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“You may think you’ve seen luxury on Providenciales, but Amanyara (Malcolm Roads; 649-941-8133; www.amanresorts.com) makes the Regent look like a Holiday Inn...what better way to forget about the recession than to lounge on one of the poolside canopied beds, nursing a cocktail?”

THE CARIBBEAN ISSUE

36 Hours in Turks and Caicos

By JEREMY W. PETERS

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DANGLING at the southern end of the Bahamas island chain like an after-thought, Turks and Caicos was often overlooked as a Caribbean destination. But thanks to some of the swankiest names in hotels — Regent, Amanresorts and Meriden, to name a few — Turks and Caicos is now firmly on the map of those seeking a beach vacation with heavy pampering and a splash of indulgence. It is the kind of place where hotel staff members adjust your beach chair umbrella as the sun shifts and pass out cool towels to keep you from overheating. And moderately priced hotels have maid service a mere two times a day, instead of providing guests with a small army of personal servants. Technically, the islands are in the Atlantic, but with this level of coddling — not to mention some of the bluest waters in the world — who cares?

Friday

5:30 p.m.

1) SUNSET SHOW

Chances are your hotel is somewhere on Grace Bay, with its stunning stretch of satin-soft white sand wrapping around the northeastern edge of Providenciales, the main island. The beach gently slopes into the ocean, which reveals bands of blue and green that are so brilliant no postcard could do them justice. This must be one of the loveliest beaches anywhere in the tropics. Time your stroll with the setting sun when the orange light reflects off the blue water.

8 p.m.

2) CONCH-ED OUT

Grace Bay is also home to a surfeit of restaurants, some better than others. For something less touristy, venture about 15 minutes by car into the Blue Hills along the northwestern coastline. Da Conch Shack (Blue Hills Road; 649-946-8877; www.conchshack.tc) stays true to its name, serving up conch from a hut on the beach that is bedecked in the mollusk's glistening pink shells. Sit down at a picnic table just a few steps from the water, take off your shoes, dip your feet into the sand and decide how you want your conch. Curried? Sautéed? Diced up and served ceviche-style? Definitely don't skip the conch fritters, which are golden brown, moist and chewy.

11 p.m.

3) KNOW WHEN TO FOLD 'EM

Las Vegas it's not. But Providenciales does offer charming, if low-key gaming, from slots to blackjack to craps. Its two tourist-gearred casinos are both situated in nondescript buildings that could easily be mistaken for medical offices or

insurance agencies. But consider that a good thing. The lack of any flashy appointments at the Casablanca Casino (Grace Bay Road; 649-941-3737; www.thecasablancacasino.com) lends a low-stakes atmosphere that won't make you feel like a chump for heading straight for the \$10 blackjack table.

Saturday

9 a.m.

4) EAT WHAT?

After laying eyes on Grace Bay, you'll probably want to stay put. But then you'll miss the nearby islets like Iguana Island, a nature preserve where the scaly little lizards scamper through the brush, and Water Cay, home to stunning Half Moon Bay, whose crescent of powder white sand is framed by limestone cliffs. For \$89, Silverdeep (Leeward Highway; 649-946-5612; www.silverdeep.com) offers three-hour excursions that include rum punch and a local delicacy — but you have to earn it. Your captain will shell and clean as much conch as you can pluck from the ocean floor, before mincing and marinating it in lemon and lime. Oh, and what is that translucent, spaghetti-shaped appendage purported to have aphrodisiac powers? That's the conch penis, and you should be prepared to eat it.

2 p.m.

5) ROOMS AT THE TOP

You may think you've seen luxury on Providenciales, but Amanyara (Malcolm Roads; 649-941-8133; www.amanresorts.com) makes the Regent look like a Holiday Inn. With the cheapest room starting at \$1,550 during the winter, lunch is a more affordable way to marvel at the resort's airy, pagodalike pavilions and reflecting pools, and even that is no bargain. The jerk chicken, garnished with an avocado and paw paw salad, is \$32 and the Greek salad (no chicken included) is \$20. But what better way to forget about the recession than to lounge on one of the poolside canopied beds, nursing a cocktail?

7 p.m.

6) INFINITE MOJITOS

Like much of the Caribbean, Providenciales has no shortage of beach bars outfitted in full-on tropical kitsch. Tiki torches, thatch umbrellas and coconut shells abound. But for something less conventionally beachy, try Anacaona at the Grace Bay Club (Grace Bay Road; 649-946-5050; www.gracebayclub.com), whose infinity bar is a 90-foot oblong slab of black granite stretching toward the water. It is claimed to be the Caribbean's longest bar, but in truth, it is not quite "infinity"

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— there is some brush that slightly obscures the ocean view. Nonetheless, it's impressive, as are the \$13 cocktails, all made with tropical flair like the raspberry mojito, and the appetizers, which should tide you over until dinner.

8:30 p.m.

7) UNDER THE PALMS

It's hard to imagine a nicer dinner setting than Grace Bay Beach. But a five-minute drive inland takes you to Coco Bistro (Grace Bay Road; 649-946-5369), about the prettiest place you can hope to find away from the water. Set underneath a canopy of soaring palm trees, this outdoor restaurant offers hearty alternatives to the steady diet of conch and fish. There's a 16-ounce bone-in prime rib (\$39), rack of lamb (\$40) and a Caesar salad served with bacon and a peppery dressing (\$9). You might even inquire about taking a palm tree home with you from the nursery right next door.

11 p.m.

8) SPLIT-LEVEL BARS

Despite its tropical locale, night life in Providenciales is more martini glasses than plastic cups. But if you insist on tiny umbrellas in your drink, head to the Ports of Call mall, a strip mall near the resorts along Grace Bay Road that has two fun-loving bars: Jimmy's downstairs (649-946-5282) and Calico Jack's upstairs (649-946-5129). The distance between the two is just a flight of stairs, so patrons can easily wander back and forth depending on the crowd and the live music offerings.

Sunday

10 a.m.

9) SUNDAY BLUES

The blues that surrounds Turks and Caicos are so vivid that you'll want to consult a color wheel. Is that cyan? Cobalt? Azure? But the water in Chalk Sound, an inlet surrounded by national park on one side and sprawling villas on the other, is the most unusual shade of blue anywhere on the island. A touch lighter than turquoise and not quite sky blue, the color appears something like the color of the United Nations flag. A camera-ready road snakes down the peninsula that runs along the southern end of the sound, providing sweeping views of the vivid water and hillsides.

Noon

10) SHRIMPS IN A CUP

In one corner of Chalk Sound sits Las Brisas (At Neptune Villas, Chalk Sound Drive; 649-946-5306), a cafe that offers inexpensive sandwiches (shredded pork, chicken and, of course, conch for about \$10) and even more spectacular views. The restaurant is perched at a slight elevation and faces the water. Don't skip the fried plantain cup filled with grilled shrimp and topped with a Creole sauce. Work it off by renting one of the sea kayaks from the bartender and paddling it around Chalk Sound. On an island this luxe, it's probably the only real work you'll do yourself the entire trip.

THE BASICS

American Airlines offers nonstop flights to Providenciales, the main island, from New York starting at around \$500 based on a recent online search. Delta, US Airways, United and Continental fly there with one stop. With the layover, prices can be lower.

Renting a car is the best option for getting around; taxis are less reliable and expensive. Avis and Budget have cars starting at \$100 a day. Remember: drive on the left.

The Seven Stars Resort (Grace Bay Road; 866-570-7777; www.sevenstarsgracebay.com) opened in 2008 and occupies one of the widest stretches of Grace Bay Beach. It has beautifully appointed suites with granite kitchens and Sub Zero refrigerators. Rates start at \$468 a night for a garden view room, though better deals can be found by calling the hotel directly for an ocean-view upgrade.

The 47-room West Bay Club (Grace Bay Road; 888-701-0079; www.thewestbayclub.com) is also directly on Grace Bay, though it is smaller and more moderately priced, with rates starting at \$300 in the high season.

If cost is no concern, Amanvara (Malcolm Roads; 866-941-8133; www.amanresorts.com) has a five-bedroom beach villa that goes for \$13,950 a night. Smaller villas start at \$5,600. The atmosphere is as serene and refined as you can expect to find anywhere in the tropics.