

# undercurrent

*The Private, In Depth Guide for Serious Divers*

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## The Grand Turk of the Turks & Caicos

*Caribbean charm of yesterday*

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Riding down Grand Turk's empty Front Street on rickety bikes, my partner and I were returning to Guanahani Hotel from dinner at the Turks Head Inn. We had biked the previous night when the entire island went black for thirty minutes while the power company did a little maintenance. We had negotiated around potholes, stopped for two cars that passed, been redirected by friendly residents who saw us miss our turn, and made it back laughing. This night, however, a white van jerked to a stop alongside me. "You can't ride without lights," the burly driver yelled. "I'm a policeman. It's against the law. You're going to jail." This guy in street clothes frightened my partner. I explained we were visitors on bikes borrowed from the Guanahani. He gave no quarter: "You're going to spend the night behind bars," he shouted, then abruptly drove half a block ahead and slammed on his brakes. We hopped off our bikes, walking them ahead apprehensively. Then, just as abruptly, he stepped on the gas and disappeared.

While I later learned that this bully was indeed a cop, he was the only unseemly character we encountered during our ten-day April sojourn on Grand Turk and Salt Cay. This dork notwithstanding, it was an enjoyable trip.

Grand Turk, some 550 miles southeast of Miami, is reachable in a single day from just about anywhere in the U.S Grab the 5:10 p.m. AA flight from Miami to Providenciales, the main tourist destination, then connect to Grand Turk and hail a cab. A mile from Grand Turk's airport is the only tourist area, along a quiet, narrow, beachfront road with restored 19th century buildings, four small hotels, two dive operations, a small bar/restaurant, and one shop selling inexpensive Haitian art and souvenirs: not a T-shirt shop to be seen on this island of roughly 3000 residents.



## *Turks & Caicos Islands*

few minutes a mosquito buzzed me. I shut the door, turned on the aging air conditioner, and adapted. (The Sitting Pretty, owned by the same company, is a sister hotel in the tourist area. I spoke with an *Undercurrent* reader who moved out because her room smelled moldy and also met a woman who said she broke into tears when she saw her room; she and her husband moved out, forfeiting their prepayment. I visited two Sitting Pretty rooms and its tiny bar and outside dining area; I don't recommend it.)

Running the leeward length of Grand Turk, about 200 yards offshore, is the island's *pièce de résistance*: a beautiful and easily accessible wall beginning at 30-40 feet. Some people rent tanks and kick out on their own. Otherwise the boats from each operation – Sea Eye Diving, Blue Water, and Oasis – follow the same routine. They'll pick you up from the beach in front of your hotel, bring tanks, and store your BC and regulator. Two morning dives begin at 9:30 a.m. (take only one if you want, and they'll return you), and one in the afternoon; tie off at a mooring, go over the wall, kick along for twenty minutes or so at 80 feet, edge up to the shallows at 35 feet or so, then return over the flats. Anchor at the edge of the wall for the second dive and tour the flats. And, if you go deeper or go off on your own, no one seems to mind. Indeed: a fine destination for the "easy diver."

At the Guanahani, Cecil Ingham, the owner of See Eye (C.I.), told me to "bring your c-card, and we'll do the paper work between dives at our shop in town." Next day the taciturn Smitty nosed his 24-foot flat-bottom six feet from water's edge and I climbed on board; he hooked up BCs and regulators and quickly motored a couple of minutes to the mooring at Amphitheatre Annex. During his short briefing he recommended 80 feet max along the wall, said we would amble back along the top of the reef, and could burn up air under the boat. The other divers sported computers and one was outfitted in the full Galapagos: a computer, dangling clips and lanyards, thick neoprene gloves, a Rolex (he set the bezel), a Dive Rite horn, a sword strapped to his calf, a whistle, even a Spare Air, and who knows what in those BC pockets.

My partner and I arrived at the Guanahani Hotel, another mile north, at 8:30 p.m., after a slow \$8/person cab ride from the airport. No one was in the office, but bartender Marvin offered a complimentary drink at their friendly bar, got us our room, and served up a good grouper dinner with frozen veggies and French fries. And we had a chat with our dive guide-to-be, Smitty of See Eye Diving, a muscular ex-policeman.

In each of two two-story cinder-block buildings, the beachfront Guanahani sports eight identical rooms with balconies facing the sea; the upstairs rooms, particularly number 8, are preferable. I was initially put off by the aging Motel Six-style room, its sink counter in the dark bathroom ugly with salt-weathered metal and stains from the cosmetics of others. I would have preferred to sleep with the sliding door open to create a breeze, but it was unscreened, so every

We began over the sand bottom (leaving the boat above unattended, a common practice here), then dropped down the splendid wall into the deep azure of the open sea ledge. The cool water – 75-76 degrees in late April – demanded a skin and a suit, and I should have brought my hood. Underwater, Smitty (who wore three rubber layers) led the dive in an elliptical path, occasionally looking back, but pointing out nothing. Fish life was unremarkable, though an occasional small mackerel flitted by, and after twenty minutes along the wall we headed toward a sand shoot to the top of the reef in 30 feet of water. Along the way I spotted a highhat under a rock and two spotted file fish eyed me. I stopped to watch a long trumpet fish on the hunt and a small stingray nosed through the sand.

After a forty-five minute surface interval we dived the Anchor, getting no deeper than 50 feet. Its large fluke, covered with coral growth, is a fine topic for wide-angle photography. Mutton snapper, many large parrotfish, and couple of barracuda hovered in the sea whips and soft corals. Smitty watched two divers – one on his first dive – miss the boat and head off along the wall; he made a brief attempt to retrieve them, then climbed back aboard. They surfaced a hundred feet away, ten minutes later, their tanks parched. P.S.: no one ever asked for a c-card or had us sign a release – or even took our names. We were “Room 7, Guanahani.”

Coral Gardens, near the Sitting Pretty Hotel, had plenty of nice soft coral, as one would expect, and snappers, grunts, and other commoners, but here Alexander, a 25-pound Nassau Grouper, holds forth, seeking chum and chin chucks A few small barracuda hovered in the distance. Most of the dive was at 35 feet. I watched a school of horseeye jacks swirl and spotted a large trunk fish who whitened his screen-patterned skin as I approached. A long-nosed butterfly fish had an inch-long parasitic isopod attached to each cheek. Smitty said that six large grouper once resided here, but divers from shore had poached them, and, although the court refused to hear the case, the dive guides meted out their own punishment. While the wall is a protected area, local people may still fish in the area, but not near the moorings.

At Black Forest, four varieties of black coral and wire coral sprouted from the wall, providing an excellent setting for wide-angle photography. Fairy basslets seemed abundant and a small school of blue chromis and Creole wrasse flowed past. I dropped down to 110 feet, but the action is all above eighty.

On the several dives I made most of the usual Caribbean reef fish were present – trumpet fish, surgeonfish, many species of butterfly fish, an occasional grey angel, blue chromis, lots of fairy basslets, innumerable parrotfish – not in great numbers, but unbothered enough to provide plenty of photo ops. Except for a few shrimp and an occasional flamingo tongue, macro possibilities were limited. Big fish? Not for my eye – not even an eel – but readers report an occasional eagle ray, manta, nurse shark, or whitetip. But the blue water diving along the sheer wall makes a trip worth the effort.



***No hustle and bustle here on Duke Street. People waved and said hello, a few wild donkeys roamed the street, and cars are few.***

And so does "the Caribbean charm of yesterday," which pervades the island. People waved and said hello, a few wild donkeys roamed the street, and cars were few. Unfortunately, "yesterday" pervades the limited menu at the Guanahani as well – powdered iced tea or lemonade, twice no fruit for breakfast because they were waiting for the plane, a lunchmeat ham and turkey sandwich with one slice of each (and they were out of tomatoes), \$8 hamburger with a McDonald's-like patty, tasty conch soup and clam chowder, but from the same canned base. Yet I survived with the eggs and good grits for breakfast and for lunch better-than-average French fries, excellent conch fritters, and something called potato mayonnaise – a baked potato filled with stuffed tuna. Another reason not to stay at the Sit-tin' Pretty: food for their dinner buffet is prepared at the Guanahani and carted down). While management talks of supply problems, superior food at the Turks Head and across the way on Salt Cay exposes their cost-cutting and lack of imagination. So my partner and I either walked, biked, or cabled (\$3/person) to town.

We'd begin with a drink at the charming little Water's Edge, with beach-side seats and fresh conch ceviche (they have real burgers here and do well on pizza night). A few nights we ambled across the street to the Turks Head Inn and walked through their private courtyard into their lovely trellis-enclosed dining room. This restaurant, managed carefully by a couple of English chaps (new managers are coming), is an engaging setting for the best food on the island Entrees run \$15-22 – pastas, excellent steaks, and mahi mahi or grouper, baked or poached with onion and tomato, and accompanied by mashed or roasted potatoes, mixed vegetables with broccoli; \$5 for a fresh dinner salad and \$5 for a glass of decent Oregon Chardonnay.

Down the road at the Salt Raker Inn, we had the Wednesday barbecue of excellent fresh snapper and tuna accompanied by a salad bar of lettuce, tomatoes,

## ***Worried About That Tropical Sun?***

Worried about getting skin cancer? Forget the French fries, and maybe even the sunscreen. A new study found no evidence that sun lotions do anything but prevent sunburn.

Many dermatologists rejected the conclusion, but the author of the study, epidemiologist Dr. Marianne Berwick of Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York, said that her own study of 1,200 people in Connecticut and a review of nine other studies suggest sunscreens just don't do much about cancer one way or another. But using sunscreens "probably can't hurt."

Her advice: "If you are high risk, stay out of the sun." People at the greatest risk for skin cancer are those with the lightest skin, hair, and eyes. Those who also have a large number of moles have an even greater risk of melanoma. If found when it is restricted to one spot, usually an irregular mole, melanoma is highly curable, but treatment is much less successful if it has spread to other organs. It may

take 20 years or more after sun exposure for melanoma to develop.

Several dermatologists strongly disagreed with Berwick. "Until there is proof that sunscreens are ineffective, it would be irresponsible to discontinue recommendations about using sunscreens," said Dr. Darrell Rigel of New York University.

At a meeting of dermatologists in March, Dr. Harvey Arbesman, professor of dermatology at the University of Buffalo, said that "people who sunburn easily and people who are out in the sun a lot should be especially conscious of diet." One million new skin cancers are diagnosed each year, and 96 percent could be influenced by proper diet, researchers said.

At-risk patients and those already diagnosed with skin cancer should lower their fat intake and consume food with more antioxidants: beta carotene, found in carrots, broccoli, and spinach; selenium, found in whole wheat flour, mushrooms, and tuna; and vitamin C, found in red and green peppers, oranges, and cranberries.

Arbesman said that dermatologists have been slow to recognize the importance of diet despite some 50 studies linking diet and cancer.

potato, or pasta salads for \$17. Mitch Rollins, an American expat who owns Blue Water Divers, played and sang soft ballads and folk music. Mitch was featured in one of the top books on diving, Water and Light, by Stephen Harrigan, who spent months on Grand Turk doing nothing but diving. I walked up and arranged a dive.

Mitch picked me up punctually at the Guanahani for what he said was his 4,963rd dive in the Turks and Caicos – “I’ve logged everyone since 1980.” A smiling, chatty fellow, Mitch asked where we’d been, then said “let’s go up

north” – meaning five minutes more – to Gorgonian wall, where over the edge scores of deep water gorgonia grew, a grand wide-angle setting. I spied a few small Nassau groupers and a tiger grouper, and a beautiful queen trigger swam within easy camera range. Mitch led a leisurely dive and back at the boat he boarded ahead; we stayed down for about fifty minutes, boarding with 1000 psi in our 3000 psi tanks, typical of just about every dive.

Mitch gave us the option of taking however long a surface interval we wanted, either on the boat or at the hotel (we took the hotel and a forty-five minute interval). His assistant Carl arrived in an hour and took me, the only diver, for the next dive. I suggested Black Forest and back over the wall for the second dive, about which there was no complaint. Carl, built like a small Sumo wrestler, showed more enthusiasm than Smitty, pointing out a crab in a hole, a sizable porcupine puffer, and a small hawksbill turtle. Price for three dives: \$75; no c-card requested, no signatures, and I dropped the money off at the Salt Raker a couple of days later.

Oasis Divers is a third operation that was opened a couple of years ago by Everette Freitas and American Dale Barker. They met while she was a passenger on the Aggressor, and Everette, a crew member, invited her back for crew week, and now they’re wed. I once came across Dale underwater and saw her constantly finding critters for the two divers she led. I saw her boat arrive to pick up divers at the Guanahani, always on time. I didn’t dive with her but happened to share a couple of beers with her at the Arawak; her enthusiasm makes me suspect she might be the best guide of the lot After all, personality and punctuality are all that differentiates these three operations.

The folks at the Guanahani, the irrepressible second bartender Oliver and manager Jeffrey Adams, were a great crew (but that ever-playing TV set is annoying). I enjoyed the beach and the pool (though critters live in it) and give the Guanahani a lukewarm recommendation. If room quality is important, four hotels rate better. I spent a night in the Turks Head in a newly-refurbished 19th century home; its peach-colored room, tiled bath, small deck with a water view, and second small room off to the side matched up well with a typical American well-maintained bed and breakfast. (Go for the top floor rooms with balconies.) It’s a stone’s throw from the ocean across the road. Hotel residents, expats, and locals frequent their lively little bar.

We pedaled their new bikes out to the Arawak Inn, another hotel. This is a small, newly-constructed condo-like complex with fifteen one-bedroom units and a nice pool two miles from the tourist district on a quiet beach. The bright and modern unit I inspected was smartly furnished with a small kitchen, tiled bath,

## Grand Turk

|                            |       |
|----------------------------|-------|
| Diving (experienced) ..... | ★★★   |
| Diving (beginners) .....   | ★★★★★ |
| Photographers .....        | ★★★★★ |
| Money’s worth .....        | ★★★★★ |

★ = poor ★★★★★ = excellent

(Caribbean scale)

and tub. Guests at the open-air bar (one of whom had escaped the Sitting Pretty) said the meals, especially the grilled fish, were a leg up from their previous digs. A cab to town is \$6/person, there is an occasional shuttle, and Oasis Divers goes back and forth with their truck, giving rides for the asking. The wall is closer here, making beach diving a little more accessible, but any operation will pick you up.

If you want to do all your own cooking, another choice is the beautifully remodeled Island House in the center of the island. I inspected a well-appointed one bedroom unit with a fully-equipped kitchen; it was very livable. Golf carts are available to motor to town.

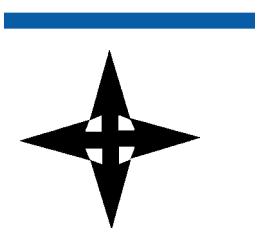
And, finally, there is the venerable Salt Raker, where the air-conditioned, cottage-like, oceanview rooms with verandas are comfortable although a peg or two below the Turks Head. They're convenient and a good choice if you like the low-rent bed and breakfast feeling.

As for the diving, the walk-up rate was about \$25 each. I see no significant financial advantage in prepaying a package unless you're coming during holidays; you might want to skip a dive, do a night dive with another operation – or switch operators.

The seven-night advertised hotel prices: Arawak: \$772-\$886/person, the difference being location (phone 888-880-4477; 305-257-1080; fax 305-257-2072); Turks Head \$478-758 (phone 649-946-2055; fax 946-2911); Guanahani \$766 (649-725-2822; fax 946-1460); Island House, \$750 (888-880-4477; 305-257-1080; fax 305-946 1523); Sitting Pretty \$880 (forget it, but 649-946-2232, fax 946-2668). Add 18% tax and service charge to your bill. If you're uncertain about your hotel, avoid the package, rent on a daily basis, and only pay a deposit in case you want to switch

To sum up: an easy-to-reach, relatively inexpensive venue, a throwback in time. Diving is easy, the sheer wall bordered by the deep blue is among the best walls in the Caribbean, and there are friendly fish to photograph. While the diving got tedious, I enjoyed the island so much six days sped by. And the folks were friendly, except the jerk ... oh, and perhaps one other guy. As I pedaled along the road a half block ahead of my partner, a car slowed, the driver opened the door, and yelled at me to slow. "Slow down and wait for de lady. You ride too fast," he admonished. "Let her go first." Come to think of it, he was no jerk, just a gentleman.

Next issue: Salt Cay, five miles away, similar diving, a fine dive operation, a range of accommodations, superior food ... a blast from the past.



Diver's Compass. . . .You can fly directly to Grand Turk on Lynx Air's prop plane from Fort Lauderdale; Sky King is the preferred inter-island airline (call 1325112 12392; e-mail KING@CARIBSURF.COM) . . . .a couple of handy stores sell snacks, canned and frozen food, sundries, and film, but if you are cooking bring fresh veggies and meats. . . .there are plenty of websites for these places and the travel agents representing them . . . .cabs are easy to get, but the prices are fixed per person; that can lead to a whopping bill when six people want to travel to the Arawak; hook up with one cab driver for the week and negotiate a favorable price. . . .Forget Coral Reef Beach Resort (it's run-down and too far away) and the Water's Edge Club (handy but run-down) . . . .plans are afoot to build a nine-hole golf course and scores of homes and resorts. . . .a small U.S. military base, staffed during the Cold War, is a ghost town. . . . the dollar is the currency; I never once saw T&C money.