

Turks Islands



Days simply drift by on these traditional, sleepy islands. Daylight hours are filled with snorkeling and diving, and quiet villages occasionally burst into activity when fishing boats return with bright silver fish and gleaming pink conch.

Quiet evenings are spent sipping spiced rum on wooden decks against a backdrop of milky turquoise seas and pink skies. In beachside bars, expats, Belongers and bureaucrats engage in noisy debate about development and cruise-ship plans for their island, while fishermen recall days when the ocean's now-barren shallows were lined with conch, and fish filled the waves close to shore.

The Turks group includes Grand Turk and its southern neighbor, Salt Cay, and several tiny cays. The islands lie east of the Caicos, separated by the 22-mile-wide Turks Island Passage.

Divers head for Salt Cay and the stunning reef wall that is a few hundred yards off Grand Turk. It stretches the island's length before plunging more than 8000ft into a deep blue chasm. Nature lovers enjoy the arrival of rare green and hawksbill turtles, which come ashore to lay their eggs. Bird-watchers delight in the variety of birds that can be seen at Gibb's, Penniston, Long, and Martin Alonza Pinzon Cays, known as the Grand Turk Cays Land & Sea Park.

The ocean's depths, full of colorful life and velvety darkness, envelop birthing humpback whales. The quiet awe of a dive with these creatures will never be forgotten.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Hug a grouper! Take a dive near Grand Turk's **MacDonalds** (p263), embrace the island's two pet groupers and fly underwater with eagle rays
- Share some spicy rum and lively conversation with divers and perhaps a former governor at Cockburn Town's **Sand Bar** (p265)
- Go whale watching or diving at **Salt Cay** (p267) for an amazing encounter with these ocean gods
- Ride a **bicycle** (p265) to enjoy the space, the ocean and the breeze on your face
- Party at the **Conch Carnival** (p263) when beach bonfires burn, kayaks race, iron men strain and *goombay* music keeps you dancing



■ TELEPHONE CODE: 649

■ POPULATION: 5967

■ AREA: 14 SQ MILES



History

The Lucayan Indians paddled their way to Grand Turk, the Caicos and the Bahamian islands at the turn of the 9th century. From these early days the Turks and Caicos and the Bahamas shared a similar history. Locals claim that the islands were Christopher Columbus' first landfall in 1492. Experts, however, have debunked the theory.

The Turks and Caicos relied upon salt export, which was the backbone of the British colony until the 1950s. Today finance, tourism, and fishing create most income, but the islands can't survive without British aid.

Relations between the islanders and their British-appointed governors have been strained since 1996, when the incumbent governor suggested that government and police corruption had turned the islands into a haven for drug trafficking. These comments appeared in the *Offshore Finance Annual*, and opponents accused the governor of harming investment. Growing opposition threatened to spill over into civil unrest. The issue created a resurgence in calls for independence, which still continue today.

National Parks

Native flora and fauna are protected within 33 areas set aside as national parks, nature reserves, sanctuaries, and sites of historical interest under the aegis of Turks & Caicos Islands National Parks.

The Turks and Caicos National Trust has established an underwater snorkeling trail off Grand Turk and initiated countrywide studies of bird populations. See the Environment chapter (p44) for more information and contact details.

Columbus Landfall National Park covers the Western shore and coral reefs off Cockburn Town; the ocean deep begins within 400yd of shore and the marine life here is extraordinary.

South Creek National Park incorporates the mangroves and wetlands along Grand Turk's south shore, and is home to migrating shorebirds and waders.

Grand Turk Cays Land & Sea Park, off the southeast shore, consists of Gibb's, Penniston, Long, and Martin Alonza Pinzon Cays. It contains important nesting sites for seabirds, as well as abundant iguanas and Turk's Head cacti. The marine life also includes pelagics, stingrays, sea mammals and fish.

Getting There & Away

Most travelers to the Turks Islands fly into Grand Turk's International Airport (via Providenciales or Nassau in New Providence, the Bahamas), a few miles from Cockburn Town.

A CONFUSED CREST

Artists were asked to submit a design for the territory's colonial crest in 1860. The selected design showed a schooner in the background and two men in the foreground raking heaps of salt, or 'white gold.' It was a typical and relevant island scene of the 19th century.

Unfortunately, the London flag maker hired to complete the job assumed that the salt heaps were igloos and added entrances to the white mounds.

The flag was finally updated in 1967 to include a new crest, depicting the country's indigenous spiny lobster, queen conch, and Turk's Head cactus.

Getting Around

You'll need your own transportation if you want to explore the island outside of Cockburn Town, where you can rent a car or bicycle. In town you can walk around easily, but bicycles are also available for rent.

There is a twice-daily flight and a twice-weekly ferry to Salt Cay, where most people use bicycles, golf carts or their legs to get around.

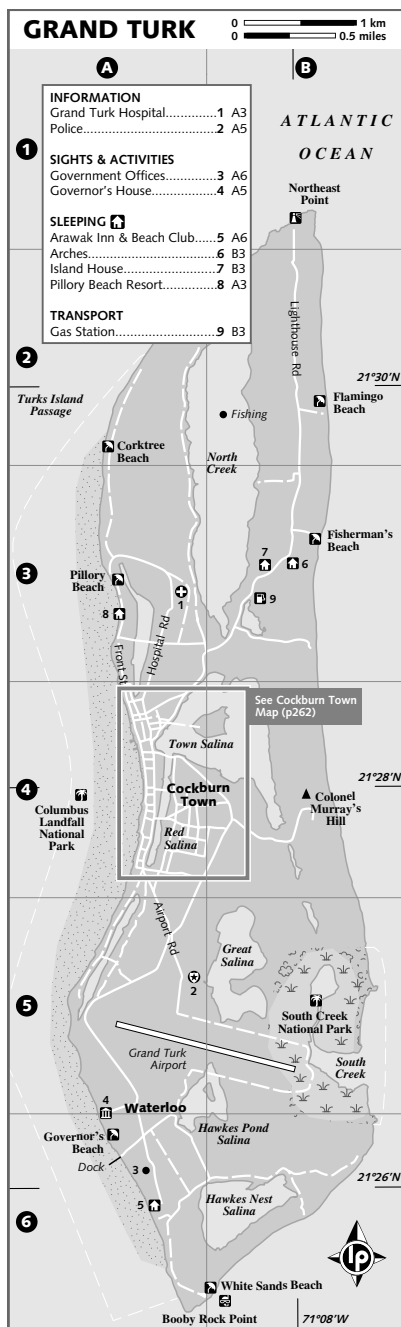
GRAND TURK

Donkeys, horses and chickens ramble in tatty, contented groups on Grand Turk's winding roads. The narrow, sleepy streets are lined with houses from the early 1800s with overhanging creaking balconies, faded paint and swathes of brilliant scarlet bougainvillea; while leafy trees cast dappled shade over passing bicycles carrying Belongers, who smile while asking 'How are you today?'

Grand Turk is a charming, offbeat gem with a rare sense of innocence. At just 6½ miles long and 1½ miles across at its widest, this small island is centered on sleepy Cockburn Town, which, amazingly, has been the administrative and political capital of the archipelago for more than 400 years.

Limestone cliffs rise along the north and east shores, and unspoilt beaches line the island with South, Governor's and Corktree Beaches the clear winners, while inland there are caves once used by Lucayans. Many Belongers and expats live in more modern homes in the eastern 'suburbs,' where the land rises to Colonel Murray's Hill.

The island's middle is dominated by several *salinas*, or salt ponds, which nowadays attract birds and mosquitoes rather than those working to extract pure salt. Salt, or 'white gold,' was the island's most important export until the industry collapsed in 1962. The entrancing groups of wandering horses and donkeys on the islands are actually descendants of the beasts of burden that worked on the salt plantations back in the 17th century, carrying 25lb bags of salt from the ponds to the warehouses and docks. When salt production was halted the creatures were set free to roam as they pleased.



COCKBURN TOWN

pop 5525

This charming business center consists of a bank, a few shops, the post office, some government buildings and a museum. You would never guess that this was the nation's capital; the faded colonial buildings and empty streets are the antithesis of Provo's sophisticated allure. Yet visitors find themselves easily adjusting to a slow and relaxed pace that matches this dozing and amiable backwater. Old warehouses built of limestone and two-tiered wooden buildings with shuttered windows elongate the town along the coastline. On the edges of town live the less-affluent Belongers. A few hotels and expat holiday homes are beginning to sprout here.

Orientation

The heart of town is sandwiched between the ocean and the salt pond named Red Salina. Front St runs one way, along the waterfront, then narrows and becomes Duke St three blocks south of the government plaza.

Pond St runs parallel 50yd to the east, along Red Salina. To the north Pond St divides: Hospital St runs north to the hospital and Lighthouse Rd runs northeast to the lighthouse at Northeast Point. Lighthouse Rd then divides to follow the waterfront to Governor's Beach and the dock, and run southeast to the airport.

Information

Businesses and government offices close at 3pm on Friday. Some businesses open 9am to 1pm on Saturday. Public phones can be found at most central places.

Cable & Wireless (☎ 649-946-2200; cwtci@tcitw.tc; Front St; ☎)

Emergency (ambulance, fire, police ☎ 911)

Federal Express (☎ 649-231-6097; mobile office)

First Caribbean International Bank (☎ 649-946-2831; Front St)

General Post Office (☎ 649-946-1334; Front St)

Grand Turk Hospital (☎ 649-946-2333; Hospital Rd) **Police** (☎ 649-946-2299)

Scotiabank (☎ 649-946-2507; Front St)

Turks & Caicos Islands Tourist Board (☎ 649-946-2321; www.turksandcaicostourism.com; Front St)

Sights

The Turks & Caicos Island Tourist Board hands out free Heritage Walk pamphlets.

FRONT STREET

Many waterfront government buildings are weathered but still retain a faded glory, notably the handsome **General Post Office**. Here the **Philatelic Bureau** displays scores of the beautiful stamps for which the Turks and Caicos are justly famous.

A small grassed plaza contains the **Columbus Monument** which claims cheekily and confidently that the explorer landed here on October 12, 1492.

Important historic buildings further north include little **St Mary's Anglican Church**, **St Thomas Anglican Church**, the pink-faced **Victoria Public Library**, **Oddfellows Lodge** and the battered **Masonic Lodge**.

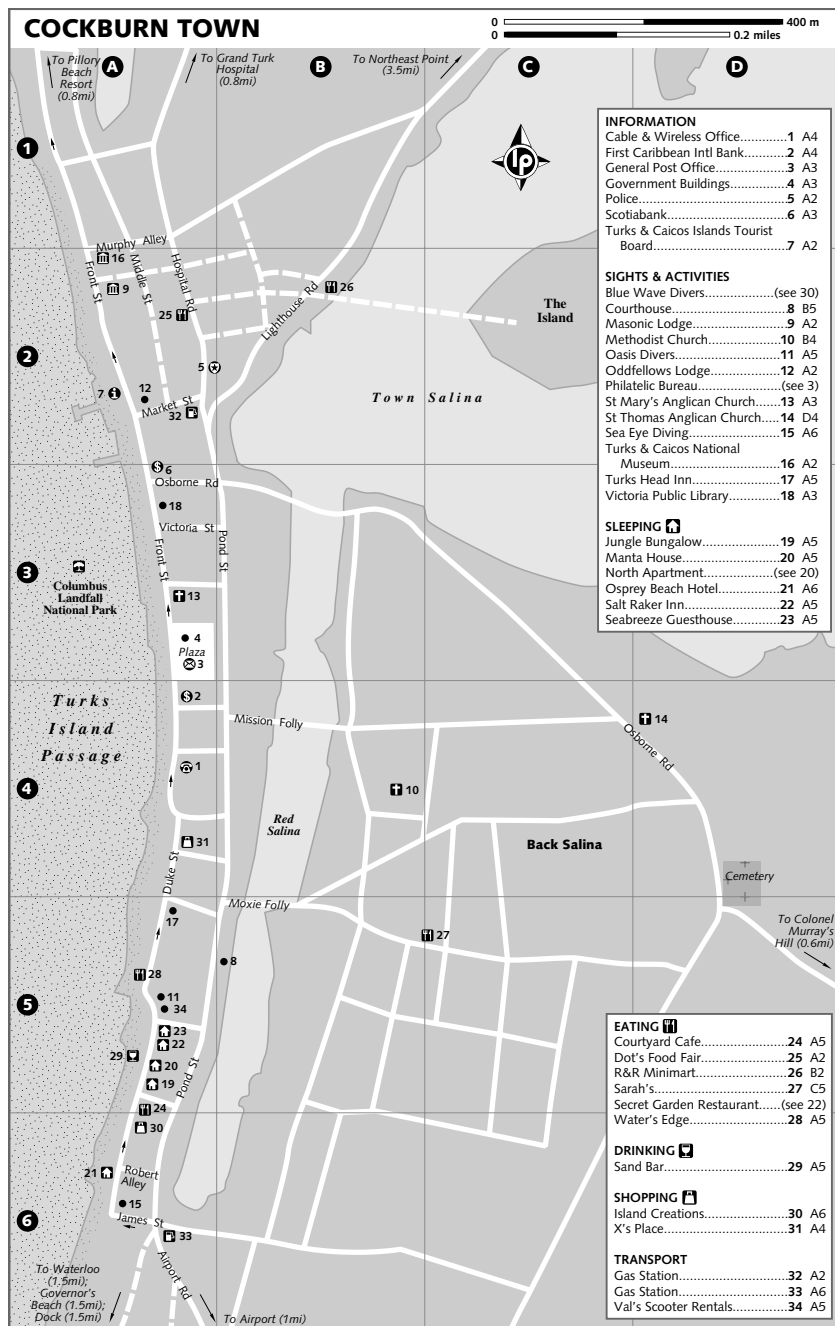
The excellent **Turks & Caicos National Museum** (☎ 649-946-2160; www.tcmuseum.org; Front St; non-residents \$5; ☎ 9am-4pm Mon-Fri, 9am-6pm Wed, 9am-1pm Sat) displays shell tools, beads, stamps, locks and greenstone *celts* (tools) dug up from the past. Other sections are devoted to the salt industry and life on the coral reef. Its central exhibit is the remains from the Molasses Reef, the oldest authenticated shipwreck in the Americas, whose hull is shown alongside the world's largest collection of wrought-iron breech-loading cannon. A gallery upstairs has an incredible, lifelike 3D underwater display; a natural history gallery with displays on local wildlife; and a room devoted to the pre-Columbian Taino culture, featuring a Taino paddle – one of only two ever found – dating to AD 1100. Tours are given at 2pm weekdays upon request.

DUKE STREET

South of downtown's main area, Duke St is lined by stone walls behind which a few mansions have been turned into rakish inns, notably the old Turk's Head Inn (sadly it belongs to a film production company and is being used for shoots in made-for-TV B-movies) and the Salt Raker Inn. Equally disappointing is the barren reef off Duke Street's beach, which is void of marine life.

AROUND TOWN

North of town, the island divides like a tuning fork, with the prongs separated by North Creek. A 2-mile-long lagoon opens to the sea via a pencil-thin mouth. **Flamingo Beach** (Map p260) and **Fisherman's Beach** (Map p260) run south from Northeast Point; seaweed and choppy waters detract from swimming.



A century-old cast-iron **lighthouse** blinks myopically from Northeast Point, while nearby **Corktree Beach** (Map p260) and **Pillory Beach** (Map p260) are great for bathing.

The government dock is at Waterloo, 1½ miles south of Cockburn Town. Also here is lovely, pine-shaded **Governor's Beach** (Map p260), a popular picnic and party spot for Belongers. Unfortunately plans for cruise-ship stops may informally 'sequester' this part of the island.

Grand Turk's other highlights are the official **Governor's residence** (1815; Map p260) at Waterloo; a grand old dame of a house that was built the year of the famous battle for which the village is named. The island's dock is here, as is the US missile-tracking station where John Glenn was debriefed in 1962 when he splashed down off Grand Turk.

Dirt roads lead south to **White Sands Beach** (Map p260) for snorkelers, and east to three prime **bird-watching spots**: Hawkes Pond Salina, Hawkes Nest Salina, and South Creek National Park, which protects the mangroves and wetlands along the island's southeast shore.

Activities

Local divers have compiled dive-site maps that list over 23 superb pristine wall-dive sites. These will show you anything you desire to see. Also extraordinary are night dives, when the coral glows as if embedded with huge luminescent gemstones. Some have mentioned Black Forest, where five types of black coral cling to an undercut festooned with sponges; Macdonalds, a coral arch where all sorts of fish, from giant friendly groupers to angelfish, hang out; and the Tunnels, where sand chutes slope down to the entrance of twin tunnels that drop to 100ft and emerge in a sponge theme park.

There are a number of diving outfits (also offering snorkel trips) in Cockburn and Salt Cay, testament to how many of the locals and visitors make the most of these fabulous coral reefs.

DIVING & SNORKELING

Oasis Divers (☎ 649-946-1128; www.oasisdivers.com; Duke St) offers two-tank dives (\$70), popular night dives (\$40) and equipment rentals for reasonable rates. Packages and special excursions include the wonderful Gibb's Cay and hand-feeding stingrays (\$50 plus

diving rates). Trips to dive close to breeding humpback whales (when in season), and to explore the 18th-century wreck off Salt Cay certainly should be considered!

The small outfit **Sea Eye Diving** (☎ 649-946-2432; www.seeyediving.com; Duke St) also offers a trip to Gibbs Cay (\$50), two-tank dives (\$60) and night dives (\$45).

Multitalented Mitch Rollins, the dive operator at **Blue Water Divers** (☎ 649-945-1226; www.grandturksuba.com; Island Creations, Duke St), also sings and plays guitar at the Salt Raker Inn at night. He offers a full range of dives including two-tank dives (\$70) and night dives (\$45).

SPORTFISHING

You can charter a boat for fishing from **Dutchie's** (☎ 649-946-2244; Airport Rd) for between \$300 and \$400 daily.

Festivals & Events

The island hosts a **Spring Garden Festival** each April. The merriment of the **Conch Carnival** in June is in no doubt. Four days of fun include treasure hunts, kayak relays, iron dive-master competitions and much dancing and partying. The **Queen's Official Birthday Celebration** features the police marching band playing with jingoistic fervor.

Cultural and musical events occur in May, August, September and November. These include the **Ripshaw Music Festival**, when Turks and Caicos rake 'n' scrape musicians gather to out-rake and out-scrape each other with much exuberance.

The annual **Grand Turk Game Fishing Tournament** is held at the end of July or in early August. The annual **Turks & Caicos International Billfish Tournament** is held each July.

There's a **Cactus Fest** in August, plus a weeklong carnival with reggae music and general festivities.

December has a **marathon** run that tests the physical mettle of all competitors, the usual joyous occasions and an annual **Christmas Tree Lighting Ceremony**.

Sleeping

There are a number of rental houses both downtown and around the island that are particularly great for families. Most of the expat businesses also manage rentals for absent owners, so just ask around, and check the websites listed in the Directory (p270).

COCKBURN TOWN

Manta House (☎ 649-946-111; www.grandturk-mantahouse.com; Duke St; s/d \$70/75; ☒ ☑) This lovely little guesthouse is an idyllic old wooden single-story home with polished wood floors, romantic Caribbean pastels and tasteful decor. A complimentary continental breakfast, small shared living room, fridge and back garden help make this a superb place to stay, budget price or not. With uninterrupted sea views from the front yard, the cottage is also just across the road from a tiny beach and the Sand Bar.

Jungle Bungalow (☎ 649-946-111; www.grandturk-mantahouse.com; Duke St; r per week incl breakfast \$995; ☒ ☑) Adjacent to the Manta House, this equally charming place has a more romantic edge, and is made for glamorous couples on a midrange budget. The simple but elegant decor incorporates animal prints, polished wood floors and a white sofa. You can also lounge in the back garden and relish the sea views from your doorstep.

Seabreeze Guesthouse (☎ 649-946-1594; www.seabreeze.tc; Duke St; r per week \$1400; ☒ ☑) This amiable and attractive blue-and-white house sits in the lovely, leafy part of Duke St, and is a five-minute walk away from restaurants, bars and the town beach. A top-story balcony spans the front of the house, with hammocks conveniently hung to watch life go by from. Three bedrooms make this a good-value option for sharing couples or a large family, as do the barbecue, bicycles, cable TV and DVD/CD player. Beach towels and other necessary linen are provided.

Salt Raker Inn (☎ 649-946-2260; www.saltraker.com; Duke St; r per week \$85-110; ☒ ☑) This 150-year-old former home of a Bermudian shipwright has been turned into an intimate, oceanfront inn. The Caribbean charm and friendly atmosphere compensate for the Inn's worn appearance (there are different rates for renovated and unrenovated rooms). All rooms have ceiling fans, fridges, and verandas. Upstairs suites have an ocean-view balcony with hammocks. The informal Secret Garden Restaurant (see opposite) is set in a quaint patio.

North Bungalow (☎ 649-946-111; www.grandturk-mantahouse.com; Duke St; r per week incl breakfast \$1300; ☒ ☑) The third of the super Manta House lodgings is made for small families. Polished wood floors gleam throughout the lodgings and the raised kitchen and additional space make it an appealing proposition. The

attractive and comfortable living room is perfect for lounging after a hard day's diving or sand-castle production on the beach. TVs can be supplied upon request. Use of the back garden and that view lend even more allure!

Osprey Beach Hotel (☎ 649-946-2666; www.ospreybeachhotel.com; r \$160; ☒ ☑ ☑) This hotel has a great seafront position at the leafy end of Duke St, and the rooms are cool, spotlessly clean and spacious. Standard suites come with a well-equipped kitchen, while deluxe rooms have more upmarket decor. All rooms are oceanfront and equipped with a phone, a coffee maker, cable TV and a private little balcony. It is only a short walk to the eateries and bars down the street, although the hotel's seafront alfresco restaurant is perfect for a quiet meal and restful glass of something cool; enjoy the killer key lime pie! Dive and meal-plan package rates include taxes, and it is cheaper to book directly with the hotel.

AROUND COCKBURN TOWN

Island House (Map p260; ☎ 649-946-1519; www.islandhouse-tci.com; Grand Turk; d \$90; ☒ ☑ ☑) Book ahead to beat the regulars for small suites in this attractive and soothing Mediterranean-style whitewashed villa set on the crest of a hill. Prior bookings also receive discounted rates. Comfortable and spotless rooms include contemporary kitchens, en suites, cable TV and balconies with hammocks. Rates include free use of utility vehicles and airport transfers. Beaches are a 10-minute drive from this tranquil, friendly and great value place.

Arches (Map p260; ☎ 649-946-2941; www.grandturkarches.com; r \$180; ☒ ☑ ☑) Another fabulous place, just up the road from Island House, enjoys a breezy ridgetop setting with views over the Atlantic. Four immaculate, spacious, self-contained apartments have been lovingly decorated in white and blue and offer the feel of a modern apartment. Great for families, but you will need a car to get around.

Pillory Beach Resort (Map p260; ☎ 649-946-2135; N Front St; s/d per 3 nights \$450/600; ☒ ☑ ☑) This pristine and attractive beachside resort offers modern and bright rooms, each with two double beds, telephone, cable TV and ocean-view balcony. A guest-only dive operation and top-class restaurant serving food with European influences makes this an enticing option. The stretch of wonderful beach that lines this resort should appeal

to families as well as lounging couples. Some great dive packages are on offer.

Arawak Inn & Beach Club (Map p260; ☎ 649-946-2277; fax 649-946-2279; r \$180; ☒ ☑ ☑) This gleaming yellow and white place is a couple of miles south of town on a secluded and gorgeous strip of beach.

Eating & Drinking

Secret Garden Restaurant (☎ 649-946-2260; www.saltraker.com; Duke St; mains \$15-26) The French owner's influences are obvious in the menu of this alfresco restaurant. Try the garlic chicken breast, the Saltraker Plate, lobster or the day's catch, plus splendid desserts such as cherry pie with ice cream. Live music, thanks to Mitch Rollins, creates a sing-along atmosphere.

Courtyard Café (☎ 649-946-2666; Duke St; mains \$5-15; ☒ ☑) breakfast & lunch) This friendly café serves the best breakfasts in town. The all-in omelettes are tasty and filling, and light lunches can be enjoyed in a shady courtyard. Waffles, cinnamon rolls, and bagels and cream cheese are other breakfast staples.

Water's Edge (☎ 649-946-1680; Duke St; mains \$6-24; ☒ ☑) breakfast, lunch & dinner; ☒) This informal restaurant and bar has the best location in town, and makes the most of it. A wooden deck overlooks the beach and is the perfect location for a yummy crab salad, cajun snapper and cocktails.

Sand Bar (☎ 649-946-1111; Duke St; ☒ noon-1am) This small but vibrant alfresco bar attracts an eclectic crowd of ex-governors, animated lawyers and innocent passersby enticed in to sip killer rum cocktails and chat the evening away. Others happily consume bar food on the beachside deck.

Groceries can be bought from **Dot's Food Fair** (Hospital Rd), **R&R Minimart** (Lighthouse Rd; ☒ 8:30am-1pm, 4-9pm Mon-Sat) and **Sarah's** (off Moxey Rd; ☒ 7:30am-6:30pm Mon-Sat).

Shopping

Island Creations (☎ 649-946-1594; Duke St; ☒ 8am-5pm) Down the south end of Duke St, this small store sells some beautiful hand-dyed silk slips, T-shirts and dresses. Ceramic pictures and other enticements show a love of color and an upbeat feel.

X's Place (☎ 649-946-1299; Duke St; ☒ 9:30am-sundown Mon-Sat) This is a trove of Haitian art, antiques, antique maps drawn by hand, and carved items.

Getting There & Away**AIR**

Refer to the Transportation chapter (p292) for information on international flights to/from the Turks and Caicos.

The following airlines fly between the Turks and Caicos Islands.

Air Turks & Caicos (www.airturksandcaicos.com) Grand Turk (☎ 649-946-2709); Provo (☎ 649-946-4181); Salt Cay (☎ 649-946-6900) Flies between the Caicos, Grand Turk and Salt Cay.

Sky King Airlines (☎ 649-941-5464; fax 649-941-5127; www.skyking.tc) Flies between Provo, Grand Turk and South Caicos. Also to the Bahamas, Cuba, Jamaica, Dominican Republic and Haiti.

Turks & Caicos Airways Provo (☎ 649-946-4255); Grand Turk (☎ 649-946-2709); Sth Caicos (☎ 649-946-3279); Mid Caicos (☎ 649-946-6136); Nth Caicos (☎ 649-946-7246); Salt Cay (☎ 649-946-6928, fax 649-946-4483) Flies between Provo, other Caicos Islands, Salt Cay and Grand Turks.

The prices quoted are for one-way flights.

Route	Price	Frequency
Grand Turk–Provo	\$75	several daily
Grand Turk–Salt Cay	\$35	2 daily
Grand Turk–Mid Caicos	\$112	3 weekly
Grand Turk–Sth Caicos	\$65	3 daily
Grand Turk–Nth Caicos	\$105	several daily

BOAT

A ferry runs biweekly from Grand Turk to Salt Cay (\$12 round-trip). Contact **Salt Cay Charters** (☎ 649-231-6663; piratequeen3@hotmail.com). Whale-watching boat trips with this company cost \$75.

A government ferry runs from the South Dock on Grand Turk on Monday, Wednesday and Friday afternoons (\$12 round-trip). Call the **Harbormaster** (☎ 649-946-2325) in Grand Turk for information.

Flamingo Cove Marina (☎ 649-946-2227; VHF Channel 16) has a few slips and basic facilities.

Getting Around**TO/FROM THE AIRPORT**

Taxis meet incoming flights and cost \$7 to Cockburn Town. There are no buses, but prebooked hire cars will meet your plane.

BICYCLE

You can rent a bicycle at **Sea Eye Diving** (☎ 649-946-2432; Duke St) for \$15 per day.

CARS & SCOOTERS

You're hardly likely to need a car in town, but pay attention anyway to the one-way system along Duke and Front Sts.

You will need a car or scooter to explore further afield. In this case be aware that groups of donkeys, horses, dogs and chickens are likely to stroll at will on and off the roads, so drive slowly, especially around bends!

Cars are available for \$80 about day. You can hire air-con cars from the following.

Ed-Rico's Rent-a-Car (☎ 649-946-1744, 649-946-1042; seacair@tcway.tc; Churchill Bldg, Front St) Will do airport pickup/drop offs.

Tony's Car Rental (☎ 649-231-1806; Grand Turk Airport, Airport Rd)

Val's Scooter Rentals (☎ 649-946-1022, 649-946-1022; per day \$40; Duke St) Near Water's Edge restaurant.

TAXI

Several locals run taxis on Grand Turk. Ask at your hotel or restaurant for recommendations. If you hire a taxi for an island tour, be sure to negotiate the fare beforehand.

GRAND TURK CAYS LAND & SEA PARK

Gibb's, Penniston, Long, and Martin Alonza Pinzon Cays make up this small park (Map p259) southeast of Grand Turk. It protects important nesting sites for seabirds and there are also large numbers of Turk's Head cacti. Penniston is an important nesting site for frigate birds, and boobies and noddy and sooty terns abound on Gibb's. The terns come to Gibb's each May and June to breed (the females lay a single egg in a thick carpet of cactus spines); human visitation is discouraged during these months. Long Cay is a separate sanctuary with a population of iguanas.

There's no scheduled transportation; you'll need to rent a boat and guide in Cockburn Town. However, dive and tour operators in Provo (see p246) and Grand Turk (see p263) offer trips.

SALT CAY

pop 339

This lovely little spot on the Turks Passage is barely 3 miles across, but is rich in nature, the highlight of which is the annual visit of the graceful and gentle humpback whales. The deep waters that surround this cay are perfect

breeding grounds for whales, and the lucky people who visit at this time may witness some real miracles. Boats set out from Grand Turk and the cay for both whale-watchers and divers to relish this experience.

The cay is 8 miles southwest of Grand Turk, has only 12 cars and plenty of sandy beaches. Donkeys and wild cattle outnumber human inhabitants, as do iguanas. Simple island living that appeals to so many, and is often unattainable, can be found here.

Divers have known about this cay and the wonderful diving here for decades, hence the comparatively great range of lodgings, bars and eateries that center around the main settlement, historic Balfour Town. This attractive place has some lovely old plantation two-story homes with wide verandas and jalousied windows. Many of these have been renovated and offer lodgings with character, class and comfort.

Big Sand Cay, 8 miles south of Salt Cay, is a haven for diminishing numbers of green and hawksbill turtles, which come ashore to lay their eggs in the sand.

The modern history of the archipelago began here in the 17th century, when Bermudian salt traders settled and a salt industry began. They made ponds linked to the sea by canals and sluice gates and built windmills to control water flow. Salt Cay was once the world's largest producer of salt. In the industry's heyday, over 100 vessels a year departed the isle for the US, bulging with 'white gold.' Nominations by Unesco to make this cay a World Heritage site as 'a time capsule from the days when Salt was King' are not surprising. It could be a museum of industrial archeology, with its decrepit windmills, sheds, and *salinas*, now smelly and scummed with wind-whipped froth.

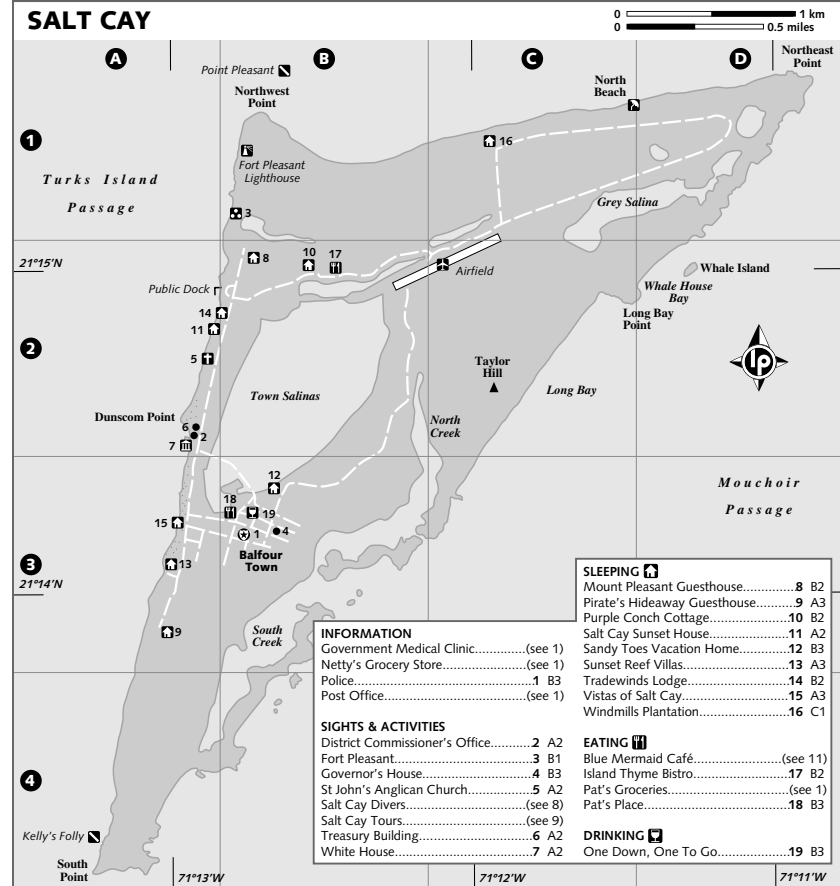
Information

Salt Cay has a **post office** (☎ 649-946-6985; ☎ 8am-12:30pm & 2-4pm Mon-Thu, 8am-3:30pm Fri). There's a small **clinic** (☎ 649-946-6970) with two nurses; a doctor visits once every two weeks. You can contact the **police** (☎ 649-946-6929).

The **Fun in the Sun Festival** is held in Balfour Town in Salt Cay each June.

Sights

The most noteworthy attraction is the splendidly preserved **White House** in north Balfour



Town, a salt merchant's stately manor with a stepped (Bermudian) stone roof and chimney. It is still owned by the Harriott family, who built the house in 1835 from stone brought here as ballast. Next door is the old wooden **Treasury Building**, where salt workers once collected their pay. Nearby are **St John's Anglican Church** and the **District Commissioner's Office**, housing the old jail.

Rusting 18th-century cannon sit atop **Fort Pleasant**, about 400yd north of Mt Pleasant Guest House.

Activities

Choice dive sites include Wanda Lust, known for its plankton-rich waters that attract whales and eagle rays; Kelly's Folly, a

rolling coral garden with hawksbill turtles, morays, and parrotfish; and HMS *Endymion* (Map p259), a never-salvaged, 18th-century British warship bristling with cannon and massive anchors in a coral canyon just 25ft down. The wreck is south of Big Sand Cay and the sea mound here has swim-throughs. There's also the Northwest Wall, plunging from 50ft to 120ft and covered with corals, and Point Pleasant, a shallow cove crowded with coral heads topped with elkhorn.

Salt Cay Divers (☎ 649-946-6906; www.saltcaydivers.tc) is a well-established outfit with two boats. It offers two-tank dives for \$80 and a number of excellent dive/stay packages. From January to March the whales are in town, and seven-night packages include

MARINE GODS

Salt Cay is perhaps the best spot in the Caribbean and West Indian regions to see humpback whales during the winter months. Scores of these gentle creatures arrive to breed in the warm waters of the Silver and Mouchoir Banks, east and south of Salt Cay.

Although a sheltered environment is important for pregnant whales, baby whales have a very thin blubber layer; the warmer water temperatures here may be needed for their survival. You will see each mother with only one newborn, as whales give birth to only one baby at a time.

A humpback whale may eat up to a ton of food a day, so it would also be safe to presume that this location supports the humpback's vast appetite for krill! It is believed that a humpback can probably stay underwater for as long as 35 minutes, although the average time may only be 10 to 15 minutes in the West Indies. This means that you should definitely be able to enjoy some privileged sights of these graceful and gentle colossi.

You may also be honored enough to hear the whales singing. Male humpbacks are famous for their songs, a sound that no-one who hears it will ever forget. The songs are probably part of the whales' mating rituals and are used in the declaration of territories. Initially scientists thought that these 20-minute-long songs were repeated continually, rather like a bird's song. Yet upon further research it was discovered that their evocative hymns change every year.

Dive and charter outfits in Cockburn Town and Salt Cay both organize whale-watching and diving trips (for Cockburn Town, see p263 and for Salt Cay, see p267).

while watching and five days' diving from \$1090 – excellent value.

Oasis Divers (Map p262; ☎ 649-946-1128; www.oasisdivers.com; Duke St) offers whale-watching trips (\$50) as well as an HMS *Endymion* wreck trip (\$75) from Grand Turk. Diving on these excursions costs extra; a prepaid two-tank dive is \$70. Gear rental is also possible from these friendly guys.

Salt Cay Charters (☎ 649-231-6663; piratequeen3@hotmail.com) offers whale-watching boat trips that start around \$75. It also offers a range of motor water sports and boats for charter (prices upon application).

Salt Cay Tours (☎ 649-946-6904; Pirate's Hideaway Guesthouse, Victoria St, Salt Cay) will take you on a tour of the island's historical landmarks and good bird-watching spots (see the useful website www.turksandcaicosbirdwatching.com). It also rents out bicycles and kayaks. The rates vary and will be supplied upon application.

Sleeping & Eating

There are also several great vacation cottages and houses to rent that range from simple stone cottages to brand-new modern villas. Check the Turks and Caicos websites, www.tcimall.tc, www.turksandcaicostourism.com and www.saltcay.org for listings.

Refreshing breezes will help keep you free of pesky mosquitoes, and lodgings require little cooling other than an open

window or two. Note that if air-conditioning is provided and you use it, you will normally be charged for the electricity.

Most lodgings have restaurants and bars that are also open to nonguests.

MIDRANGE

Mount Pleasant Guest House (☎ 649-946-6927; mtpleasantinfo@yahoo.com; Balfour Town; r \$105; ☒ ☑) This timber-beamed, unpretentious gem dates back to 1830, when it was a salt merchant's house. The seven air-conditioned rooms all have wooden floors, lively tropical pastel decor, and heaps of charm. Hammocks are slung between shade trees in the grounds. An excellent restaurant and bar also keeps you very well fed and watered (try the superb seafood, carrot cake and homemade sherry trifle) and bicycles are provided for guests. Dive packages are available.

Tradewinds Lodge (☎ 649-946-6906; www.trade winds.tc; Victoria St, Balfour Town; r \$145; ☒ ☑) This modern and light beachside property offers weekly packages. All rooms are bright, spotlessly clean and comfortably furnished. They have well-fitted kitchens or kitchenettes, a screened patio and ocean views. Dining is also available on an outdoor deck, perfect for sunbathing and whale watching. Bicycles and a barbecue are also available for guests.

Pirate's Hideaway Guesthouse (☎ 649-946-6909; www.saltcay.tc; Victoria St, Salt Cay; r \$120; ☒ ☑) This

Hansel-and-Gretel-style B&B abounds in stained glass, Haitian art, and murals on a pirate theme. Hardwood floors, nautical-themed bathrooms (plus shell-lined tubs), and tropical decor add to the character of these comfy rooms. A bar and restaurant have an outdoor deck which overlooks the sea, and is lit at night with flaming torches.

Salt Cay Sunset House & Blue Mermaid Cafe (☎ /fax 649-946-6942; Balfour Town; r \$140; ☒ ☑) This lovingly-restored plantation house sits on the beach.

Some great rentals also exist; try the cute whitewashed old stone **Purple Conch Cottage** (www.saltcay.org; \$100), which looks directly out over the beach, or **Sandy Toes Vacation Home** (☎ 649-946-6906; www.saltcay.org; apt per week \$1200; ☒ ☑), a fresh and comfortable house that contains two tasteful and bright apartments. Facilities include a golf cart. **Vistas of Salt Cay** (☎ 649-946-6906; www.saltcay.org; r per week \$1000-1200; ☒ ☑) is close to the beach, and offers use of bicycles or a golf-cart.

TOP END

Windmills Plantation (☎ 649-946-6962; www.saltcay site.com; d with/without meals \$495/375; ☒ ☑ ☒) This small deluxe resort in a stunning beachside location about 1½ miles north-east of Balfour Town is a replica of an 18th-century colonial plantation. Eight classic and elegant suites have hand-carved four-poster beds, lanterns and terra-cotta-tiled floors. Each ground-floor room also has a private outdoor courtyard and plunge pool. It has its own restaurant and bar (the owners of this resort pride themselves on their Caribbean cuisine), and diving packages are available. Not one for children.

Sunset Reef Villas (☎ 649-946-6901; www.sun setreef.com; Balfour Town; d per week \$1300; ☒ ☑) Pleasant and simple one- and two-bedroom modern beachside villas come with all the mod-cons, including TV, video, CD, stereo, washing machine and fully equipped kitchen. An outdoor grill on a deck with hammocks helps provide the island ambience. You can rent a golf cart for \$50 per day, and a bicycle for \$40 per week. Snorkel gear is \$10/50 per day/week.

Island Thyme Bistro (☎ 649-946-6977; mains \$10-23; ☒ lunch & dinner Thu-Tue) Either eat alfresco in the sheltered Coconut Room, or indoors where a bar serves some wicked cocktails. Bahamian and American fare with a special

twist is popular with many. Picnics can also be made with advance notice.

Pat's Place (mains \$6-17; ☒ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Serves great island dishes, especially tasty steamed fish.

Groceries can be bought at **Netty's Grocery Store** and at **Pat's Groceries**. Knock at their houses if the stores are closed.

Entertainment

Locals gather to play dominoes at the One Down, One to Go bar. It has a large-screen TV, a pool table, darts, a pool and dancing. The bars at the Mount Pleasant Guest House and Pirate's Hideaway Guesthouse are alternative venues, and a tad more sophisticated.

Getting There & Around

AIR

Please refer to the Transportation chapter (p292) for information on international flights to/from the Turks Islands.

For flights between the Turks and Caicos Islands, including Salt Cay, please refer to the Getting There & Away section in Cockburn Town (p265).

One of the island's two taxis will inevitably show up after the driver sees the plane land at the Salt Cay Airfield.

BICYCLE

Many lodgings provide free bicycles for guests. You can rent a bicycle from Pirate's Hideaway Guesthouse on Salt Cay for around \$10 per day and from Sunset Reef Villas for \$40 per week.

BOAT

A ferry runs biweekly from Grand Turk to Salt Cay (\$12 round-trip; 45 minutes). Contact **Salt Cay Charters** (☎ 649-231-6663; piratequeen3@hotmail.com). Whale-watching boat trips with this operator cost \$75.

A government ferry runs from the South Dock on Grand Turk Monday, Wednesday and Friday afternoons (\$12 round-trip). Call the **harbormaster** in Grand Turk (☎ 649-946-2325) for information.

GOLF CARTS

Everyone uses golf carts to traverse the island. Many lodgings offer free carts, or they can be hired from Pirate's Hideaway Guesthouse on Salt Cay from around \$40 per day and from Sunset Reef Villas for \$50 per day.

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