

Why Turks & Caicos?

Expert April Hutchinson says:

They've come a long way from the days when their key attraction was a conch farm on Providenciales and the main places to stay were all-inclusives, such as Club Med and Beaches. 'Provo' and its 39 sister islands (only a handful are inhabited) now offer a more sophisticated menu of nature-focused pursuits and incredible places to stay, including headliner Parrot Cay, with its celebrity-packed villas. More of a place for nature-lovers than clubbers, the big focus is bumming around on beaches (Grace Bay is the country's poster-child) or getting stuck into the array of activities above or below water. (Visit between December and April, and you might spot migratory North Atlantic humpback whales.) This certainly isn't a shopping spot either, but what it does offer by the bucketload is true sleepy charm, interesting wildlife and beaches so pretty you'll weep.

Parrot Cay

Who'll love it: Spa-goers, honeymooners and celebs.
Because: There's something special about waking up, padding down through manicured gardens — or straight off your deck, if in a beach house or villa — and being on one of the world's most incredible beaches, knowing you're one of only a handful who will ever scrunch its sand between your toes. This private island is 400-plus hectares and there's little beyond Parrot Cay's beach, its pretty, muslin-draped rooms and the Como Shambhala Retreat spa, where you loll baby-like from the arms of one therapist to another.

Travel's tip: The main hotel feels a little dated — and the restaurant lacks soul; stick to poolside food at Lotus.
Book it: Bailey Robinson (01488 689700, baileyrobinson.com) has seven nights at Parrot Cay from £3,256pp, B&B, including flights.

Grace Bay Club, Providenciales

Who'll love it: Friends and foodies.
Because: One of the original hotels on Grace Bay, it now has 82 super-sized American-style rooms, most with kitchenettes. The hotel is handily split into two sections, the adults-only hotel and the family-friendly 'villas', each

ON THE MENU

Grab the chance to eat Caribbean Queen Conch guilt-free on the only Caribbean island where it's farmed. The white meat is sweet, mild and a little clam-like. At Anacaona, the 'Tasting of Conch' includes a chowder, a salad and a gorgeous golden fritter

Amazing grace: below, the pool at Grace Bay Club in the Turks & Caicos; clockwise from top left: aerial view of Bavaro Beach, Dominican Republic; smokin' local; shadow play; flamingoes at Barahona; walking the dogs at Hotel Todo Blanco; lobster as served at Casa Bonita

with its own pool and restaurant. Hotel boss Nikheel Advani is determined to prove the Caribbean can do good food and he drives the annual island food festival. His restaurants here are oceanfront Anacaona, Grill Rouge (peppered with flashes of red), and the poolside Krave, while Jars is a beach pop-up serving everything... in jars. There's also a decent spa, a butler and a kids' club — but above all, the friendly service is what keeps people coming back.

Travel's tip: Rooms are a bit noughties in decor, but a redesign is on the way.
Book it: Carrier (01614921354, carrier.co.uk) has a seven-night stay from £2,140pp, B&B, including flights.

Gansevoort, Providenciales

Who'll love it: City-slickers with floppy sunhats, chic kaftans and Kindles.
Because: This alabaster goddess on Grace Bay is so soothing it's practically yoga. There are wide white loungers by the pool, pristine white tablecloths in the restaurant and white parasols gleaming in the sun. The other Gansevoorts are in NYC, and this one's got the confidence of the city — it's just that here all the rooms have sea views. Staff are on top of their game.

Travel's tip: On the topic of yoga, don't let the morning class clash with breakfast; right beside the restaurant, the teacher gives instructions via a microphone.
Book it: Doubles from £275, B&B (0016499417555, gansevoort hotelgroup.com).



Why the Dominican Republic?

Expert Fiona Dunlop says:

The DR has always been perceived as package-holiday central. And yes, it has golf courses, beach-buggies and safari-trucks, but also a mountainous interior speckled with pretty villages and a desert inhabited by iguanas, as well as a stunning Colonial capital that gives Havana a run for its money. Palm-lined beaches edge much of the eastern and northern coasts, then there's cool Cabarete and the lush, unspoilt Samaná peninsula for hiking, riding, diving, whale-watching and/or lotus-eating. On the wild southwest, mountains tip into pounding surf before flattening into the spectacular Bahía de las Águilas.

Hotel El Beaterío, Santo Domingo

Who'll love it: Indie travellers, history buffs and music aficionados.
Because: Smack in the heart of Santo Domingo, the Caribbean's oldest capital, this guesthouse makes a brilliant base. Converted from a 16th-century convent, it cuts an historic figure, though the 11 spacious rooms around a patio come with air-con and wi-fi. After a day exploring Santo Domingo's backstreets, museums and breezy seafront, the hotel's roof terrace offers a quiet retreat. Come nightfall, you are just steps away from a range of merengue and bachata clubs and bars where you can hang out long into the night.
Travel's tip: Rates include a basic breakfast; you'll find better nearby.
Book it: Doubles from £60, B&B, payable in cash (0018096878657, elbeaterio.com).

Casa Bonita Tropical Lodge, Barahona

Who'll love it: Outdoor types and design fans.
Because: This place blasts you away with its stupendous views. Clinging to the hillside, its 12 thatched rooms with balconies are impeccably kitted out, but it's outside you'll want to be. In the garden, the infinity pool seems to drop over the cliff, and in the stunning, open-sided restaurant great local produce is served with big smiles. Beyond lies a large, privately owned forest reserve, where you can wander, whizz along a kilometre-long zip-line or have a massage in the riverside spa.
Travel's tip: Don't expect calm beaches — surfing is the thing here. Take a day-trip to the Bahía de las Águilas.
Book it: Doubles from £170, room only (00180954005908, casabonitadr.com).

Hotel Todo Blanco, Las Galeras, Samaná

Who'll love it: Couples, divers and nature-lovers.
Because: Todo Blanco is a stylish yet affordable hotel located on a pristine beach at the very tip of the Samaná peninsula. Eight large rooms, each with tiled floors and generous balconies, feature loads of white (hence the name *todo blanco*, 'all white'). Even better they all overlook a lush garden, beach and magnificent bay. In the restaurant (opens Dec-May), the menu is dominated by authentic Italian dishes and seafood. Fishing boats hauled up nearby can be hired to head out to other beaches, such as the glorious Playa Rincón.
Travel's tip: Las Galeras remains delightfully sleepy, so short on nightlife.
Book it: Doubles from £67, room only (0018095380201, hoteltodo blanco.com) >

NATURE NOTES
 Watch out for rhinoceros iguanas (with their horn-like snout); they skulk about close to Casa Bonita. They might look scary, but they're a lot more afraid of you than a rhino would be