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Travel & Vacations

Posted on Sun, Oct. 29, 2006

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GRAND TURK ISLAND

There's more to the Turks and Caicos than Provo

A new cruise ship port will attract more than divers looking for unspoiled underwater landscapes.

BY LORRY HEVERLY
 Special to The Miami Herald

Small island charm and pristine underwater landscapes are a winning combination on Grand Turk Island. The famous "Grand Turk Wall" runs the length of the island, a quarter mile or a 10-minute boat ride from the shoreline, with a 7,000-foot drop off into the Columbus Passage.

Wall diving here is stunning. Draped in a healthy carpet of corals and sponges, the wall is populated by a bevy of marine life and sports a diverse topography of daring vertical drop offs, steep sloping terrain and coral undercuts. With 23 dive sites in Grand Turks waters there is plenty of variety to keep divers happy.


Popular sites include the Amphitheater, where coral topples over high ledges between deep sand channels making divers feel like they are in an underwater theater. There is a



LORRY HEVERLY/FOR THE MIAMI HERALD

GOOD SEASONAL DIVING: Divers will find Manta Rays in summer, turtles year round and Humpback whales migrating past the island in winter.

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resident Nassau grouper named Alexander that lives at Coral Gardens. And Black Forest is stunning for its coral variety and an overhanging wall filled with precious Black coral.

Divers can swim through coral-encrusted arches at McDonalds, or follow crevices down the wall at a site called Tunnels, where divers navigate through a narrow tunnel to an opening in the wall leading to a stunning underwater landscape. The Library is a favorite for night dives with interesting marine creature encounters at this shallow-water site.

Divers will find good seasonal diving with Manta Rays in summer, turtles year round and Humpback whales migrating past the island in winter (December to April).

Charming and friendly, Grand Turk has a sleepy Caribbean feel, but perhaps not for long. The winds of change are looming with the completion of a new cruise ship complex to handle arrival traffic to this newest Caribbean port of call.

SALT CAY

A 45-minute boat ride from Grand Turk, the waters off Salt Cay, the southernmost island in the Turks and Caicos, teem with healthy populations of fish and pristine reefs. There are a dozen dive sites near the island, including Turtle Gardens with its fields of colorful coral and frequent Hawksbill turtle sightings.

Northwest Drop is a classic wall dive and a hangout for nurse sharks. Most interesting is the 'conch highway', a sandy strip where hundreds of conch gather in the fall. After the morning dives, it's back to the island for lunch and a walkabout.

Salt Cay is an island forgotten by time. In its heyday, from the late 1700s to the 1960s, it was one of the world's largest exporters of salt. Today, it's a tranquil place among relics and ruins of the past. Check out the Salinas (salt ponds) and old windmills used to produce salt. Don't be distracted by a band of wild donkeys, chickens, cattle and large iguanas roaming the streets. They reside here along with the village's 100 residents.

There is Netty's little grocery store, the British Colonial-style Methodist Church built by freed slaves in the 1840s, whimsical guesthouses and whitewashed homes with conch shell lined walls and pastel colored trim. On the beach, the Green Flash Cafe, a local watering hole, is the place for whale watching during the season or catching the sunset and perhaps a green flash.

South of Salt Cay are the remains of the HMS Endymion, a British warship wrecked on a reef in the late 1700s. Resting at 30 feet, her nine-foot cannons and large anchors are scattered about the ocean floor. A popular site for wrecks, this shipwreck graveyard also has artifacts from several other sunken vessels.

UNINHABITED ISLAND

Meet sting rays and explore unspoiled beaches on an excursion to the uninhabited island of Gibbs Cay. A mile from Grand Turk, the boat crew free dives for conchs, bringing a bounty of colorful pink shells to the boat. While guests snorkel or roam the remote beaches, the crew prepares fresh conch salad, throwing the leftovers into the surf. Dozens of sting rays quickly get the message that lunch is served, gathering in the shallow water until the free food runs out.

COCKBURN TOWN

Quaint and winsome, the town of Cockburn is a cluster of historic streets lined in old Colonial and Bermuda-style buildings, reflecting the rustic charm of an era when salt was king.

Nip into the Turks and Caicos National Museum in an historic home built with local limestone and salvaged ships' timber. Treasures abound including artifacts from the Molasses Reef Wreck, the oldest ship found in the New World. Other exhibits highlight the rich culture and natural diversity of the island. Salt Pans dot the island just outside of town where horses and chickens and locals roam.

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- Turks & Caicos Tourist Board: 800-241-0824, www.turksandcaicostourism.com
- Bohio Dive Resort, Grand Turk: 649-946-2135, www.bohioresort.com
- Oasis Divers, Grand Turk: 800-892-3995, www.oasisdivers.com

American Airlines flies from Miami to Providenciales with connecting flights to Grand Turk. Sky King offers multiple flights a day from Providenciales to Grand Turk.



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