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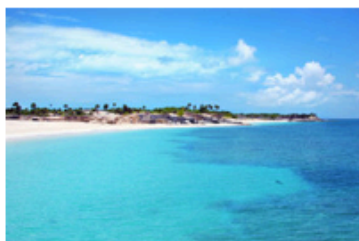
Island Paradise Awaits on the Turks and Caicos Islands.

By Kate Parham

Kate Parham is a freelance food and travel writer. You can learn more about Kate's travels at www.kateparham.com.

As soon as I spit into my mask, strapped on my flippers and jumped into the water, I could not believe my eyes. Neon-bright fish darted to and fro amid radiant reefs, and an angry-looking barracuda swam past, followed by a shark that looked a bit too large for my liking. Although I didn't have to swim for my life at that moment, I was able to swim for my supper later that afternoon -- diving for conch on a tour led by guides Kwee and Robens from Caicos Dream Tours.

"You don't catch, you don't eat," Kwee taunted us. Back into the water we went, each of us vying for the largest conch. Our guides then led us to a private beach where we waded through the pool-blue surf, spying starfish while sipping tropical drinks, while Robens began transforming our mollusks into a delicious snack of conch salad with tomatoes and green peppers.



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Such is the life on the Turks and Caicos Islands. Surrounded by the world's third-largest coral reef, the Turks and Caicos Islands have some of the most ethereal waters in the world, with waves rarely rising above a gentle ripple. The deep-water passage separating the Turks from the Caicos islands has made this remote locale a hot spot for scuba divers, and Grace Bay Beach on the island of Providenciales -- Provo in the local patois -- has been deemed the best beach in the world by Condé Nast.

<p>▼</p> <p>Where to stay</p> <p>The Regent Palms</p> <p>Rooms from \$450 to \$2,750</p> <p>800-967-9044</p> <p>www.regenthotels.com/provider/hotel-tc/tcturks</p>	<p>Amid the natural beauty of Provo (the most well-known of the islands) sits the perfect paradise, the Regent Palms Resort. The resort fronts the much-lauded Grace Bay Beach, and it is truly a 12-mile stretch of heaven. Beach and water stretch for miles, uncluttered and pristine. Were it not for the small army of hotel staff on hand to attend to your every need, you would almost feel alone.</p>
<p>What to do</p> <p>Caicos Dream Tours</p> <p>649-231-7274</p> <p>www.caicosdreamtours.com</p>	<p>Want to have a private dinner on the beach? Done. Martinis and a massage by the pool at midnight? No problem. The 72-suite luxury resort is there to please. And please, it does. With enormous suites -- complete with spacious walk-in showers and open kitchens outfitted with Viking appliances -- you'll never want to leave your room. Of course, once you take a look at the infinity pool or the diamond-clear ocean, you'll have just the motivation you need to venture outside.</p>
<p>Where to eat</p> <p>Parallel23</p> <p>800-967-9044</p> <p>www.regenthotels.com/provider/hotel-tc/tcturks/dinings</p> <p>Coyaba</p> <p>649-946-5186</p> <p>www.coyabarestaurant.com</p>	<p>The good life begins with pitchers of rum punch at the ultra-casual beachfront eatery da Conch Shack. Sitting at a brightly painted picnic table, the dish du jour is obvious: conch. Cracked conch (think calamari). Conch ceviche. Beautiful golden brown conch fritters. Conch chowder. Each dish better than the last. What was once used by the island's indigenous people, who carved the spiral shells into tools, musical horns and ceremonial objects, is now the second most popular edible snail (behind escargot) and is known for its mild, sweet clamlike flavor.</p>
<p>da Conch Shack</p> <p>649-946-8877</p> <p>www.conchshack.tc</p>	<p>Be sure to eat your fill because dinner on the island starts late. "People don't eat until at least 8:30, when the breeze picks up," says J.S. Richer, head of food and beverage at the Regent Palms' restaurant, Parallel23. The dining room channels a cool, elegant vibe with a color palette of white, silver and light blue; French doors open to a terrace that is set</p>

for service. Or, diners can watch the chefs work in the expansive open kitchen. The restaurant specializes in tropical fusion, and our heirloom tomato salads, fresh seafood and foie gras, and, yes, conch -- paired with Montaudon's crisp Grande Rose Brut champagne -- was wonderful.

The restaurant's chefs also can prepare in-room meals for guests of the resort, a service I was happy to take them up on. Among the dishes presented for my private patio-dining experience were truffled quail and succulent ostrich fillets and, again, fresh conch salad.

The next evening brought me to Coyaba, where award-winning chefs create Caribbean-influenced cuisine in an atmosphere that was like dining amid a lush, tropical garden. Among the specialties of the house: octopus carpaccio, gorgonzola gnocchi, whole red snapper and garlic-crusteD corn on the cob. I barely had room for coconut ice cream and chocolate wontons, but somehow, I managed to devour every last bite.

It was just as well -- I would need all my strength for the next day's agenda of power relaxing at the resort's stunning 25,000-square-foot spa. Here, guests enjoy treatments in individual cabanas surrounded by water, including the signature Zareeba massage, an indigenous purification ritual that uses a blend of freshly brewed therapeutic herbs followed by a cooling wrap and a toxin-releasing body massage. A new healthy bistro addition specializing in light fare like sashimi and watermelon gazpacho is set to open soon, meaning you will never need to leave this heavenly area. It is, like the rest of the island, paradise, pure and simple.