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Tropical Fish, Magical Sunsets, Conch and Iguanas: Turks and Caicos provides everything for families

South Florida Parenting

Snorkeling, sailing, sunbathing, a pirate-themed resort pool for kids and the world's largest conch farm are just some of the family attractions awaiting you in the Turks & Caicos Islands.

"On our next vacation, I want to learn to snorkel," our 8-year-old daughter exclaimed as I picked her up at school. Her third-grade class was studying the "Creatures of the Sea" and some of her friends shared their snorkeling experiences with the class.

That evening, my husband announced, "I need a vacation!" as he came through the door.

So I began combing through slick travel magazines and scanning the Internet for a family-friendly beach resort that would meet all of our family's desires. My husband wanted an all-inclusive resort with daily activities. I wanted a beautiful beach to walk along at sunset, and our daughter wanted to swim and snorkel in warm water.

One magazine touted Grace Bay Beach on the island of Providenciales as one of the best beaches for diving and snorkeling in the world. On the Internet, I found Beaches Resort and Spa at Turks and Caicos, a family oriented, all-inclusive Sandals resort located on Grace Bay. It offered land and water sports, children's programs and a great location.

On to Provo Southeast of the Bahamas in the British West Indies are about 40 small islands and cays called the Turks and Caicos. Some are inhabited; others are barren. One is a sanctuary for more than 1,000 rare rock iguanas. Providenciales, also known as Provo, is part of the Caicos western island chain. Turks consists of the eastern islands separated from Caicos by a 22-mile-long passage.

Provo is only a 65-minute flight from Miami. The weather is usually sunny with an average temperature of 83 degrees F. English is the most common language.

Gus, our cab driver, told us the island of Providenciales has an extremely low crime rate, and the islanders are called "belongers." Most are descendants of slaves brought to the island by British Loyalists. Others came from Bermuda to work in the salt industry.

After only a few minutes on Provo, we knew this was not St. Thomas or Nassau. Provo is dry and rocky with scrub brush, yet the surrounding waters are a brilliant turquoise blue. Crowds and noise are refreshingly lacking.



Gus delivered us to Sandals' Beaches Resort and Spa on Grace Bay. It's the largest resort on the island, catering to multigenerational families.

Many grandparents enjoy the pools, restaurants and Grace Bay's white sand beach with their children and grandchildren. All food, liquor, child care, land activities and sports are included in the lodging fee.

At check-in we received a colorful bag filled with bottles of shampoo, conditioner, lotion and shower gel. Our room in the newer French Village area of the resort had garden and pool views. The mahogany, four-poster, king-size bed was soft and elegant; but the sofa bed for our daughter was springy and uncomfortable.

A choice of food and fun The Beaches Resort offers a choice of international dining options. For our first evening, we chose the continental-style Schooner restaurant overlooking Grace Bay Beach.

The all-you-can-eat Alaskan king crab legs we ordered were piled high on our plates. The following morning our breakfast at family-friendly Giuseppe's featured a huge buffet of fresh fruit, breakfast rolls, made-to-order omelets, cereals, pancakes and large delicious scones.

The resort's kids' extravaganza, Pirate's Island, caters to 6 years and up from 9 a.m. to ??? p.m. Situated around a huge wooden pirate ship, this area has waterfalls, caves and two waterslides. Inside the ship is a '50s diner, Bobby D's, serving pizza and mac 'n' cheese and featuring a soft-serve ice-cream sundae bar.

There is also a game room with numerous electronic games and a jungle room with air hockey, billiards and foosball tables.

Complimentary snorkel and dive boat trips are offered in the morning and afternoon. Our daughter was excited, yet fearful. Our first trip was a boat ride out to Pink Elephant in the Princess Alexandra Nature Preserve.

As our snorkel guide gave instructions, our daughter placed a life vest over her head and readied her mask and tube. When the anchor was thrown overboard, she became frightened and begged to stay on the boat while we jumped in.

After a pep talk from her dad and the instructor, she followed us and another little girl into the warm water. Holding my hand she finally put her facemask in the water and pointed to a sea turtle grazing on sea grass. At first I thought she might get scared, instead she swam above this friendly creature as it gave us a tour of its underwater home.

Strawberry grouper swam among parrotfish and yellowfin. Colorful coral decorated the sea floor. It was an experience we will never forget.

After a buffet lunch at the Tex-Mex Cantina, we took a catamaran and sailed along Grace Bay in hopes of seeing some bottlenose dolphin. We never did, but many do.

On the way back, we decided to sign up for another snorkel trip. This time we went out to The Cut, a 10-minute boat ride to the outer reef. We jumped into an underwater fantasy of friendly stingrays dancing near our feet and schools of red snapper swimming by our side.

Huge sea cucumbers rested on the shallow floor next to beautiful coral shaped much like the human brain.

For dinner we enrolled our daughter at Pirate's Island, where she ate with other kids at Bobby D's while we sampled escargot, p ate, duck a' la orange and whitefish at adults-only Le Petite Chateau.

Another night the whole family enjoyed the show at Kimonos, as a Japanese chef came to our teppanyaki table and sliced, diced, saut ed and tossed the cooked items onto our plates.

Islands to explore Next morning after breakfast and a Pilates class at the Temple of Relaxation, we toured the island. Since this is a British colony, we were hesitant to rent a jeep and drive on the left side of the road. Instead we asked the front desk for a guide to drive us around.

Our guide, Andryell, drove us past numerous condominium developments under construction. As we approached the leeward side of the island, he dropped us off at a boat marina where tour boats take visitors to Little Water Cay or Iguana Island. A 10-minute boat ride took us to a barren island inhabited by thousands of rock iguanas. This particular species exists nowhere else on Earth. We wished we had brought snorkel gear, because the water teemed with brightly colored fish.

After returning to the marina, we drove by the Caicos Conch Farm, a smelly place that bills itself as the world's only conch farm. Islanders eat the succulent flesh of the oversized mollusks in conch chowder, conch fritters, conch salad, conch burgers and conch sushi.

The farm breeds these endangered delectables for both local and overseas markets - in an effort to save the queen conch from extinction. Tours are available for visitors to learn more about this unique Caribbean food.

Driving toward Chalk Sound National Park, we stopped at the Cheshire Hall Plantation, where cotton and sugar cane were once grown. Now in ruins, the plantation thrived for about 30 years in the 1800s and is one of the key historic attractions on the island. Unfortunately, it was closed for the day by the time we arrived.

Along the way, our daughter noticed numerous dogs along the side of the road. "Oh those are pot cakes," Andryell said. These wandering dogs are named after the food at the bottom of a pot. Food scraps and pan scrapings are tossed to them daily after the family dinner. Two years ago, 5,000 of these animals roamed the island. Today their number is down to about 2,000, thanks to an active spay-neuter program.

Sad to go home again After three days on the island, we felt like belongers. Reluctantly we placed our bags into a car to be taken to the small airport. As we paid a \$12-per-person-airport-departure fee, we sadly waved goodbye to our new friends.

Providenciales was better than we expected. The Beaches Resort offered all the activities my husband wanted. We all enjoyed swimming in the warm waters of Grace Bay and watching the magenta sunsets. Our daughter was thrilled to swim with many of the colorful and friendly underwater creatures she learned about in her class.

Turks and Caicos is a relaxing vacation destination that should be experienced soon. In five or 10 years, it will be much more developed and crowded than it is today. Now is the time to go and enjoy the pristine white beaches, swim in unpolluted water and meet the friendly islanders above and below the sea.

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