

### General:

We visited Grand Turk for the first time on December 26-31, 2005. The water and beaches here are stunning – gorgeous shades of turquoise and deep blue water with white-powder sand. The dive shops and most of the tourist hotels and restaurants are located along a stretch of beach known as “The Strip.” The beach here is beautiful and the sunsets are fabulous. The interior and non-tourist areas of the island where local businesses and homes are located was not particularly attractive, though the people were friendly and we always felt safe. Horses, donkeys and dogs roamed around everywhere.

We stayed at the Island House resort and dove with Oasis Divers. The Island House is run by long-time manager Colin and it was quite nice, though it was not on the water. Oasis is a very good dive operation and we really loved our divemaster, Mackey. If we ever return to Grand Turk, we would definitely choose Oasis again and we’d probably end up staying at the Island House, though I really did miss being on the water. (More details on lodging and diving are contained in the sections below.)

We found the diving on Grand Turk to be mixed – some of the sites we dove were outstanding, while others were somewhat mediocre. Several sites contained abundant colorful large sponges and hard and soft corals – great wide-angle stuff. In terms of marine life, we saw a decent number of fish, especially on top of the reefs. Most of the standard reef fish were there. We came across turtles on every single dive. We saw quite a few butterflyfish on most dives (all kinds) but not many angel fish. We only found one spotted drum, and never saw a single scorpionfish. Schooling creole wrasse were seen on many dives, as were groupers of all sizes, from small to quite large. We saw nurse sharks a couple of dives. Our two night dives were excellent – we saw crabs, lobsters, squid, octopi, etc. both times. One major disappointment was the complete lack of macro critters – we literally saw only a couple of banded coral shrimp on one night dive, occasional flamingo tongues, a total of 3 Pederson cleaner shrimp (all on one dive) – not a single arrow crab, nudibranch, or other small creature.

In comparison to other dive destinations we have visited (the East End of Grand Cayman, Little Cayman, the Bahamas, Belize, Bonaire, Cozumel, the Kona coast of Hawaii, Utila Dominica, and Roatan), we found the diving here to be better than Cozumel, Bonaire or the Bahamas; about on par with the Utila and Roatan (though very different from the Bay Islands); and a step below the Caymans and Dominica.

The topside weather was beautiful during our stay – mostly sunny every day with no rain. The water was cold, however (being late December), enough so to be bothersome by the last half of the second morning dive. We didn’t see mosquitoes or no-see-ums here, except for a few mosquitoes in the evening. We didn’t use insect repellent at all during the day and had no problems.

The ideal vacation agenda here would probably be to do morning dives, spend the afternoon relaxing on the beach, and go on a couple of night dives.

### **Travel:**

We flew from Atlanta to Providenciales, Caicos on Delta, then took the short flight from Provo to Grand Turk on Sky King. Both airports were fairly nice by Caribbean standards (well air-conditioned, clean, nice seats, etc.) and all airport personnel we dealt with were friendly and accommodating. There were long lines checking in and going through security screening in the Provo airport for our return flight on Saturday due to the fact that four large planes were departing for the US within a couple of hours of each other that afternoon.

Sky King runs multiple regular daily flights among the Turks and Caicos islands. The planes are small twin engine prop planes with about 15 seats. We had to pay excess weight charges for the first time ever on Sky King (\$10 going and \$14 returning – go figure). Our bags weigh about 120 lbs. total for all four – above their maximum allowance of 44 lbs. per person. All our bags did make it on the plane with us both ways. In fact, the only trouble we had with baggage occurred in the Atlanta Airport – somehow one of our bags got lost between the baggage re-check in the international arrival area and the baggage claim area, but Delta had it delivered to our house within 36 hours.

### **Lodging/Dining:**

We stayed at the Island House resort, a well-known dive lodge on the island which has been managed by Colin (a retired Brit) for a number of years. The Island House is a nice property, with pretty common areas and a pool. There are about 10-12 guest rooms arranged around a nice courtyard, and Colin seems to be on-site to help tend to your needs at all times. All rooms have A/C and good-size porches and balconies. You can see a large lagoon from the back side of the property, but the view is not beautiful. Our room was on the bottom floor, so the view from the top floor rooms may have been more scenic. <http://www.islandhouse-tci.com/>

Our room was outfitted with a double bed, dresser and a sitting area with a table. We had small kitchenette with microwave, stove and refrigerator. Storage space was adequate. The bathroom had a bathtub/shower, toilet and sink, and we always had plenty of hot water. Tap water is not potable, but fresh drinking water was provided on-site. Maid service was provided daily and towels were replenished each day. Guest rooms had televisions, phones, alarm/CD players. The electrical outlets in the room took standard US plugs.

One bonus of staying at the Island House is the Colin provides a car or truck with the lodging package. These are generally well-used cars in good running order that are perfect for divers. On the afternoon of our arrival, Colin drove us around the island and showed us the main roads. He took us by the dive shop and the grocery store and pointed out all the places that we needed to know about. It is about a 10-minute drive from the Island House to the dive shop. The grocery store, gas station, restaurants are also within a 5-10 minute drive.

There are 5 or 6 restaurants along the strip that serve American-style food. All of them have a reputation for serving food in typical slow island-time fashion with moderate to

high prices, so we chose not to eat our meals there. Instead, we purchased take-out meals from a couple of the local places. We ordered pizza from Mookie Pookie Pizza Palace twice and had two meals from each pizza (\$24 for a large). This worked out really well for accommodating our night-diving schedule. We also got take-out lunch here one day (meat, veggies, rice & beans) for \$9 per plate. The pizza was great and the lunch was good. We got lunch twice from the Poop Deck in town – fried chicken, rice & beans and potato salad for \$6 per plate – it was extremely spicy but delicious. We enjoyed taking our lunch back to the Island House and eating by the pool. We did get nachos from the Sand Bar on the strip the last night (\$12 for a large plate of loaded nachos) – they were good, and it was nice watching the sun set there.

We toured several other places while we were in Grand Turk. Here are some details.

Bohio Beach Resort: This is a very nice property with an onsite dive operation and restaurant. You can shore dive Black Forest, one of the best dives on Grand Turk, from their beach via scooter. The rooms are nice and clean with a view of the beach (Some rooms have mini-kitchen some, do not). If cost is not an issue, then this is the really the way to go. If you want to go to town, you will need transportation. It is pretty far away from town. <http://www.bohioresort.com/>

Osprey Beach Hotel: This is an OK property with an onsite restaurant. It is right in town, so you can walk to the dive shops and restaurants. Most divers we met were staying here, and they seemed to pretty happy with everything. The rooms are clean with a view of the beach (Some rooms have a mini-kitchen some do not). If cost is an issue, then this is a place you may want to consider. I think they even have some sort of meal plan. <http://www.ospreybeachhotel.com/>

The Arches: This is a very nice property with outstanding views of both sides of the island because it is on a hill. The website does do these 2 bedroom condos justice. These four units are upscale condos with outstanding kitchens, separate bedrooms, and bath rooms. You will have to rent a car to go anywhere. This is the downside of this property, but I have to say I liked it a lot. <http://www.grandturkarches.com/>

Aqua House: We did not go in these condos because these two units had people in them. But if I ever returned to Grand Turk, we will stay here because of three reasons: i) the condos look very nice on the webpage and they are right on the beach, ii) the condos are close to town. Bikes are provided with each unit, so you can quickly get into town for food and diving, and iii) the cost is pretty reasonable. <http://www.aquahouse.tc/>

### **Diving:**

All the dive shops in town use Carolina skiffs for their everyday dive boats. These are no-frills boats, but the dive sites are all within 5-15 minutes from shore, so it's not really a problem. One thing we did not like is that you board the boat from the beach, and if the water is not calm you tend to get a good bit of sand in your booties and the legs of your wetsuit, which is annoying. There is a Bimini cover over part of the boat, but there is no shield from the wind so the ride back to shore was chilly, especially at night. You do a

backroll off the side of the boat to enter the water. Given the layout of the boat, there is no camera table or rinse tank, but gallons of freshwater were put on board for rinsing cameras.

The dive shop is located just across the road from the beach, where the dive boats generally anchored. The normal dive schedule includes two boat dives each morning, with a surface interval back on shore between dives. We found Oasis to be very accommodating to guests' wishes with regard to afternoon or evening dives. We did an afternoon dive on the first day, then asked to do night dives the following two nights instead, and Mackey was happy to oblige. During most of our trip, we dove with the same group of divers each day – we had a minimum of 3 on the first day, and a maximum of 6 on the last 2 days. Everyone in our group got along really well and had fun together.

Once our gear was set up on the first day, we did not touch it again until the end of our trip, so we only had to rinse our skins and booties each day. The crew took care of the remainder of the gear. The gear storage room at the shop was adequate with two large rinse buckets and ample hanging space for wetsuits. There was also a room with cubbies for items you wanted to leave at the shop, as well as a dedicated camera table. There are benches for sitting and donning wetsuits in front of the shop. One thing that was somewhat irritating was the presence of sand everywhere, which is tracked back from the beach when you get off the boat, making it difficult to get dressed without getting sand in your wetsuit or your clothes.

While we were there, the water was rough for the first two days, so we had to launch the boat from the southern end of the island along a calmer part of the coast on the first day and from an area further north near the library in town on another day. This meant that we had to be shuttled back and forth in the back of a pick-up truck from the dive shop to the boat. This was not a really big deal to us, and apparently this is fairly common during the winter months when the surface can be choppy.

Below is a day-by-day description of the dive sites we visited.

#### Tuesday:

We started the day at ***Black Forest*** – an awesome dive with a big expanse of colorful negative overhanging reef with lots of beautiful large corals and sponges. The plentiful black coral on the reef here gives the sites its name. We saw both gray and queen angelfish here, along with many common reef fish. After the surface interval, we dove ***Austin's Reef***. The reef here had a sloping wall. We saw 3 turtles, an eagle ray swimming out in the blue, a large puffer fish, and a number of schooling fish all over the reef. We found a nurse shark in the shallows, and garden eels populated much of the shallow sandy area. The afternoon weather was overcast and the water was rough, so we had to dive from the southern end of the island. We went to ***Chief Magistrate's Reef***, where there was a short sloping wall with lots of encrusting sponges and corals and sponges on the wall. Reef fish were plentiful here and we saw a turtle in the shallows.

#### Wednesday:

On Wednesday morning we again took off from the south and dove the *Tunnels* for our first dive of the day. This site is characterized by a neat swim-through that leads out to the wall, which is very pretty with lots of sponges and corals. We saw a number of common reef fish along the wall, with schools of snappers and grunts on top of the reef. Just as we were turning around, a huge cloud of sand engulfed us and stayed with us all the way back to the mooring. This is the only time we have ever experienced this – it was very odd to be in clear water and see a giant cloud of sand overtake you and drop visibility from 80' to 20' almost instantaneously. Our next dive took us to *Finbar Reef* in the north. This site had a number of reef fish on top, and we saw a filefish, a couple of spotted trunkfish, a large barracuda, a gray angelfish and a spotted eel. We had an awesome night dive on *Austin's Reef*. We found 2 octopi, 2 nurse sharks, a couple of lobsters, more than 10 king crabs, some hermit crabs, a turtle, and several basket stars.

#### Thursday:

The weather improved on Thursday and we enjoyed sunny skies during our first dive at *Aquarium*. This site is amply named, as we saw lots of fish on the reef, including a school of bar jacks. Gorgonians are thick on the wall here. Our second dive was conducted at *McDonalds* – names for an arching swim-through that takes you out to the wall at about 60'. We saw a large barracuda here and some small ones in addition to the normal reef fish. There were some Christmas tree worms here and we saw a flamingo tongue. We convinced Mackey to take us *Black Forest* for our night dive, and it was spectacular. The color on the overhanging wall was even more brilliant at night, and we saw a small octopus, a spotted eel, and a number of crabs and lobsters. We also found some orange cup coral on the wall and a tiny (maybe 2" long) baby squid in the sand in the shallows.

#### Friday:

The sky was sunny and the water was very calm on Friday. We did our first dive far north at *Ampitheater*, and it was among the best dives of the trip. Tall gorgonians covered parts of the wall and reef, and fish were abundant. The topography here is very beautiful – the wall goes in and out. Our last dive of the trip was conducted at *Rolling Hills*, another pretty site. Here we saw 2 queen triggerfish and a giant lobster in a small cave along the wall. We also saw several Pederson shrimp and a neat formation of finger coral in a barrel sponge.