

THE ATLANTAN

MODERN LUXURY™ | APRIL 2007

THE RADAR JET SET

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RAW BAR! Da Conch Shack in the Turks and Caicos islands.


ON ISLAND TIME *What's the buzz about the Caribbean's new "It" destination, Turks and Caicos?*

RELAX! JUST DO IT. WHEN YOU WANT SOME FUN

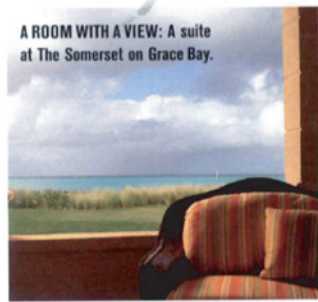
If your personal vision of paradise involves high-end shopping and plenty of it, a frenetic nightlife and a lushly green tropical landscape, then the islands of Turks and Caicos aren't for you. Stick to South Beach. But the relaxed pace seems to suit luxury- and privacy-focused names like Streisand, Willis, Affleck and Garner fine—they're among the celebs and jet-setters vacationing, marrying and buying property on the islands. This just in: Catherine Zeta Jones and Michael Douglas have snagged a yet-to-be-built \$7 million, 5-bedroom villa at the Mandarin Oriental Dellis Cay, a private island resort owned by a Greek shipping magnate that will include 25 suites and 17 villas when it opens in 2009. Also scheduled to debut soon—a grand, new Ritz-Carlton resort on West Caicos.

So what's the allure of these admittedly flat and scrubby little islands? Since their interiors are so banal, there's little reason to stray from the beaches with their warm, clear water and sand that's like sugar, sugar kisses. Oh, and there's the tax thing: They have none to speak of—no income, inheritance, property or capital gains. Investors like that. Plus, Turks and Caicos is a British territory with a relatively small population that, while displaying a tolerable level of irritation at tourists generally, doesn't seem to hate Americans—which is a plus in a paradise just 75 minutes from Miami.

SIZE MATTERS!

Most of the islands' resorts are located along the gorgeous Grace Bay beach in Providenciales (known as Provo). The newest is The Somerset on Grace Bay. Opened in November, it's already famous for its almost ridiculously expansive suites—more than 5,300 square feet for a two-floor penthouse, with several "smaller" (only 3,300 square feet!) exquisitely designed units taking up entire floors nearby. Unlike the hip-hop/Spring Break-for-adults flavor of some nearby resorts, The Somerset exhibits a playful gentility, with unexpected touches like a regulation croquet court (watch out—these Brits are sticklers for the rules) and lessons in sandcastle building. Even the resort's excellent restaurant O'Soleil is unique, with sweeping white walls, high ceilings and crystal chandeliers. Another Somerset success: the most efficient, friendly service on the islands, with an especially endearing absence of attitude. And ask about The Somerset's support for the rescue of orphaned island dogs, known as "potcakes"—you can even adopt your own. Call 649.946.5900. Rates from \$455-\$5,000. www.thesomerset.com. 

A ROOM WITH A VIEW: A suite at The Somerset on Grace Bay.



WHERE TO EAT AND DRINK: PROVO

You can have conch cracked, sautéed, stir-fried, or in fritters, curry and chowder at Da Conch Shack (649.946.8877), but we recommend the raw experience. Arrive by sea—a boat from your Grace Bay resort will drop you at the sun-drenched, sand-floored shack in about 15 minutes. Bare-chested locals will deftly open and clean a magnificent mollusk plucked from the water just moments before, offering you a perfect white slice, sashimi-style.

For a more upscale and pampered experience, top choices include Caribbean fusion at resort restaurants with a view like Anacaona (649.946.5050), Grace's Cottage (649.946.5096) and Magnolia Wine Bar and Restaurant (649.941.5108), but oddly enough some of the best fine dining in and around Provo is Italian: Bella Luna (649.946.5214) and Baci (649.941.3044).

You know nightlife is lagging when the hottest spots in town are called Danny Buoy's and Bambooz Bar & Grill (649.941.8146). A typical night at the latter: A bronzed and beautiful 21-year-old heiress, three dreadlocked locals, a gaggle of well-tended Southern socialites and some lobster-red Canadians all singing along with an off-key karaoke crooner to Lynyrd Skynyrd's "Sweet Home Alabama." While it was oddly endearing, until the South Beach-like hot spots arrive, here's an idea: cuddle up early and sleep in late. Hey, it's a vacation—you party enough back home.