

the paradise

THE TURKS & CAICOS—ONLY 90 MINUTES FROM MIAMI—

BY JEFF BOOK . PHOTOGRAPHS BY MATTHEW HRANEK AND GRACE HUANG

next door

ARE THE BEST ISLAND GETAWAY YOU'VE NEVER HEARD OF

Sifted-sugar sand, essence-of-turquoise water: the beach at the Meridian Club on Pine Cay.



Like a growing number of

harried celebrities, honeymooners, and other fugitives from modern pressures, I recently discovered what pirates on the lam knew three centuries ago: The Turks and Caicos Islands are a great place to hide out. They're on the map, but even well-traveled types often can't say exactly where—in the Atlantic, strung out southeast of the Bahamas and just north of the Caribbean Sea, which is why many Caribbean guidebooks ignore them. The chain's forty-plus islands, most uninhabited, are low-lying and arid, many covered in scrub and cactus. The allure is on- and just offshore: pristine beaches, one of the world's longest coral reefs, and waters as turquoise as any this side of Bora-Bora.

A good argument has been made that Columbus first landed on Grand Turk, the capital but not the principal island. (That's Providenciales, or Provo in local parlance.) In 1512 Ponce de León stopped here, finding freshwater, if not the Fountain of Youth. Later came pirates, Bermudian salt rakers, and Loyalists, who established cotton and sisal estates after the American Revolution. The indigenous Arawak Indians having long since been eradicated, the colonizers imported slaves to work the plantations, and their descendants now make up the bulk of the population. Passenger jets didn't land here until the mid-1980s, and tourism remains more low-key than on most of the Caribbean islands. Development has been regulated, and about a third of the country (still a British Crown Colony) is protected as national park or trust land. The islands' natural beauty is even celebrated on the coat of arms, which might have been designed by Lewis Carroll: flamingos flank a shield adorned with other island denizens, among them a lobster, a conch shell, and a Turk's Head cactus. (This prickly native, named for its fezlike crown, inspired the moniker of the Turks group, while "Caicos" comes from *cayos*, Spanish for cays or islets.)



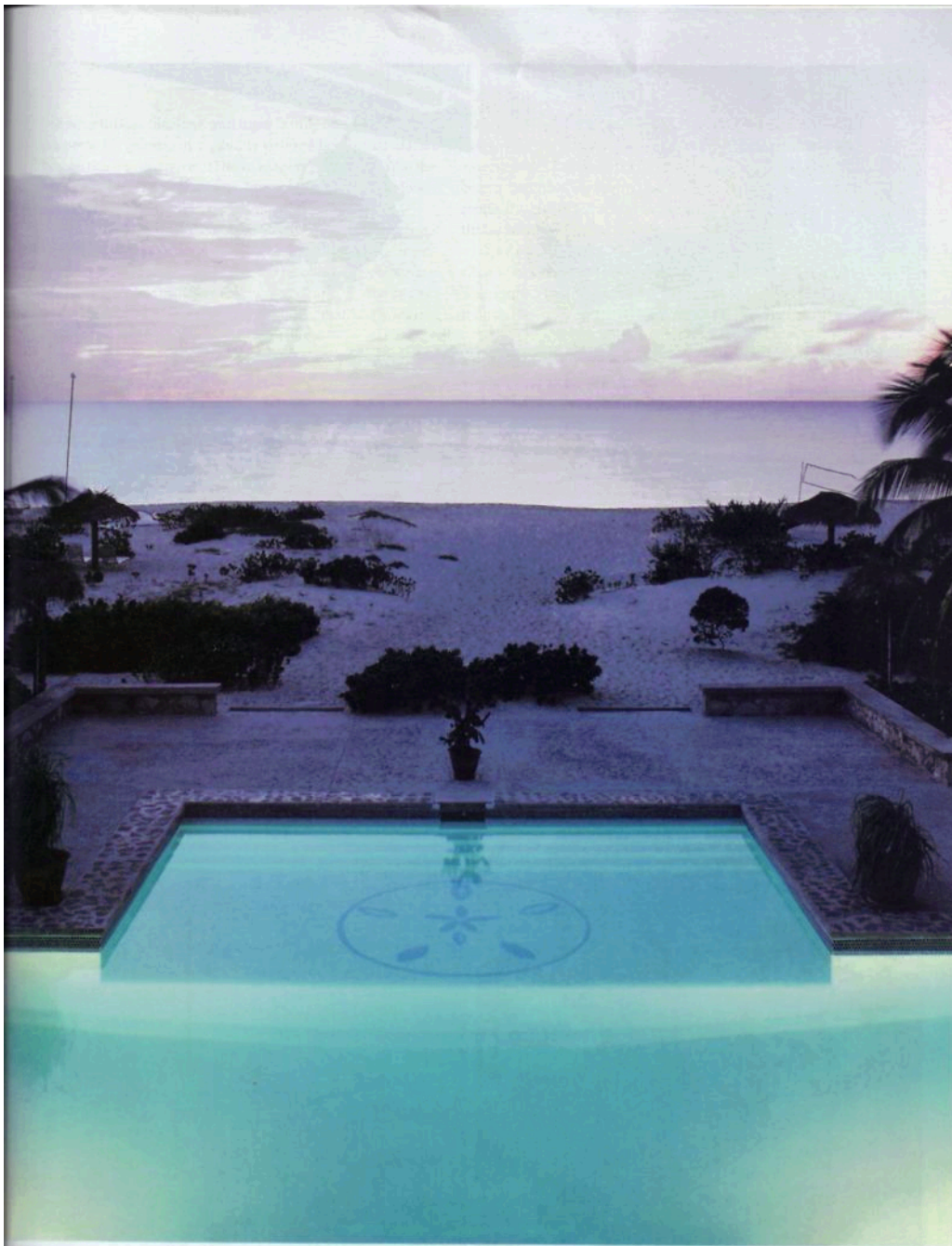
The most populous and main commercial island, Providenciales, is drawing an increasing number of vacationers as well as people looking to put money into island real estate or tax-sheltered bank accounts. But while Provo is a growing commercial center, it's a far cry from Cancún: You still won't find high-rises or fast-food franchises (the Kentucky Fried Chicken branch closed for lack of interest).

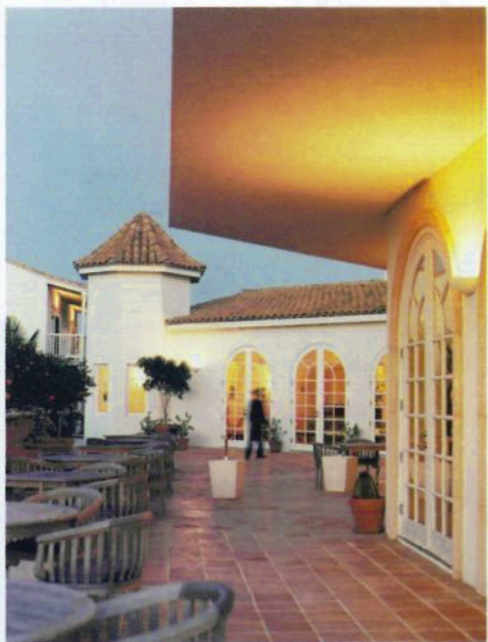
But the sleepy charm that is the essence of the Turks and Caicos lies out on the small islands between Providenciales and Grand Turk. That's where my girlfriend and I headed to sample two distinctly different brands of solitude—barefoot simplicity at Pine Cay and international luxe at Parrot Cay, which opened in December of 1998.

We transferred by boat from Provo to the tiny island of Pine Cay, home of the Meridian Club. It consists of 12 beachfront suites and one cottage, a pool, and a two-story clubhouse building that houses the restaurant and bar. The Meridian Club has changed little since it was built some three decades ago—precisely how its well-heeled devotees like it. To many of them, the club is the anti-Four Seasons.

A first-timer, however, could be forgiven for finding the Meridian Club remarkable for the things that it lacks—television, radio, air-conditioning, in-room phone—considering that its rates (\$585–\$825 per night) are right up there in the Four Seasons range. The rooms, moreover, are motel-like

Guest rooms at the Meridian Club (above right) are strictly no-frills—they don't even have telephones, much less air-conditioning—but they couldn't be closer to the resort beach (above left). Opposite: The utterly serene, utterly deserted Meridian Club pool at sunset.





but nonetheless pleasant, and there is only one phone on the property for guests, in a gaudily painted booth that stands beside the tennis courts. (The managers like to describe the Meridian Club as a cell-phone-free zone. Guests who violate the code are likely to find there's no vacancy ever again.)

What the Meridian Club does have is mind-altering tranquility, as well as delicious food, an attentive staff, and a perfect two-mile-long beach. The resort doubles as a clubhouse for homeowners, mostly wealthy Americans, on the island. The wood-sided houses—none of them, thankfully, examples of seaside statement-architecture—blend nicely with the landscape of 800-acre Pine Cay, all of which is a nature preserve.

The atmosphere here is old-money casual: Men are asked to wear collared shirts to dinner, but shoes are optional. Homeowners mingle with guests during cocktails, when all join in a resort ritual—watching for the green flash that strobes the horizon when the sun sets. ("Your best chance of seeing the green flash," a grizzled resident proclaimed, "is through a bottle of Heineken.") During our stay we missed it as well as Jojo, the friendly dolphin who's become a resort mascot. But we did see the night heron who appears every evening, convinced that there are fish in the Meridian Club swimming pool.

With all meals and activities included, the Meridian Club is like an adult summer camp—one where sloth is a virtue. You can join the morning snorkeling trip, commandeer a bike (Pine Cay is car-free as well as care-free), a sea kayak, play tennis. You can also arrange, as we did, to become a couple of latter-day Crusoes and be deposited, with a picnic lunch, on deserted Dellis Cay nearby. My favorite snapshot from the trip captures the halcyon mood of that afternoon. It shows nothing but blue water, puffed-up clouds, white sand; in the foreground there's a bit of fringed beach umbrella, in the background you can just make out the launch heading back to Pine Cay.

During meals we got acquainted with our fellow guests, among them a plastic surgeon, a real estate developer, and a record-company executive who once played soccer with Bob Marley. The dinner menu changes daily and is mercifully basic—steaks and chops as well as lobster, grouper, and other fresh seafood, all prepared with flair. Twice a week the dining moves outdoors for a poolside barbecue or a buffet of island specialties such as conch fritters with peas and rice. Dinner is sometimes followed by a "jump-up" (island-speak for dance) that occasionally sees conga lines snaking around and into

the pool. On the fifth night after the full moon each month there is also an after-dinner boat trip to watch marine glow-worms mate. I missed that, but by the time we boarded the boat to neighboring Parrot Cay, I was in touch with my inner reptile, having made a field trip to Little Water Cay, a preserve that is home to 2,000 rock iguanas.

Opened in 1998, Parrot Cay is everything the Meridian Club is not. It is owned by B. S. Ong and his wife, Christina, Singapore-based operators of Bali's Four Seasons hotels, and it hews to the group's luxury standards. The main building is



a grand neocolonial-style structure; the room decor—terracotta tiles, pillow-strewn couches and chairs, four-poster beds draped in lingerie-sheer gauze—suggests an urbane island cottage. Modern technology is optional: You can request a TV (few do), ignore the in-room compact disc player (or not), and forgo the air-conditioning, as there is a ceiling fan and sliding white shutter doors that open onto gingerbread-trimmed verandas and sea breezes. As if to underscore its status as a world-class cocoon, Parrot Cay's service staff consists of native islanders and Asians brought over specifically to work at the resort. (This reportedly created friction when Parrot Cay opened; we saw no sign of it during our visit.)

For a shot of local color, we ferried the short distance to North Caicos and toured it with Mac Campbell of M&M Taxi. Although the island is separated from Parrot Cay by a small channel, it nonetheless gets more rainfall and is thus a garden spot, with citrus, tamarind, and papaya trees and a large flock of resident flamingos. (Continued on page 150)

Parrot Cay clips (opposite, clockwise from bottom right): The infinity-edge pool; a Javanese royal lulur bath at the resort spa; the neocolonial-style main building; the driver of the resort launch, which ferries guests to and from the airport in Providenciales.

Paradise Next Door

(Continued from page 105) However, even with Mac's binoculars, they were just a pink smudge on the far side of Flamingo Pond. "They fly back over here in the evening," he explained. "Come then or in the morning and you'll see them better," he said. We had a simple but satisfying lunch of fried fish, grits, and cold beer at Super D Cafe at the island airport; a quick look at the picturesque ruins of Wade's Green plantation, near the village of Kew; then headed back to the resort.

Parrot Cay's luxe blend of pampering and seclusion is as winning as the Meridian Club's back-to-basics ethos. Kayaking, sailing, windsurfing, and snorkeling are gratis. (For an additional charge the staff can arrange scuba-diving, fishing, and waterskiing.) On arrival guests are given flip-flops with nubby insoles that massage the feet, and the resort's state-of-the-art Shambhala spa offers a round-the-world roster of treatments like the Balinese spice body mask and the Chinese Tui Na massage, one of the best I've ever had. The only discordant note was the golf cart that careens around the property at dusk, spewing an anti-mosquito fog that is more noxious than dangerous. (For the record, the mosquitoes weren't bad at either resort during my stay.) Otherwise, my peevs were so minor—on the order of "Why don't they have more toasters at the breakfast buffet?"—that I thought resort life was spoiling me for the real world.

The larger question is whether the real world will spoil the Turks and Caicos. Bruce Willis is reportedly building a star-size retreat on Parrot Cay. There's also talk of connecting some of the islands with causeways and of creating a big cruise-ship port on uninhabited East Caicos, though neither project has funding.

Take note though: Word is spreading. But for now, what a fellow guest said of the Meridian Club remains true of the Turks and Caicos in general: "Everything I'm looking for is here, and what's not here I don't care about." ■

GETTING THERE The Turks and Caicos Islands are served by American Airlines (800-433-7300; www.aa.com) from Miami and Delta Air Lines (800-323-2323; www.delta.com) from Atlanta. The flight to Providenciales takes 1 1/2 hours from Miami and 2 1/2 hours from Atlanta.

OFFICIAL CURRENCY U.S. dollar

LOCAL TIME Eastern Standard Time (except for Pine Cay, which is an hour ahead from October 28 to June 1).

RESORT RATES Prices are double occupancy, from the least expensive double to the most expensive suite. Rates do not include 9% government tax and 10% service charge.

THE MERIDIAN CLUB \$585-\$825 per person (depending upon season). Includes meals, activities, and for stays of five nights or more, round-trip transfer from Providenciales. 800-331-9154; www.meridianclub.com.

PARROT CAY \$360-\$1,900 low season; \$530-\$2,900 high season. Includes breakfast, dinner, and round-trip transfer from Providenciales. Rooms with a sea view are worth the extra money. Those with the best outlook are in the buildings closest to the beach. 877-754-0726 or 649-946-7788; fax 649-946-7789; www.parrot-cay.com.

USEFUL WEBSITES I found good general information at Expedia (www.expedia.com) and Fodor's (www.fodors.com). For information on island history and local restaurants, consult www.timespub.tc, the website of the local quarterly, *Times of the Islands*; www.provo.net; www.tci-search.com; and www.wherewhenhow.com. At the *Outside* magazine website (www.outsidemag.com/magazine), I found an old though still accurate water-sports roundup, as well as a droll dolphin story by Tim Cahill that mentions Pine Cay mascot JoJo.

FURTHER INFORMATION The U.S. office of the Turks and Caicos Tourist Board is at 800-241-0824 or www.turksandcaicostourism.com.