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TRAVEL

The wooden walkway at Somerset on Grace Bay leads down to a sandy beach and crystal waters.

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Tropical solution

The sun-splashed islands of Turks and Caicos will cure those winter blues

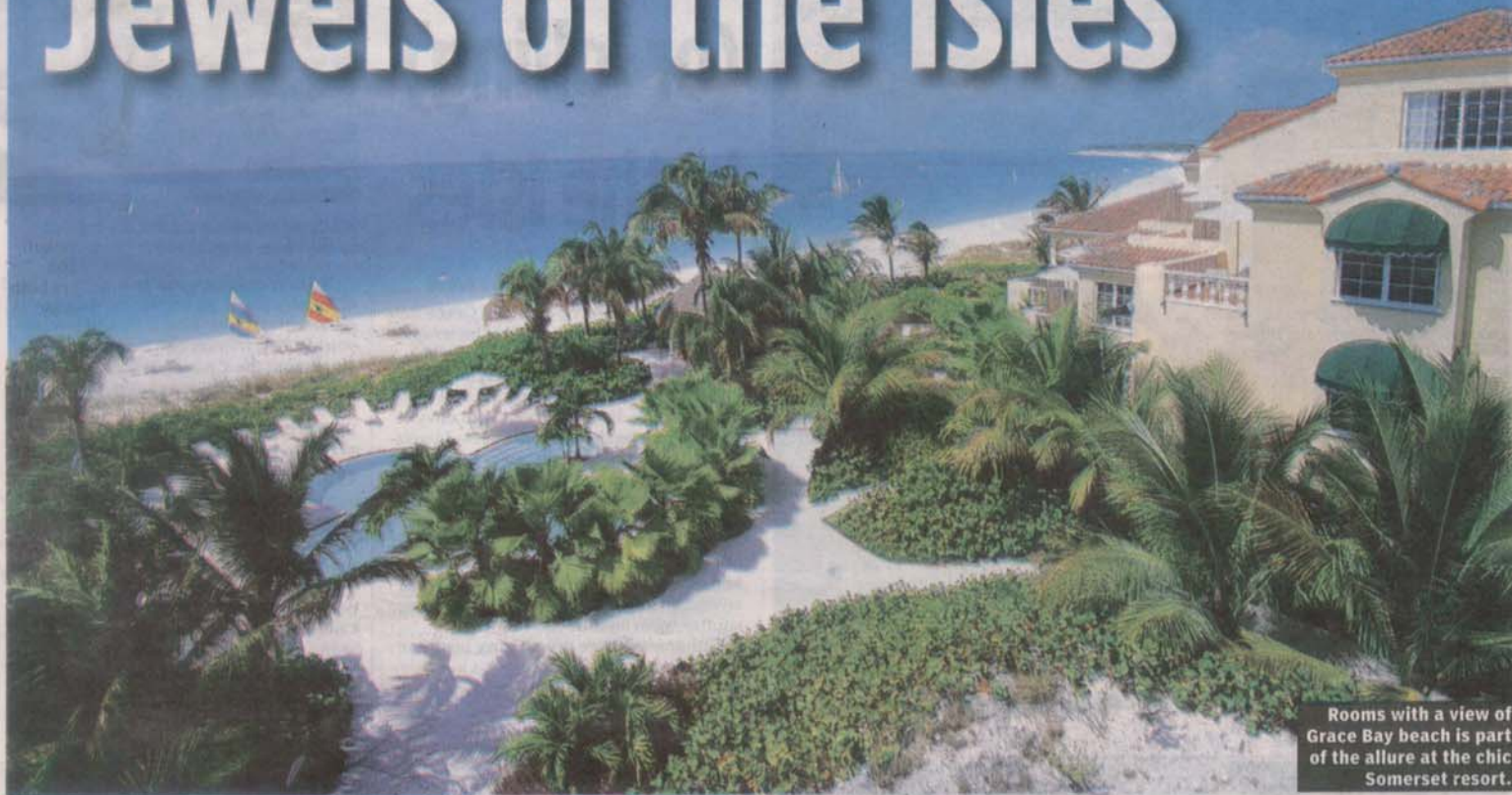
BY MICHAEL NASSAR



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Jewels of the isles



Rooms with a view of Grace Bay beach is part of the allure at the chic Somerset resort.

Find your beachfront bliss in Turks and Caicos

The most developed of the 40-strong chain of islands that constitutes Turks and Caicos, Providenciales — or Provo, as the locals call it — is no mere gateway, but a destination unto itself.

Pristine nature and crystal blue waters coexist easily alongside chic hotels and elaborate spas. And since Provo is also a nonstop flight from New York, the powdery Turks and Caicos beaches are a lot closer than you'd imagine.

Here's our insider's guide to an easy, relatively affordable escape from civilization that's never less than civilized:

Water, water everywhere

Yes, the water down here is really as blue as the postcards promise. That's because the islands lie on the edge of two undersea mountaintop plateaus, creating shallow wading beaches of turquoise water.

With one of the most extensive reef systems on Earth, there are a number of underwater sites for even a novice snorkeler to explore. Wade into Grace Bay and you will quickly see fish dart in and out of a myriad of colorful sponges and coral (just be careful not to touch or kick any part of the fragile reefs).

More seasoned divers can dive along the edge of an awe-inspiring abyss a quarter-mile out, staring into the dark where the ocean floor rapidly drops off to as deep as 7,000 feet, as turtles and eagle rays glide silently by.

Silverdeep (www.silverdeep.com) can arrange a local boat tour for the less adventurous, or take divers and snorkelers further afield to Middle Caicos or one of the many uninhabited — and less trafficked — cays like Pine or Dellis. Little Water Cay also makes a fun stop — to check out the crowd of endangered rock iguanas that have taken over the island.

It's only 15 minutes on a puddle-jumper over to Grand Turk's Columbus Passage, where between January and April the entire pod of more than 1,500 Atlantic humpback whales migrates to the warm waters between Grand Turk and Salt Cay to calf and mate.

Take a tour out on the water to listen to the world's greatest natural symphony — a whale concert that can be heard for miles around (www.saltcaytours.com).

Try soaring high above the beach — up to 500 feet — in a safe and fun parasail,

which combines the thrill of parachuting, hang-gliding and sailing all at once. Families or friends can fill a boat and then fly solo, tandem or even three at a time. Or try riding the Big Yellow Banana — an inflatable, banana-shaped vessel — as you and up to 10 people try to hold on while rocking and rolling over the waves (www.CaptainMarvinsParasail.com).



Spa sensations

Caribbean spas have come a long way from the days of the "coco-loco" massage, and Turks and Caicos is no exception.

Lie back and take pleasure in the amazing sensation of tiny droplets of essential oils being applied along your spine during the Little Drops of Caribbean Rain treatment at the plush, lush Regent Spa. It's the perfect antidote to your flight here, bringing your body back into alignment. Or indulge in Zareeba, the exclusive

90-minute island detox that will have you stirring up your own witch's brew of boiling herbs in a private sweat lodge (www.regentpalms.com).

Parrot Cay is a private island favored by celebrities looking to unwind out of sight of the paparazzi. It also features one of the best spas in the Caribbean, the COMO Shambhala Retreat, combining 100 unspoiled acres with luxury pampering. Find your Zen in indulgent Indian Ayurvedic therapies, like a warm-oil Abhyanga massage or Shirodhara, to stimulate your "third eye." Then hang around for the guided meditation, yoga or Pilates (www.parrotcay.como.bz).

Stylish or sublimely secluded

If your tastes are more SoHo than SoBe, then chic Somerset on Grace Bay is the place to haul out your Prada flip-flops.

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An extensive reef system makes Turks and Caicos a popular dive destination.

Strolling (or lolling) in the isles

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Laying on the sandy powder of Grace Bay beach, you might nevertheless be tempted to stay inside — rooms here are extravagantly sized apartments with full kitchens and living and dining areas that will turn cramped city dwellers green with envy. A few rooms even boast ocean-view Jacuzzis on the balcony (www.thesomerset.com). When you need seclusion, look no further than Amanyara, the first Caribbean offshoot of Asia's famous Aman Resorts. Nestled in the low-lying tropical foliage of Point Pond Nature Reserve, the timber and glass guest pavilions open up to the environment on three sides (or you can shutter them against the elements).

Either way, there are no nosy neighbors to intrude on your privacy — it's just you and the dramatic coast in luxurious surroundings (www.amanyara.com).



A hot-oil massage makes it very easy to find your bliss at Parrot Cay.

No matter where you end up in the land of infinity pools, no sunset can be complete without watching it sink below the world's first infinity bar. Stretching 90 feet across the Grace Bay Club beach and down to the shore, it's cool by day — and downright wicked as the sun dips beyond the horizon and the adults come out to play (www.gracebayclub.com).

On the horizon

The 6,000-acre uninhabited island of West Caicos — home to the 500-acre Lake Catherine, a natural wildlife sanctuary and breeding ground for pink flamingos; and Molasses Reef, rumored to be the final resting place of Christopher Columbus' Pinta — will open its shores at the end of this year to a unique resort that's the result of a public-private collaboration with the Turks and Caicos government.



Caribbean view from the infinity pool at Somerset on Grace Bay

Molasses Reef, a Ritz-Carlton Reserve, will marry the legendary service of Ritz-Carlton in conjunction with the eco-imperative of maintaining a minimal footprint at two national parks and archeological sites. If it's a success, it may prove a blueprint for future eco-sensitive developments around the world (www.WestCaicosReserve.com).

Affordable alternatives

Like almost every other friendly, easy-going Caribbean island, the cat has been let out of the bag: Provo is seeing its

share of condo development and second-home subdivisions that are slowing driving prices up higher and higher.

The good part of that news is that many of these developments also enjoy double lives as amenity-heavy, beachfront condo-hotels, renting out apartments and rooms while the owners are away, or offering teaser rates to prospective buyers while construction continues on other phases of the resort.

Now, more than ever, is the time to take advantage, before getting priced out

(unless, of course, the economy tanks, in which case there'll be plenty of million-dollar suites to be had for a song).

Speak with your travel agent about putting together a package deal — a winter's week on the beach, including airfare, can still be had for about \$1,000. ♦

wanna go?

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if you go...

American Airlines now offers daily direct service from JFK to Provo in 2½ hours — you'll never want to connect through Miami or San Juan again (www.aa.com).

With such an easy commute it's no wonder that 90% of tourists to Turks and Caicos are American. English is the official language and U.S. dollars are the official currency. Note, however, that as a former British colony they still drive on the left side of the road.

Of the 40 islands, only eight are inhabited by people. Discover your own private refuge (and a whole lot more) at www.turksandcaicostourism.com.



The facials at the Regent Palms will leave you with a healthy glow.