

TO BE BASED AT SEA OR ON LAND?

TCI TWO WAYS



RICHARD CONDYFFE chooses the liveboard route to explore the Turks & Caicos Islands – after which we look at a shore-based alternative



AS WITH MANY PEOPLE, 2020 forced me to think differently about my short-term diving options, and to incorporate more local diving. But as the year progressed my attention turned to those countries that were starting to open up, and with which restrictions and stipulations

Was Covid testing required for entry? Was quarantine required on arrival or return? From which countries of origin was travel permitted? Were convenient flights available? What was the local infection rate?

Turks & Caicos Islands turned out to be my lead option. I had never been there before, but I understood it to offer some of the Caribbean's best wall-diving and good opportunities for shark encounters.

Something else that made TCI appealing was the fact that a negative Covid PCR test was required with a sample taken within five days of arrival.

This gave a little more breathing space to get test results in time, versus the three days mandated by many countries.

Additionally, travel insurance that included coverage for possible Covid-related needs was mandatory.

There were good deals to be had, and the *Turks & Caicos Aggressor II*, running

a rare 10-day trip, was the charter I chose. Flight options were limited, but being US-based I could use Delta or American.

Then, eight days before departure, I went online to check that I had selected my seats – and the alarm bells went off!

My flight from Delta's Atlanta hub to the island of Providenciales had been cancelled and I'd received no notification!

Thank goodness I'd gone online at that time, or I'd have gone to check in with no flight to board!

Fortunately, I was able to rebook on American Airlines. My lesson was that in these fluid times changes are frequent, and it's well worth keeping an active eye on that ever-changing environment!

Two days before my flight I uploaded my negative Covid test result and proof of insurance to the TCI government travel website and in an hour had received my authorisation to travel.

Armed with my hand sanitiser, a supply of face masks and a face-shield that I had procured for additional aircraft peace of mind, I was ready to go.

On entering the Provo customs hall my hands were sprayed with disinfectant. Everyone stood in the queue, socially

Pictured: Atlantic trumpetfish blending in.



distanced, for temperature-taking and immigration clearance. All very smooth and efficient.

Turks & Caicos is part of the British West Indies, located south-east of the Bahamas. Brilliant turquoise water surrounds its 40 islands.

Most of the dive-sites consist of a steep wall starting 12-18m deep, with ample exploration opportunities around sandy flats and coral-heads above the wall.

With multiple sites around multiple islands, our experienced liveboard captain Amanda could select those that offered shelter from swells generated by a busy season of Atlantic tropical storms.

I boarded the *Turks & Caicos Aggressor II* and my bags were sprayed to sanitise them while I washed my hands at a sink set up outside.

On the yacht, hand-sanitising dispensers were located in many of the common areas as well as in guest-rooms. Social distancing and mask use were also encouraged.

At meal-times the crew all wore masks and food was plated by the crew in place

Above, clockwise from top: Caribbean reef shark hunting at night; mottled jawfish resting his jaw before tending the next batch of eggs; channel clinging crab; green turtle dives back down to the reef.

Below: The popular Dome dive-site.

of the usual self-service buffet.

Diving got underway, with two days at Provo's north-west corner. With creatures on each dive ranging from the very small to the large there was plenty to satisfy both macro and wide-angle photographers.

The crew were patient and helpful with my pre-dive questions to determine lens selection, and with at least two dives at each site we had the opportunity to alternate between wide and macro.

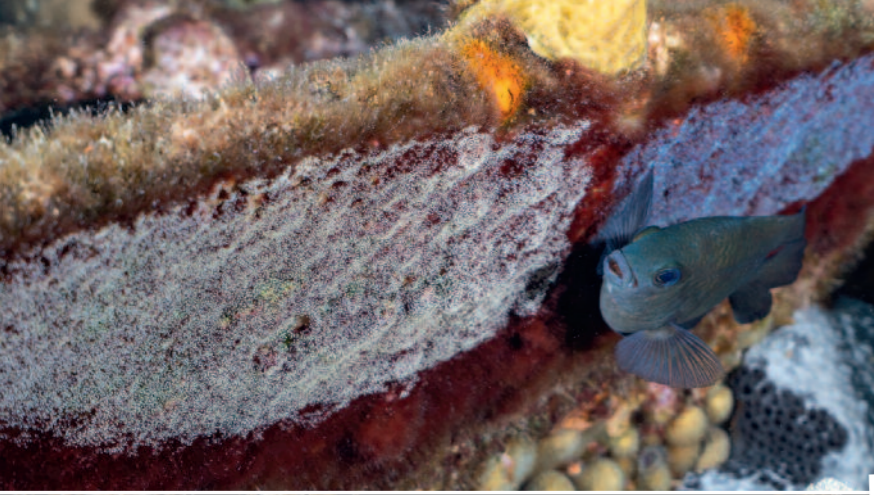
Caribbean reef sharks could be seen patrolling the colourful wall in their back-and-forth figure-of-eight pattern. Large channel clinging crabs hid under the wall's overhangs, waiting for night to fall.

Away from the wall, sandy flats were home to fields of garden eels, while fine rubble supported numerous yellowhead jawfish with holes to dance above and into which to quickly retreat when divers' bubbles came uncomfortably close.

MY FAVOURITE dive-site at North-west Point was the Dome. This man-made structure, now partially collapsed, was built for a 1990s French TV game show called *Le Tresor de Pago*.

One of the challenges meant freediving into the underwater dome, receiving air from a scuba tank and collecting pearls before returning to the surface.

The show was cancelled after several contestants sustained lung over-expansion injuries, leaving the dome



for divers to enjoy in perpetuity. Significant coral growth adorns the dome and supports a great variety of life. A portion of the structure can be swum through. Highlights on afternoon dives included a damselfish fanning eggs painted across a section of the structure.

The strobe-positioning challenge created by a pea-sized juvenile trunkfish hiding deep in crevices between a series of orange tube sponges also occupied me

Clockwise from top left: A longfin damselfish aerates a mosaic of eggs; juvenile trunkfish hides between tube sponges; orange ball corallimorph; a rare fingerprint cyphoma; also rare – a pink-circled simnia; spinyhead blenny; a longsnout seahorse.

Right: Nurse sharks hunt at French Cay.

for some time. At night the action changed. As soon as we descended to the Dome our lights attracted black jack that

hoped they would help them in their hunting efforts.

This meant I had to be careful not to hover my light on any exposed fish for too long and draw the hunters attention.

While scanning crannies with my light I came across a free-swimming spotted moray eel out to catch its dinner.

I followed it for a while and in the blink of an eye saw it grab an unaware goatfish.

With the goatfish only half-swallowed, in swooped a black jack to pull the fish from the jaws of the moray!

My first thought was to feel frustrated for the eel, but back on the boat I was reminded to spare a thought for the goatfish, which literally got eaten twice!

WEST CAICOS was our next stop for three days. By now all the guests had settled into the Covid-era routines, which also included observing the crew measure nitrox levels and each guest then signing with his or her own pen.

West Caicos provided more impressive wall-dives as well as a great variety of creatures in and around sandy flats and coral heads.

The Boat Cove site yielded a variety of diverse colourful subjects. A tiny spinyhead blenny allowed me to clamp a super macro converter onto my port then be my model for a few minutes before tiring of my presence.

At night the relatively uncommon orange ball corallimorph extended its nearly transparent tentacles outwards, displaying its orange tips like bright lanterns.

At Elephant Ear Canyon, dive-guide Kelly celebrated excitedly after finding a shortnose batfish. I was happy to make my own contribution to the dive, looking up at just the right time to see a squadron of at least 20 eagle rays fly gracefully by.

I screamed as loud as I could through my regulator to alert the rest of the group. With a macro lens on my camera, all I could do was watch the spectacle in awe.

Ten seconds later, they were gone. 29°C water is very warm for eagle rays, and the guides had been surprised at the number of recent sightings. 2020!

The boat moved on to French Cay, renowned as a sharky destination and living up to the billing. The highlight site was certainly Rock 'n' Roll.

In daytime the wall provided diverse attractions, For me that included finding lionfish perched on top of a coral head, making for pleasing images against the



blue backdrop. More eagle rays cruised past too – though only three this time!

At night the shark action began, with nurse sharks attracted by both our boat and dive-lights. Nurses hunt by pushing their mouths, often very forcefully, into any spot where they think fish might be hiding, and using powerful suction to vacuum up whatever prey they find.

Before Covid lockdown the dive-guides were used to seeing nurse sharks only on these night dives, but recently several reef sharks had joined in – not to practise the same hunting technique, but likely excited by the action and to mop up any leftovers.


This made for great footage to be captured by the group and dive-guide / video-pro Sarah.

AN ADDITIONAL BENEFIT of this extended charter was the opportunity to explore some rarely visited dive-sites. At French Cay these were Jules Junction and Nightingale.

The added variety was engaging and created optimism of finding different critters. One such was a tiny elongated mollusc so slim that it appeared painted on to its host; the pink-circled simnia, spotted by eagle-eyed Kelly.

Ten days went by, seeming more like seven. After two final dives at Northwest Point on our way back to the Turtle Bay Marina home base, diving was complete and my first international trip of the Covid era was drawing to a close.

As well as the diving, I had enjoyed the escape from the daily news cycle.

The Turks & Caicos authorities, the airline and the Aggressor staff did everything they should and could to support a safe travel experience. I needed to be comfortable with the circumstances, and flexible with the potential for late changes to my plans. TCI proved an excellent all-round destination to which I would certainly return. 



DESCENDING INTO warm azure water, a hit of diving endorphins kicked in, fuelled by an exhilarating 50-minute boat-ride to West Caicos in the Caribbean sunshine.

Laughter rippled through the salty air as we prepped our gear and, as on the first dive of any trip, I experienced a slightly giddy out-of-body feeling.

I grinned into my regulator as reef sharks curiously approached. The water temperature was 28°C and it was pre-pandemic January 2020. The cold dark nights of London and a personally testing start to the year evaporated into the ocean along with my slow exhalations.

Looking back now, after collectively and individually facing some of the toughest months we've ever known, and our yearning to escape at odds with uncertainty about when and where that might be possible, I still describe the Turks & Caicos Islands as a world-class diving contender.

I stayed at Beaches Turks & Caicos Villages & Spa Resort on the north coast of Providenciales. Set in Grace Bay, 12 miles of sweeping white sand, it's a place to unwind and contemplate diving as you settle in, rum cocktail in hand.

Wall-dives are always a huge draw for me, having dived so many on the Red Sea's outer islands, and those in TCI are



Beaches / Sandals is more of a fun-for-all-the-family route to Caribbean diving – PENELOPE GRANYCOME sampled it just before the pandemic struck

no exception. Covered in corals, sponges and gorgonians and dropping away to considerable depths below, they provide the chance of seeing bigger animals passing in the blue while being able to turn your head in towards the crustaceans and critters that populate rocky caves and coral gardens – a double treat.

Our first two dives at West Caicos were packed with marine life: bold Caribbean reef sharks, a super-relaxed turtle, one huge lobster hiding away in his cave, scorpionfish and an eagle ray.

The plethora of sites here include such delightful names as Highway To Heaven, Elephant Ear and Mushroom, all ranked according to whether the diver is "novice", "advanced" or "master".

There are no dives directly from the resort. They are all accessed by Beaches' twin-diesel Newton dive-boats, which are comfortable and have 5m diving platforms. Fresh fruit, pastries and limitless water were welcome after dives,

Above: Beaches Turks & Caicos resort is set in Grace Bay, Provo.

Left: Nassau grouper.

as was the provision of decent heads!

For certified divers, everything is included in the original resort booking. This means all dive-gear too, although I took my own, unable to be parted from it.

Only A-clamp tanks were available so I took along a yoke converter for my DIN regs. The Caribbean/Atlantic tends to follow US standards, with weights on the boats in imperial measures, and the dive-guides refer to depth in feet rather than metres, so you need to make a few mental adjustments.

OUR SECOND DIVE of the first day, at Driveway, saw one of our dive-guides spear a lionfish.

No friend to Caribbean waters and a menace as an invasive and voracious predator, lionfish harm reef systems by competing for space with overfished native stocks, and killing off vital species.

So nothing unusual about the lionfish-spearing these days, but we were gripped to watch as a reef shark swam up and seized the dead fish, chowing down with enthusiasm.

Unfortunately such zeal on the part of the sharks extends only to dead lionfish, because they're too lazy to bother hunting them while alive. They leave the hard work to the experienced dive-guides.

There is no deliberate shark-feeding to



Above: Grey reef shark.

Below: Penelope gets in the mood at the dive-centre.

entice the sharks, but those in TCI seemed naturally inquisitive, approaching close whether a dead lionfish beckoned or not.

Teaching sharks to eat live ones has been attempted, but so far to no avail!

Another lionfish that we watched speared ended up in the pan of one of the resort's leading chefs, to then melt on our tongues, its delicate flavour enhanced by a sublime buttery sauce. DIY catching or preparing of these venomous fish without experience is not recommended, because they require expertise in handling and removing the dangerous spine.

An accidental sting above or below water will be very painful, and while most people recover without complications, the worst-case scenario is anaphylactic shock and/or cardiac arrest.

Shark snacking included, this dive was a dream. We descended over a sandy area with scattered coral-heads leading into

a sand-chute and passed down through the reef to a ledge at around 25-30m, where the wall drops vertically.

As with many sites at West Caicos, all along the wall divers find black coral and purple tube sponges. With gorgeous light catching the hypnotic sheen on the sharks' bodies as they glide past, and dark walls rising from the deep into the bluest blue, drama is guaranteed.

THE NEXT DAY brought further wall-dives at Northwest Point, at the Chimney and Eel Garden. I didn't want to get out!

My group consisted of experienced divers who could stay deeper for longer, but I found that depths and dive-times were generally conservative because of the numbers of new divers the resort trains.


This makes it a good place for experienced divers to consider if they want to introduce family or friends to diving. Beaches/Sandals offers several courses tailored to different levels of experience from the PADI dive-centre overlooking Grace Bay Beach.

E-learning carried out before travelling allows more time in the water and less in the classroom.

PADI's partnership with Sandals Resorts International began in 1997 and, across both Beaches and Sandals, it says the 100,000-plus certifications issued are "a monumental accomplishment".

Beaches' watersports manager Mark Healey told me of the centre's Green Star Award for dedication to conservation and described it as one of the top five dive operations in the Western Hemisphere.

No issue goes unresolved, he claimed, and I can testify to this, having rather foolishly locked myself out of my computer after my first 28m dive.

I had accidentally set it in Altitude mode and, although I knew I was safe, had strayed from its projected deco ceilings. It certainly let me know about 



my transgression, but one of the pro guides kindly lent me his personal spare.

Heading back out to West Caicos, we were blessed with a humpback whale sighting.

There was much excitement on the bridge and bow as we revelled in our luck.

Humpbacks migrate annually in the winter season from the northern Atlantic to warmer Caribbean waters to give birth and mate, and are often spotted in deep water in the Turks Island Passage near Grand Turk and Salt Cay.

ANOTHER RELAXING dive saw us drop to about 27m via a small crack and up a long wall before returning to the boat for refreshments and a surface interval being entertained by playful dolphins. Divers jumped back in to swim and dive with them in the extraordinarily blue water.

The diving is not particularly difficult, but the abundance and wide range of sites meant that they never felt limited.

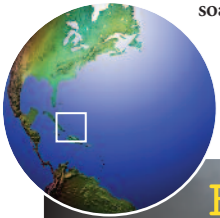
It was good to be in the zone without the task-loading that can occur in cold UK waters or on more strenuous liveboard trips – this is a place to let your

skill-set kick in and simply soak up the relaxation.

Our last dive of the short trip, at a site called the Gully, was

an exploration of a beautiful wall shallowing up to where a huge turtle and barracuda hung out, then a rainy boat passage back to relax before a fabulous night out at one of the glam restaurants.

The deal is that, whether newly certified or seasoned, guests can enjoy up to two free dives a day as part of a Sandals or Beaches holiday and any subsequent stays. Beaches also has two locations in Jamaica while Sandals, set up to offer 5*



Top and above: All the dive-sites are a boat-ride away from the resort.

pampering, provides diving on that island as well as in the Bahamas, Grenada, St Lucia, Barbados and Antigua.

With a lot of watersports options beside scuba, guests are invited to combine it with canoeing/kayaking, sailing, windsurfing, catamarans, waterskiing, paddle- or knee-boarding.

As with so many dive operators, throughout the Covid pandemic dive-staff across the resorts have been trained in the stringent safety and security protocols required to keep guests safe.

I was there just before all the sanitisation and social distancing procedures had to be imposed and felt the genuine cheer of everyone enjoying the diving and the array of restaurant choices and free bars!

With so many options amid all this wonderful Caribbean hospitality, I can't wait to dive there again. ✒

FACTFILE

GETTING THERE ▶ BA operates flights from London Gatwick to Providenciales (PLS) twice a week. Several US-based carriers operate flights connecting through the US mainland.

DIVING & ACCOMMODATION ▶ *Turks and Caicos Aggressor II* operates mid-April to mid-January (from mid-Jan to mid-April it moves to Silver Bank near the Dominican Republic for humpback whale snorkelling, aggressor.com. Land-based operators such as Beaches Turks and Caicos Village & Spa provide diving options mainly around Provo and French Cay, beaches.co.uk

WHEN TO GO ▶ Year-round diving. Water temperature is 29°C in summer and 26°C in winter.

MONEY ▶ US dollar

HEALTH ▶ Hyperbaric chamber in Provo.

PRICES ▶ Return flights from London with Delta from £590. 2021 Aggressor rate for a 7-day charter is US \$3195. In September 10-day charters are offered for the same price. Seven nights all-inclusive at Beaches TCI in a French Village luxury room king, including return flights and transfers, costs from £2695pp (price valid for travel on select dates between 1-20 May, 2022 if booked before 17 August, 2021).

VISITOR INFORMATION ▶ visittci.com

