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## Dive into the Turks and Caicos

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TURKS AND CAICOS—Not far ahead of the dive boat I can see the occasional head pop up, breaking the surface for a sniff of warm, tropical air. Sea turtles. The sighting is enough to send the snorkellers on board scrambling to prepare their gear. People spit into their masks, quickly rubbing it onto the glass to prevent fogging once in the water. Our boat captain unpacks the waterproof spotting charts and deals them around. The dog-eared pages are filled with coloured pictures of sponges, corals, tropical fish, intimidating looking sharks and, of course, sea turtles.

“These waters are part of the marine sanctuary,” explains Brent Forbes, a guide with eco-outfitter Big Blue Unlimited. “This zone is protected against anchoring and fishing, conching and lobstering. When you get in you’ll see the turtles, but watch for spotted eagle rays, stingrays, parrotfish and nurse sharks.”

**Turks and Caicos**, a chain of 41 small islands, straddles the seam between the Atlantic Ocean and the Caribbean Sea. Incredible water in shades of blue that defy description — turquoise, navy, marine, aqua, teal — and the marine life below the surface draws visitors to these island pedestals of coral limestone.

According to Forbes, the gin-clear water and bountiful coral reefs have long been magnets for experienced divers. “It varies by season — in the busy season we see more divers than snorkellers, but people still come to snorkel all year round.”

Once described as “the forgotten islands,” word is leaking out about Turks and Caicos. The hub of commercial growth — the island of Providenciales (Provo) — is a centre for offshore banking and pricey condominium developments, but the people are still very much in touch with the island’s best asset, the surrounding sea. Local outfitters encourage responsible exploration without damaging the natural beauty and health of the island chain. Guided nature hikes, kayaking through mangroves, deep dives and shallow reef snorkelling are all on the Big Blue Unlimited menu of activities.

Over the side of the boat I am transported into a world of elkhorn coral, growing so thick that it can only be described as a coral forest. I float in the salt water, transfixed by a lone hawksbill turtle below, casually nibbling on sponges and sea plants. With a little flipper action and some rudder work by its tail, the turtle gracefully surfaces for another breath and then dives immediately, heading for another feed at the bottom. I know it could move off at any moment, so I just float and gaze from above. The turtle graces me with a 15-minute show, foraging before it decides it has other things to do in a distant part of the reef. It shoots into warp speed and leaves me far behind, bobbing on the surface.

Outside of Provo, some of the chain’s smaller islands are still far from developed. Billed as “the island time forgot,” tiny Salt Cay has an airport terminal just slightly larger than a storage shack, a single police officer to patrol all six square kilometres, wandering livestock with the right-of-way, and a quiet that is only broken by roosters and donkeys.

Flat and scrubby, most of the island’s surface is covered with the huge remains of salt ponds and some of the derelict windmills that once powered the lucrative salt industry. Powerful salt barons, made wealthy by the production of the scarce “white gold,” sold shiploads of the stuff to the armies in North America, where it was used to preserve meat for Washington’s troops.



Aquamarine waters and a beautiful boat anchored near a perfect beach. Nah, there's not much to like about the Turks and Caicos.

Jo Matyas photo/For the toronto star

Salt Cay traffic is non-existent. I've arranged for a golf cart to be waiting when my inbound flight lands. Keys are in the ignition. Instructions are to return it to the airport before departure ... and don't forget to leave the keys.

Wild donkeys roam the tiny dirt and sand laneways, descendants of the ones used to power the windmills. Almost all the island homes are modest salt raker cottages, typical homes of the labourers who once worked the salt ponds. Low stonewalls topped with inset conch shells separate the yards, keeping the wandering animals from eating their way through gardens.

At Pat's Place, one of the few places to eat, I share a pitcher of fresh lemonade with a honeymooning couple from Denver and eat a meal of Pat Simmons' speciality — conch fritters, hand-cut fries and hot pepper jelly. I'm given directions to a good snorkelling spot: drive down a dirt cart track, continue on foot, stay on one side of a bluff and look for a rock formation. The island has no signs and the few dozen people who live here are in no hurry to add any.

Just as on Provo, the world changes underwater. In the clearest waters I've ever seen is an incredible sight of plump blue parrotfish, leathery brown staghorn coral and huge rounds of brain coral.

But the day ends and I return my golf cart (keys in the ignition) to the airport. When the Twin Otter lands on the tarmac, it's got the feel of a local bus service. People hop off, more climb on, and packages are passed in and out of the plane windows. The door slams shut, the props come alive and we rattle down the runway. As we lift off, I look back at Salt Cay, struck by the fact there's not nearly enough time to explore the island time forgot.

*Josephine Matyas is a Kingston-based freelance writer whose trip was subsidized by Turks & Caicos Tourism and Ocean Club Resorts. She can be found online at [www.writerwithoutborders.com](http://www.writerwithoutborders.com).*

#### **Just the facts**

**WHERE TO STAY:** [Ocean Club Resorts](http://www.oceanclubresorts.com) on Provo is an all suite resort, right on the white sands of 20-kilometre long Grace Bay Beach. [www.oceanclubresorts.com](http://www.oceanclubresorts.com)

**ACTIVITIES:** [Big Blue Unlimited](http://www.bigblue.tc) has three locations on Provo at Leeward Marina, Grace Bay and Saltmills. [www.bigblue.tc](http://www.bigblue.tc)