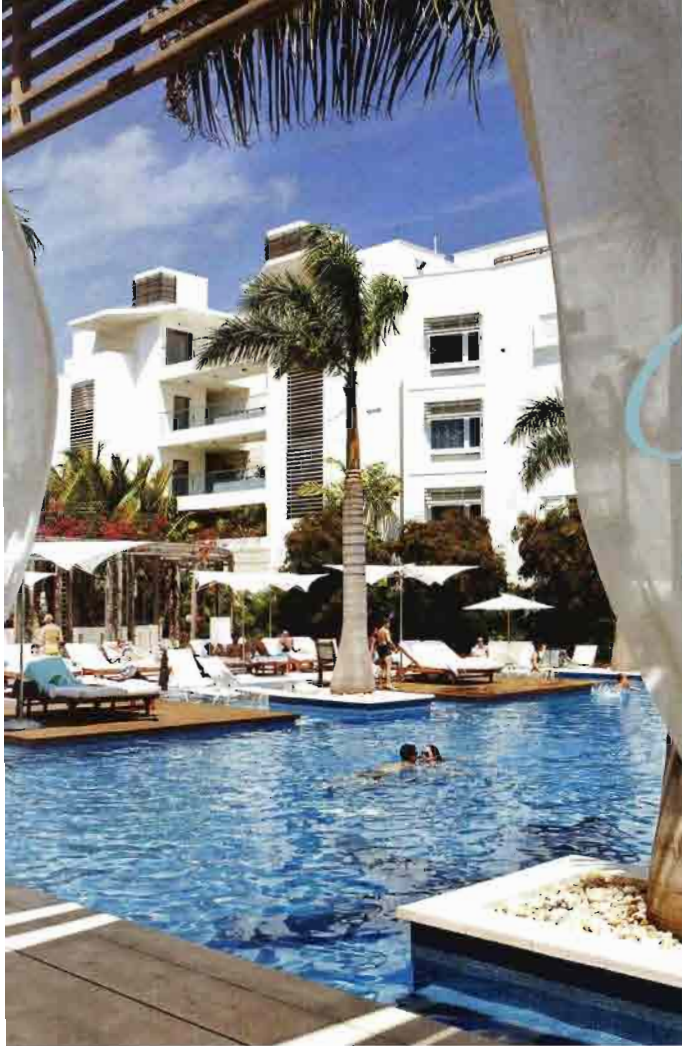
At the Canadian-owned GANSEVOORT
TURKS + CAICOS, you're not just going on
vacation - *you're adopting a lifestyle*



the Get-Away

By LINDA LEWIS

Photography by LAURA ARSIÈ



When

When developer and owner Rob Ayer meets me in the lobby of his two-year-old condominium hotel and says he's thrilled to be wearing jeans to work today, it's not because he's relieved to be in casual clothes. In fact, a pink golf shirt and flip-flops are status quo attire for the 46-year-old from Kitchener, Ont.

But it's an unusually breezy December day, so he's dressed for the occasion in long-pants. "You can get sick of the sun," Ayer explains sheepishly, "so when it's cool, I love it!"

Everything about this interview makes it unique. We're seated in a stylish open-air space that propels your gaze beyond the 7,000-square-foot pool toward Grace Bay Beach (chosen best beach in the world by the World Travel Awards). Over the next couple of days, we'll meet up again — chatting over cocktails with Ayer's 45-year-old wife, Wendy, and sweating it out side by side in the hotel's grueling Core Fusion class. At this stage of his life, "rough day at the office" for the expat entrepreneur might simply mean tackling some challenging waves on his kiteboard. He admits his friends back home often remark, "What are you doing — sitting on the beach today, Rob?"

Who couldn't handle this as their day job?

Actually, most of us. Life on Providenciales (known locally as Provo, one of 40 islands and cays that make up Turks and Caicos) may seem easy, but it's based on a background of hard work that took Ayer to Toronto, Vancouver and Seattle before his envious landing in the Caribbean.

"We saw 16 different countries that year," Ayer explains, recalling how, in 2001, he and Wendy starting searching for their place in the sun (a move that was affordable after he earned a tidy sum taking his dot-com company, Onvia, public). So why eventually settle on Turks?

"I won a golf tournament when I was here, and won \$5,000," he quips about the island not particularly known for the sport, "and said, 'I love this place!'"

In truth, what's not to love? Canadians have always had an affinity for the tiny nation — in fact, prime minister Robert Borden suggested annexing it back in 1917 — with





PAGE 88: Rob Ayer spends time "at the office" with his wife, Wendy. PAGE 89: Even the walkways are thoughtfully designed at the Gansevoort. OPPOSITE PAGE: Because the relatively small resort is centred around a large pool, all guests have plenty of space for relaxation. THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Fresh fare beckons at the hotel restaurant, the Bagatelle. Seaside snapshots include an expansive view, a conch shell on the beach and David Bowen, Turks and Caicos' director of culture, enjoying the sunshine with his son. Rob shows off his usual work attire.



THIS PAGE: The Ayer family — Rob, Alina (10), Wendy, Bradley (8) and Dylan (7) — love to make waves together. OPPOSITE PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Lunchtime style is barefoot on the beach at local resto Da Conch Shack. Wendy stays fit at one of the Gansevoort's challenging Core Fusion classes. Golfers aren't the only colourful players at the local course.



Like the *Caribbean island* it's situated on, the resort is sophisticated without being snooty — a casual style that befits Ayer and his family.



various petitions, proposals and a private member's bill over the decades recommending we formalize the relationship.

Still, when the Ayers came to Provo to build a new business, little did they know that they would also be building a family that would add three children *all at once* to the population of about 17,000.

There is no question that, like its sister properties in New York and Miami, the Gansevoort Turks + Caicos places guests in the lap of luxury — starting at \$341 per night (Ayer and his business partner, fellow Canadian expat Bruce MacLaren, have a licensing agreement with the upscale brand). During my three days at the resort, I encounter Russian gazillionaires who've imported spectacular fireworks for a private birthday party on the beach. The spa where I enjoy a massage is part of the well-known U.S.-based Exhale chain, and the Bagatelle resto/bar is *the* place to be in Provo on a Friday night.

Fortunately, it feels more like opulence than decadence, more understated than overdone. At this prime spot on the beach's west end, there is still room to breathe. To avoid having a next-door neighbour, Ayer helped fund an adjacent protected public park. And thanks to density regulations, the buildings are only five storeys high. The suites themselves also evoke more glamour than glitz. Floor-to-ceiling windows show off the jaw-dropper view — in fact, every one of the 91 guest rooms

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THE GETAWAY

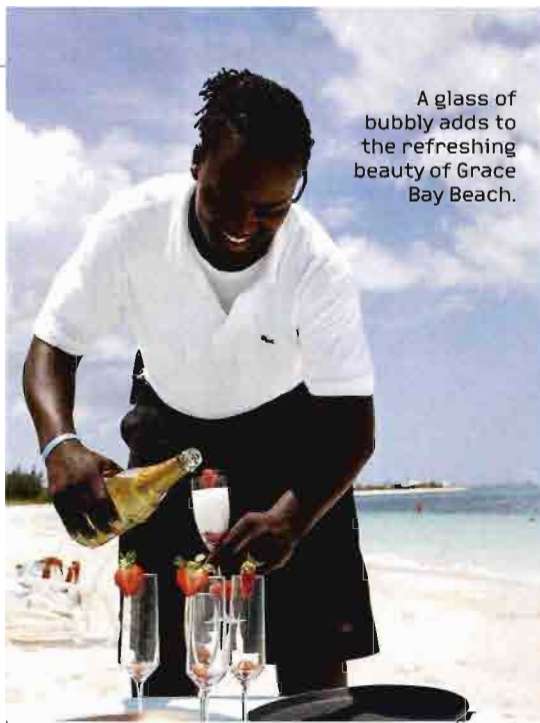
Continued from page 93

boasts unobstructed views of the ocean. Simple but breathtaking photography of the local landscape provides the only artwork — no tacky tropical tchotchkes here. My favourite touch? The bathtub that fills from the ceiling.

All in all, the boutique-style hotel, while still chic, has quite a residential feel. It's not surprising, since of the 52 condos that run from \$512,000 for a beachfront studio to \$3.66 million for a penthouse, less than a dozen were unsold at press time (and 17 are owned by Canadians). The Gansvoort Hotel Group's job, says Ayer, is to "put heads into beds" when the owners want to rent out their units, for a respectable 50-50 split.

It all works because, like Turks itself, the resort is sophisticated without being snooty — a casual style that befits Ayer and his family. If you go into the boutique you may spot Ganzy, the ultra-sleek hotel cat/mascot, wandering around. Hop on a boat tour, and you'll find yourself alone on Iguana Island, where the prehistoric-looking beasts (some three feet long) are so ugly they're beautiful. Leave the hotel for lunch and you could dine barefoot on the beach at Da Conch Shack. Then take a quick drive to the huge 80-foot-deep limestone hole called, naturally, The Hole — a tourist site "for adventurous souls only" that is so laid-back there is barely a sign, never mind a guardrail.

The true natural wonder, though, is the water. As lovely as a palm tree-lined infinity pool is, nothing beats Grace Bay, which shows off the third largest reef in the world. And the colour...! I assumed the etymology of Turks is related to "turquoise," a word that doesn't begin to do the hue of the ocean justice. In fact, the word Turks comes from "Turk's head," a red-topped cactus. Says Ayer: "A lot of people complain about us 'Photo-shopping' the images in our [brochures]. But the water really is that colour." It is, in fact, picture-perfect.



A glass of bubbly adds to the refreshing beauty of Grace Bay Beach.

PICTURE-PERFECT COULD BE used to describe his family as well. A typical Saturday for the Ayers makes families back in Canada appear downright lazy. Between the three kids — Alina, 10, Bradley, 8, and Dylan, 7 — the schedule includes 8:30 a.m. soccer, 10 a.m. golf, 11 o'clock horseback riding, 1 p.m. dance and 1:30 in-line hockey. Then again, no extracurricular activity is more than 10 minutes from home. And during the week, says their mom, a former high school teacher in British Columbia, "what's nice about the island is that everything sort of ends at six o'clock." But family life did not originally proceed like clockwork. How did they handle rough beginnings? Says Ayer admiringly: "I'm lucky. I have a very strong wife."

When the couple decided to adopt a child, they hoped to do so from home. But, says Ayer with a hint of frustration, "as a Canadian citizen, Canada doesn't support you if you don't live in Canada. It's backwards. So we ended up having to do international adoption." In 2005, they went to the Ukraine for weeks, waiting and waiting and working their way through red tape. Unlike in China, his wife explains, you don't get matched beforehand, so the couple had no idea whom they were waiting for. When they finally found out, it

was the day before the Ukraine temporarily closed its doors to foreign adoption. "They said, 'Let's see what we can get away with,'" recalls Ayer. "'We know you're not ready for three, but here, that's all we have.'"

And that's how the Canadian couple came back to the Caribbean with three small, adorable siblings who spoke no English.

"That was an adventure," admits their dad. "We were very naive. We went from [expecting] one to three." At the same time, he'd bought the land in Turks, was creating the plans and designing the condo hotel. Compared

to building a family, he laughs, "how hard can it be to build a resort?"

Six years later, their children are fully acclimatized. Says Wendy quietly: "The kids don't have too much memory of life in the Ukraine. Their situation wasn't that great." When I meet her for a glass of wine at the hotel bar, she can't stay too long; she is on her way to their school play ("It's a very social island," she tells me. "For instance, there will be cocktails for the parents at the play"). But her brood would *love* to move to Canada to be with all their cousins and play ice hockey; they spend every summer at their cottage on Stoney Lake in Ontario's Kawartha region. Occasionally Wendy gets wistful about things Canadians take for granted, such as the variety of merchandise (turns out we have a shared passion for shoes from Bigley's in Bobcaygeon, Ont.). On the other hand, her youngest loves diving for conch. Where else could he do that? And on school breaks, the kids get to order room service and stay at Daddy's hotel.

Nevertheless, there are drawbacks to living in paradise. "It's tough to get things done, like getting your car licence renewed," says Ayer. "Everything on the island takes time." Then he smiles with eyes that match the colour of the ocean he calls home. "But that's also one of the joys." **M**