

# The Best of the Turks & Caicos Islands

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For years, the Turks & Caicos Islands' considerable natural attributes were known to just a fortunate few—many of them divers and snorkelers exploring the ring of pristine coral reefs and dramatic drop-offs of the continental shelf wall. But the sun-kissed archipelago is undiscovered no more: Overnight, it seems, resorts, restaurants, and tour operators have sprung up like mushrooms after a spring rain. Construction along the beautiful 19km (12 miles) of Grace Bay Beach is fashioning a lineup of sleek condos and resort hotels, and the tourist infrastructure is racing to catch up. Notoriously potholed dirt roads have been ironed smooth, and a brand-new Hotel School at the Grace Bay Club is helping train a first-generation hospitality community.

Even with all the madcap development the islands have undergone in the last 5 years, the Turks & Caicos Islands (or the “TCI”) have retained their getaway-vacation feel. The islands are best appreciated if you prefer your pleasures laid-back. If your idea of entertainment is 24-hour steel drums on the beach or a superheated nightlife, you may be disappointed (I take that back—there’s always Club Med). The partying is more the beach-shack-and-a-beer variety, with shade from casuarina trees and unencumbered views of turquoise seas.

This is not to say that you can't get your fill of high-adrenaline outdoor adventures. You can scuba-dive a vertical undersea wall where the continental shelf drops a heart-stopping mile deep (*Scuba Diving* magazine named the TCI one of the top 10 best diving sites in the world). You can parasail high over Grace Bay and actually swim alongside humpback whales or velvety stingrays. You can cast a line for bonefish, reef fish, night fish—or free-dive 6m (20 ft.) down to the sea bottom for fresh conch.

Still, what is most remarkable, in even the most heavily touristed spots like Grace Bay, is what you *don't* experience. You never hear the roar of jet skis or scores of motorboats (the coral reef is a protected

national park and simply too shallow in spots to allow an onslaught of powerboats and personal watercraft). You don't see giant water parks rising up over the horizon. You aren't stepping over sunbathers packed cheek by jowl. You aren't confronted by an army of pushy hucksters roaming the beach.

And don't even bother coming if you're looking for a shopping spree. Chain retailers and superstores have yet to make inroads here—no Gap, no Target. You won't even see those mega T-shirt shops that have become ubiquitous in many seaside resorts. You *can* buy T-shirts, for sure, both of the generic tourist variety and more personalized versions, at boutique shops scattered about in the few retail clusters on Provo. You can find good art by local and regional artists in established galleries. Home furnishing shops are opening in ever-increasing numbers, and luxury brands from all over the world are sold at upscale resort boutiques.

In fact, you won't find a typical chain-*anything* here, so if you can't go 3 days without a fast-food burger, you may be a little grumpy after a week on the TCI. But you can get more-than-acceptable non-chain burgers, pizzas, and any kind of Western-style grub you desire—as well as some of the best food in the Caribbean. Expect to pay bruising big-city prices for anything you eat, however; it's tough to grow anything in this parched, sandy terrain, and a lot of what you eat is flown in daily.

Indeed, if you like your Caribbean islands thrillingly lush and mountainous, the dry scrubland terrain of the TCI may underwhelm you. But if you dream of lying on a pristine parcel of sugary sand encircled by a mesmerizing aquamarine sea, or want nothing more than to spend an afternoon happily bubbling about a living, breathing coral reef with mask and snorkel, book a trip now.

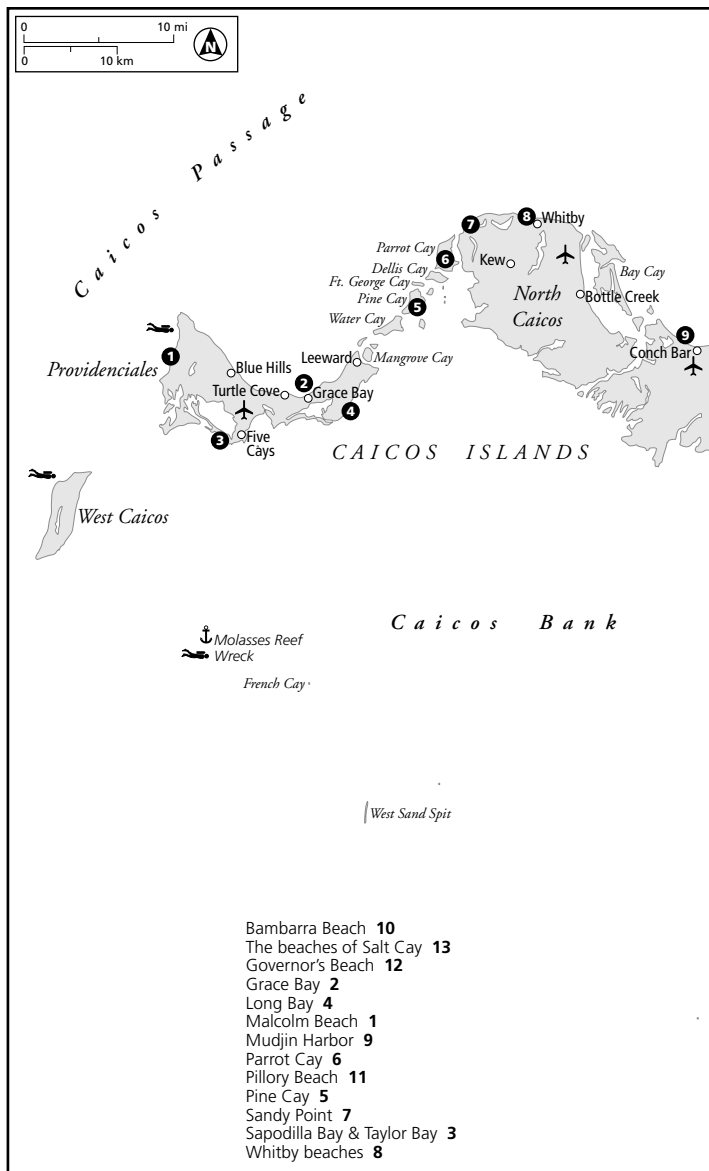
For a thumbnail portrait of each island, see “The Islands in Brief,” in chapter 2.

## 1 The Best Beaches

Surrounded by the world's third-largest coral reef, the Turks & Caicos Islands have some of the finest powdery-sand beaches and most ethereal turquoise seas in the world. Most are just minutes away from an airport, and you'll rarely have to vie for beach space with anyone else. Tour boats can whisk you to uninhabited cays where you can play Robinson Crusoe for a day. The waters are pristine and diamond-clear, and waves rarely rise above a gentle ripple—perfect for young kids and snorkelers of all ages.

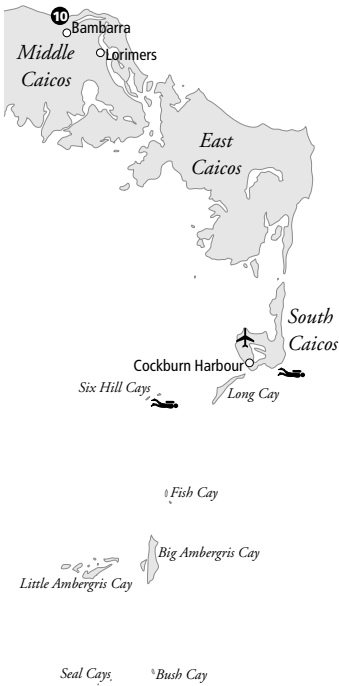
- **Grace Bay** (Providenciales): These 19km (12 miles) of pale sands and azure seas are the pride of Provo; for the third year running, Grace Bay Beach was named the World's Leading Beach at the 2007 World Travel Awards. An increasing number of resorts and condo hotels have sprung up along the shore. Like much of the TCI, the beach is fringed by a coral reef system with fabulous snorkeling and diving. See chapter 5.
- **Malcolm Beach** (Providenciales): The traditional way to see this charming cove (often referred to as Malcolm Roads Beach) is with a 4x4 along twisting, bumpy Malcolm Roads. You can also access the beach by staying at Amanyara (the resort is adjacent to the beach) or by getting a tour-boat operator to take you there. Its waters are part of the Northwest Point Marine National Park. See chapter 5.
- **Long Bay** (Providenciales): The calm, shallow waters of this quiet beach on Provo's southeastern shore make it perfect for young children. Take a horseback ride on the beach here with Provo Ponies. See chapter 5.
- **Sapodilla Bay and Taylor Bay** (Providenciales): Part of the Chalk Sound National Park, these beautiful, shallow bays along Provo's southwest coastline have soft, silty bottoms and warm water. See chapter 5.
- **Pine Cay** (Caicos Cays): The money shot in *Caribbean Travel & Life's* coverage of the 2005–06 winter season? A photograph of this private island's perfect crescent of sand, ringed by azure seas. It's the front yard of the Meridian Club resort. See chapters 3 and 5.
- **Parrot Cay** (Caicos Cays): Another gorgeous private island, this one with a secluded beach graced by beach bums of the celebrity variety. See chapters 3 and 5.
- **Sandy Point** (North Caicos): Up until now, only boaters and those in the know found their way to this spectacular beach, within sight of the Parrot Cay Resort. Ground was broken in 2006 for construction of the Royal Reef Resort, a luxury hotel and condos fronting the beach. See chapters 3 and 5.
- **Whitby beaches** (North Caicos): The coves of **Three Mary Cays** are prime snorkeling spots. Step into the shallows of the palm-fringed **Pelican Point Beach** (in front of Pelican Beach Hotel) and find conch shells of every size. Lovely **Horsestable Beach** has enjoyed its North Caicos seclusion for years (it's also a prime bird-watching spot); now it's the home of a luxe condominium resort. See chapters 3 and 5.

# Best Beaches in the Turks & Caicos Islands



A T L A N T I C

O C E A N



- **Mudjin Harbor** (Middle Caicos): This beach is as stunning seen from the limestone cliffs towering above as it is up close. You can explore the wind-swept coves and turquoise shallows below. See chapter 5.
- **Bambarra Beach** (Middle Caicos): Casuarina trees fringe this picturesque, untrammled beach. Its shallow aquamarine waters are the site of the festive Valentine's Day model sailboat races, and the Middle Caicos Day beach party is held here in August. See chapter 5.
- **Governor's Beach** (Grand Turk): Grand Turk's most celebrated beach has great snorkeling and is a popular picnic spot under shady pines. It's in the Columbus Landfall National Park—more about Columbus's "landfall" later—and within sightlines of the new Grand Turk Cruise Center, which in 2006 began welcoming 2,000-passenger ships 2 to 3 days a week. See chapter 6.
- **Pillory Beach** (Grand Turk): The Bohio Dive Resort is set on this handsome stretch of Grand Turk beach. See chapter 6.
- **The beaches of Salt Cay:** This tiny island has some of the best snorkeling beaches in the Caribbean. The calmest waters are usually found on North Beach and Point Pleasant. See chapter 6.

## 2 The Best Outdoor Adventures

The waters here are superlative for all kinds of outdoor adventures, from diving and snorkeling to sailing, kayaking, and fishing. But watersports aren't the only game in town. You'll find prime golf and tennis facilities in Provo—and Rollerblade hockey is all the rage with local school kids. See chapters 5 and 6 for more on outdoor sports.

- **Snorkeling the islands:** The snorkeling opportunities are excellent throughout the islands, whether the Caicos Cays, North Caicos, Middle Caicos, South Caicos, Grand Turk, or Salt Cay (which some claim has the country's best snorkeling). But you don't even have to leave Grace Bay to find great snorkeling. The government has established snorkel trails at Smith's Reef (just outside Turtle Cove) and Bight Reef (right in front of the Coral Gardens resort; the hotel even has an on-site dive-and-snorkel instructor). These reefs are right off the shoreline, providing easy access into a fragile but beautiful world. See chapter 5.
- **Taking a beach cruise** (Caicos Cays): A number of tour-boat operators offer variations on half- and full-day beach sojourns. Your trip may include a stop on **Little Water Cay**, a protected nature reserve inhabited by a colony of rare rock iguanas;

snorkeling the coral reefs and diving for conch; or combing the beaches of uninhabited cays for sand dollars and other shells. See the “Caicos Watersports Operators: Master List” box on p. 106

- **Riding horses on the beach** (Long Bay, Provo): You don't need a whit of riding experience to thoroughly enjoy a leisurely late-afternoon trot on a beautiful beach. The gentle mounts of Provo Ponies are perfect for novices, but they don't mind kicking it up a bit for proven riders—they love the beach, too. See chapter 5.
- **Strolling Grace Bay before sunset:** You'll be surprised at the long stretches of beautiful beach you have all to yourself. The sand is a little cooler, and the water takes on the pink and purple hues of the setting sun. Stop in and sink into an inviting white-cushioned perch at the **Lounge** (p. 91), the oceanfront bar at Grace Bay Club, and sip a cocktail while you wait for the green flash on the horizon during sunset (seeing it is said to bring good luck). See chapter 5.
- **Watching the glowworms glow:** Four or five days after a full moon, millions of glowworms come out just after sunset to mate—lighting up the shallow local waters with a sparkling green glow. You can see them on a glowworm cruise in the Caicos Cays or off any number of Caicos Bank docks. The show is over after the females devour the males when the mating ritual ends. See chapter 5.
- **Hiking or biking the Crossing Place Trail** (Middle Caicos): This old coastal road, first established in the late 1700s by settlers working the local plantations, has been reopened from the Conch Bar to the Indian Cave field-road section and is now a National Trust heritage site. It has heartbreakingly beautiful sections, some on bluffs overlooking the blue-green ocean shallows and rocky outcrops; others bordered by island brush that includes wild sea-island cotton, remnants of the 18th-century plantations, and elegant sisal. Follow hiking or biking trails; when you get hot, take a swim in the shallow coves below. Be sure to visit **Conch Bar Cave**, a massive aboveground limestone cave system that was used by Lucayan Indians some 600 years ago. See chapter 5.
- **Diving the Wall off Grand Turk:** You can find great scuba-diving spots throughout the TCI, including spectacular opportunities off Provo's Northwest Point and in West Caicos. But Grand Turk's electrifying dives are just some 274m (900 ft.) offshore,

where the continental shelf drops off from the coral reef in dramatic fashion. Along the ledges of this sheer wall is marine life in all its eye-popping plumage. See p. 109.

- **Whale-Watching on Salt Cay:** From January through April, humpback whales migrate along the 7,000-foot trench of the Columbus Passage (which runs btw. the Turks islands and the Caicos islands) to the Silver Banks to mate and calf. You can actually snorkel and swim alongside these 15m (50-ft.) creatures. See chapter 6.
- **Finding treasures on the beach:** The currents drop off a good amount of flotsam on these windward TCI beaches—much of it worthless junk. But hey, one man’s trash is another man’s treasure. Nearly every island has a visionary artist or two who finds inspiration (and raw materials) in beach salvage. Of course, you never know what will wash up: In 2006, silver pieces of eight and an 18th-century spyglass were picked up on the Salt Cay beaches. And bottles containing messages have found their way here from all over the world; the Turks & Caicos National Museum even has a collection of messages in a bottle. The water’s edge also yields gorgeous shells, from snow-white sand dollars to queen conch shells—but remember: Always return a shell back into the sea if it has something living inside. (And shell collecting is not permitted in the national parks.) See chapters 5 and 6.

### 3 Frommer’s Favorite Luxury Resorts

Most of the country’s accommodations are on Providenciales, where more and more resort/condo hotels are being constructed as this is written.

- **Amanyara**, Northwest Point, Provo (☎ 866/941-8133): The Amanresorts’ first foray into the West Indies is a hit, deftly marrying pampered luxury with a laid-back Turks & Caicos aesthetic; the name means “peaceful place.” The guest pavilions are beautifully appointed in typical Aman teakwood and state-of-the-art big-kid toys, and are utterly private. See p. 77.
- **Parrot Cay Resort**, Parrot Cay, Provo (☎ 877/754-0726): Yes, this is the exclusive island resort where Ben Affleck married Jennifer Garner and Bruce Willis owns a home. But it’s also a pretty wonderful place to completely unwind and de-stress, whether you’re stretched out on the secluded beach or thrilling



- to a treatment by a Balinese masseuse at the world-class COMO Shambhala spa. See p. 79.
- **Grace Bay Club**, Grace Bay, Provo (☎ 800/946-5757): One of the Grace Bay pioneers continues to reinvent itself, and everything, from the spacious luxury suites to the unparalleled service, is first-rate. Don't expect attitude, however; this is one of the warmest, most welcoming spots in town. You can even have a private dinner served to you under the stars on the beach. See p. 65.
  - **The Regent Palms**, Grace Bay, Provo (☎ 866/877-7256): There are no bad rooms at this gorgeous resort, with infinity pools, shops, restaurants, and a 25,000-square-foot spa with reflecting pools. It offers both serenity and a lively nightlife, with the Plunge Bar heating up at sunset. See p. 68.
  - **The Meridian Club**, Pine Cay, Provo (☎ 866/746-3229): This is luxury of a different kind, where 12 comfortable beachfront suites—sans TV, phones, radios, even air-conditioning—on a secluded private island offer the kind of solitude and serenity found in few places in the world. The beach and water-sports opportunities are superb. See p. 81.
  - **Point Grace**, Grace Bay, Provo (☎ 866/924-7223): Set on a stunning bend on Grace Bay Beach, this resort gets consistent high marks for its spacious, handsomely furnished British-Colonial-style suites, lovely pool, and ultra-romantic restaurant, Grace's Cottage, one of Provo's top places to dine. See p. 67.
  - **Grand Turk Inn**, Front Street, Grand Turk (☎/fax 649/946-2827): The big, comfortable suites are laid-back luxury personified. The innkeepers, sisters who've lived all over the world, are hospitality pros, and their loving restoration of the 150-year-old Methodist manse has created Grand Turk's best accommodations. See p. 132.
  - **Windmills Plantation**, Salt Cay (☎ 649/946-6962): It's hard to put a label on a place so emblematic of its original owners' singular tastes and whims. But if you like your luxury lodgings with a distinctly boho flavor and more than a touch of whimsy, head here to tiny Salt Cay's only high-end resort. From afar, the otherworldly setting resembles some dusty island outpost out of *Alice in Wonderland*; the roofs of the inn's fanciful structures are splashed in bright blues, reds, and yellows. See p. 148.

## 4 The Best Moderately Priced Lodgings

Let's face it: Bargain hotel rooms in Provo are increasingly few and far between (you can still find affordable lodging on the other islands, however). Keep in mind that one way to save on hotel rates is by taking advantage of the special packages advertised on most hotel websites, offering decreased rates and extra perks with extended stays. You can also find good hotel (and hotel/air) packages on popular travel-booking websites like Expedia and Travelocity, particularly in the off season (mid-Apr to Nov). And don't forget to look into villa rentals (see chapter 2 for more information). Here are my choices for the best of the islands' less-expensive accommodations.

- **Sibonné Beach Hotel**, Grace Bay, Provo (☎ 800/528-1905): This place gives you a room just steps away from the waters of Grace Bay for a steal. Small and charming Sibonné is one of the oldest resorts on Grace Bay, and its rooms—all of which have sea views, by the way—are nothin' fancy but nicely appointed. But the real steal is the oceanfront apartment with full kitchen and two patios—one screened and one open, each with a melt-ingly lovely view of Grace Bay that many of the more chichi resorts would die for. See p. 76.
- **Caribbean Paradise Inn**, Grace Bay, Provo (☎ 877/946-5020): The owner, Jean Luc Bohic, has a little gem of a B&B here, a 2-minute stroll from prime Grace Bay Beach. All rooms are set around the tropical courtyard and pool. The gourmet restaurant Coyaba moved here in 2006, bringing in a lively scene at night. See p. 75.
- **Comfort Suites**, Grace Bay, Provo (☎ 888/678-3483): This is a comfortable place to stay; the pool area is attractive, and the suites are spacious. And the location is prime: 1 block from Grace Bay and just across from the Ports of Call shops. See p. 76.
- **Pelican Beach Hotel**, Pelican Beach, North Caicos (☎ 649/946-7112): The price is right at this small, comfortable spot smack-dab on Pelican Point. Rooms are admittedly nothing special, but the beach is grand—and the food, cooked by owner Susie Gardiner, is superb home-style island fare. See p. 83.
- **Osprey Beach Hotel**, Duke Street, Grand Turk (☎ 649/946-2666): You're in the thick of the Duke Street action, yet you're just steps away from the solitude of the island's southwestern beach. Many of the rooms have four-poster beds and cool white linens, and all are large and clean; those in the main section

have private oceanfront patios. You'll see lots of familiar faces from all over the island at the barbecue around the pool every Sunday and Wednesday night. See p. 135.

- **Island House**, Lighthouse Road, Grand Turk (☎ 649/946-1519): The British-born owner, Colin Brooker, is charm personified, and his small inn perched on a Grand Turk hill has killer views of the sea and the island's gently sloping green bluffs. The freshwater pool lies in a lovely courtyard filled with tropical vegetation. You aren't on the beach, but Colin provides all his guests with a vehicle to get around the island. See p. 133.
- **Bohio Dive Resort**, Front Street, Grand Turk (☎ 649/946-2135): Set in a prime location on beautiful Pillory Beach, this hotel has big, clean rooms (the suites have kitchenettes) and offers reasonable dive/lodging packages. It has a good restaurant and a bar overlooking the beach. See p. 132.

## 5 Frommer's Top Family Resorts

The TCI is as much a first-rate family destination as it is a top honeymoon retreat. You'll find plenty of properties that go out of their way to entertain and pamper the kids. Here are my top choices for great family fun.

- **Beaches Turks & Caicos**, Lower Bight Road, Provo (☎ 800/232-2437): Beaches just walked away with another World Travel Award for best family resort. And why not? It's got Sesame Street characters making appearances, camps and activities for kids of all ages, kid-specific restaurants, and a full-service nursery. See p. 60.
- **Grace Bay Club**, Grace Bay, Provo (☎ 800/946-5757): The setup here couldn't be better for accommodating both families and romantic twosomes—each has its own set of villas, pools, and restaurants. The resort's Kids' Town is the premier kids' activity program in the TCI, with a wonderful array of things to do (and a treehouse, even!) and a tireless leader in Morgan Luker. See p. 65.
- **The Sands at Grace Bay**, Grace Bay, Provo (☎ 877/777-2637): This has always been one of the top spots in Provo for families (fully equipped kitchens, nice pool, great beach), and with its recent makeover and refurbishment, it's better than ever. It even has a giant toy box near the beach with all sorts of wonderful beach toys for the kids. See p. 73.

- **Royal West Indies**, Grace Bay, Provo (☎ 800/332-4203): This sprawling resort is another spot that deftly accommodates both families and couples, with full kitchen facilities and a great kiddie pool set apart from the “Quiet Zone” pool. See p. 73.
- **Ocean Club Resorts**, Grace Bay, Provo (☎ 800/457-8787): It’s family fun all the time at these popular resorts, with day camps, great pools, and kitchens. See p. 72.
- **Parrot Cay Resort**, Parrot Cay (☎ 877/754-0726): Yes, this celeb magnet is actually a big softie for kids. It’s especially kid-centric during the Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays, when families come for long stays and the activities director seeds the shallow waters with colorful conch shells for a kids’ treasure hunt and plants messages in bottles on the beach. See p. 79.

## 6 Frommer’s Favorite Dining Experiences

You will eat very well indeed on these islands, whether dining on fresh conch in an outdoor beach shack or sampling a chef’s multi-course tasting menu in an elegant five-star resort. Here are some top picks.

- **Anacaona**, Grace Bay, Provo (☎ 649/946-5050): The setting for the Grace Bay Club’s premier restaurant is unbeatable: You’re seated under the stars, surrounded by flaming torches, on a tiered and lushly planted landing overlooking Grace Bay Beach. The food is as good as the ambience. See p. 91.
- **Aqua Bar & Terrace**, Turtle Cove, Provo (☎ 649/946-4763): It’s not fancy (the patio chairs are plastic), but it’s seriously good, and the bonhomie is contagious. This is one of my favorite spots to dine in Provo, with a deck overlooking Turtle Cove and a great chef. See p. 98.
- **Baci Ristorante**, Turtle Cove, Harbour Towne, Provo (☎ 649/941-3044): This Italian restaurant has a fabulous setting on the docks of the Turtle Cove marina. Lacy iron doors lead out to terraced outdoor seating on the water. The food is standard Italian—fettuccine Alfredo, lasagna alla Bolognese—but hearty and good, and a break from all that conch. See p. 99.
- **Coco Bistro**, Grace Bay, Provo (☎ 649/946-5369): Most everyone who eats here comes away happy. It’s both a special-occasion place (with a romantic setting) and a foodie haven. Owner/Executive Chef Stuart Gray is a hardworking, hands-on guy—you’ll see him hollering out food orders as the glitterati swoop in. See p. 91.

- **Da Conch Shack**, Blue Hills, Provo (☎ 649/946-8877): Da Conch Shack is one of those irresistible spots that has it all: a great setting (outdoors on a Blue Hills beach), good, fresh food (conch pulled out of its shell on the beach below and prepared to order), and a joyful, laid-back, barefoot vibe. See p. 87.
- **Grace's Cottage**, Point Grace Hotel, Grace Bay (☎ 649/946-5096): You'll see plenty of couples holding hands on these candlelit cottage patios (located outdoors and pillowed in tropical vegetation)—but when the grub arrives, it's every man for himself. New chef Mario Larese is bringing an inventive menu to the beach. See p. 92.
- **Hemingway's on the Beach**, Grace Bay, Provo (☎ 649/941-8408): With a location this good (right on Grace Bay Beach, under the stars at the Sands on Grace Bay resort), this spot doesn't have to be this dependable. But it's packed day and night, largely because the food is consistently tasty and fresh. Everyone serves conch chowder, but few are as good as Hemingway's. See p. 95.
- **Magnolia Restaurant & Wine Bar**, Turtle Cove, Provo (☎ 649/941-5108): The view alone is worth the trek up the hill above Turtle Cove marina, but the food easily stands on its own. Seared rare tuna is a house specialty. Have a drink and watch Grace Bay glitter. See p. 100.
- **Mango Reef**, Royal West Indies Resort, Grace Bay, Provo (☎ 649/946-8200): It's not on the beach (it overlooks one of the resort's pools), and it's certainly not luxe. But this comfortable, casual spot is one of those places where the food is so consistently good you'll look for excuses to eat here. Look around; you'll see locals, business folk, and other savvy diners chowing down. See p. 95.
- **Pat's Place**, Historic South District, Salt Cay (☎ 649/946-6919): Pat taught school on Salt Cay for 28 years. She now serves home-style island cooking on a modest porch behind her home. You'll feel like Mom is behind the stove when she brings out her family-style platters of barbecued chicken, potato salad, and peas 'n' rice. See p. 149.