

1 Beachcomber Islands

Aquatic Playgrounds . . . 2

Life's a Beach . . . 14

Unvarnished & Unspoiled . . . 21

Sailing Along . . . 32

Diving's the Thing . . . 38

Storied Sand & Surf . . . 45

Archipelagos & Atolls . . . 51



Fraser Island

Where Sand Is King

Australia

Sand is just sand, right? Well, Fraser Island may change your mind about that. Lying just south of the Great Barrier Reef, this is the world's biggest sand island, an ecological marvel where ancient eucalyptus rainforest actually grows out of dunes up to 240m (787 ft.) high. You'd expect it to have beaches, but to have an uninterrupted surf-foamed Pacific beach running the length of the island for 120km (75 miles)—now that's something special. Only problem is . . . you can't swim there. The currents offshore are just too strong, and the shark population is just too, well, sharky. But there's an easy way around that: Go inland, where Fraser Island offers so many places to swim, it's like nature's biggest water park.

Set into the sand dunes of Fraser Island are more than 100 little freshwater lakes, ringed with dazzling white sand that's pure silica—whiter sand than the big Pacific beach, in fact. Some, like brilliant blue **Lake McKenzie**, sprang up when water filled hardened hollows in the dunes; others, like emerald-green **Lake Wabby**, were created when shifting dunes dammed up a stream. Shallow, swift-flowing **Eli Creek** is as much fun as a lazy river ride—wade up the creek for a mile or two and then let the current carry you back down.

You should, of course, spend some time on **75-Mile Beach**—it's actually a highway you can drive along with a four-wheel-drive vehicle (the only cars allowed




Previous page: Cape Hatteras beach. Above: Fraser Island.


on this island). A rusted wrecked luxury steamship, the ***Maheno***, sits right on the beach, offering a rare chance for nondivers to see a shipwreck up close; just north of the wreck loom gorgeous erosion-sculpted ocher cliffs called the **Cathedrals**. At the northern end of the beach, you can dip into the ocean in the spalike bubbling waters of the **Champagne Pools** (also called the Aquarium for their tide-pool marine life), shallow pockets of soft sand protected from the waves by a natural rock barrier.


With no towns and few facilities apart from low-profile ecotourism resorts, Fraser Island has been maintained as a no-frills destination for folks who love wildlife better than the wild life. It's a place for camping out, bird-watching, and bush walking through eucalyptus woods and low-lying "wallum" heaths that offer a spectacular wildflower display every spring and summer. Its fringing wetlands feature pristine mangrove colonies and sea-grass beds, where dugongs and swamp wallabies thrive. And from August

to October, Fraser Island is one of Australia's best sites for seeing humpback whales returning to Antarctica ⁴⁸⁶ with their calves in tow (book whale-watching tours, as well as dolphin- or manatee-spotting tours, from local resorts). Dingoes even run wild here, one of the purest populations anywhere—what's more Australian than that? —HH

i Tourist information, 262 Urraween Rd., Hervey Bay (☎ 61/7/4215 9855 in Australia, or 1800/811 728; www.frasercoast.holidays.info), or www.fraserisland.net.

 Hervey Bay (15km/9½ miles).

 45 min. by catamaran or barge from Hervey Bay.

 \$\$ **Fraser Island Backpackers YHA**, Happy Valley (☎ 61/7/4127 9144; www.fraserislandco.com.au). \$\$\$ **Kingfisher Bay Resort**, West Coast (☎ 61/7/4120 3333, or 1800/072 555 in Australia; www.kingfisherbay.com).

2

Aquatic Playgrounds

Koh Phuket

Pearl of the Andaman Coast

Thailand

This classic volcanic island not only has beaches but also has fabulous views of beaches—and of shimmering turquoise seas and emerald green hills dotting the horizon. Before Phuket was devastated by the tsunami that struck Indonesia on December 26, 2004, the beautiful island province of Phuket (pronounced Poo-get), on the Andaman Coast of Thailand, enjoyed a bubbling tourism market drawn to its stunning beaches, balmy Indian Ocean seas, and mellow vibe. In fact, during high season, the island's prime beaches were packed with holiday revelers (and some of

the island towns, like Patong, took on a certain seedy overdevelopment), and Thailand's largest island quickly went from a hideaway of the beach-loving cognoscenti to the country's leading holiday destination. Then the tsunami struck, killing some 7,000 people in Thailand and virtually wiping out resorts on Phuket's beautiful west coast.

Today this island has rebounded spectacularly from the catastrophe, with most of the destroyed properties rebuilt and new luxury resorts rising up all over the island. The seas are clear, and underwater

BEACHCOMBER ISLANDS

coral gardens are reputedly back to pre-tsunami splendor (fishermen even report spotting large schools of fish they haven't seen for years).

Phuket is directly connected to the Thailand mainland at the island's northern tip by the **Sarasin Bridge**. Renting a car is the best way to see the island, but driving the cliff-hugging roads on hairpin turns can be heart-stopping—on the roads in Phuket, anything goes. With a car, you can beach-hop the west coast and stop in at **Phuket Town** to shop and see colonial mansions built by the moneyed set when the island economy revolved around tin and rubber production. You can head to the island's last rainforest, located in the **Khao Phra Thaw Royal Wildlife Reserve**. Here you can hike and stand beneath waterfalls and perhaps spot the bloom of the rare *Rafflesia*—the “corpse flower”—which looks and smells like rotting flesh.

The island's west coast offers the most cinematically beautiful palm-fringed beaches, many of which have starred in such Hollywood films as *The Beach*, *Rescue Dawn*, and *The Man with the Golden Gun*. **Kata** and **Karon**, on the island's southwest coast, are two of Phuket's finest beaches. Just north of Patong, **Kamala Bay**, **Surin Beach**, and **Bang Thao Beach** have secluded resorts on smashing beaches for those who want to hit the action in Patong but don't want to sleep there. North of the main resort areas, **Nai Yang**, part of **Sirinath National Park**, has few facilities but a fantastic beach fringed with casuarina pines. A coral reef just offshore makes for great snorkeling.

You can participate in just about any watersports on the island, but the diving around Phuket is particularly world-class.

Fantasea Divers (☎ 66/7628-1388; www.fantasea.net) offers dive packages and PADI certification courses in addition to full-day dives around Phuket. **Scuba Cat**, in Patong (☎ 66/7629-3120; www.scubacat.com), offers a full range of trips for anyone from beginner to expert. The snorkeling is great on Phuket, too, with right-off-the-beach opportunities at places like **Nai Harn Beach** and **Relax Bay**.

You'll have no trouble finding a viewing spot that offers cozy seating and sun-downers to watch the red-tinged sun melt into the darkening sea. Of course, if you're after more bustling nightlife, head to the 3km (1¾-mile) beachside strip at **Patong**. Lit up like a seedy Las Vegas in miniature, it's got bars, nightclubs, discos, malls, and such familiar Western chains as Starbucks. It also has hundreds of “hostess” bars, so you may want to take the family elsewhere. —AF

 **Tourism Authority of Thailand** (TAT), 191 Klang Rd., Phuket Town (☎ 66/7621-2213; www.tourismthailand.org).

 Phuket International Airport.

 **\$\$\$ Indigo Pearl Resort**, Nai Yang Beach and National Park (☎ 66/7632-7006; www.indigo-pearl.com). **\$\$\$ Le Royal Meridien Phuket Yacht Club**, 23/3 Viset Rd. (☎ 800/225-5843 in the U.S. and Canada; www.lemeridien.com).

The Lido di Venezia

The Lido Shuffle

Italy

Yes, Venice ⁴⁰⁶ itself is an island, or rather a huddled mass of islands. There's water *everywhere*. Nevertheless, when the Venetians want a day by the sea, they head to another island: the Lido.



While some adventurous tourists make it out to the Venetian lagoon's other islands (p. 420), very few opt to spend their precious days in Venice at the local beach. If you're traveling in the summer, however, know that Venice can get mercifully muggy and few hotels offer swimming pools. With kids in tow on my last visit, I knew we needed to include a beach day in our vacation. The Lido was the perfect solution.

Centuries ago, the Doge's navy sailed out from this long, thin barrier island, which separates the lagoon from the Gulf of Venice, an arm of the Adriatic Sea. Nowadays it's easily reached by the ACTV waterbus—there's a direct boat from the train station (#35), though the #1 vaporetto also sails over once it's finished cruising the Grand Canal. The lagoon side of the island is traced by a shady promenade with superb Venice views, while a strip of beach runs along the 18km-long (11-mile) gulf front; they're linked by the Gran Viale, which leads from the waterbus landing to the beach.


Facing the sea across palm-lined Lungomare Marconi, you'll find two sister bastions of old-world resort elegance, the **Hotel des Bains** and the **Westin Excelsior**; each has its own private beach, a Riviera-style strand with deck chairs and cabanas. (Visconti's classic film of Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* was filmed at the

Hotel des Bains and its beach.) The more egalitarian public parts of the Lido beach (along Lungomare G. D'Annunzio) are more of a family hangout, though you can expect to see a few topless sunbathers and men in incredibly skimpy Speedos. (And there were my boys in their baggy surfer jams.) The broad strip of fine-grained golden sand was convivially crowded, so we could combine sunbathing with people-watching. Protected by a system of outlying dikes, the waters lapsing the beach are calm and shallow, great for youngsters (our youngest was only 4 at the time), and almost ridiculously warm, practically like a bathtub. The bottom's a little sludgy, but blessedly free of the rocks or sharp shells that make wading a problem in the New England waters we were used to.

During the Venice Film Festival every September, the Lido is a hot spot, thanks to the 1930s modernist **Palazzo del Cinema**, and the adjacent Art Deco **Casino**, which has become a secondary venue since it closed for gambling in 1999. —HH

 **Tourist information**, Fondamente San Lorenzo  **39/041/5298711**; www.turismovenetia.it).

 **Aeroporto Marco Polo**.

 \$\$\$ **Locanda Ai Santi Apostoli**, Strada Nuova, Cannaregio  **39/041/5212612**; www.locandasantiapostoli.com). \$\$ **Pensione Accademia**, Fondamenta Bollani, Dorsoduro  **39/041/5210188**; www.pensioneaccademia.it).

Majorca

Vamos a la Playa

Balearic Islands, Spain

The most recreationally tricked-out of Spain's playground Balearic islands, Majorca is also the largest and most popular of the archipelago. With a holiday atmosphere that lasts almost all year and fun beachy things to do for all ages and tastes, Majorca has much more to offer the active traveler than the one-trick-pony party isle of Ibiza ²⁴⁶ or the tiny, trendy getaway of Formentera ¹⁸³.


Majorca (note that the island's name is just as often spelled "Mallorca," which is the Catalan version—double *L* or single *J* in the middle, it's the same place) holds the dubious distinction of being one of the global "pioneers" of package tourism. In the 1950s, droves of sun-starved Brits and Germans began streaming in on charter flights, and the trend has never really let up. Majorca remains *the* no-brainer beach getaway for much of northern Europe. When chalky-white, soon-to-be-lobster-toned mainlanders take over the shores of Majorca every summer—and the situation is most extreme in August—Majorca can cease to feel like a place with any kind of cultural identity. However, that's typical of many sunny Mediterranean locales—Spain's Costa Brava and Costa del Sol aren't much different. So what if the best beach real estate has been snapped up by sterile hotels that look like a tangle of beached cruise ships? That kind of in-your-face holiday atmosphere can be great fun as long as you know what to expect. Majorca still has plenty of unspoiled corners along its pretty coastline of pine-backed coves, and if you're looking for a social holiday, you certainly won't be disappointed.

Majorca's capital city of **Palma** is a vibrant and charming metropolis with a population of a quarter million, as well as

splendid architecture and colorful street life. From June to August, Majorca's northern and eastern coasts are packed to the gills, as that's where the best beaches are. Party animals should head for **El Arenal**, south of Palma, where the revelry transitions seamlessly from the sand to enormous discos that feel like Oktoberfest-by-the-Sea. North of Palma, you'll find almost exclusively Brits—and lots and lots of merriment—at **Magaluf** beach. Nearby **Santa Ponça** is where the Scottish and Irish go, and the resort's Celtic-themed architecture is supposed to make them feel right at home. **Puerto de Andratx** is not yet overrun with the package tour set, so go now before the buildings and golf course that are underway here draw in the masses. Halfway up the northwest coast, the seaside town of **Valdemossa** is quieter (practically dead at night) and is where Michael Douglas and Catherine Zeta-Jones have a house. Over on the east coast, **Port d'Alcúdia** is an altogether stress-free place, great for families. On any of these beaches, you'll find the full complement of watersports, though **jet skis** remain the most fashionable water-borne thrill on Majorca.

The flip side to the potentially chaotic coastal scene is that Majorca is blessed with the most dramatic interior of any of the Balearics, and exploring that splendid mountain scenery is a highlight that too few visitors take advantage of. You'll need a car to get around even a fraction of the 3,640-sq.-km (1,405-sq.-mile) island. The **Serra de Tramuntana** mountain range dominates the northwest coast—take a day away from the sand to drive up to the island's spectacular highest point, **Puig Major** (1,445m/4,741 ft.). Away from Palma and the coast is also

where the best self-catering villas and *agriturismos* are to be found, often in panoramic hilltop locations. —SM

 www.illesbalears.es or www.mallorca.spain.net.

 Palma-Sont San Joan.

 From Barcelona (3½ hr.), and from Valencia (4–7 hr.). **Transmediterránea** ( 34/90-245-46-45).

 \$\$\$ **Can Furios**, Camí Vell Binibona, Binibona ( 34/97-151-57-51; www.canfurios.com). \$\$\$ **La Residencia**, Son Canals, Deià ( 34/97-163-90-11; www.hotel-laresidencia.com).

5

Aquatic Playgrounds

Grand Bahama Island

Grand Vacationland

The Bahamas

On a map, Grand Bahama Island looks like a razor-tooth saw, its spindly fingers of sand stretching out into the deep blue sea. The history of this island is rife with tales of ships wrecking on the shallow reefs that trace the island's 97km (60-mile) shoreline. Its very name, in fact, is derived from the Spanish phrase for "great shallows": *gran bajamer*.

From the air, the island is distinguished not so much by the landscape as by the seascape, flashing that sumptuous Bahamas blue, which segues from teal to turquoise in a flicker of sunlight. Here in The Bahamas the land and the sea are eternally intertwined. This coral reef archipelago is a low-lying chain of some 700 islands, 2,000 cays, and scores of rocky outcroppings dotted along the southern Atlantic Ocean—see p. 36, [241](#), and [254](#) for info on more islands in the chain. The northernmost island of The Bahamas is Grand Bahama, just 84km (52 miles) due east of Palm Beach, Florida.

This 155km (96-mile) island has all the best attributes of a typical Bahamas island (and some say a few of the worst, including overdevelopment, particularly in bustling **Freeport**, the island's largest city). Largely flat, sandy scrubland, Grand Bahama has fine, snow-white beaches; calm, shallow coves perfect for swimming and snorkeling; some of the best **scuba**

diving opportunities in the world (The internationally renowned diving school UNEXSO [www.unexso.com] is here); and a well-developed tourist infrastructure in the resort cities, with lots of hotels, restaurants, casinos, golf courses, and water-sports operators.

But dig deeper, and you'll discover another, less-frenzied Grand Bahama, one that is rich in history. This was the island, after all, where slaves freed by the British in the pre-Civil War years settled and staked a claim. Many of the older towns on the island were founded by these slaves and still bear their names. Grand Bahama is also the site of some significant Lucayan archaeological sites from a couple of centuries before Columbus threaded these islands in 1492. A Lucayan Indian burial ground is located in the world's largest underground system of limestone caves in what is now **Lucayan National Park**. Descendants of slaves still live on Grand Bahama; the Lucayans were wiped out by disease and hardships brought on by the European expeditions.

Like many other Bahamian islands, Grand Bahama has plenty of quiet pleasures. On its East End are idyllic, unpopulated beaches with names like **Fortune Beach** and **Barbary Beach**. (Of course, if you prefer beaches with a little more action, head to the island's southwest






Lucayan National Park.

coast to popular spots like **Xanadu Beach.**) In **Lucayan National Park**, on the island's north coast, wooden walkways lead through a mangrove swamp to one of The Bahamas' most beautiful beaches, **Gold Rock Beach**. It's a stretch of sand that reaches far into clear, shallow waters, with stingrays painting fleeting shadows on the waves. Even amid the bustle of Freeport you can discover the soul of The Bahamas, in the local straw crafts sold at the **Port Lucaya Marketplace** and the infectious *goombay* music played at Junkanoo celebrations and parades. —AF

 www.bahamas.com.

 Nassau (New Providence Island).

 \$\$\$ **Old Bahama Bay**, West End ( **242/350-6500**; www.oldbahamabay.com). \$\$ **Pelican Bay at Lucaya**, Seahorse Rd., Lucaya ( **242/373-9550**; www.pelicanbayhotel.com).

Aquatic Playgrounds

6

Isla Todos Santos

Surf's Up!

Mexico

Uninhabited but for shorebirds, sea lions, and harbor seals, tiny Isla Todos Santos is an oasis of peace and serenity in the Bay of Ensenada off Baja's Pacific coast. Just offshore is another story: Here in the cold, clear waters, the surf spits out monster 15m-high (49-ft.) waves during winter swells. The prime reef break is "Killers," where waves can reach heights of 18m (59 ft.) and over. It's found at the northwest tip of the island.

Actually two islands, Sur and Norte, Isla Todos Santos, located 97km (60 miles) below the California/Mexico border, has become such a major spot for giant waves that it has drawn big-time competitions, such as those leading up to the **Billabong**

XXL Global Big Wave awards (www.billabongxxl.com), considered the Oscars of big-wave surfing. The surfing world has come a long way since the goofy, giddy days of the famous Windansea Surf Club, formed in the early 1960s by a community of surfers from La Jolla, California. It was this group of surfing fanatics who first discovered, in their *Endless Summer* quests for the perfect wave, the monsters at Isla Todos Santos.

Why such huge waves in a spot where every other nearby beach has waves half the size? Like the perfect storm, the perfect wave is dependent on a number of factors. Surfers say that at Isla Todos Santos, the reef points directly into the mouth


of the swells, and a deep underwater canyon works to double the size of any wave that comes its way.

Once the site of abalone farms, the island now has a lovely cove and is also a favorite spot for kayakers, who paddle the bay in the company of dolphins and the occasional whale. **Humboats Kayak Adventures**, in Eureka (☎ 52/707/443-5157; www.humboats.com), offers combo camping/kayaking expeditions to Isla Todos Santos. Nature rules here, with superb tide-pooling, stargazing, and watching the occasional migrating gray whale cruise by. The fishing is pretty impressive here, too, with exceptional catches of large bonito, rock cod, whitefish, and yellowtail. For fishing expeditions, contact **Ensenada Sportfishing Works** (☎ 52/646/156-5151; www.ensenadasportfishingworks.com), which offers day and overnight trips and leaves from Ensenada, 19km (12 miles) away.

The island's pristine state can be directly tied to its inaccessibility: Isla Todos Santos can be reached only by boat. (Don't confuse Isla Todos Santos, the island, with Todos Santos, the town—the

latter is a coastal town located on the Pacific Coast side of the Baja California peninsula.) And if you come to surf, know that you don't just walk off the beach and catch a wave at Isla Todos Santos—in most cases, you need to be towed to the big reef breaks. If you don't have a boat, you can rent out a *panga* (skiff) with a driver in Ensenada. You can also get information on boats leaving for the island by visiting the **San Miguel Surf Shop**, Avenida López Mateos between Gastelum and Miramar, Ensenada (☎ 52/646/178-1007). Here you can get local surf reports and rent longboards, shortboards, and wet suits (you'll need the last in the frigid waters). —AF

 www.visitmexico.com.

 Tijuana or Ensenada (airport being built at press time).

 Ensenada (19km/12 miles).

 \$\$\$ **Casa Natalie**, Carretera Tijuana-Ensenada Km 103.3, Ensenada (☎ 888/562-8254 in the U.S., or 52/646/174-7373; www.casanatalie.com).

7

Aquatic Playgrounds

Marco Island

Mangrove Magic

Ten Thousand Islands, Florida, U.S.

On the map, the southern Gulf Coast of Florida almost looks like it's dissolving into the sea, with a maze of inlets and channels shattering the land into thousands of tiny islands. The largest mass, Marco Island is anchored to the mainland by an extension of Naples's Collier Boulevard, arcing over the water just enough to let boats skim underneath. Even Marco looks half-waterlogged because it's bisected by so many man-made canals.

Marco Island is the gateway to the Ten Thousand Islands, many of them wildlife

preserves teeming with dolphins, manatees, shorebirds, alligators, and the elusive Florida panther. Runaway real-estate development in the 1960s turned Marco itself into a condo-packed haven for snowbirds from the Northeast, but what it lacks in historic charm, Marco makes up for in sports options. Granted, most Marco-ites—residents as well as visitors—seem content to lounge in front of the high-rise resorts that line the island's **3½-mile-long (5.6km) crescent of sugar-sand beach**, waiting for spectacular sunset views. But


BEACHCOMBER ISLANDS

boaters and fishermen know that with just a little exploring, you can rediscover what made this island such a draw in the first place.

Game fishing is one of Marco's strong points, whether you go for tarpon, redfish, pompano, and snapper in the islands' calm backwaters, or head out into the Gulf for deep-water prey like grouper, king mackerel, barracuda, and cobia. Show up at the **Marco River Marina**, 951 Bald Eagle Dr. (☎ 877/864-0588 or 239/394-2502; www.marcoriver.com), or the **Cedar Bay Marina**, 725 Elcam Circle (☎ 239/642-6717; www.cedarbayrentals.com), to rent boats or charter fishing tours; or reserve ahead of time with **Sunshine Tours** (☎ 239/642-5415; www.sunshinetoursmarcoisland.com), **Six Chuter Charters** (☎ 239/389-1575; www.sixchutercharters.com), or **Marco Island Sea Excursions** (☎ 239/642-6400; www.seaexcursions.com).


To penetrate into the heart of the Ten Thousands Islands, however, kayaking or canoeing is your best bet. Just north of Marco Island, there's a self-guided canoe trail around Rookery Bay at the Southwest Florida Conservancy's excellent **Briggs Nature Center**, on Shell Island Road, off Fla. 951 between U.S. 41 and Marco Island (☎ 239/775-8569; www.conservancy.org), which also has a half-mile boardwalk trail through a pristine example of Florida's disappearing scrublands. At **Collier-Seminole State Park**, east of Marco Island off U.S. 41 (☎ 239/394-3397; www.floridastateparks.org/Collier-Seminole),

www.floridastateparks.org/Collier-Seminole), you can rent canoes to explore a 13½-mile (22km) canoe trail along the twisting mangrove-lined Blackwater River. For more experienced canoers and kayakers, there's the **Paradise Coast Blueway**, a network of paddling routes marked via GPS waypoints from Everglades City, at the tip of Everglades National Park, up the coast to the fishing village of Goodland, just southeast of Marco Island. Along the route, you'll pass through the mangrove estuary of the **10,000 Islands National Wildlife Refuge** (☎ 239/353-8442; www.fws.gov/refuges/profiles/index.cfm?id=41555) and the orchid-draped cypress slough of **Fakahatchee Strand State Preserve** (☎ 239/695-4593; www.floridastateparks.org/fakahatchcheestrand), where rangers occasionally lead guided canoe trips. This is what Florida looked like before the condos sprouted, and you'll have it all to yourself. —HH

 **Marco Island Area Chamber of Commerce**, 1102 N. Collier Blvd. (☎ 800/788-6272 or 239/394-7549; www.marcoislandchamber.org).

 Naples.

 15-mile/24km drive from Naples.

 **\$ Boat House Motel**, 1180 Edington Place (☎ 800/528-6345 or 239/642-2400; www.theboathousemotel.com). **\$\$\$ Olde Marco Inn & Suites**, 100 Palm St. (☎ 877/475-3466 or 239/394-3131; www.oldemarcoinn.com).

Aquatic Playgrounds

8

Vieques Island

Glow-in-the Dark Swimming

Puerto Rico, U.S.

It's almost like something out of a horror movie—the eerie blue-green glow of the waters around you, responding to every flitting fish and swirling oar. But far from

being some ghastly chemical calamity, the phosphorescence of Vieques Bay is a 100% natural phenomenon, and one you have to see to believe.



A beach on Vieques Island.

In 2003, the U.S. Navy closed its installation on the island of Vieques (pronounced Bee-ay-kase), off the coast of Puerto Rico, and since then Vieques has begun to boom as an ecofriendly—and still charmingly scruffy—destination. With some 40 palm-lined white-sand beaches, and reefs of antler coral offshore, Vieques—7 miles (11km) off the big island's east coast, only an hour by ferry—has an obvious sand-and-sun appeal. For years, Vieques has been where Puerto Ricans go to get away from the tourists on the main island. Snorkeling, kayaking, and fishing (both spin casting and fly-fishing) are hugely popular here, and the waterfront of the island's main town, **Isabel Segunda**, is lined with watersports operators, all of whom seem to be related to one another and cheerfully share business. That small-town casualness is one of the island's strongest appeals.

On the south coast, the panoramic crescent of **Sun Bay (Sombe) public beach** is a longtime favorite, located near the pretty fishing village of Esperanza, where

several watersports outfitters have shops as well. But since the Navy moved out, the beautiful white sands of **Red Beach (Bahia Corcha)** and **Blue Beach (Bahia de la Chiva)** have been opened to the public as well, as part of the huge **Vieques National Wildlife Refuge** (office on Rd. 200, Km 0.4; ☎ **787/741-2138**). The refuge is also a prime destination for superb bird-watching; endangered species such as the sea turtle, the manatee, and the brown pelican inhabit its mangrove wetlands and sea-grass beds.

Vieques's most unique feature is **Mosquito Bay**, just west of Isabel Segunda. It's nicknamed Phosphorescent Bay for the way its waters glow in the dark, thanks to millions of tiny bioluminescent organisms called pyrodiniums (translation from science-speak: "whirling fire"). They're only about one-five-hundredths of an inch in size, but when these tiny swimming creatures are disturbed, they dart away and light up like fireflies, leaving blue-white trails of phosphorescence, clearly

Island Hopping the Turks & Caicos: Barefoot Luxury

Overnight, it seems, this sun-kissed archipelago has become synonymous with tropical island luxury. A nation of low-lying coral islands just below The Bahamas, the TCI seemed content to be a laid-back place where you could soak up the sun and sip a sudsy Turks Head beer in a ramshackle beach shack. Sure, beach bums and divers already knew about these islands: The dry, flat scrubland terrain may be fairly underwhelming, but there was no way those turquoise seas, rich marine life, and luscious white-sand beaches could go unnoticed. It wasn't until the 1990s, however, that the Turks & Caicos took on a new persona. That's when a newly elected government opened its doors to development of the high-end variety. Today on the island of Providenciales, the 19km (12 miles) of **Grace Bay Beach**, the country's most famous stretch of sand, has a lineup of luxury resorts, each one the last word in barefoot luxury. And though said government is gone—its premier forced to resign amid allegations of corruption that included being perhaps a little *too* helpful to developers—the islands have emerged as one of the region's top destinations.

In spite of the ramped-up development, this British Protectorate has managed to retain its laid-back, “no worries” feel; even the upscale resorts have absorbed the warm, wry TCI outlook—no attitude here, thank you. If you're looking for scintillating nightlife—bone-rattling discos, say—you'll be sorely disappointed. On the TCI, the low-key beach-shack-and-cold-beer ethos still reigns. Most visitors island-hop by puddle jumper, although you can charter a boat (pricey) to get from one Caicos island to another, and a ferry runs between Provo and North Caicos, weather depending. This is not to say that visitors can't get their fill of outdoor thrills. You can scuba-dive a vertical undersea wall where the continental shelf drops a heart-stopping mile deep, swim alongside humpback whales and stingrays, cast a line for bonefish, or free-dive 6m (20 ft.) to the sea bottom for fresh conch. **Big Blue Unlimited** (📞 649/946-5034; www.bigblueunlimited.com) is one of the islands' top outfitters for watersports; they also offer kayaking eco-tours into North and Middle Caicos.

Here is what you *won't* experience on the Turks & Caicos islands: You won't hear the roar of jet skis or an army of motorboats—the shallow coral reef is part of a protected national park. You won't spend your beach time stepping over sunbathers packed like sardines or fending off pushy hucksters. But if you dream of lying on a parcel of sugary sand encircled by emerald seas, or want nothing more than to spend your days bubbling about a splendid coral reef with mask and snorkel, this is the place for you.

Grace Bay beach lies on the northeast coastline of 98-sq.-km (38-sq.-mile) **9 Providenciales (Provo)**, the archipelago's most developed island. This is where the action is, with the bulk of the country's lodging, dining, tours, and activities. Still, don't expect a bustling metropolis: Provo remains sleepier than most other Caribbean islands; that's a big part of its charm. The **10 Caicos Cays**, also called the Leeward Cays, are gorgeous little spits of sand. Some of these former pirate lairs are

now private islands with secluded resorts; others are uninhabited except by day-trippers beachcombing and snorkeling the shallows. Beach cruises among the cays is one of the TCI's most popular activities; **Silver Deep** (📞 649/946-5612; www.silverdeep.com) offers a range of excursions that let you snorkel, swim, fish, or hunt for sand dollars.

The projected site of the second TCI boom is 11 **North Caicos**; it has lovely secluded beaches and lush tidal flats. A causeway now links North to 12 **Middle Caicos**, the largest island in the Turks & Caicos. Middle has a remarkably varied landscape. Soft green slopes overlook beautiful **Mudjin Harbor**, where you can snorkel in bottle-green shallows. **Crossing Place Trail** is a raised 18th-century pathway named for the shallow sandbar that connects Middle and North at low tide. At **Bambarra Beach** the sunlit aquamarine waters stretch long into the horizon. 13 **South Caicos**, a still-sleepy fishing community of some 1,200 people, is hearing faint rumblings of tourist development. With its excellent diving and bonefishing opportunities and historic Bermudan-style architecture, "Big South" is an up-and-coming spot.

Separating the Caicos archipelago from the two Turks islands, to the east, is the **Turks Island Passage**, also known as the Columbus Passage. Christopher Columbus sailed into the New World via this waterway, and many historians believe the explorer made landfall on the island of 14 **Grand Turk**. Today this small gem of an island, the nation's capital and the keeper of the country's rich heritage, is recovering from a devastating 2008 hurricane. Still standing are the 150-year-old lighthouse, 19th-century Bermudian homes, and abandoned salinas from the salt-raking era. Grand Turk is one of the world's great diving spots, where the dramatically steep "wall" of the continental shelf lies just minutes from shore. **Blue Water Divers** (📞 649/946-2432; www.grandturkscuba.com) is one of the area's top dive operators. You can swim in the shallow water with stingrays at nearby 15 **Gibbs Cay**.

If getting away from it all is your bottom line, head to tiny 16 **Salt Cay** (pop. 60), little more than a spit of sand in turquoise seas. Salt Cay is missing many of the basic accouterments of 21st-century civilization, like ATMs and cars, but don't be fooled by its modest demeanor: People come from around the world to snorkel, dive, and whale-watch in the luminescent green seas and to comb its secluded beaches for flotsam and jetsam. Salt Cay is admittedly small (6.5 sq. km/2½ sq. miles), but it is a place of haunting beauty and enormous heart. —AF

📍 **Turks & Caicos Tourist Board**, Stubbs Diamond Plaza, Providenciales (📞 800/241-0824 in the U.S. or 649/946-4970; www.turksandcaicostourism.com).

✈️ Providenciales International Airport.

🏠 \$\$\$ **Grace Bay Club**, Providenciales (📞 800/946-5757 in the U.S., or 649/946-5050; www.gracebayclub.com). \$\$\$ **Parrot Cay** (📞 877/754-0726 in the U.S., or 649/946-7788; www.parrotcay.com.bz).

discernible on a cloudy, moonless night. (**Note:** Don't come here during a full moon—you'll see almost nothing.) You can swim in these glowing waters, a sensation that's incredibly cool. **Island Adventures** (☎ 787/741-0720; www.biobay.com) operates 2-hour nighttime trips in Phosphorescent Bay; you can get even closer to those glow-in-the-dark waters on a nighttime kayak tour offered by **Blue Caribe Kayak** (☎ 787/741-2522; www.enchanted-isle.com/bluecaribe). —HH

📍 www.enchanted-isle.com.

✈ Vieques.

🚤 Isabel Segunda (1¼ hr. from Fajardo, Puerto Rico).

🚢 \$\$ **The Crow's Nest**, Rte. 201, Barrio, FL (☎ 877/CROWS-NEST [276-9763] or 787/741-0033; www.crowsnestvieques.com). \$\$ **Trade Winds Guesthouse**, Calle Flamboyán 107, Esperanza (☎ 787/741-8666; www.enchanted-isle.com/tradewinds).

Life's a Beach

17

Isla Partida & Isla Espíritu Santo

Paradise in the Sea of Cortez

Mexico

There are beautiful beaches, and then there are beaches that literally take your breath away: Pristine coastal ecosystems where the living inhabitants—here, dolphins, manta rays, seals, and more—are in such elegant sync with their environment that they seem almost airbrushed into the picture. Set inside a quarter-moon crescent of sand ringed by honeycombed cliffs, **Ensenada Grande** is all that and more.

With lusciously clear cerulean seas, Ensenada Grande is just one of several magnificent beaches fronting the Sea of Cortez on **Isla Partida**, an uninhabited, completely uncommercialized island on Mexico's Baja California Sur coast, and its bigger sister island **Isla Espíritu Santo**, also uninhabited and owned by the Nature Conservancy. The two islands are connected by a mere sandbar, and are UNESCO Biospheres. Most itineraries encompass both islands.

Both Isla Partida and Isla Espíritu Santo offer superb, unspoiled beaches and some of the Western Hemisphere's most exceptional sea kayaking, snorkeling, and wildlife-watching opportunities. The conditions

are pristine—it's basically you and the sea, sky, and sand. The good news is that it looks like things will stay that way. The Sea of Cortez, also known as the Bay of California, has protected UNESCO World Heritage Site status. The bay contains an astonishing 39% of the world's total number of species of marine mammals and a third of the world's marine cetacean species. As for the islands, both are UNESCO Biosphere reserves.

The best way to see Partida and Espíritu Santo islands is on a guided boat trip or island safari, with opportunities to camp out on the islands under the stars. A number of solid tour guides operate out of La Paz, the capital of the state of Baja California Sur—a 2-hour boat ride away from the islands. **Baja Quest** (☎ 52/612/123-5320; www.bajaquest.com.mx) offers 3- to 5-night sea kayaking and camping expeditions to Espíritu Santo, with lots of time built in for snorkeling the waters and exploring the islands. **Sea & Adventures** (☎ 800/355-7140 in the U.S. or 52/612/123-0559; www.kayakbaja.com) also offers kayaking and camping trips to Espíritu Santo with expert guides.

Baja Camp (www.bajacamp.com) operates overnight camping stays in big, comfortable tents on one of Espiritu Santo's most beautiful beaches, **Ensenada del Candelero**, from June through September out of the marina at La Paz. You can kayak or swim alongside sea lions and seals, snorkel amid manta rays and sharks, and fish for your dinner—a gourmet chef will prepare it for you as you relax with your feet in the sand in a beachside tent, watching the last sunbeams of the day pirouette on the sparkling bay. —AF

 www.explorebajasur.com.

 La Paz.

 2-hr. ride from La Paz.

 \$ **Hotel Mediteranne**, Allende 36, La Paz (☎ 52/612/125-1195; www.hotelmed.com). \$\$ **La Concha Beach Resort**, Carretera a Pichilingue Km 5 (☎ 52/612/121-6161; www.laconcha.com).

18

Life's a Beach

Grand Cayman

Easy Fun Under the Caribbean Sun

Cayman Islands

It's cleaner, safer, and more organized than many other islands in the turquoise Caribbean sea, and if there's one drawback to this state of affairs on Grand Cayman island, it's that you might wonder why you've come all this way for somewhere about as exotic as . . . your own backyard. However, if you're looking for a vacation with reliable sunshine, tropical-cliche beaches, and amazing undersea exploration, in a place that's fun and family-friendly, you could do a lot worse than Grand Cayman. Though Hurricane Ivan inflicted serious damage here in 2004, the rebuilding of the island was an excuse to make some much-needed improvements to many facilities, and Grand Cayman is looking better than ever.

Surrounded by coral reefs and dramatic drop-offs in all directions and endowed with perpetually warm and clear waters, Grand Cayman is a major diving and snorkeling destination—it's said to be the birthplace of recreational Caribbean diving; scuba pioneer Bob Soto opened the island's first dive shop in 1957. What's especially nice is that most sites, marked

by moorings in the water, are easily accessible right from the beach—there's no need to spend a bunch of money on boat dive trips. If you do want something organized and guide-accompanied, look no further than the excellent **Red Sail Sports** (☎ 345/945-5965; www.redsailcayman.com), which has locations all over Grand Cayman. In fact, Red Sail is your one-stop shop for just about every activity under the sun or on the waves: If it's a water sport, they'll either rent you the equipment or take you out for an excursion.

Beach going on Grand Cayman is practically synonymous with spreading your towel and soaking up the scene on the sugary sands of **Seven Mile Beach**. Not only is this the most intrinsically spectacular beach on the island, but it's also where all the action is. Parasailing and jet-skiing are only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the water-based fun here—the sea is shallow and inviting all along the beach, and you can rent ocean kayaks, aqua trikes, view boards, paddle cats, and paddleboats to explore at your leisure. The calm conditions make this an ideal



Diving in Grand Cayman.

place to teach little ones how to snorkel. After a day playing in the surf and sand, take your pick from the dozens of bars and restaurants (most attached to hotels,




which welcome nonguests at their dining facilities) that line the beach.

Other notable beaches on Grand Cayman are **Cemetery Reef** (great for snorkeling), **Smith Cove** (a diminutive strip of sand perfect for swimming and a quiet picnic), and remote **Rum Point**, an oasis of Caribbean seclusion with lots of shady palms and an atmospheric beach cafe.

The classic Cayman wildlife encounter is **Stingray City**, a shallow, open-water site about 3km (1¾ miles) east of the island's northwestern tip where you can dive among and feed near-domesticated stingrays. (Book an excursion through Red Sail Sports or any of the touts on Seven Mile Beach.) It's thrilling, though certainly not without its risks: The animals are not normally aggressive, but they still possess dangerous stingers. —SM

 www.caymanislands.ky.

 Grand Cayman–Owen Roberts International.

 **Beach Club Colony Hotel & Dive Resort**, 719 W. Bay Rd., Seven Mile Beach  **345/949-8100**; www.beachclubcolony.ky). **\$\$\$ The Ritz-Carlton**, W. Bay Rd.  **800/241-3333** in the U.S. and Canada or 345/943-9000; www.ritzcarlton.com).

Life's a Beach

19

Anguilla Love Shack

On my first visit to Anguilla, I was ready to be wowed. This was Anguilla, after all, island of posh resorts and fabulous beaches, and playground of the rich and famous. But once I got off the ferry I felt . . . underwhelmed. Where was the glamour, the pizzazz? All I saw were goats munching dry scrub brush, sandy roads with no stoplights, and a flat, dull horizon of *more* scrub brush. Once I arrived at my

unprepossessing inn, a place that had obviously seen better days, I felt my heart sinking. It was time to hit the beach, for better or worse.

The sand was blindingly white, the sea a transparent blue. Fronting the beach was a shady stand of palm trees. A lone dog tripped down the beach. Otherwise, the wide, curving strand was empty: no touts, no hawkers, no jet skis buzzing, no radios

blaring. Just powdery sand, sparkling turquoise seas, and a goofy-looking dog making his merry way along . . . *one of the most beautiful beaches I've ever seen.* It was noon, I had been in Anguilla all of 1 hour, and it was the start of a full-blown love affair.

Anguilla is many things: It's justly famous for its laid-back luxury hideaways on stunning beaches, with some of the priciest rooms in the region. A British dependency, having been colonized by English settlers in the 17th century, it's also an old-fashioned sort of place, with a modest and unassuming but well-educated, tightly knit community of some 14,000 people. The influence of the Christian Council has successfully kept cruise ships, casinos, and other potential bogeymen at bay. You won't see bus loads of camera-toting visitors being led from one attraction to another. Frankly, Anguilla has few attractions to begin with—if you can call a handful of rickety old colonial relics scattered about “attractions.” The Valley, the island's main center, has full-service banks and grocery stores, but it's not a charmer to tour, like Gustavia on neighboring St. Barts ²⁶⁰, which competes with Anguilla for the title of poshest Caribbean island. The landscape is typical coral and limestone; flat, dry scrubland with low-lying salt ponds; and a few hills for panoramic views.

You hit scenic gold when you get to the beaches. Most of the best (Barnes, Maundays, Meads, Rendezvous Bay, Shoal Bay West) are on the west end of the island. **Rendezvous Bay** is a long, curving ribbon of satiny, pale-gold sand that stretches along the bay for 4km (2½ miles). In the northeast, 3km (1¾-mile) **Shoal Bay** is Anguilla's most popular beach, with powder-soft sands and a lively beach bar scene.

The hook—if Anguilla has a “hook” other than wonderful beaches and correspondingly fine watersports activities—is the island's ultracasual, ultrainclusive, sublimely pleasurable **beach shack scene**. Anguilla has some of the finest restaurants in the Caribbean, but if you want to chill out the barefoot way over

barbecue and mellow reggae, hit the beach. Even the most uptight financial-services nerd will feel his backbone slip watching a fine Anguilla sunset with his feet in the sand, a beer in the hand, and a grilled lobster smoking on the coals. I don't think I've ever seen anything quite like the **Dune Preserve** (📞 264/497-2660). Owned by reggae star and Anguilla native Bankie Banx, the oceanfront bar/restaurant is a beehive of salvaged boats and beach detritus. At Upper Shoal Bay, check out **Gwen's Reggae Bar & Grill** (📞 264/497-2120), where Gwen Webster serves barbecued chicken in a shady palm grove with hammocks. Uncle Ernie died in 2007, but a photograph of him watches over the action at **Uncle Ernie's** (📞 264/497-3907) on Shoal Bay, where you can get chicken and ribs and cold Red Stripe beer. Down a bumpy road to Junk's Hole is Nat Richardson's **Palm Grove Restaurant** (📞 264/497-4224). There you can snorkel in warm, clear seas until your lobster comes off the grill. Some say this is where Brad and Jennifer bid each other adieu. Romance may be fleeting, after all, but true love—we're talking mine for Anguilla—is here to stay. —AF

Anguilla Tourist Board (📞 264/497-2759; www.anguilla-vacation.com).

✈️ St. Maarten (Princess Juliana International Airport; 16km/10 miles). Small commuter airlines fly into Anguilla's Wallblake Airport from St. Thomas, San Juan, and Antigua.

🚢 Public ferries run between Marigot Bay, St. Martin, and Blowing Point, Anguilla (📞 264/497-6070); or privately run charter boats and ferries deliver passengers between Anguilla and the airport in St. Maarten.

🏠 \$\$\$ **CuisinArt Resort**, Rendezvous Bay (📞 800/943-3210 in the U.S. and Canada or 264/498-2000; www.cuisinartresort.com). \$\$ **Frangipani Beach Resort**, Meads Bay (📞 866/780-5165 in the U.S. and Canada or 264/497-6442; www.frangipaniresort.com).

Ilha de Santa Catarina

Sizzle in Floripa

Brazil

If you're looking for the hottest beach scene on the planet these days, you may want to bypass Miami, San Juan, and Ibiza 246 and head straight to Brazil. Santa Catarina Island (Ilha de Santa Catarina), aka the island of Florianópolis, has become one of the most popular destinations in Brazil, with miles and miles of gorgeous beaches offering world-class surfing.

First, what's the difference between Santa Catarina, Florianópolis, and Floripa? **Florianópolis** the city is the capital of the state of Santa Catarina, about a 1-hour flight from São Paulo. Half of the city is also located on the island of Santa Catarina. Island and city together are just referred to as Florianópolis, which people often shorten to Floripa. Floripa is easily accessed via a bridge from the mainland.

Much of Floripa's appeal has to do with its 42—yes, 42—beaches, not a stinker in the bunch. The north end of the island is made up of modern resorts and calm waters; it's an urbanized, heavily touristed beach scene, particularly in the high summer months of December, January, and February. Yet even amid all the action, the beaches are perfectly swimmable, even picturesque. If you like your beaches less trampled, check out **Santinho**, a quieter spot on the rocky northern coast with a beautiful, expansive beach, the island's only five-star resort, and a quaint village.

Farther south in the center of the island, the **Lagoa da Conceição** is a large lagoon wrapped in sand dune and verdant vegetation. Nearby, the quiet little community of **Lagoa da Conceição** boasts some of the best restaurants in the region. **Barra de Lagoa** has vintage fishing-village charm, more good beaches, and **del Morro de Barra**, a lovely section of town



linked by a lagoon (crossed by a hanging bridge) where no cars are allowed. Just to the east are the spectacular beaches of **Galeta**, **Mole**, and **Joaquina**—wide, sandy strands enveloped in verdant green hills and blessed with large, surfable waves. Mole is a happening hangout for gorgeous bodies and skimpy swimsuits. Lovely Galeta doesn't even bother with the suits: It's the island's only clothing-optional beach.



Farther south toward **Campeche**, the handsome beaches become more rugged and the rolling waves are like catnip to surfers—and the partying goes well into the night here. To the west side of the island facing the mainland, the quaint Azorean fishing village of **Riberão da Ilha** is accessible only via a narrow, winding seaside road with views of the Bahia Sul and the lush hills of the mainland across the bay.

Wherever you are, you won't be far from restaurants and cafes offering delicious regional seafood. Local *camarão* (shrimp) figure prominently on menus, as do local oysters, farmed right here in the seas around Riberão da Ilha. —AF

 www.braziltour.com.

 Florianópolis International Airport.

 Rodoviária buses link Florianópolis with every major city in southern Brazil ( 55/48/3222-2260; www.rodoviasbr.com.br).

 **Pousade Penareia**, Rua Hermes Guedes da Fonseca 207 ( 55/48/3338-1616; www.pousadapenareia.com.br). \$\$ **Praia Mole Eco Village**, Estrada Geral da Barra da Lagoa 2001 ( 55/48/3239-7500; www.praiamole.com.br).

Sanibel Island

Seashells, Seashells, by the Seashore

Florida, U.S.

I'm the sort of beachgoer who could spend the entire day walking up and down the strand, searching for seashells—in fact, once I get started, I hardly notice anything else. Maybe it's because I'm a Midwesterner, but I still get a ridiculous thrill out of finding shells in the sand, even relatively common things like whelks, olives, scallops, sand dollars, and conch. And I've never found a better place to indulge this obsession than down on the Gulf Coast of Florida, where a little apostrophe of coastal keys, attached by a long causeway to Fort Myers, offers the most amazing concentration of seashells I've ever seen.

Sanibel Island is a superb beach destination for other reasons, too—fine sugary white sand and healthy stands of palm trees, the local curbs on high-rises and

tacky development, the amount of land devoted to wildlife refuges—but I'll freely admit that it was the shells I went for, and they did not disappoint. Some 200 species of shells can be found on Sanibel's wide, placid beaches. Prime time for shell hunting is February to April or after any storm; low tide is the best time of day. Shells can be sharp, so wear Aqua Socks or old running shoes whenever you go walking on the beach. Just make sure to peer into the shell to check whether living creatures are still inside—Florida law prohibits taking live shells from the beaches.

Shoot, there's even a shell museum here: the **Bailey-Matthews Shell Museum**, 3075 Sanibel-Captiva Rd. (☎ 888/679-6450 or 239/395-2233; www.shellmuseum.org), devoted solely to salt-water, freshwater, and land shells. Shells




Fishing on Sanibel Island.


from as far away as South Africa surround a 6-ft. (1.8m) globe in the main exhibit hall, showing their geographic origins. Most important for my purpose, though, was the *Wheel of Fortune*-shaped case identifying shells likely to wash up on Sanibel.

To find really rare shells, you can always head for the adjacent shoals and nearby small islands; **Captiva Cruises** (☎ 239/472-5300; www.captivacruises.com) runs shelling trips, departing from the South Seas Resort on nearby Captiva Island, and several charter-boat skippers also will take guests on shelling expeditions (you can find several of them at the Sanibel Marina on North Yachtsman Dr., off Periwinkle Way east of Causeway Blvd.). Maybe next

time I'll get around to that—I'll just need an extra suitcase to tote all my treasures home. —HH

i Tourist information, 1159 Causeway Rd. (☎ 239/472-1080; www.sanibel-captiva.org).

 Fort Myers International (14 miles/23km).

 5-mile (8km) drive on Sanibel Causeway (FL 867) from Fort Myers.

 **\$ Palm View Motel**, 706 Donax St. (☎ 877/472-1606 or 239/472-1606; www.palmviewsanibel.com). \$\$\$ **Sundial Beach Resort**, 1451 Middle Gulf Dr. (☎ 866/565-5093; www.sundialresort.com).

Life's a Beach

22

Green Island Coral Cay Paradise

Australia

Reportedly, the local aboriginal population regarded this 6,000-year-old island as *wunjami*—a place haunted by spirits, to be avoided if possible. But those days are long gone: Reachable by a 45-minute catamaran ride from the mainland city of Cairns, this gorgeous, 15-hectare (37-acre) coral cay island has become a favorite destination for Aussie day-trippers, who come to enjoy the sun, sand, and flora and fauna. Located 27km (17 miles) off the coast of Queensland, Australia, in the middle of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park, Green Island offers natural beauty—in addition to its spectacular beaches and reefs, it's the only one of the Great Barrier Reef's 300 sand cays with its own rainforest—and some of the world's best snorkeling and scuba diving right off the beach.

Green Island has always emphasized ecofriendly tourism, dating back to its designation as a national park in 1936. Today, it teems with tropical birds, more

than 120 species of native plants, and all manner of marine life, from the fish that inhabit the coral gardens ringing the island to the **Marineland Melanesia Aquarium, Museum and Crocodile Farm** (☎ 61/7/4051 4032), where you can have hands-on encounters with sea turtles and the smallest of the establishment's 30-odd crocs. **Glass-bottom-boat tours** are a specialty here—in fact, Green Island is thought to have been the first place on earth to employ this boating innovation—and the island also boasts the world's oldest underwater observatory. For those inclined to immerse themselves in the surrounding sea, snorkeling and scuba gear can be rented, and diving boat trips to the nearby Great Barrier Reef itself are also available.

Insiders know that the true Green Island experience begins after the last ferry leaves the island at 4:30 each afternoon. Then, the overnight guests of **Green**

Island Resort—the island's sole hotel, as well as the only five-star resort in Queensland—have the little island to themselves. The resort features 46 luxury suites set in the midst of the island's rain-forest, and a stay grants access to the underwater observatory, windsurfing, canoeing and snorkeling equipment, a glass-bottom-boat tour, and a guided nighttime nature tour. Scuba instruction and certification is also offered. Guests of the resort can have a great time just exploring on their own, though, as they're given the run of an island with a circumference that can be walked in a little under an hour. In addition to the marine life, guests give particularly high marks to the sunset, the empty stretches of beach, and the opportunity to spot offshore fish feeding at twilight—an event that sharks have been known to attend.

If you're not staying on the resort, you can still visit the island on a day trip—a number of tour operators offer boat trips

that include stops on the island. **Great Adventures** (📞 1800/673-366 or 61/7/4044 9944; www.greatadventures.com.au)—owned by Quicksilver, the same company that owns Green Island Resort—runs day tours to Green Island from Cairns.

With Sydney a good 4 hours away by plane and boat, Green Island remains a bit off the beaten track. And if you're lucky enough to claim the island for your own, you may find yourself hoping the rest of the world heeds the old aboriginal legends and keeps away—at least for a night or two. —AF

📍 www.destinationqueensland.com or www.queensland.com.sg.

✈️ Cairns (4 hr. from Auckland).

🚤 45-min. ride from Cairns.

🏠 \$\$\$ **Green Island Resort** (📞 1800/673-366 or 61/7/4052 1511; www.greenislandresort.com.au).

23

Unvarnished & Unspoiled

Phu Quoc

Wild & Pungent

Vietnam

There are plenty of island paradises in Southeast Asia (like Bali 201 and Koh Samui 302, to name a few) that have been discovered by Western tourists, but Phu Quoc is not one of them—for now, anyway. Just west of mainland Vietnam in the Gulf of Thailand, this island falls squarely in the category of “go now” destinations around the globe. Resort developers and Vietnamese tourism authorities are grooming Phu Quoc to be the next big ecotourism vacation spot in Southeast Asia. But until modern infrastructure arrives, Phu Quoc is a superauthentic island getaway, where luxury hotels are still very affordable and golf courses are nonexistent, and where touring is done by

moped down dusty red-dirt roads that lead to secluded beaches.

Phu Quoc is best suited to those with a sense of adventure and a love of unvarnished culture. While Phu Quoc has some of the best and least trodden beaches in the region, getting to those unspoiled stretches of sand often means renting a scooter and threading your way down unmarked dirt roads or arranging casual rides with local fishermen or motorists. (Even with prearranged boat or four-wheel-drive tours, you never really know what you're going to get, which is certainly half the fun.) Head for the north and northeast part of the island to find the emptiest, most gorgeous beaches. **Ganh**

Dau Beach even has a view of Cambodia, just 18km (11 miles) away. If you do set out on your own exploration of Phu Quoc, always pack a lunch and plenty of water, though even the smallest towns and quietest beaches usually have some sort of restaurant where you can sample the delicious, seafood-rich island cuisine.

The main town on Phu Quoc is **Duong Dong**, on the west coast of the emerald-shaped island, where the airport, seaport, and most hotels and services are located. **An Thoi**, on the southern coast, is the next town of any size; it's a bit too remote to function as a base, but is close to the pristine white-sand beaches of **Bai Sou** and **Bai Kem**. Sprinkled up and down the coasts of Phu Quoc are smaller, less developed villages where visitors can have a truly genuine encounter with island culture. One is **Cua Can**, interesting for its old wooden bridges and where impromptu tours up the Cua Can River can be arranged with local fishermen. For just about anything water-based, **Famous Tony** organizes tours for individual groups (☎ 84/913/197334; info@tonyanh.com).

Anywhere you visit on Phu Quoc, you'll need to get used to the island's smell. Because Phu Quoc is one of the premier manufacturers of fish sauce in Vietnam, the scent of dried fish literally permeates

every corner of the island. If you're interested in touring one of these factories, the largest is **Hung Thanh** (☎ 84/77/846124; www.hungthanhfishsauce.com.vn), in Duong Dong. Attempting to transport a souvenir bottle of fish sauce out of Phu Quoc is another story: The airlines have banned them because of the risk of breakage and accompanying stench in the cabin and cargo hold!

Because of its limited transportation connections (you can fly here from Ho Chi Minh City or take a ferry from Rach Gia and Ha Tien, on the west coast of Vietnam), Phu Quoc is usually visited as part of a longer trip to Vietnam and Cambodia. When the new international airport is completed—sometime around 2011—more direct flights from more cities will surely bring a new kind of tourism here. —SM

📍 www.discoverphuquoc.com.

✈ Duong Dong airport (50 min. from Ho Chi Minh City).

🚢 Duong Dong Express from Rach Gia, 2½ hr. (☎ 84/77/3981648; www.duongdongexpress.com.vn).

🏠 \$\$ **Cassia Cottage** (☎ 84/77/3848395; www.cassiacottage.com). \$\$\$ **Grand Mercure La Veranda** (☎ 84/77/3982988; www.laverandaresort.com).

Unvarnished & Unspoiled

24

Lombok

Not the Next Bali

Indonesia

Travel writers and tourism board officials in search of catchy tag lines love to compare Lombok to Bali (201), that much more famous Indonesian island 40km (25 miles) to the west: Lombok, they say, is “what Bali was like 30 years ago,” or “an unspoiled version of Bali.” These descriptions are only partly apt. Lombok is predominantly Muslim, whereas Bali gets

much of its distinctive flavor from its unique Hindu traditions. Lombok's geography is quite different, and it's generally much drier here than in Bali.

But unlike Bali's well-developed tourism infrastructure, tourism is in its early stages on Lombok: Despite recent resort development, the overall atmosphere that prevails on Lombok is that of an authentic

Indonesian culture, largely undiscovered but welcoming of outsiders, with some excellent beaches and awesome surfing spots thrown into the mix.

The brooding cone of **Gunung Rinjani** (Mount Rinjani, a 3,726m/12,224-ft. strato-volcano) dominates the profile of Lombok, which is shaped a bit like a stingray whose “tail” trails off to the southwest. Hiking to the top of Rinjani is the favorite pursuit of many backpackers who stay on the Gili Islands, off Lombok’s west coast. **Matar-ram** is the largest city on Lombok, where you’ll find fascinating local flavor in the streets and markets but not much in the way of Western tourism. Lombok’s hotel strip lies to the north of Mataram in an area called **Senggigi**.

Surfers will want to make a beeline for **Kuta** on the south coast (not to be confused with Bali’s übertouristy Kuta Beach), which has some of the best waves in the world. At **Grupuk Beach** (in the Kuta area) swimmers can enjoy the calm waters of the cove, while boarders can take outrigger canoes to the waves beyond the point. The biggest waves are usually at rugged **Segez Beach**, 2km (1¼ miles) from Kuta. Offshore, **snorkeling and diving** opportunities abound, and charter boats that can deliver you to prime dive sites are easy and cheap to organize—Gili Islands-based **Blue Marlin Dive** (☎ 62/370/632424; www.blue-marlindive.com) is a reliable outfitter.

Lombok’s interior of gently rolling hills is filled with rural villages and waterfalls that make for fun and edifying day trips when you need a break from the sun and sand. Arts and crafts collectors will find Lombok immensely satisfying, as the island specializes in pottery, baskets, and woven textiles that are still very affordable. All throughout Lombok, you’ll also receive a warm and hospitable reception from locals—and especially children, whose smiles are infectious.

Political unrest in Indonesia in the early 21st century had a dramatic impact on the growth of tourism on Lombok, and it’s just now beginning to pick up again, as foreign investors pour millions into luxury resorts and golf courses. My advice is to travel to Lombok now, on the cusp of its tourist boom, before it truly becomes another (overcommercialized) Bali. —SM

📍 www.lombok-network.com.

✈ Mataram-Selaparang.

🚢 Traditional ferry or fast boat from Bali, 2½–5 hr.

🏠 \$\$\$ **The Oberoi Lombok**, Medana Beach, Tanjung (☎ 62/370/638444; www.oberoilombok.com). \$\$ **Qunci Villas**, Jalan Raya Mangsit, Senggigi (☎ 62/370/693800; www.quncivilas.com).

25

Unvarnished & Unspoiled

Tioman Island

Dragon of the Sea

Malaysia

Legend has it that Tioman Island, 58km (36 miles) off Malaysia’s east coast, is actually a dragon princess who stopped here to rest, fell in love with the beauty of the place, and never left. It’s a sentiment many visitors share. The largest island in a string of volcanic atolls in the South

China Sea, Tioman is indeed shaped like a sleeping dragon. Although it’s a treasured destination for many Malaysian vacationers, Tioman is still fairly raw and largely undiscovered, with nowhere near the development of sister Malaysian islands Penang 264 and Langkawi 237, on

the country's west coast. The business of tourism is a modest one on Tioman, with one large resort and a smattering of understated lodges, chalets perched in the jungle canopy, and traditional huts set in the sand. The island has no asphalt roads (except in the main town of Tekek) or cars (just bikes and four-wheel-drives)—in fact, the most expeditious way to get around is by hopping a boat from one part of the island to the other. The waters surrounding Tioman are part of the protected **Tioman Marine Park**. A controversial marina project that reportedly cut into the fragile coral reef enveloping the island was allowed to move forward and is now open, and the island has been awarded duty-free status. Little Tioman may be on the verge of a development boom.

Tioman Island first entered the global consciousness when the movie *South Pacific* was filmed here in 1958. In its role as the paradisiacal Bali Ha'i, Tioman was trumpeted as one of the most beautiful islands in the world. It's still spectacularly lovely. Emerald cliffs rise dramatically from pale-sand beaches. The fringing coral reef, gin-clear waters, and balmy year-round water temperatures draw divers and snorkelers from around the world. The snorkeling is especially good—even right off the beaches. One of the best places to snorkel is in **Air Batang**, where you can swim amid coral gardens packed with colorful fish and turtles. **Tioman Dive Centre** (☎ 60/9/419-1228; www.tioman-dive-centre.com) offers dive and snorkeling trips. Scuba professionals **Dive Asia** (Salang and

Tekek; ☎ 60/9/419-5017; www.diveasia.com.my) offers dive safaris and PADI-certified courses.

For such a relatively small island—it's only 22km long and 11km wide (14x6¾ miles)—Tioman is incredibly diverse, a magnificent hodgepodge of rainforest, mist-shrouded granite spires, mangrove swamp forest, and coral reef. Much of the island interior is tangled jungle vegetation and protected nature reserve. The woods are filled with rare and exotic breeds, including the long-tailed macaque, binturong (Asian bearcat), pythons, and some 138 species of birds. Trekking trails through the steamy jungle interior take in waterfalls, rapids, and natural pools.

Note: November to February is monsoon season, with frequent rain showers and rougher seas. —AF

i Tourism Malaysia (☎ 60/3/2615-8188; www.tourismmalaysia.gov.my).

 **Tekek Airport** (40 min. from Singapore).

 From Tanjung Gemok (1 hr., 15 min.), **Fast Ferry Venture** (☎ 60/9/413-1997). From Mersing (2 hr.), **Blue Water Express** (☎ 60/7/799-5015).

 \$\$ **Berjaya Beach, Golf & Spa Resort**, Tioman Island, Pahang Carul Makmur (☎ 60/9/419-1000; www.berjaya-hotels-resorts.com). \$\$\$ **JapaMala Resort** (☎ 60/3/4256-6100; www.japamala-resorts.com).

Unvarnished & Unspoiled

26

Kamarkan Island

Red Sea Reefs

Yemen

Kamarkan gets its Arabic name, “two moons,” for the unusual double reflection of the moon that it's possible to see, just

as the moon is rising in the early evening, in the waters off the northern end of the island. Located at the strategic southern

tip of the Red Sea, Kamaran was occupied over the centuries by the Portuguese, the Ottoman Empire, and the British, before being handed over to Yemen in the mid-20th century. Interesting remnants of those eras remain scattered over the island, but Kamaran's most compelling draw for visitors is its excellent diving and opportunities to experience a very traditional way of life, practically untouched by tourism.

Long and thin, 108-sq.-km (42-sq.-mile) Kamaran is a mostly flat shelf of sand and rock, unrelieved by vegetation except for some green pastures in the north where wild camels and deer graze. Look in almost any direction, and the panorama consists of two colors: beige and turquoise. Tawny stone buildings left over from Kamaran's most prosperous era, when the Ottomans used it as a quarantine station for pilgrims on their way to Mecca, blend almost imperceptibly into the backdrop of gently rolling dunes. The island's sparse population is divided among three dusty, yet fascinating and friendly, authentic villages where visitors can mix with friendly locals and sample the delicious (and cheap) typical island food.


The coastline of Kamaran descends into the tantalizing, wildlife-rich waters of the **Red Sea**: It's this embarrassment of undersea vitality, contrasting so starkly with the barren scene on land, that makes a visit here so worthwhile for divers and snorkelers. Kamaran is surrounded on three sides by coral reefs, with dense mangroves taking up the fourth side. While the perimeter of Kamaran itself is riddled with places where you can swim among schools of grouper and rays or explore archaeological remains of the island's previous eras, some of the best dive sites lie off such uninhabited nearby islands as

Zubayr and **Ogban**, which have endless mazes of coral channels and caves and an awesome spectrum of fish, sea turtles, sharks, and dolphins.

Tourism on Kamaran is decidedly primitive: There are no palm-lined drives, no golf courses, no shopping centers. The only "hotel" on the island is really a camp of sorts, Kamaran Tourist Village (see below). Accommodations are seaside *tihama* huts (mud-and-thatch constructions typical of the Red Sea coast) with traditional cots or western-style beds and mosquito nets. Toilets and showers are in another building a short walk away. By day, the tourist village organizes diving excursions and tours (by donkey or by pickup) of Kamaran's historical sights; by night, communal feasts and performances by traditional local musicians bring guests together in the central *mafraj* (sitting room).

This bare-bones state of affairs seems poised to change soon, however, as Egyptian development companies have recently signed agreements with Yemeni officials to invest \$500 million in infrastructure and resort facilities on Kamaran. Until those projects are carried out, for anyone not interested in Red Sea diving, or complete peace and quiet in a place that is still culturally authentic, Kamaran can feel desolate, and the sun and moist heat on the Red Sea, need I remind you, are unrelenting. —SM

 www.kamaran.net.

 Kamaran airport, with connections to Sana'a. (Or fly to Sana'a, then drive or bus to Salif and make a 20-min. boat transfer.)

 \$\$ **Kamaran Tourist Village**  **967/7771-1742**; www.kamaran.net).

Los Roques

Sail Away

Venezuela

Like La Blanquilla ¹⁸⁷, Los Roques enjoys the same sparkling turquoise seas and warm trade winds as its more popular counterparts in the Caribbean. But this island chain is much more gloriously untouched, with rudimentary tourist infrastructure and pristine ecosystems. Largely free of the civil unrest and political upheaval that bedeviled many Latin American nations in the late 20th century, the Venezuelan archipelago of Los Roques offers an embarrassment of riches when it comes to experiencing the Caribbean of old.

The archipelago Los Roques is made up of some 300 islands—224,749 hectares (555,367 acres) of sea and land that includes more than 42 *cayos*, or coral cays, and 250 spectacularly colorful coral reefs. Only a handful of the islands and cays are inhabited. A national park since 1972, the islands of Los Roques compose the largest marine reserve archipelago in the world. Los Roques is protected by not one but two barrier reefs. The archipelago is a sailor's dream; constant winds range from 10 to 15 knots, and the barrier reefs ensure that the waters are protected. In fact, many people charter a crewed sailboat or motored yacht in Los Roques and dip from one jewel-like cay to another, stopping to snorkel or fish in brilliantly clear, warm lagoon waters.

Others take up residence in one of the many family-owned *posadas* (inns) on **Gran Roque**, the largest island in the archipelago and the only island with lodging options (it's also the site of the airport). Strict regulations ensure that the island is not overrun with megaresorts: None of the *posadas* is higher than two floors, and none has more than 15 rooms. A good half of the *posadas* are owned by Italian expats, which explains the island's old-

world Mediterranean vibe—café menus include such Italian classics as carpaccio. The boat-filled **Gran Roque beach** is a great place to promenade, but it's not the beach you've come from miles away to experience—you find it in the breathtaking little cays strewn throughout the archipelago. A stay in a *posada* lets you enjoy the culture of the island and get your Robinson Crusoe fix, too: Most offer full-service day trip excursions to a lovely, uninhabited cay nearby to which you're delivered by boat, with a picnic basket of food, a cooler of beer, and a big umbrella. Ah, *paradiso!*


The diving and snorkeling in and around Los Roques is world-class. **Lost World Adventures** ( 800/999-0558 in the U.S. and Canada or 404/373-5820; www.lostworldadventures.com) offers diving, fishing, and sailing tours in and around the island. Many fishermen come from around the globe to go **bonefishing** in Los Roques; called "the gray ghost of the shoals," the bonefish of Los Roques are big, weighing up to 5.4kg, and spirited. The seas are full of tarpon, jacks, barracuda, tuna, and bonito. Gran Roque is also garnering attention as a terrific **kitesurfing** spot; the constant winds fill billowing sails and send boards skimming across the seas.




Keep in mind that if you plan to charter a boat in Venezuela, the boat should be licensed by the Venezuelan authorities and a Venezuelan *marinero* (mariner) must be onboard. So if you want to explore the Venezuelan archipelagos bareboat (without a crew), you'll need to board the boat in another country—nearby Grenada ⁵⁷ is a good choice. Otherwise, any boat you hire in Venezuela comes with a crew—not a bad idea if you're unfamiliar with these waters.

The protected status of Los Roques is good news for the future of the islands. Only the northeast corner of the national marine park is allowed to have accommodations for visitors, and the islands have virtually no cars or trucks—people get around largely by golf cart, bicycle, or good old feet. Being on land is a temporary state of being, however; most everyone is lost in a liquid Caribbean dream. —AF

 www.los-roques.com.

 Caracas to Gran Roque (35 min.).

 Boat charter from Caracas or Puerto la Cruz (mainland Venezuela).


 \$\$ **Posada Acuarela**  58/212/953-6455; www.posadaacuarela.com). \$\$ **Posada El Botuto**  58/416/621-0381; www.posadaelbotuto.com).

28

Unvarnished & Unspoiled


Nevis



Liming It

The sleepy, laid-back counterpart to its busier, more touristed sister island, St. Kitts , Nevis is the unvarnished, unspoiled Caribbean. It's lovely, all right, with bejeweled coral reefs and palm-fringed, white-sand beaches. Still, goats and donkeys roam the largely rural 93-sq.-km (36-sq.-mile) island, and untamed bougainvillea spills onto dirt roads and over colonial windmills. It's no vision of manicured perfection, and for many travelers, that's not a bad thing.

Nevis (pronounced *Nee-vis*) was built on sugar cane, and the 18th-century ruins of the sugar trade can be found all over the island. Nevis, one-half of a two-island federation (the larger St. Kitts is the other half separated from Nevis by a 3.2km/2-mile channel), was under British control for 200 years until it achieved independence in 1983. The island's capital and main port, **Charlestown**, is a living-history relic from colonial times, its streets lined with Georgian-style structures. The island was slowly building a reputation for gracious West Indies-style hospitality when Hurricane Omar hit the region in 2008. Damage from the hurricane closed down the island's largest and swankiest property, the Four Seasons Nevis, and put

hundreds of islanders out of work (the resort was scheduled to reopen in summer 2010). The handful of other island properties, many of them small-scale inns charmingly rejiggered from centuries-old sugar plantations, are soldiering on in a weakened world economy.

Still, quiet seclusion has its fans, and Nevis is increasingly on the radar of those rich and discerning folks who are weary of glitzy resorts and who appreciate discreet, character-filled tropical hideaways far from the cruise ship crowds. (It's been called a rustic alternative to St. Barts ) Painter Brice Marden recently bought the Golden Rock Plantation Inn, an old sugar plantation that was converted into an inn in 1958.

It doesn't hurt that Nevis is blessed with a stunningly scenic landscape that takes in velvety volcanic peaks, beautiful beaches, and lush rainforest. You can hike up 955m (3,133-ft.) **Mount Nevis** with biologists on fascinating nature hikes through **Top to Bottom**  869/469-9080; www.walknevis.com). You can stroll amid vividly hued tropical flora and tangled vines in the **Botanical Gardens of Nevis** (Montpelier Estate;  869/469-3509; www.botanicalgardennevis.com). You can take a fabulous




Gardens on Nevis.


snorkel trip on the **MV Rum** (☎ 869/469-1060), cruising the unspoiled reefs along the island's leeward coast. You can head underwater for a dive trip in virgin seas with the pros at **Scuba Safaris** (☎ 869/469-9518; www.scubanevis.com).


Nevis has a number of fine beaches, including **Oualie**, which lies in a sheltered cove with sunset views, and **Pinney's**, a 4.8km-long (3-mile) stretch of velvety white sand and Caribbean seas. You can sail, windsurf, and fish to your heart's content, or you can golf, hike, and play tennis—but really, put down that tennis racket and put up your feet. Nevis is about succumbing to the island's old-fashioned West Indian charm and meditating on a grain of sand. Taking it easy is called

"liming" here, and if someone back home asks you what you were doing on Nevis, the proper answer is *"Liming!"* —AF

i Nevis Tourism Authority (☎ 866/55-NEVIS [556-3847] in the U.S. and Canada or 869/469-7550; www.nevisisland.com).

 Antigua (20 min.), St. Maarten (20 min.), and San Juan (60 min.).

 St. Kitts (ferry companies don't take reservations; 45 min.).

 \$\$\$ **Montpelier Plantation**, St. John Figtree (☎ 869/469-3462; www.montpeliernevis.com). \$\$ **Oualie Beach Resort**, Oualie Beach (☎ 869/469-9735; www.oualiebeach.com).

Padre Island

Sun & Surf, Texas-Style

Texas, U.S.

No, I'm not talking about South Padre Island, which might conjure up images (unpleasant or otherwise) of cheap hotels and raucous bar crawls—a scene best left to college spring breakers. Just to the north lies **Padre Island National Seashore**, a 70-mile (113km) stretch of sand, low dunes, and prairie grasses where south Texans come for fun in the sun and surf. Everything's bigger in the Lone Star State, and Padre Island is doing its part to make the adage ring true: This is the longest section of undeveloped barrier island in the world.

Easily accessed from Corpus Christi or Galveston [352](#), Padre Island National Seashore is barely a mile wide and bordered

by the Gulf of Mexico on the seaward side and the **Laguna Madre** on the landward side. Hairline channels separate Padre Island from Mustang Island to the north and the resort hotels of South Padre to the south. Laguna Madre is a hypersaline lagoon (meaning its salt content is higher than the ocean's), one of only six such lagoons in the world. On both sides of the seashore, the water is warm and salty, which gives everything that floats in it extra buoyancy.

For such a narrow strip of land, Padre Island is teeming with wildlife. Coyotes, badgers, raccoons, opossums, rats, squirrels, and bats make up the diverse **mammal population** among the low grasses.



A sunset over the Gulf of Mexico.

The island is positioned along the **Central Flyway**, a major bird migration route, and many species stop at Padre to winter or to breed and nest. All told, some 350 species of birds have been documented along the national seashore. The rich sea life in the area includes many fish and **sea turtles**, four different species of which nest here. Summertime visitors might be lucky enough to witness the Park Service's hatchling release program of Kemp's Ridley turtles in action. Several species of venomous and nonvenomous snakes live here, too, though they're rarely seen. However, visitors should be on the lookout for three species of poisonous snake: the western diamondback, the massasauga, and the Texas coral snake.


Although it's under the jurisdiction of the National Park Service, don't expect a *totally* pristine encounter with nature here: Vehicles are allowed right on the beach in most places, and you'll likely have to contend with convoys of SUVs on weekends and holidays and whenever the weather's nice. Furthermore, plenty of flotsam from the Gulf of Mexico makes its

way to the shores of Padre Island, meaning that avid beachcombers can find treasures like shells and driftwood among the metal, glass, and plastic that washes up here. At the northern end of the seashore, **Malaquite Beach** is the most unspoiled beach in the area—it's closed to vehicular traffic—with simple wood-frame picnic shelters where you can set up for a day of shore exploration. For those wishing to stay a bit longer at Padre Island, the **Bob Hall Pier** area, also at the northern end, is the only part of the island where you'll find hotels and restaurants. —SM

 **Malaquite Visitors Center**, Milepost 0 (📞 361/949-8068; www.nps.gov/pais).

 Corpus Christi International.

 43-mile (69km) drive from Corpus Christi.

 \$\$ **Bahia Mar**, 15201 Windward Dr., Corpus Christi (📞 361/949-2400; www.bahiamarsuites.com). \$ Camping permits available at park visitor center (see above).

Unvarnished & Unspoiled

30

Cape Hatteras

Graveyard of the Atlantic

North Carolina, U.S.

Hwy. 12 runs the length of the **Cape Hatteras National Seashore**, and at times this curving two-lane road feels like a ride in an amusement park. Over here you can see the waters of the mighty Pamlico Sound, a huge estuarine breeding ground for marine life. Over there is the mighty Atlantic Ocean, milky whitecaps and sea spray visible above the dune line. You are basically riding a slender thread of blacktop between two massive bodies of water.

Driving Hwy. 12 gives you a good idea of how narrow and fragile this sliver of land is, and how easily a good nor'easter can breach it, sending waves crashing into the sound. Which it does, every so often—this, after all, is how inlets are formed.

The Cape Hatteras National Seashore runs 70 miles (113km) along North Carolina's Outer Banks from Whalebone Junction to Ocracoke Island (351). At the Cape itself, the land juts deep into the ocean

where two currents meet—you can actually see the warm, blue Gulf Stream crashing into the chilly Labrador current. The largest lighthouse on the East Coast is here, shining its 1,000-watt beam to mariners maneuvering this elbow of land, but even that powerful beam of light is sometimes not enough: The shifting shoals around Cape Hatteras are littered with the bones of some 2,000 wrecked ships—the reason the area is called “The Graveyard of the Atlantic.” Here lie schooners, steamships, warships—even a 987-ton Civil War ironclad, the *USS Monitor*, discovered in 1974.

For today’s tourists, however, the Cape Hatteras National Seashore is a watersports paradise, with small villages separated by miles of undeveloped, unspoiled beaches forever protected against commercial growth. It’s one of the East Coast’s top beach recreation spots, with plenty of surfing, sailing, windsurfing, fishing, and scuba diving opportunities. For top-notch kite boarding, surfing, and windsurfing lessons and rentals, head to **Kitty Hawk Kites** (📞 252/986-1446; www.kittyhawk.com), which has locations on Hatteras Island in Hatteras village, Avon, and Rodanthe. For sportfishing, **Hatteras Harbor Marina** (📞 800/676-4939; www.hatterasharbor.com) offers half- and full-day inshore and offshore fishing charters, gear, and bait.

What makes this seashore so captivating is its beautiful wildness, and wild it will stay; only 12% of the island can ever be developed (the rest is protected federal or state parkland or wetlands). The wind is a constant, and currents can be unpredictable. The sea air is pungently salty. The national seashore is, after all, an unprotected strip of sand that stretches out into the Atlantic almost to the Continental Shelf. The land

and the sea are in a constant dance; the sand rolls underneath the banks and comes up the other side. Boundaries shift; the bones of old ships disappear.

Coming from the north, the drive down Hwy. 12 takes you past **Oregon Inlet**, where waves crash and tumble on the shoals and fishermen in waders wrestle puppy drum onto the beach. Oregon Inlet was formed in 1846, when the sea split the land in a roaring gale. In between stretches of national seashore are old fishing villages and new beach houses. Wrecked ships figure large in the history of the old lifesaving station at **Chicamacomico**; the original building from 1874 is still on-site, as is the 1911 station, its weather-beaten shingles silvery with age. The black and white stripes of the 1870 **Cape Hatteras Lighthouse**, in Buxton, spiral up the length of the 200-ft. (61m) tower.

Cape Hatteras is an informal, barefoot kind of place. You can easily beach-hop from one stretch of tawny sand to another—just pull into one of the park’s beach-access parking lots, cross a wooden boardwalk over dunes of sea oats, and find a spot to lay your towel. The waves, the sand, the seagulls flying overhead: It’s all blessedly wild, untamed by little more than the elements. —AF

📍 www.nps.gov/caha and www.hatterasguide.com.

✈️ Norfolk, Virginia (2 hr.).

🚢 Ocracoke (coming from the south, 40 min.; www.ncdot.org/transit/ferry).

🏠 **Breakwater Inn**, 57896 Hwy. 12, Hatteras Village (📞 877/986-2565 or 252/986-2565). **Comfort Inn**, 46745 NC Hwy. 12, Buxton (📞 877/424-6423 or 252/995-6100; www.outerbankscomfortinn.com).

Tortola

Bareboatin'

British Virgin Islands

In the opinion of many travelers, a “bareboat” vacation—in which you and your companions charter a sailboat for a week or so, load it with provisions, and head wherever the trade winds and your imagination take you—is the ultimate way to explore any island chain. And there’s no better place to launch your own sailing adventure than in the bareboat capital of the world: Tortola, the largest (19×4.8km/12×3 miles) and most populous of the British Virgin Islands.

In terms of convenience, safety, affordability, and sheer number of attractive places to drop anchor, the 60-plus islands and cays of B.V.I. are tailor-made for the do-it-yourself island hopper. The capital of the British Virgin Islands, **Road Town**, nestled on Tortola’s mountainous southern coast (the island’s beaches are all on the northern, Atlantic side), is home to dozens of charter companies with well-maintained catamarans and single-hulled boats to choose from. (Powerboats and full-sized yachts with crew are also available.) Sail out of the town’s well-protected natural harbor, and you’ll find yourself a couple of hours away from **Norman** ³⁵⁰, **Peter**, and **Cooper islands**, all awaiting with white-sand beaches, reefs perfect for snorkeling, sheltered coves for anchoring overnight, and waterfront bars and restaurants that cater to the seaborne set. The larger islands of Virgin Gorda ³⁰⁷, to the northeast, and Jost Van Dyke, off Tortola’s northern flank, are both less than a day’s sail away. Scattered about are scores of uninhabited islets that are yours for the claiming.

The key to any successful bareboat vacation is advance planning. Charter companies all ask you to submit a “sailing resume”

proving you have enough experience to handle their boats. The official B.V.I. tourist site, www.bviturism.com, has a long list of reputable charter companies with links to their websites. While prices vary, bareboat vacations tend to be remarkably affordable, typically costing about as much as a cruise. If you’re worried about rusty sailing skills, you can charter a boat with an extra sleeping space or two and pay for your own skipper and cook. In addition to knowing the best spots to drop anchor, the crews-for-hire in Tortola are also accustomed to blending in with new boat mates. For a little extra, you can even request a captain who’s a certified sailing instructor.


Sailors aren’t the only active travelers enjoying Tortola’s sparkling seas. Divers and snorkelers have much to explore here, most notably the wreck of the **HMS Rhone**, a British Royal Mail steam packet ship that sank here in an October storm in 1867. The wreck lies in depths from 6 to 24m (20–79 ft.) just south of Tortola near Salt Island. Reserve a dive with **Blue Water Divers** (☎ 284/494-2847; www.bluewaterdiversbvi.com) to the site of the Rhone and other gems of the deep.


For those who prefer to spend their time on solid ground, Tortola has its share of fine resorts and villas, all imbued with the relaxed, friendly, non-theme park atmosphere (no casinos here, thank you!) for which the B.V.I. is known. The beaches on Tortola are actually quite wonderful, from popular **Cane Garden Bay**, wrapped in soft green hills, to the secluded sands of **Long Bay**, where you can swim and snorkel in clear, gentle seas.

With half its income coming from tourism and the other half from the financial industry (the island is headquarters to

many of the world's offshore companies), and a currency based on U.S. dollars, Tortola is an enchanting blend of old world and new. And when you're out in the archipelago, the wind filling your sails, it's all yours to discover. —AF

 www.bviturism.com.

 Tortola: Beef Island International Airport, connected to Tortola by the Queen Elizabeth Bridge.

 Regular ferries from St. Thomas, U.S.V.I. (45 min.).

 **\$ Ole Works Inn**, Cane Garden Bay ( **284/495-4837**; www.quitorymer.com).
\$\$\$ The Sugar Mill, Apple Bay ( **800/462-8834** in the U.S., or 284/495-4355; www.sugarmillhotel.com).



32


Sailing Along



Paros

A Break from Greek Cultural Overload

Greece

Paros should be a required stop on any traveler's itinerary through the Cyclades islands. Not only because it's the archipelago's transportation hub—lying halfway between the more well known islands of Mykonos  and Santorini —and has great beaches but also because its lack of any single must-see historical sight makes it a sort of cultural free-pass for anyone suffering from antiquities overload (a common affliction in Greece). Make no mistake, Paros has history and some of the islands' quaintest darn villages, but the bulk of your time on Paros is much more likely to be spent sunbathing or learning to windsurf, blissfully unobligated to traipse through yet another hot and dusty archaeological site.

Most visitors arrive by ferry at busy **Parikia**—as Greek port towns go, it's not the most compelling, though it is quite lively. But watersports fans won't much care about staying in town, for Paros is known first and foremost as the **windsurfing capital of Greece**. Thanks to constant, strong winds along the strait between Paros and Naxos  (off the east coast of Paros), conditions are excellent from late spring to early fall. Serious windsurfers tend to avoid the peak months of July and


August, when all too many "amateurs" take to the water. Go ahead and join them: The free *Paros Windsurfing Guide*, available at tourist offices island-wide, provides resources for equipment rentals and lessons; I like the **F2 Windsurfing Center** on Golden Beach ( **30/22840/41878**) and **Santa Maria Surf Club** on Santa Maria Beach ( **30/22840/52490**).


If heaving water-logged sails out of the water seems like too much hassle on your Greek holiday, just take yourself and a towel to the beach. The best all-around strip on Paros is 1km-long (¾-mile) **Chrissi Akti** (Golden Beach), on the island's southeast coast. It's blessed with omnipresent breezes that keep windsurfers happy and tan-seeking landlubbers from feeling too sun-fried on the sand. With smooth and chalky rock formations dividing the bay into pretty coves, **Kolimbithres** is the most picturesque beach on Paros, with basic facilities and snack bars. Rounding out the big three of Paros beaches is **Santa Maria** (also a favorite spot for windsurfers), on the northeast tip of the island. It's very un-Greek-looking in that the fine golden sand stretches back from the water quite a way, and the waves that gently lap at the shoreline are a shallow, clear turquoise.

Venture inland to visit the medieval hill town of **Lefkes** (which also has the island's best hotel, the Lefkes Village Hotel), with its postcard-perfect square and cafes. The fishing village of **Naoussa**, across the bay from Kolimbithres beach, is utterly charming and getting more gentrified by the season as trendy shops and upscale restaurants move in. Art junkies or mineralogists familiar with such masterworks as the *Venus de Milo* may want to check out the defunct marble quarries at **Marathi**. Parian marble was highly prized by the ancient Greeks and Romans alike, who once had hundreds of thousands of slaves working here day and night to export

chunks of the luminous white stone for use all over the Mediterranean world. —SM

 www.parosweb.com or www.paroslife.com.

 Paros Airport.

 From Piraeus (3–6 hr.), and other Cyclades islands (1–3 hr.), to Parikia.

 \$\$ **Hotel Petres**, Naoussa ( 30/22840/52467; www.petres.gr). \$\$\$ **Lefkes Village Hotel**, Lefkes ( 30/22840/41827 or 30/210/6748470 during winter; www.lefkeshotel.com).

Sailing Along

33

Tjörn

Yachting & Trekking Among the Rocks

Sweden

Every summer, yachties and sun seekers from mainland Sweden flock to this island, causing the population to double, from 15,000 to more than 30,000. The rest of the year, the people lucky enough to live and work on Tjörn have one of western Sweden's most diverse recreational areas in their own backyard.

Like so many Scandinavian islands, Tjörn has a coastline defined by countless rocky inlets and infinite offshore skerries. The protected, azure waters of the Skagerat Strait, which runs from Tjörn's west coast, between Denmark and Norway, to the North Sea, are a magnet for the sailing crowd. The annual **Tjörn Runt** regatta (held in Aug) circles the island and brings with it thousands of colorful boats.

Tjörn's intricate topography also makes for some wonderful exploring, whether along the shore or into the island's wild interior. Trekking is a year-round activity here, taking in such varied scenery as green pastures, dense groves of trees, and unspoiled beaches. While cycling or hiking in the **Tuveslatt** district, you might come across ancient rock carvings and ruins of Stone Age dwellings. Whether you're looking for a protected cove or sandy stretch of shore, Tjörn offers plenty of places to swim in summer. Believe it or not, the water up here does get warm enough in July and August for a dip, though it'll be a bracing one!

Skärhamn, halfway up Tjörn's western coast, is the island's municipal seat and




Tjörn Island and sailboats.


main harbor. The marina swells to capacity in the summer months with the boats of vacationers, and a lively holiday atmosphere permeates the town, which, at 58 degrees north latitude, stays light almost all night long. In fact, the unique quality of light on Tjörn has been drawing artists for centuries. Be sure to visit the very worthwhile **Nordic Watercolour Museum** (Södra hamnen 6; www.akvarellmuseet.org), set in a striking modern building on the water's edge in Skärhamn.

The inhabitants of Tjörn have traditionally drawn their livelihood from the sea. Fishing is as important today as it was in the island's early history, but the construction of the Tjörn Bridge in 1960 greatly facilitated the island's leap from isolated fishing community to thriving community

of industry, with the growth of prosperous canning, shipping, and shipbuilding businesses. (With this modernization, too, has come the construction of thousands of summer cottages for vacationing Swedes.) Fortunately, the stewards of Tjörn's growth and progress have been careful to ensure that development does not infringe on the island's natural treasures. —SM

 www.tjorn.se.

 Gothenburg (61km/38 miles).

 Tjörn Bridge, 664m (2,178 ft.) to Stenungsund.

 \$\$\$ **Salt & Sill Floating Hotel**, Klädesholmen ( 46/304/673480; www.saltosill.se).

Island Hopping The Bahamas Out Islands: Out on the Water

More than 700 islands make up the Bahamas archipelago, but many visitors never venture farther than the two main islands, Grand Bahama and New Providence (Nassau)—and, of course, Paradise Island, a single bridge away from Nassau and home to the massive Atlantis resort. More and more, however, travelers are heading on to a chain of beautiful and historic islands that stretch south from Grand Bahama. Known as The Bahamas' Out Islands—or “the Family Islands,” as the tourism department calls them—these silky strands of sand have some of the finest and most pristine natural resources in the entire archipelago: gorgeous beaches and vibrant undersea coral gardens; sub-lime fishing, diving, and snorkeling; and prime sailing waters. The Out Islands also teem with historic sites, from the ruins of sugar plantations to the Victorian cottages in Dunmore Town, The Bahamas' former capital. Direct flights from the U.S. are now making these tropical isles easier to access, but not to worry: The islands and cays are still remote enough to stay peaceful and secluded and slightly rough-hewn.

Built on a backbone of coral, the Out Islands owe much of their inaccessibility and lack of development to the fringing reefs and shifting shoals that have made navigation dangerous for big ships for hundreds of years.



Sailing by the Abacos.

The closest islands to Grand Bahama are the 26-cay **34 Abacos**, which have a famously beautiful beach, **Treasure Cay**. The Abacos are a major sailing center, with the largest marina in The Bahamas and a number of celebrated regattas. According to *Cruising World*, The Bahamas are blessed with some of the clearest, cleanest seas to navigate in the world, in large part because of the absence of industry and river runoff. If you're itching to charter a sailboat and get out on the water, contact **Abaco Sailing** (www.abacosailing.com); they also offer lessons. The Abacos have been called “Nantucket under the Palms,” for the vintage New England-style clapboard cottages built by the

island's first settlers, British Loyalists who fled America in the wake of the War of Independence.

Divers flock to The Bahamas' largest island, **35 Andros**, which has the third-largest coral reef in the world. Anglers come to battle the fighting bonefish that live in the sparkling shallows. For a fly-fishing expedition in a shallow-draft flats boat, contact **Phillip Rolle's North Andros Fly Fishing** ([242/329-2661](tel:2423292661); www.northandrosflyfishing.com). Just beyond the reef is the “Tongue of the Ocean,” a steep drop-off that harbors big game, including blue marlin, sailfish, dolphin, wahoo, king fish, mackerel, tuna, snapper, and grouper.


36 Eleuthera may be the Out Islands' most touristed spot, with an international airport that is seeing increasing traffic from major airlines. The long, narrow island (177×4km/110×2½ miles) has lovely sugary-sand beaches ringed by teal water, and colonial-era villages and plantations. Just 3.2km (2 miles) east is **37 Harbour Island**, a favorite destination of the rich and trendy and the site of the former capital of The Bahamas, **Dunmore Town**. This lovely little village has colorful clapboard homes rimmed by white picket fences and draped in bougainvillea. Harbour Island's most famous beach, **Pink Sand**, is 4.8km (3 miles) of luminous, salmon-hued sand.

For castaway seclusion on magnificent beaches, head to **38 Cat Island**, 209km (130 miles) southeast of Nassau. Legend has it that the island was named after Arthur Catt, famous British sea captain or notorious pirate; take your pick. Cat Island was settled in the late 1700s by British Loyalists from the Americas who built prosperous cotton plantations here with slave labor. Today the island is littered with the ruins of their 18th-century plantation homes.

The 365 islands and cays that compose the beautiful **39 Exuma** chain are a sailing paradise, with secluded coves, uninhabited cays, and excellent anchorages. Ecotourism is also big here, with the 456-sq.-km (176-sq.-mile) **Exuma Cays Land and Sea Park** (www.exumapark.info), the Caribbean's first marine fishery reserve.


Some people think **40 Long Island** may be the prettiest of The Bahamas' Out Islands. It's another slender thread of land, just 97km long by 2.4km wide (60×1½ miles). The beaches are classic strands of Bahamian pink and white sand, lapped by clear, gentle seas. Long Island is also the site of **Dean's Blue Hole**, the world's deepest blue hole, plunging 203m (665 ft.) into the ocean floor. (A blue hole is generally created when the ceiling to a limestone cave collapses in the ocean.) Dean's Blue Hole is a fabulous spot to snorkel: You just paddle in off the white-sand beach with snorkel and flippers; the depth quickly drops from 1.5 to 180m (5–591 ft.). This is also one of the world's prime free-diving spots, and you can take free-diving lessons here from world-record-holder William Trubridge at **Vertical Blue** (www.verticalblue.net).

Rounding out the Out Islands is **Bimini** island, one of the top sport-fishing capitals of the world—it's reviewed separately on p. 242. —AF

 www.myoutislands.com or www.bahamas.com.

 Nassau (New Providence Island).

 Ferry service between Nassau and Eleuthera, Andros, Harbour Island, and Great Exuma (Bahamas Ferries; ☎ **242/323-2166**; www.bahamasferries.com).

 \$\$\$ **Green Turtle Club Resort and Marina**, Green Turtle Cay, Great Abaco (☎ **866/528-0539** in the U.S., or 242/365-4271; www.greenturtleclub.com). \$\$\$ **Rock House** (☎ **242/333-2053**; www.rockhousebahamas.com).

Buck Island

Lucky Buck

U.S. Virgin Islands

The largest of the U.S. Virgin Islands, St. Croix ³⁴¹ has plenty of attractions—relaxing beach resorts, stands of lush rainforest, historic plantation houses, and a thriving rum factory. But many visitors come here mainly to go scuba diving along the drop-offs, reefs, and wrecks that line the island's north coast, or snorkeling around the reefs of the west end. And among St. Croix's many dive sites, it's generally agreed that the premier spot is the pristine marine garden surrounding nearby Buck Island, now owned by the National Park Service. Some divers declare it's the finest dive spot in the whole Caribbean.

A tropical speck lying a mile and a half off St. Croix's northeast coast, Buck Island

is only about 1km wide and 1.6km long ($\frac{3}{4}$ ×1 mile), but it is nearly surrounded by an elkhorn coral barrier reef—the only elkhorn reef in U.S. waters, in fact. The waters here are so clear, visibility can be up to 30m (98 ft.). There's an underwater snorkeling trail laid out among the grottoes at the eastern end of the island, where the water's only 3.6m (12 ft.) deep and landmarks are clearly marked with underwater signs; sun dapples the submarine labyrinths as a wealth of reef fish, like queen angelfish and smooth trunkfish, flit in and out. There are also two approved mooring spots for scuba divers, where relatively shallow water—9 to 12m (30–39 ft.)—surrounds haystack formations of



A beach on Buck Island.

elkhorn coral. Marked walking trails bisect the island—it'll take about 45 minutes to hike across—where you'll pass through dry tropical forests of tamarind, frangipani, and pigeon-berry trees to get a spectacular oceanview panorama from the island's gentle crest. Hawksbill turtles, leatherback turtles, brown pelicans, and least terns are among the endangered species that thrive along Buck Island's shoreline; be sure to respect their nesting areas when you're enjoying the island's unspoiled white coral beaches.

You can reach the island either by private boat (you must get a permit from the park visitor center in St. Croix's capital, Christiansted) or on a half- or full-day tour by one of the boat operators licensed to serve the island, including **Caribbean Sea Adventures** (☎ 340/773-2628; www.caribbeanseaadventures.com), **Captain**

Heinz (☎ 340/773-3161; teroro@vip.powernet.net), and **Llewellyn Charters** (☎ 340/773-9027). —HH

Buck Island Reef National Monument visitor center, 2100 Church St., Christiansted (☎ 340/773-1460; www.nps.gov/buis).

✈ Henry E. Rohlsen Airport, Estate Mannings Bay, St. Croix.

🚤 8.8km (5½ miles) by boat from Christiansted: 40 min. by motor boat, 1½ hr. by sailboat.

🚢 \$\$\$ **The Buccaneer**, Gallows Bay, St. Croix (☎ 800/255-3881 in the U.S. or 340/712-2100; www.thebuccaneer.com).
\$ **Holger Danske Hotel**, 1200 King Cross St., Christiansted (☎ 340/773-3600; www.holgerhotel.com).

42

Diving's the Thing

Bonaire

Friendliest Diving in the Caribbean

Think of Bonaire as the Caribbean, version 2.0—an island of slower paces and authentic encounters, perhaps to try out after you've exhausted the nonstop activities and crowded beaches of other islands like Aruba 261. Boomerang-shaped Bonaire, just 80km (50 miles) north of Venezuela, is desertlike, with just a few stretches of rocky beach, so travelers with a major sunbathing agenda should look elsewhere. However, what draws people here over and over is Bonaire's world-class diving and snorkeling: Its reef-lined western coast is an amazing, uninterrupted chain of shore-accessible sites with turquoise waters. The island's yellow, five-character license plates say it all: "BONAIRE, N.A.—DIVERS PARADISE."

Upon arrival on Bonaire, divers pay a one-time fee of \$25 for the **Bonaire National**


Marine Park "nature tag." Then, you hit the road and keep your eyes peeled for yellow stone markers pointing the way to one of the island's 53 shore dive sites. Once under the crystal-blue water, feast your eyes on a magnificent array of nearly 500 species of reef fish, sea turtles, rays, sharks, and dolphins. For a diver, Bonaire is pure heaven: Your days are filled with easily accessible, diverse sites, and the island's omnipresent, outgoing outfitters make the practical side of diving—filling tanks, getting tips on where to see whale sharks, and so on—a breeze. With a population of about 10,000, Bonaire is very much a tight-knit community, and one of the best ways to experience this is to get into the local diving culture. For a more targeted approach to diving here, the official website of Tourism Corporation Bonaire (see below)


has a comprehensive list of the island's 22 accredited dive operators.

For nondivers, there are still enough natural attractions above the waterline to make for a satisfying short stay. The north half of the island is the hilliest and most scenic: The drive north from the capital of **Kralendijk** takes in turquoise sea on the left and coral cliffs on the right. Along this road, there are lovers' lookouts aplenty, and paths suitable for hiking or biking leading off the shoulder. The wildlife preserve of **Washington Slagbail National Park** (☎ 599/785-0017; www.washingtonparkbonaire.org) takes up 6,000 hectares (14,826 acres) of northwestern Bonaire: Here you can see tropical birds, visit the romantic black-sand beach of **Boca Chiquito**, and dive into remote bays like **Wajaca**, whose reef shelters turtles and octopuses.

As if the airport terminal—Flamingo International, painted bright pink—weren't enough to tip you off, Bonaire is famous for its **flamingos**, which spend most of their time in the salt flats in the southern part of the island. Slaves once worked to extract salt from here (you can

see some remnants of their stone huts nearby), but the salt pans today are run by the International Salt Company, which employs many a local. Also in the south of Bonaire is the island's best area for beach bumming, **Lac Bay**, with its sandy shores, gin-clear waters, and vivid coral reef. One of the most endearing places in the Caribbean is to the northwest—**Donkey Sanctuary** (☎ 599/95/607-607; www.donkeysanctuary.org), where abandoned or injured animals (originally brought over from Spain for hard labor in the 1600s) are cared for and given a comfortable and loving home on the range. —SM

 **Tourist information**, Kaya Grandi 2, Kralendijk (☎ 599/717-8322; www.tourismbonaire.com).

 **Flamingo Airport**, connections through Aruba, Curaçao, and St. Maarten.

 **\$\$\$ The Deep Blue View**, Kaya Diamanta 50, Santa Barbara Heights (☎ 599/717-8073; www.deepblueview.com). **\$\$\$ Harbour Village Bonaire**, Kaya Gobernador N. Debrot 17, Playa Lechi (☎ 599/717-7500; www.harbourvillage.com).

Diving's the Thing 43


Roatán

Coral Reef Paradise

Bay Islands, Honduras

You know a destination has “arrived” in savvy travel circles when people refer to it only by its first name. “We’re heading to *Roatán*,” someone confides, and everyone nods knowingly. That would be Roatán, Honduras, and if you haven’t heard of it yet, you soon will: It’s the Caribbean in an unspoiled state, with pristine sugary-sand beaches and lush coral reefs. It also has some of the best diving, offered at the cheapest prices, anywhere in the world.

This beautiful tropical island is the argest of the Bay Islands (which include

Utila  and Guanaja) off the Caribbean coast of Central America. It’s 65km (40 miles) long and comprises 127 sq. km (49 sq. miles). Roatán is a serious dive and snorkel destination, with warm, diamond-clear waters that are protected as a marine park. It sits on the second-largest barrier reef in the world, a magnificent necklace of coral that is alive with sponges, turtles, eagle rays, and fish in a paint box of vivid colors. The diverse underwater topography is one of dramatic ridges, channels, and vertical walls.

The island has several dive shops that can get you onto the reef in under 30 minutes. On **West End**—home to the island's best beaches—**Ocean Connections** (www.ocean-connections.com) is a PADI-certified dive center that offers recreational diving, diving courses, and dive packages on Roátan. Its dive center is just 15 minutes away from the coral reef.



On land, the vibe is laid-back and refreshingly unpolished. Visitors shouldn't be surprised if the electricity goes out for a few hours, and the nightlife essentially consists of hanging out, barefoot and sunburned, with new island pals over sun-downers. If you get bored with the water activities during the day, you can hit the **iguana reserve** just outside French Harbour—it holds 2,500 iguanas of four distinct species; or go horseback riding through the **Gumbalimba Nature Park**, a forested jungle reserve filled with colorful tropical birds like parrots and native macaws. You can even take a **Jungle Canopy Tour** along several platforms in the park, where the views of forest and sea are superb. For info on all park tours, go to www.gumbalimbapark.com.




The lodging scene here largely comprises small inns and hostels—and a few diving resorts like **Anthony's Key** (see

below)—and there is only one spa on the island (at Parrot Tree Plantation, a planned development). But Nikki Beach is opening up one of its upscale resorts in 2010. Roátan also has been targeted by not one but two major cruise lines (Royal Caribbean and Carnival), which are greatly expanding their Roátan presence—by 2010, the island could be visited by some 200 ships and around 700,000 cruise passengers annually. And airlines are now offering direct flights from Miami, Houston, and Newark into the international airport at **Coxen Hole**, the island capital. Prices and crowds on this lovely, supremely relaxed Caribbean outpost remain reasonable for now—but I recommend diving in as soon as you can, before that changes. —AF

 www.hondurastips.honduras.com.

 La Ceiba (30 min.).

 La Ceiba (1½ hr.): **M.V. Galaxy Wave** ( **504/445-1795**; www.safewaymaritime.com).

 \$\$\$ **Anthony's Key Resort**, Sandy Bay ( **954/929-0090** [U.S.]; www.anthonyskey.com). \$\$ **Mayan Princess Resort**, West Bay ( **504/445-5050**; www.mayanprincess.com).

44

Diving's the Thing

Ambergris Caye

Coral Reef Paradise

Belize

Coral reef systems around the world are under threat; in fact, it's estimated that one-third of all coral reefs in the world may be damaged beyond repair. Nestled in the crook of the arm of Central America is one of the world's most stunning examples of a living, breathing, thriving coral reef—an exquisitely fine-tuned ecosystem that experts say is under threat from rampant

development and the destruction of critical mangrove habitat. The degradation of Belize's coral reef would have serious repercussions: The Belize Barrier Reef Reserve System, named a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1996, is the longest continuous barrier reef in the Northern Hemisphere, 306km (190 miles) of rich and diverse marine habitat less than half a mile



Diving in Ambergris Caye.

offshore. The diving and snorkeling along this reef is first-class, and the water quality and visibility are consistently excellent. It's a vital life source for marine species and a significant habitat for such threatened species as marine turtles, manatees, and the American marine crocodile. It is also the country's top tourist attraction. In 2009, after UNESCO officially placed the reef on its Danger List, the Belize prime minister called it a "wake-up call" for the country.

Among the hundreds of sand cays and atolls strung along Belize's coral reef, the largest island, Ambergris Caye, enjoys a prime position in this marine ecosystem: The island's 40km (25-mile) shoreline runs almost parallel to the barrier reef. Just 15 minutes by puddle jumper from Belize City, Ambergris Caye is the most developed island in the country, home to most of the cays' lodgings and restaurants. But don't expect high-gloss hospitality: A trip to Ambergris Caye is a journey back to an old-fashioned Caribbean, leisurely and laid-back. If a road is paved at all, it's paved with cobblestones. It has neither glitzy nightlife nor megaluxe resorts, but you can get a cold bottle of the local lager, Belikin,

for about \$2. Ambergris Caye doesn't even have classic Caribbean beaches, more like short spurts of white sand between mangrove forests and sea. Waded into the shallows, and you're up to your ankles in sea grass.

The fishing village of **San Pedro** (pop. 7,000) has grown to be the largest town on Ambergris Caye. This is where the action is—the island hub for restaurants, cafes, and nightclubs—and where most of the islanders live. San Pedro has a funky, joyful vibe, where the sandy streets are filled with bicycles and golf carts, and the occasional taxi.

As for the lack of big, wide classic beaches, do as the locals do: Swim off one of the many piers that extend beyond the sea grass. Or do your swimming during your forays to the coral reef, when you'll be immersed in warm, sparkling blue waters.

The coral reef is the major draw for visitors, and Ambergris has incredibly easy access to world-class dive and snorkel sites. **Shark-Ray Alley** and **Hol Chan Marine Reserve** are two justifiably popular snorkel spots just off the island, where close encounters with green moray eels,

groupers, stingrays, and nurse sharks are abundant. Both sites are about 6.4km (4 miles) southeast of San Pedro Town. For reliable scuba diving service, contact **Amigos del Mar** (📞 501/226-2706; www.amigosdive.com), **Aqua Dives** (📞 800/641-2994 in the U.S. and Canada, or 501/226-3415; www.aquadives.com), or **Gaz Cooper's Dive Belize** (📞 800/499-3002 in the U.S. and Canada, or 501/226-4455; www.divebelize.com). Among the operators who specialize in snorkeling trips here is the very personable Alfonse Graniel and his launch **Li'l Alfonse** (📞 501/226-3537). —AF

📍 www.belize tourism.org, www.goambergris caye.com, or www.ambergris caye.com.

✈️ Belize City to Ambergris Caye (15 min. on Tropic Air or Maya Island Air).

🚤 Water taxi (45 min.—1 hr.): **Caye Caulker Water Taxi Association** (📞 501/223-5752; www.cayecaulkerwatertaxi.com).

🏠 \$\$\$ **Tides Beach Resort**, Boca del Rio Dr. (📞 501/226-2283; www.ambergris caye.com/tides). \$\$\$ **Victoria House** (📞 800/247-5159 in the U.S. or 501/226-2067; www.victoria-house.com).

45

Diving's the Thing

Rock Islands

Really Big Fish

Palau, Micronesia

They almost seem to float on the shimmering surface of Palau's Southern Lagoon, rounded knobs of ancient coral formations mantled in dense emerald-green foliage. Though most of them are uninhabited, this spatter of tiny islands 805km (500 miles) west of the Philippines 452 has become famous among divers for its rich diversity of marine life. The warm blue waters are so clear (up to 30m/98-ft. visibility) that even snorkelers get quite a show, but scuba divers report truly awesome experiences here, with breathtakingly deep drop-offs and immense submarine caverns. Wall-diving sites such as the **Blue Corner**, the **Blue Holes**, the **German Channel**, the **Peleliu Wall**, and the **Ngmelis Drop-Off** have achieved almost legendary status among divers in the know.

It's the big fish that give the Rock Islands their special claim to fame. Commercial fishing has been banned in Palau 454 for more than a decade, and as a result, threatened shark, barracuda, and wrasse species, as well as turtles and dolphins and

giant clams, thrive around the island's spectacular reefs. Tallies vary widely, but there are somewhere around 300 islands in the group, spread over some 161km (100 miles) of ocean south of Palau's largest island, **Babeldaob**. Three ocean currents converge here, which means that hundreds of migratory fish species pass in and out of these waters. Several World War II shipwrecks provide underwater landmarks to explore; you can also swim through tunnels in certain islands' coasts to reach inland marine lakes, populated with rare stingless jellyfish, a snorkeling experience you'll never forget.

For a great overview of the Rock Islands, take a speedboat tour from the main tourist town of **Koror**, about 20 minutes from the airport. These tours will whiz you around to secluded coves, jewel-like lagoons, and the most dazzling strips of white-sand beach. When it's time to get down to some serious diving, leading dive-boat operators include **Fish and Fins** (📞 680/488-2637; www.fishnfins.com),

Neco's Marine (📞 680/488-1755; www.necomarine.com), and **Sam's Tours** (📞 680/488-7267; www.samstours.com). For a little variety, you can also try kayaking and sport fishing around the islands; there are plenty of watersports shops in Koror, as well as at the leading resorts.

Exotic as Palau may seem, English is spoken everywhere, and the U.S. dollar is the main currency. You can easily base yourself in Koror, or book a berth on a live-aboard boat such as the *Eclipse* (book through Sam's Tours, above) or the *Ocean*

Adventure I and III (book through Fish and Fins, above). —HH

📍 **Palau tourist office** (📞 680/488-2793; www.visit-palau.com).

✈️ Palau International Airport, Babeldaob Island.

🏠 \$\$\$ **Dolphin Bay Resort**, Peleliu Island (📞 680/345-5555; www.dolphinbay-resort-peleliu.com). \$\$\$ **Palau Pacific Resort**, Koror (📞 680/488-2600; www.palaupr.com).

Diving's the Thing 46

Onemaba Island

The House Reef Rules

Sulawesi, Indonesia

When Swiss-born diver Lorenz Mäder launched the **Wakatobi Dive Resort** in the mid-1990s, this remote island cluster in the Banda Sea barely registered on the world map of premier dive sites. But that was what Mäder liked about it: Remote and pristine, these Indonesian islands offered warm, clear, shallow waters around superb biodiverse reefs, with no tourist hordes to contend with. If you were serious enough about diving to make the effort to get here, underwater nirvana was yours for the taking. Word quickly spread; eventually no less a submarine authority than Jacques Cousteau pronounced Wakatobi possibly the finest dive site in the world.

The resort itself is set on the scrubby, flat island of Onemaba, which means “long white beach” in the local language—and fittingly, the resort buildings front onto a gorgeous white-sand beach, fringed with nodding palms. What began as a sort of bare-bones destination located in a single traditional longhouse has morphed into a high-end resort for some 50 guests at a time, with private air-conditioned bungalows furnished with canopied beds, soaring teak-beamed ceilings, sleek volcanic


stone floors, and huge windows overlooking the sea. Amenities include Internet access, top chefs serving gourmet fusion cuisine, and a private airstrip, where charter flights from Bali (201) arrive bearing resort guests. If you don't want to stay on land, the resort also has its own luxury live-aboard motor yacht, the *MY Pelagian*.

Lodging includes all meals and three daily 70-minute dive expeditions out to the surrounding Wakatobi islands of Wangi, Kaledupa, Tomea, and Binongki, all of which have thriving reefs; there are more than 40 dive sites available, where you can do everything from drift diving to exploring calm coral bowls, pinnacles, and bommies. With a ratio of one guide to every four divers, these outings tend to be highly productive; during a 10-day stay, you can easily rack up 40 hours or more of bottom time. Don't expect fake shipwrecks and artificial seawalls; do expect incredibly healthy reefs with brilliantly colored coral, hard and soft, and an astonishing variety of marine life from clown fish to rays, wrasses, eels, and sharks, including exotics like pygmy sea horses, ghost pipefish, leaf scorpionfish, and cuttlefish.

Even better, Wakatobi Dive Resort has an excellent house reef right off that white beach, a fringing reef that's accessible via tender boat 24 hours a day. Given all the other great dive opportunities here, that house reef is the icing on the cake—but oh, what icing! —HH

 www.wakatobi.com.

 Wakatobi Dive Resort, 2½ hr. from Bali.

 **\$\$\$ Wakatobi Dive Resort**  **866/825-3429** in the U.S., or 62/868/1212-2355; www.wakatobi.com).

47

Storied Sand & Surf

Kos

Temple of Healing

Greece

The world of medicine made a giant leap here in the 4th century B.C. Kos is the birthplace of the father of Western medicine, Hippocrates, whose followers founded the Kos Asklepeion, a healing temple that became a pioneering hospital and medical school specializing in the therapeutic principles laid out by Hippocrates. It was Hippocrates who led the way in separating superstition from fact in the practice of clinical medicine and whose belief in taking a whole-body approach to medicine was light-years ahead of its time. The ruins of the sprawling Asklepeion are among the many archaeological treasures of this, the third-largest island in the Dodecanese chain.

The healing properties of Kos are not limited to its hospitals. This largely flat island, studded with two small peaks, is a sun-splashed, soul-lifting slice of Greek island paradise. It has gorgeous beaches, picturesque villages, and a lively sociability. Tourism is the island's main industry, and the capital, **Kos Town**, can sometimes seem overrun with buzzing beach resorts and besotted youth, but if you get out into the serene countryside, amid ruins and verdant farm fields, colorful villages and rustic tavernas, you get to experience Kos at its most authentic.


Because the island is largely flat, it's easily seen by bicycle, and bikes can be

rented throughout the island. You might start your sightseeing by biking along the northern coastline to **Tigaki Beach**, just 10km (6¼ miles) from Kos Town. Tigaki's shallow waters and gentle surf make it a fine beach for families; ditto for **Marmari Beach**, just 10km (6¼ miles) west of Tigaki. For a little more wave action, head just 5km (3 miles) west to **Mastahari**, which has lots of family-owned restaurants fronting the beach. On the south side of the island (which can be reached by bus or car from Kos Town), beautiful **Kefo-los** has sparkling seas and ivory sand. It's an easy swim to the small island just off the beach, which holds the monastery of **St. Nicolas**.


The Kos beaches are bliss, but a visit to the **Asklepeion** is a must for visitors to Kos. The ancient ruins lie in an area just 4km (2½ miles) west of Kos Town. The buildings are set dramatically upon four terraces linked by a marble staircase. Among them, the Temple of Asklepeion is a Doric temple that was built in the 2nd century B.C. The Stoa here once housed Hippocrates's medical school.

More antiquities can be found around the port of Kos Town, where excavations of the ancient city have uncovered ruins from a range of civilizations, from the classical-era **Agora** to a 15th-century **castle built by the Knights of St. John**. It's

a remarkable architectural timeline tracing this island's rich history. —AF

 www.hippocrates.gr or www.visitgreece.gr.

 Athens (55 min.).

 Year-round regular ferry service from several islands, including Piraeus (10 hr.), Rhodes (3 hr.), Mykonos (9 hr.), and Syros (6½ hr.). Daily hydrofoils (fast ferries)

run in high season between Kos and Rhodes (2 hr.) and other Aegean islands, including Agathonisi (2½ hr.), Kalymnos (35 min.), Leros (1½ hr.), Lipsi (2 hr.), and Patmos (2½ hr.). Reservations: www.ferries.gr.

 \$\$\$ **Alice Springs Hotel**, 100 Lambi, Kos Island ( 30/22420-23473; www.alicespringshotel.com). \$\$\$\$ **Hotel Planatista**, Psalidi, Kos Island ( 30/22420-22400; www.platanista.gr).

Storied Sand & Surf

48

Santa Maria The Yellow Island

The Azores, Portugal

Geographically speaking, Santa Maria is an island with a split personality. Half of it is flat as a pancake, with golden beaches and ubiquitous sunshine, while the other half, the eastern end, is hilly and almost wild with lush vegetation and frequent rainfall—and the island only measures 17km (11 miles) end to end. Like all the Azores, Santa Maria is a traditional place and quite remote, but with its sparkling seacoast, upcountry scenery, and truly untouched feel, there's plenty to draw the visitor in search of an offbeat, beachy island destination.

The southernmost of the Azores archipelago, and the closest, along with São Miguel ²⁹⁹, to the Portuguese mainland, Santa Maria is sometimes called the “Yellow Island” for the vivid hues of sunny yellow wildflowers that bloom here as early as February. But Santa Maria is an island of many colors—it's known for its white-washed and basalt-trimmed architecture, some of which dates back to the 15th century when the Portuguese first settled here. In the high country, you can't miss the fertile dark-red soil. Santa Maria is also referred to as the “island of the sun” for the indisputable meteorological fact that


Santa Maria is drier and has better weather year-round than its fellow Azores.

Despite its diminutive size, Santa Maria has excellent unspoiled beaches that are integral to the island experience here; the bathing areas are basically divided between São Lourenço Bay, on the north-east coast, and Praia Formosa, a wide bay along the southern coast. Swimmers and aesthetes will want to return to **São Lourenço Bay**, again and again. This crescent of soft sand, punctuated by dramatic rocks, and backed by neatly defined vineyards that terrace up to muscular-looking, verdant hills, is one of the most stunning bathing spots in the Azores. But perhaps the best beach for those who love wide expanses of gorgeous sand is **Praia Formosa**, well equipped with watersports and refreshment facilities.

At 590m (1,936 ft.), **Pico Alto** is the highest point on the island, with breathtaking views in every direction. The main town on Santa Maria, **Vila do Porto**, is also the oldest in the Azores, with characteristic winding streets that lead all the way up to a panoramic fortress on a cliff overlooking the port. The village of **Anjos** earned its place on the tourist circuit of Santa Maria

by being the first European spot where Christopher Columbus landed on his return from the Americas. There's a bronze statue of Columbus near the chapel of **Ermida de Nossa Senhora dos Anjos**, one of many historic churches on the island, but one that gets special status because it's where the explorer and his crew prayed for continued safe travels. —SM

 www.azores.com.

 Santa Maria Airport, connections from São Miguel.

 From São Miguel (4 hr.), twice per week in summer.

 \$\$ **Hotel Colombo**, Rua Cruz Teixeira, Vila do Porto ( 351/296/820200; www.colombo-hotel.com).

49

Storied Sand & Surf

Rügen

Bathing in the Baltic Sea

Germany

Beautiful island beaches may not be the first thing that comes to mind when you think about Germany, but this Scandinavian-flavored gem is definitely worth a visit for its sand and shore, especially if you have kids in tow. It's already been discovered by

thousands of travelers who flock here for long, leisurely summer holidays.

Located in the Baltic Sea off Germany's northeast coast, 976-sq.-km (377-sq.-mile) Rügen Island is Germany's largest island, with enough land to encompass



Children playing on Rügen beach.

family-friendly seaside resorts, sandy beaches, a chalk-cliff coastline, preserved wetlands, and fairy-tale forests. Its location by the sea keeps temperatures temperate and fresh breezes constant, and its northerly latitude extends daylight hours in summer well into the evening; it gets a hundred more hours of sunshine annually than Munich.

Rügen is home to 70,000 people, who live in four towns and scores of municipalities including the capital, Bergen. In the 19th century it was an elegant Baltic spa resort. It continued to be a popular vacation destination after World War II when it was part of the German Democratic Republic (East Germany), and German reunification did nothing to blunt its popularity. Today the population swells to include visitors on holiday enjoying Rügen's numerous recreational opportunities. The long, fine-sand beach and gentle surf in the seaside town of **Binz** make it ideal for small children (it also has dog-friendly and clothing-optional beaches). Hiking and biking trails trace the island along level, well-maintained pathways. You can rent bikes at **Weiradhaus Deutschmann**, which has two offices in Binz (near the railway station and the petrol station; ☎ 49/38393-32420).

Children of all ages delight in the **Rasender Roland** (www.rasender-roland.com), a kid-size narrow-gauge railroad steam train that travels from **Putbus** (west of Binz) to **Gohren**, with stops at the resort towns of **Sellin** and **Baabe** and at **Jagdschloss**, a 19th-century hunting castle set at the highest point in a 1,200-hectare

(2,965-acre) beech forest. In the evenings, folks in Binz stroll down its famous wooden beachside promenade past elegant, beautifully preserved 19th-century villas with Art Nouveau grace notes. If the stars are out, it's an impossibly romantic scene.

You can get to Rügen by traveling over the Rügenbrücke Bridge, which connects the island by road and rail with the city of Stralsund on the mainland, and crosses over the Strelasund. If you don't have a rental car, Rügen has a reliable public bus system (RPNV; ☎ 49/3838-8229-55). Whether you take a bus or rent a car, a ride in the countryside reveals the island's impressive assortment of vintage palaces (*schloss*) and manor houses, many of which offer accommodations and cultural events. —AF

📍 www.ruegen.de or www.ostseebad-binz.de.



Berlin (3½ hr. from Rügen).



Glewitz ferry (www.weisse-flotte.com) between Rügen and the mainland (Stahlbrode-Glewitz). **Scandlines** (www.scandlines.com) transports passengers and autos from Sweden (Trelleborg) to Rügen's Sassnitz harbor, about 10km (6¼ miles) north of Binz.



Steigenberger Resort Hotel, Neddeseitz 18 (adjacent to Jasmund National Park; ☎ 49/6966-5644-60; www.ruegen.steigenberger.com). **Travel Charme Kurhaus Binz**, Strandpromenade 27, Ostseebad Binz (☎ 49/38393-66-50; www.travelcharme.com).

Storied Sand & Surf

50

Antigua

A Beach for Every Day of the Year

Here's how you might spend a fine day on the eastern Caribbean island of Antigua. It would start in a boat skimming sparkling

green seas where you might spot a hawksbill turtle moving gracefully below the glassy surface. You put down anchor

when you find the right beach. Will it be a soft crescent of secluded white sand? A palm-fringed gathering spot with lilting calypso rhythms and barbecues smoking? A sheltered cove of sparkling blue water? Take your pick; all are public. You dive into the warm, sun-splashed seas, water so buoyant you practically float atop the waves. You've brought provisions, of course, picnic fare, drinks, and—most important—snorkeling equipment. The coral reef delivers calm, protected waters packed with underwater eye candy. With flippers and snorkel, you commune with parrotfish, angelfish, grouper, sponges and sea fans, and more big, lumbering turtles. A fine day, indeed.

It's been said that Antigua is more or less a beach with an island in the middle. It's also been said that Antigua has a beach for every day of the year. Even if they number only 364, Antigua's beaches would still rank among the Caribbean's finest. (The locals have their secret favorites.) The gentle waves and powdery sand make **Dickenson Bay**, on the northwest coast, popular with families. The kicked-up Atlantic surf at **Half-Moon Bay**, on the island's southeastern coast, is a windsurfer haven. Some of the island's best snorkeling can be had on **Long Bay**, **Galleon Beach**, and **Pigeon Beach**. If you're looking for great dive sites, head to the southern or eastern shores, where marine life teems among the steep walls and ledges. **Big John's Dive Antigua** (☎ 268/462-DIVE [462-3483]; <http://diveantigua.com>), which has PADI-certified instructors and 25 years' experience diving on Antigua, can help arrange many trips.

Antigua is the largest English-speaking nation in the Leeward Islands; the island nation includes Barbuda (182) and Redonda. Throughout the island, you can see the crumbling relics of the island's days as a sugar-processing workhorse for the British Empire. These days, many of the

remnants of 18th-century sugar plantations have been converted into tourist properties or lie in splendid ruins in a tangle of lush vegetation. The historic town of **English Harbor** was once the Caribbean headquarters of the British Navy and is now part of the restored **Nelson's Dockyard National Park**. Antigua's not-so-distant colonization (it achieved full independence from Britain in 1981) is evident in the island's lilting British/Caribbean accents and the tradition of afternoon teas. Most of the islanders are descendants of the African slaves the British brought over to work the sugar plantations.

The island's strong sailing tradition is also a likely offshoot of the British occupation, when a young Horatio Nelson arrived in Antigua in the late 18th century to develop the naval facilities and dockyard (he stayed in his quarters on the ship, calling the island "a vile place"). Regattas and races sponsored by local yacht clubs give the island a fizzy, celebratory ambience year-round. Even if you're not a sailor, you can get out on the water any number of ways, from cruises to eco-tours, to speedboat charters.

Antigua has a pretty sophisticated tourism infrastructure and plenty of small-scale luxury resorts, each with its own splendid chunk of beachfront real estate. But if you're the adventurous sort—and even if you're not—it's highly recommended that you take to the water and discover your own little slice of sandy paradise. —AF

 www.antigua-barbuda.org.

 V.C. Bird International Airport.

 \$\$\$ **Carlisle Bay Antigua** (☎ 268/484-0000; www.carlisle-bay.com). \$ \$ **Sibonney Beach Club** (☎ 268/462-0806; www.caribbean-resort-antigua-hotel-sibonney-beach.com).

Oahu

The Hawaiian Icon

Hawaii, U.S.

Though it's sometimes dismissed by island aficionados as either too populated or too Vegas-y to be a proper vacation destination, Oahu is in many ways the most Hawaiian island of the archipelago. Legendary, one-of-a-kind sights like Waikiki Beach, Pearl Harbor, and the North Shore surf breaks make Oahu a must-see, even if only for a few days en route to Maui (263), Kauai (88), or the Big Island (242). This is the Hawaii of classic TV and movies, from the tiki idol episode of the *Brady Bunch* to *From Here to Eternity*, with appealing retro-Polynesian style all over the island. In 2008, Oahu also received a very welcome publicity shot in the arm when native son Barack Obama, the pride of

Makiki (a neighborhood in the capital city of **Honolulu**, on the south side of Oahu), was elected President of the United States.

Surfers need no more compelling reason to book a trip to Oahu than the promise of being able to ride the waves that crash on the fabled **North Shore**. When winter brings 30-ft. (9m) swells, the world-class breaks of **Waimea Bay**, the **Banzai Pipeline**, and **Sunset Beach** are for experts only. In summer, the waters are much calmer, and these become idyllic snorkeling spots. The funky town of **Haleiwa** is known as Surf City, U.S.A., with all the midcentury memorabilia and hang-loose atmosphere you'd expect—a little kitschy, but fun.



Surfing in Oahu.

Of course, you haven't seen Oahu until you've done **Waikiki beach**. Essentially a suburb of Honolulu, Waikiki's famous pink-sand beach is lined with glitzy hotels, excellent dining and shopping, and great places to people-watch. It's hard to find any kind of Polynesian soul in Waikiki, but the dramatic promontory of **Diamond Head volcano**, at one end of the beach, is an undeniably iconic symbol of Hawaii. All along the beach here are watersports vendors offering everything from snorkeling equipment rentals to outrigger canoe excursions.

Oahu's "day of infamy"—the bombing of **Pearl Harbor** on December 7, 1941—is chillingly recalled at the **USS Arizona Memorial** (www.nps.gov/usar). The monument spans the sunken remains of the ship where 1,177 crew members died during the Japanese aerial attack. Also at Pearl Harbor, the enormous **USS Missouri** battleship (www.ussmissouri.com), where Japan signed its surrender in 1945 to end World War II, is now open to the public as a museum ship.

Since the 2008 presidential campaign, Obama tourism has become a lucrative addition for island guides—as much a part of the modern Oahu experience as surf lessons on Waikiki beach or visiting the *Arizona* memorial. For a fee, entrepreneurial locals will sell you a map that marks all the places on Oahu where the various generations of Barack's family have ever set foot, and organized tours will take you to the 44th president's favorite burger joint, **Kua 'Aina Sandwich Shop** (66-160 Kamehameha Hwy.; ☎ 808/637-6067), or bodysurfing spot, **Sandy Beach**, on Oahu's southeastern tip. —SM

📍 www.gohawaii.com/oahu or www.visit-oahu.com.

✈ Honolulu International.

🏨 \$\$\$ **Royal Hawaiian**, 2259 Kalakaua Ave., Waikiki (☎ 808/923-7311; www.royal-hawaiian.com). \$\$ **Waikiki Parc**, Lewers St. (☎ 800/422-0450 or 808/921-7272; www.waikikiparchotel.com).

52

Archipelagos & Atolls

Bazaruto Archipelago

Pearl of the Indian Ocean

Mozambique

Glorious Mozambique is like Rip Van Winkle awakening from a deep sleep. Held back by years of iron-fisted colonial rule, devastating civil wars, and drought, this East African nation is emerging as one of the world's most unspoiled, undiscovered destinations. Among its treasures is the beautiful Bazaruto Archipelago, whose pink-coral beaches and dazzling Indian Ocean seas have been largely untouched by civilization for decades. It's a seascape so magical, so environmentally exquisite, that the government has wisely designated the entire archipelago as a protected national marine park. It's a remarkably forward-thinking

directive aimed at maintaining the region's ecological and social integrity.

The archipelago is composed of five islands lying in the Indian Sea off the southern coast of Mozambique: Bazaruto, Benguerua, Margaruque, Banque, and Santa Carolina. **Margaruque** is a private island owned by a Zimbabwean millionaire. **Banque** is tiny and completely undeveloped. The largest island, **Bazaruto**, has voluminous sand dunes whose color changes with the light, from Namibian red to blindingly white. Both Bazaruto and the second-largest island, **Benguerua**, have interiors of glittering freshwater lakes,

home to large crocodiles—evidence of the island's ancient past. Benguerua also has high, beautiful dunes, from which you can watch the moon set and the sun rise. One way to experience this amazing landscape is on horseback; **Mozambique Horse Safari** (📞 258/82-7639249; www.mozambiquehorsesafari.com) offers day rides on Benguerua's empty white-sand beaches past flocks of flamingos skimming the tidal flats. Cashew nuts, once the country's major export, still grow on indigenous trees on Benguerua, as do wild orange trees, coconut palms, and sisal plants.

The rich and famous haunted **Santa Carolina** island (also known as Paradise Island) from the 1940s to the 1960s, when Mozambique was still a Portuguese colony. Bob Dylan wrote the song "Mozambique" on a piano in the sumptuous 250-room Art Deco **Hotel Santa Carolina**; the piano is now in safekeeping at the Indigo Bay Island Resort (see below) because when the Portuguese abruptly fled the country in 1975, they abandoned the hotel; it now lies in ruins. Rani Resorts, which runs several resorts in Mozambique, have been granted the rights to redevelop the island and plan to re-create the hotel as it was in the 1940s; look for a 2010 opening.

The islands in the Bazaruto archipelago are largely sand, sea, and tropical flora and fauna. There are no towns on the islands, no shops, no streets, and no cars. Tourism is in its infancy here, and large-scale development is not in the cards for the archipelago. The handful of resorts on the islands follow the conservation-minded example of the high-end, low-volume, low-impact bush lodges of Botswana: pampered luxury in pristine surrounds, at a price. Foreigners

are not allowed to own land in Mozambique but can build (eco-conscious) concessions with long-term (99-year) leases.

Even though the island "attractions" are few, there's plenty to do here. Activities include superb **deep-sea diving** and **snorkeling** on unspoiled coral reefs; **salt-water fly-fishing**; and **big-game fishing** for whopping marlin, sailfish, king mackerel, and bonito (tag and release, of course). Bazaruto also has the largest remaining population of **dugong** in East Africa. This extremely rare mammal is a sea cow (and relative of the manatee) and though it has been hunted to the brink of extinction, it can be spotted on boat tours. You can arrange any of these activities through your lodging.

It's not difficult to get to Bazaruto. You can fly into the coastal city of **Vilanculos**, on the Mozambique mainland, from Maputo (Mozambique's capital) or Johannesburg, South Africa. Most resorts then arrange for charter flights from Vilanculos to the islands or set up boat transfers. Non-hotel guests are not allowed onto the islands with resort properties. —AF

📍 www.mozambiquetourism.co.za.

✈️ Vilanculos, Mozambique (from Maputo, Mozambique, 1 hr., 20 min.; Johannesburg, South Africa, 2 hr., 30 min.). Charter flights on CFA Air Carters from Maputo.

🚤 Lodges arrange boat transfers (30 min.).

🏠 \$\$\$ **Indigo Bay Island Resort & Spa**, Bazaruto Island (📞 27/011/658-0063; www.indigobayresort.com). \$\$\$ **Marlin Lodge**, Benguerua Island (📞 27/012/460-9410; www.marlinlodge.co.za).

San Blas Islands

Kuna Yala

Panama

Imagine this: The San Blas Islands were once simply a place you passed through on the way to the Panama Canal. Boy, have times changed: The sleepy little San Blas Islands are still sleepy—that's their charm—but these idyllic, sun-dappled tropical isles off the northeast coast of Panama are now a big lure for nature lovers and beach bums. The pristine islands in the Caribbean Sea were even selected one of the top two "best cruising destinations in the world" by *Cruising World* magazine, and CBS's *Survivor* TV show visited one San Blas island, Sapbeinega.

Composed of approximately 365 islands and cays, the San Blas Islands are part of the Comarca de Kuna Yala, an autonomous territory controlled by the native Kunas, who call it Kuna Yala ("Kuna Territory"). Only 60 of the islands are inhabited; the others are largely uninhabited white-sand atolls fringed with palm trees and ringed by pulsing coral reefs and clear, sparkling emerald seas. It's an impossibly gorgeous seascape. The capital of Kuna Yala is the island of **El Porvenir**, a 20-minute flight from Panama City. If you decide to stay in the Porvenir area, head to **Island Perro (Dog Island)** for some great snorkeling just off the beach around the wreck of an old cargo ship. Other top snorkeling spots include the **Cayos Holandes**, a group of remote and largely uninhabited cays in the northeast quadrant of the archipelago.

Some 50,000 Kunas currently live in Panama. One segment of this indigenous tribe lives on just a handful of the islands in thatched-roof villages—theirs is a close-knit community in the most literal sense. The rest of the San Blas islands have an almost primitive, castaway feel, with no

one else for miles around. Coral reefs support a vital population of spectacularly hued marine life—you can snorkel-hop from one island to the next with joyous abandon.

One of the most fascinating things to do in the San Blas Islands is take an expedition to a Kuna village and learn more about the Kuna culture. The Kunas move from one island to another in motorized *cayucos* (dugout canoes), and many of the lodges are owned and operated by the Kunas. You can even buy traditional (Keith Haring–like) *mola* embroidered textiles. The Kuna women wear traditional colorful dresses (women travelers should wear one-piece suits or coverups, if possible, to avoid offending the Kunas). **Ancon Expeditions of Panama** (☎ 507/269-9415; www.anconexpeditions.com) offers solid Kuna Village and San Blas expeditions.

If you're interested in taking combination kayaking and snorkeling trips of the San Blas Islands, contact **Adventuras Panama** (☎ 507/260-0044; www.aventuraspanama.com). Full-service 3- to 21-day sailing trips of the island archipelago are offered by **San Blas Sailing** (☎ 507/314-1800; www.sanblassailing.com), with plenty of mooring stops to snorkel, swim, and soak up the scenery. —AF

📍 www.visitpanama.com.

✈️ Panama City, then small plane (Air Panama or Aeroperlas) to El Porvenir.

🛖 \$\$\$ **Coral Lodge**, near San Blas (☎ 507/232-0200; www.corallodge.com).
 \$\$\$ **Sapibenega The Kuna Lodge**, Iskardup island (☎ 507/215-1406; www.sapibenega.com).

Turneffe Islands Atoll

Life on the Atoll

Belize

From the shallows to the deep, the marine ecosystem in Belize is so vibrant that the waters pulse with life everywhere you look. For fishermen chasing hard-fighting bonefish in sparkling saltwater flats and divers exploring tropical coral gardens, the Turneffe Atoll is one of the most vital places in the world. In fact, according to the Oceanic Society, which operates a marine research center here on Blackbird Caye, Turneffe is the most biologically diverse atoll in the Western Hemisphere.

At 48km long and 16km wide (30×10 miles), the Turneffe Islands Atoll is the largest of three atolls (coral reefs ringing a shallow lagoon) off the coast of Belize. Some 200 islands, or cayes, make up the atoll, some mere dollops of sugary white sand, others blanketed by mangrove forests or swaying coconut palms. The islands represent the tip of a submerged volcanic rim that rises from deep offshore waters, and the surrounding vertical wall makes for world-class diving with excellent visibility (down to 24–30m/80–100 ft.). Sightings include eagle rays, turtles, green morays, jewfish, nurse and reef sharks, grouper, snapper, and horse-eye jacks. Close by, the **Elbow** offers huge gorgonians and sponges in current-driven drift dives. A little farther out, **Lighthouse Reef** features the famed underwater sites **Half Moon Caye** and **Blue Hole**. It was Jacques Cousteau who blazed the trail to the Blue Hole in 1972. This circular limestone sinkhole, 300m (984 ft.) wide and more than 120m (394 ft.) deep, is actually a massive Ice Age cavern whose roof collapsed to create a cobalt-blue ocean hole. It's filled with giant stalactites and stalagmites and large pelagics, fat groupers, and rays.

You can get to Turneffe by a 2- to 3-hour boat ride from Belize City for day trips on the atoll, or you can take overnights on full-service dive boats operating out of Belize City or Ambergris Caye ⁴⁴; the **Aggressor Fleet** (www.aggressor.com) offers weekly dive trips to the Turneffe Atoll on the **Belize Aggressor II** out of Belize City. But perhaps the most thrilling way to experience Turneffe is to stay at one of the three well-run resorts on the atoll, all of which have excellent fishing and dive operations and offer fishing, dive, and general vacation packages. The oldest (40 years) is the 5.6-hectare (14-acre) private island resort **Turneffe Island Lodge** (see below), considered one of the Caribbean's top saltwater-flats fishing destinations. Blackbird Caye has two resorts: **Turneffe Flats** and **Blackbird Caye Resort**.


Avid divers and anglers have long known about Turneffe, but it's a little off the radar of most mainstream travelers, perhaps because the atoll lies 56km (35 miles) from the mainland, and the tourism infrastructure of this unspoiled landscape is, well, little more than water and sand. Things may be shifting, however. Conservationists are raising warning flags that the balance of this exquisite ecosystem could be tipped in the near future by illegal fishing and the private purchases of public land—slices of the atoll are up for sale. Much is riding on the preservation of these marine habitats: According to the Ocean Society, the expanses of mangrove and sea-grass habitat serve as a huge nursery area for crocodiles, manatees, dolphins, and invertebrates. Underwater sponges provide rich feeding grounds for


the endangered hawksbill sea turtle. Endangered and threatened nesting species of birds include the least tern, the roseate tern, and the white crowned pigeon.

If you simply can't get enough of unspoiled coral atolls, head just south of Turneffe to **Glover's Reef**. It was named for the 18th-century British pirate John Glover, who used the atoll as a base from which to plunder passing Spanish galleons. This marine reserve and UNESCO World Heritage Site has a no-fishing zone (over 75% of the area) that ensures a rich

and diverse marine life along the 207-sq.-km (80-sq.-mile) coral reef. —AF

 www.travelbelize.org.

 Belize City (48–56km/30–35 miles from Turneffe).

 Boat transfers to island from airport (about 90 min.).

 \$\$\$ **Turneffe Flats**, Blackbird Caye ( **888/512-8812** in the U.S. or 501/220-4046; www.tflats.com). \$\$\$ **Turneffe Island Lodge**, Little Caye Bokel ( **713/236-7739** [U.S.]; www.turnefferesort.com).

55

Archipelagos & Atolls

Tuvalu

Somewhere in the South Pacific . . .

At the remote coordinates of 9 degrees south latitude and 179 degrees east longitude, Tuvalu may just be the most far-flung independent monarchy in the world. Its name, pronounced *Tu-vah-loo*, means “eight standing together,” for the eight islands that originally composed Tuvalu. There are now nine, together covering a grand total of 27 sq. km (10 sq. miles) in area, making it the fourth-smallest country in the world land-wise; the population, at just over 11,000, isn't much bigger. The South Pacific island of Tuvalu is one very remote spot, with little tourism infrastructure, but if you do find your way there—perhaps sailing between Hawaii and the Cook Islands (p. 516) or French Polynesia—you'll find broadly smiling locals and a number of interesting sights and activities to keep you happily occupied as you hop around the atolls.

Five of the islands of Tuvalu are atolls while the other four are the tops of more solid pinnacles of land. None of the islands of Tuvalu reaches an elevation of more than about 4m (13 ft.), and all are covered

with sugary white sand and coconut palms. **Funafuti** atoll is the capital of Tuvalu, and its village of **Fogafale** is where the island's few services are to be found. Bicycles are the preferred mode of transportation here and far outnumber motor vehicles. The Australian dollar is the local currency.

Tuvalu's attractions do not include any mountains, hikes, or waterfalls. Instead, it's all about the uninterrupted, bliss-inspiring (and potentially stir-crazy-making) expanses of ocean in every direction, and outstanding snorkeling amid the coral reefs. Great distances of open water separate the islands of Tuvalu, so if you're looking for the truly unspoiled South Pacific, this is it. Tuvaluans perform their Polynesian dances for each other—not outside visitors, though they're welcome, too—and play an ancient ballgame called *te ano* that also involves singing, dancing, and traditional dress.


During World War II, Tuvalu was occupied by the Americans, and this provides a


BEACHCOMBER ISLANDS

bit of historical sightseeing around the islands. The **remains of warplanes** are nestled in the shrubs along the American-built airstrip on Nanumea; and on that same island, the wrecks of small American landing craft are still visible in the low surf. The principal “archaeological” site on Funafuti is not war-related but Darwin-related: It was here that several holes were bored more than 300m (984 ft.) to prove Darwin’s theory on the formation of atolls. The boreholes can still be seen today at the site called **David’s Drill**, after the scientist who led the experiment.

Although it’s unlikely that tourism will be sufficiently developed here to provide a

significant source of income, Tuvalu has benefited greatly from the Internet age: Its national domain suffix “**.tv**” is hungrily sought by media corporations worldwide, and Tuvalu is only happy to sell, providing the tiny island nation with millions of site-rights dollars every year. —SM

 www.timelesstuvvalu.com or www.tuvaluislands.com.

 Funafuti International Airport (connections to Tarawa, Kiribati and Suva, Fiji).

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