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TRAVEL

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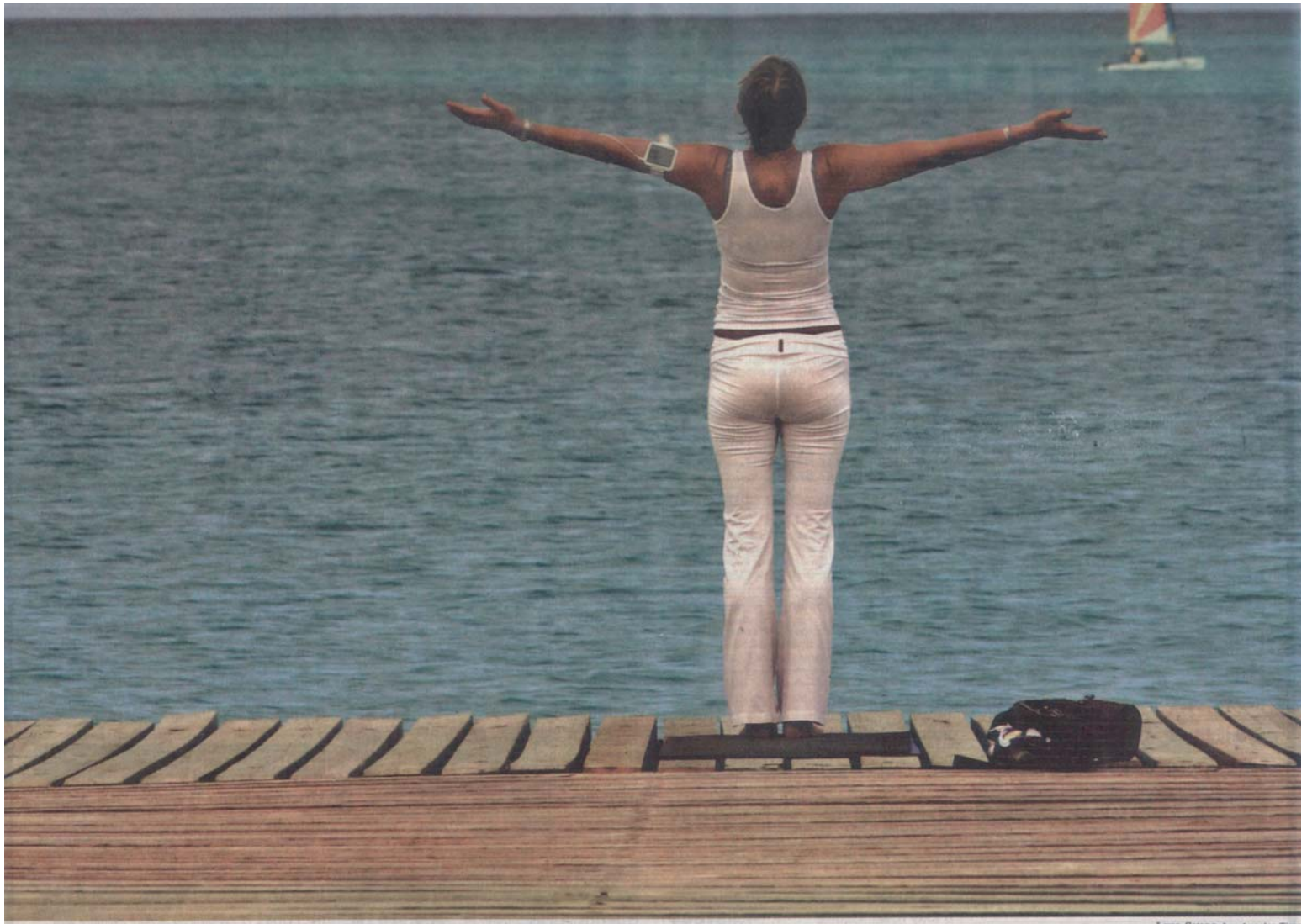
CARIBBEAN



Basking in the stars

The rich and famous go barefoot in the Turks and Caicos Islands. No trust fund?

No worries. Even commoners can commune on these cays. *Pages 8 and 9*



BREATHE DEEPLY: A guest practices yoga on a pier at Club Med's Turquoise at Grace Bay on Providenciales. The all-inclusive resort is a relatively affordable option in these millionaire isles. LUIS SINCO Los Angeles Times

Caribbean costars

Celebs are splashing down at this archipelago, where high-end tourism is booming. Regular folks can look for stars — or starfish — at this tropical idyll.

By ROSEMARY McCLURE
Times Staff Writer

L Grace Bay, Turks and Caicos
EGENDARY rocker Keith Richards was out of uniform. No dangling cigarette, no wailing guitar, no stormy look. As a matter of fact, he was grinning. And scratching the tummy of a shaggy black munchkin of a dog.

It was late January, and the Rolling Stones icon was chilling on a wooden dock overlooking the turquoise waters surrounding Parrot Cay, a Caribbean islet that bills itself as "the world's most exclusive resort."

The 1,000-acre private island is in Turks and Caicos, a semi-obscure archipelago east of Cuba that has been propelled into the limelight by its rising popularity with the glitterati.

The multimillion-dollar beach house owned by Richards shares the sandy white shoreline with the homes of Bruce Willis, Christie Brinkley and Donna Karan.

The mind boggles just thinking about the neighborhood's holiday parties and summer barbecues.

I spent several days exploring their chichi slice of paradise, snorkeling in electric-blue waters, sinking my toes into sun-bleached sand, breathing the balmy air. OK, so maybe I was out of my league playing on their turf, but I faked it. You don't have to be rich to have fun here.

It wasn't all play, though. I spent three days touring resorts — very high-end resorts. The kind where you might run into a star, someone like, oh, Conan O'Brien. I saw him hiding under a baseball cap pulled so low over his face that I might not have recognized him but for skin so white it was almost blue. News flash: People with skin that fair should vacation in Seattle, not the tropics.

But tourists like O'Brien have helped make Turks and Caicos Islands, or TCI, a success story. Twenty years ago, these 40-some islands and cays had few paved roads or services. Now this British crown colony has one of the fastest-growing economies in the world; its 33,000 residents share their islands with about 300,000 tourists annually. There are a dozen or so high-end resorts where overnight stays often top \$1,000 a night and a booming real estate market that caters to multimillionaires.

The soaring popularity of the tiny West Indian territory, isn't surprising. It's a 75-minute flight southeast from Miami — close enough to make it an attractive short-holiday destination for the East Coast platinum-card crowd. (New Yorkers can get there in 3½ hours; from L.A., it takes about seven.) Other pluses: The currency is

the U.S. dollar, crime is minimal, locals are amiable and everyone speaks English.

And, of course, there are the stars. Where they lead, others follow.

Once a secret hideaway for a handful of celebrities, TCI is now on the hot list. Everywhere I went, people talked about the luminaries who were visiting: Cindy Crawford at the Grace Bay Club, Will Smith at the Somerset on Grace Bay, Alicia Keys at the Regent Palms, Kelly Ripa at Amanara. The four luxury resorts are on the island of Providenciales, a.k.a. Provo, TCI's main tourist center. The other islands and cays are low-key, except for Grand Turk, the capital, where a Carnival Cruise Lines port opened in 2006.

But Provo has the momentum; it's home to an international airport, along with great beaches, fine restaurants, a small casino and a golf club, all packed into 38 square miles. I spent most of my time in Provo, peeking below the brims of baseball caps for famous faces.

Visitors who aren't interested in stargazing can find other diversions. For instance, I hopped on a boat in Provo and headed out to sea. In less than 30 minutes I found an isolated sandy cay (80% of TCI's islands are uninhabited) populated by osprey, flamingos and iguanas. Nearly 300 square miles of the islands have been designated as parkland and wildlife sanctuaries.

One of the biggest draws is underwater, where divers and snorkelers come eye to eye with a color-saturated world populated by an array of sea life. Many people visit to explore the coral reef, one of the world's largest. Divers also can scuba down a vertical sea wall where the continental shelf drops a mile.

And then there are the outstanding beaches, especially Provo's 12-mile-long Grace Bay Beach, covered by ultrawhite, very fine sand and lapped by dazzling turquoise waters. Jet skis and other noise-makers are prohibited. The coral reef that fringes the island creates something akin to a lap pool.

A part-time resident of TCI has a theory about Grace Bay. "This beach is so beautiful, you can sit on it and lose 10 years of your life," said Jim McCollum. He stopped and corrected himself: "No. Gain 10 years of your life."

Either way, it works for me. I could easily spend 10 years lazing in that ethereal blue sea.

DINING IN BLUE HILLS

Although high-end tourism is the name of the game here, you can see these islands on a budget. A couple of motels on Grace Bay charge \$100 to \$200 a night (see box), and dining where the locals do saves money too.



GOOD AS GOLD: Sink your toes in the same sand as the celebrities. Visitors frolic surfside before a diaper change at Providenciales' Grace Bay.

These places may not feature foie gras or filet mignon, but they have an unbeatable Caribbean vibe.

Smokey's on Da Bay, for instance, is the place to be on Wednesday nights in Provo. Reggae music blares from huge speaker towers while cooks grill dinner. The diner-style restaurant is in Blue Hills, a small settlement on Provo where the locals live, shop, play. It's a handful of miles from the elegant resorts on Grace Bay.

On Wednesdays, Smokey's indoor-outdoor restaurant has a fish fry that draws British and American expats as well as locals — who are called Belongers and make up about half the TCI population. These descendants of early settlers and African slaves came to the islands more than 200 years ago to work cotton plantations.

I arrived just in time: Corn on the cob, lobster and snapper were sizzling on the outdoor grill. Overhead, a full

moon sparkled, its light reflecting off Grace Bay. The dark silhouette of a small sailboat bobbed on the water at anchor. Another patron seemed just as captivated by the scene as I.

"Ten years ago," he said, looking across the bay to where hotels lined the water, "I'd look down the beach and see two lights. Now there are lights everywhere. It's like Miami Beach."

He wasn't complaining. Like most of the Belongers I talked to, he was happy about the changes, which have brought jobs and new opportunities.

I went back to work on my lobster, cracking open the shell and sucking out meat that was so fresh and succulent I knew it had come out of the water earlier that day. When I was done, I hunted down owner Smokey (real name: Aulden Smith), complimented him, and noticed a saying posted inside the restaurant: "Thank God for



RELAX OR ROLL: Unwinding at exclusive Parrot Cay, neither Keith Richards, top, nor his dog seems a beast of burden. Girls gallop past a mural on Providenciales, home to an international airport, fine restaurants and more.

life, enjoy it and smile. Don't let nothing spoil it for you."

The next day, still enjoying life and smiling about my dinner, I headed back to Blue Hills to try another local favorite, Da Conch Shack, arguably Provo's best-known cafe (actually a couple of brightly painted huts with white picnic tables). Fish can't get much fresher than it is here. Live conch (pronounced conk) are held in pens until diners order. They can watch their conch as it's brought up out of the ocean and cracked open.

My drives to Blue Hills had taken me away from the tourist zone, so I decided to go a bit farther afield and explore the island inland. Away from the stunning turquoise water, the view didn't seem much to look at: sandy soil and low scrub brush.

I'd already realized there weren't many shops; the airline lost my luggage for a few days, and I had to

scramble to find something to wear. But my search then had been hurried.

Now I took my time, weaving through Provo on well-paved streets. The island has three national parks, two of them marine parks, and another inland called Chalk Sound. A fellow traveler told me it was full of "incredibly blue water," but I didn't think it could compare with Grace Bay.

I was wrong. When I topped a small hill that overlooked the sound, I saw a dozen shades of turquoise water in a shallow lagoon studded with green islets. Low hills framed the horizon, landlocking the quiet pool. Overhead, white cumulus clouds floated across a deep blue sky. I wanted to stay forever.

PRETENSION-FREE RESORT

Most of Grace Bay's newest resorts are spare-no-expense, über-luxurious palaces that rival the Caribbean's top

resorts. But the granddaddy of them all on this prime curve of sand is a familiar name with no such pretensions of grandeur: Club Med.

The French company pioneered the tourist industry here when it cut a road from the Providenciales International Airport and opened its doors to GMs (*gentil membres* or "gracious members") in 1984.

Club Med Turkoise has been going strong ever since, doing its own thing in a sort of a quirky vacuum that ignores the world outside its gates. The club, for instance, sets clocks forward an hour, creating its own time zone.

Nonetheless, Club Méditerranée Turkoise is overwhelmingly popular with guests—one of the most popular Club Meds in the Americas. It caters to couples, singles and groups of friends 18 and older.

I spent a couple of days here. It's all-inclusive, which means I could eat,

drink, play and dance the night away for one set price. So I did. No one was more surprised than I at how much fun it was. Everyone was friendly, the Grace Bay Beach location couldn't have been better, and the recently renovated rooms were fine, if a bit spartan. It was sort of like staying at a Holiday Inn with perks.

"A friend talked me into this," said fellow GM Kusi O'Hemeng of Alexandria, Va. "Before I came, I thought it was so '80s." He said he nearly left on the first day of his vacation, but by the second day, he was happy he hadn't.

"I met so many great people. You can decide to have a lot of fun or to be by yourself. Either way, it's terrific."

PARROTING PARROT CAY

Parrot Cay, the exclusive island that's home to Richards and other superstars, receives the credit for bringing a buzz to Turks and Caicos and proving that the area was ready for high-end tourism. Now other developers are eager to take advantage of that wave of interest with their own private-island projects.

One balmy afternoon, I hitched a ride from Provo to the uninhabited island of West Caicos, site of Molasses Reef, a new Ritz-Carlton project. The 125-room hotel, along with privately owned villas and cottages, is under construction. Prices range from \$2.2 million to \$6 million each.

More than 25 of the vacation homes have already been sold to a moneyed clientele, many of whom have a net worth of more than \$50 million. The development, which is being promoted as "the ultimate escape," is scheduled to open in late fall.

The selling point is simple: exclusive barefoot luxury.

"Only a few will ever sample the idyllic life on this uncharted island," burbles sales material for the development.

Mandarin Oriental is also getting into the private-island business here. It is scheduled to break ground on Dellis Cay this spring and open a small hotel in 2009. Eventually, 71 waterfront villas also will be built on the cay, their plans drawn by such stars as Zaha Hadid, Kengo Kuma and Carl Eitenperger.

Other names being dropped here: actors Michael Douglas and Catherine Zeta-Jones, who are said to have purchased a home on the 560-acre island for \$7 million.

For the time being, however, Parrot Cay seems to hold the aces. A 35-minute boat ride from Provo, it offers privacy, exclusivity and a proven track record. And the commute is fantastic.

I took a morning ride to the island one day, happy to be on that aquamarine sea. I watched quietly as uninhabited cays slid by on the horizon.

I saw little sea life, though, and asked the captain, 20-year-old Gerard Brown, about dolphins and whales.

Humpbacks migrate through these waters, he said, and are often seen from January to April.

"Haven't you heard about Jo-Jo?" he asked. I hadn't.

"Jo-Jo is our famous friendly dolphin. He follows the boats. One day a lady leaned over the side to pet him and he kissed her." He laughed.

I laughed, too, then turned quickly back to look at the water.

I had done pretty well spotting celebrities on this trip. Maybe I would get lucky and spot Jo-Jo. At least he wouldn't be hiding under a baseball cap. Hard as I tried, though, I couldn't get a glimpse of him. He was the only superstar I really missed.



Photographs by LUIS SINCO Los Angeles Times

THE LURE: *Balmy Turks and Caicos Islands, and the luxury resorts popping up there, are proving irresistible to the moneyed crowd. Above, Providenciales is among the more than 40 islands.*

Cost? A pirate's bounty

Tiny Turks and Caicos, 575 miles south of Miami, is flourishing and has developed some of the most luxurious resorts in the Caribbean. Here's a sampling of its posh resorts.



Photographs by LUIS SINCO *Los Angeles Times*

PARROT CAY

This 1,000-acre private island resort has 59 rooms, suites, beach houses and villas. In its days as a hideout for swashbuckling sailors, it was called Pirate Cay. Now it's a home away from home for celebs and wealthy travelers. Asian-inspired décor, yoga and a 16,500-square-foot spa. Rates: \$525 to \$10,000 a night.

P.O. Box 164, Providenciales, Turks and Caicos Islands, British West Indies; (877) 754-0726, www.parrotcay.com.bz.



GRACE BAY CLUB

Get a Caribbean vibe at this all-suite resort on striking Grace Bay Beach. Recently expanded and renovated, the resort has adults-only and family sections and fine dining at Anacaona Restaurant. Pools, spa. Rates: \$501 to \$8,470 a night.

P.O. Box 128, Providenciales; (800) 946-5757, www.gracebayclub.com.



SOMERSET ON GRACE BAY

This year-old resort on the powdery sand of Grace Bay Beach exudes classic elegance, with British Colonial accents and furnishings. One- to five-bedroom condos, infinity pool, fine dining at O'Soleil restaurant. Rates: \$275 to \$5,000 a night.

Princess Drive, Providenciales; (877) 887-5722, www.thesomerset.com.



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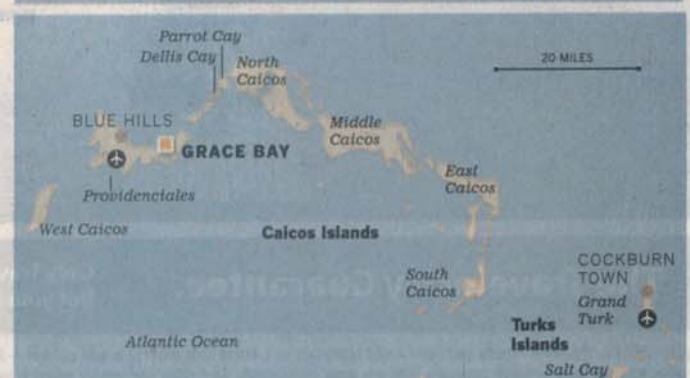
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REGENT PALMS

Also taking up residence on Grace Bay Beach is the Regent Palms, with 12 acres of lush landscaping, formal gardens and 164 Colonial-style rooms and suites in five separate buildings, as well as the elegant bar, pictured above. The rooms can be converted into one- to three-bedroom suites. Tennis court, 25,000-square-foot spa, pool and fine dining at Parallel23. Rates: \$325 to \$6,500 a night.

Grace Bay, Providenciales; (800) 545-4000, www.regenthotels.com/thepalms.



Source: ESRI