

TRAVEL

# INDULGING IN **TURKS AND CAICOS**

*Providenciales delivers the world's most perfect beach, with ample splurging on the side*

By Doug Wallace



Drake's private jet is taking up a huge parking spot at the Turks and Caicos airport, and the whole of Providenciales is aflutter. Apparently, he has rented a mansion on the south side of the island that once belonged to Prince, and he had dinner the other night at Indigo, its top restaurant, set within the Wymara Resort and Villas, where I'm checking in. Maybe he and I are destined to meet, over a snifter of something expensive, perhaps.

My rapper reverie evaporates with my first glimpse of Grace Bay just beyond the Wymara's glistening pool, which is ringed with the afternoon crowd lazing away in private cabanas, pink bougainvillea petals drifting everywhere. This upscale Canadian-owned resort – my home for a few days – is on the quieter end of Grace Bay Beach, which is once again the winner of TripAdvisor's Travellers' Choice award for Best Beach in the world. My trunks are on and I am in the ocean in a flash.

I am more than just washing away winter, I am also hitting two big travel trends: privacy is the new luxury, and revenge travel is at the top of everyone's list. After two years of staying home, people are ready to spend, celebrate milestones that went uncelebrated, corral their friends into private villas and get a head start on their tan. My micro-trip to Turks and Caicos feels like a prize, my light at the end of the pandemic tunnel. And by the looks of Instagram this spring, I see that I'm not alone: people are treating themselves, because they deserve it.

### **This is your new favourite place**

Just a four-hour flight from Toronto, the Turks and Caicos Islands is a British territory, two groups of 40 or so tropical islands sitting at the bottom of the Bahamas, just above the Dominican Republic. Other than off-shore finance, tourism is the money-maker, with one and a half million people arriving in 2019 – mostly from the United States, Canada (including plenty of Quebecers) and the United Kingdom, followed by Italy, France and Germany.

A few different languages at the Wymara reach my ears. There are honeymooners, of course, special-occasion celebrants, groups of

girls having a week away, a few small families with youngsters. Many guests have an "entrepreneurial" look about them – devil-may-care hair, a few tattoos, expensive sunglasses, whispering into their headsets.

The LGBTQ community also finds Turks and Caicos welcoming, due in part to the number of expatriates who have made their home here. "Providenciales, the island with the most hotels, has a population comprising 60 per cent expats," says Jorge Collazo, Wymara's general manager. "The combination of cultures makes it a place where being different from the norm is not that unusual." And the pink dollar is a boon to many Caribbean islands these days, as they try to make up for two years of lost income. Every little bit helps. At the beach, I see a couple of gay couples enjoying the sun and sand, spotting the tell-tale shorter-than-hetero swimwear.

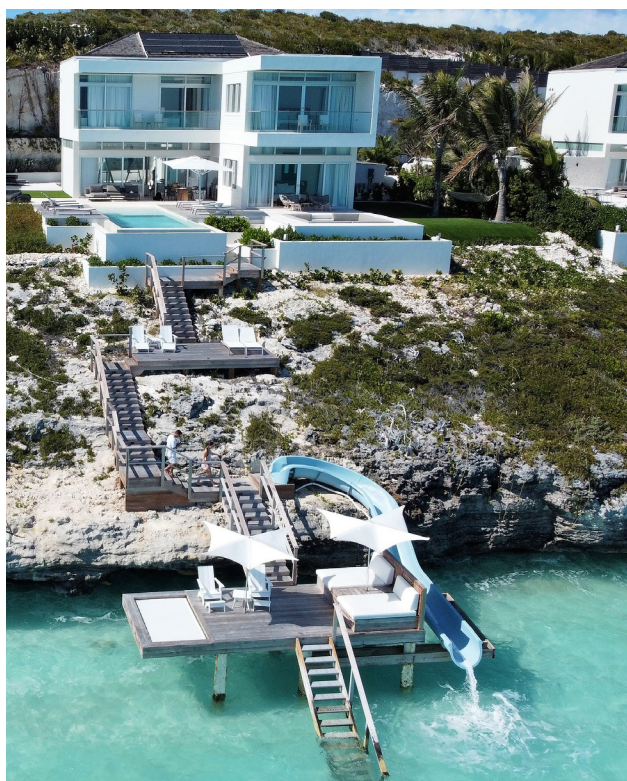
Collazo is an immaculately groomed force of nature, a whirlwind of linen and energy and wit, with a bit of cheek thrown in for good measure. The guests adore him. "In my personal experience, I have not felt judged on the island for being gay," he says. "I am openly gay, and if somebody assumes otherwise, I politely correct them."

He explains that gay guests like the Wymara for a few reasons. "We want our guests to feel that they can be themselves. We treat gay couples with the same level of normalcy that we treat straight couples, of course," he says. "And from an architecture and decor perspective, Wymara is a departure from the colonial Caribbean style – we have always been the modern alternative in Turks and Caicos. Our service is not intimidating or stuffy. We are more about the environment and less about the ceremony of luxury travel – less formal, more fun. On a personal note, I do go out of my way to meet and recognize gay couples who visit our hotel. It really is a pleasure to have them here."

### **From the beach to the buffet**

Truly, it's all about the water in Turks and Caicos – diving, snorkelling, fishing, sunset sailing, sand-castling. The water is so clear, the snorkellers and scuba divers are thrilled with the visibility and





with the third-largest barrier reef in the world. Boat charters let you explore the coastline, head out for some fishing, or whale-watch in the Turks Island Passage.

Naturally, there are small sailboats and kayaks for combing the shore. Waterskiing and wakeboarding come second, followed by the wind-oriented kite-surfing, kite-boarding and wind-surfing. There's electric foil surfing, which is a combination of surfing and kite-boarding, and a slower sport called sub-winging, where you are slowly pulled around underwater while holding on to a winged board that you can steer up or down whenever you need to take a breath. The list goes on.

Me, I'm content to just read a book for a change, then wander into the beachfront restaurant for a chicken sandwich with sweet potato fries.

The food scene in Turks and Caicos is a blend of culinary cultures and combinations, including those of the Taino people, the islands' Indigenous ancestors. African, Jamaican, Hispaniolan and Bahamian heritages all play a part in the kitchens here, as do the Bahamas' original residents, the Lucayans.

While all the resorts have multiple restaurants (fancy or not) to choose from, it's worth stepping out into the real world to discover delicious conch soup or conch fritters (on practically every menu), succulent grouper done a dozen different ways, grilled lobster tails when they're in season from August to March, and blue crab and rice, an island comfort food. Take-home tip: the local hot sauce makes a great souvenir.

Wymara chef Andrew Mirosch, a former commercial fisherman, adds an Australian touch to dishes that champion local ingredients, particularly the fresh seafood. He hosts a weekly fish fry on the beach, where guests kick off their shoes and sit down to grilled lobster, smoked chicken and crispy grouper.

#### **A lifestyle you could get used to**

For those who truly value their privacy, the series of four- and five-bedroom Wymara Villas at Turtle Tail Bay on the south side of the island offer more luxury, more privacy, more space, more everything – tennis courts, a marina, security. The water is even bluer over here, it seems.

Considered a lifestyle investment – for memory-making rather than merely money-making – the villas are enjoyed by their owners for a few months a year, then available for rent the rest of the time. Regardless of the price, value can be found: for a group of eight friends, a villa can be less expensive than four one-bedroom suites over at the resort. There's no beach, but the limestone cliff makes for little lounge nooks all the way down to the water, which reaches into the limestone undercutting. There's a waterslide down the last few metres of the cliff that lands you in the ocean – a video op if ever there was one.

We settle in for a few hours of lunch and pool time. We stare out at the water, watching the colours shift, the buzz of distant personal watercraft our soundtrack to the rosé-soaked afternoon. Three Sea-Doos, in fact. We hear the next day that Drake and two bodyguards were out for a spin that same afternoon. Best sighting ever.