

Visitors can dive for the ubiquitous mollusks in the Turks and Caicos islands, and then play their shells, eat their garlic-glazed meat and join in a yearly fest

Conch-crazy in the Caribbean

BY JUDITH RITTER
PROVIDENTIALS, TURKS AND CAICOS

Within seconds of putting on our masks and flippers, the sky darkened and torrents of rain began to fall. But the sea where our tiny boat was anchored stayed clear and my dive companion, a young man named Lucky Forbes, simply glanced at the grey sky and said: "It's a bang-yang day."

"Bang yang" is island talk for a kind of heavy, steady rain that is rare on the little spits of sand and scrub that make up the Turks and Caicos Islands. A British territory a 1½-hour flight south of Miami, the islands are hot and dry and surrounded by coral reefs so abundant with sea life that it's one of the world's top dive spots.

What locals like Lucky dive for rain or shine — and what they eat, talk and sing about — is conch. The pink spiral shells decorate every restaurant. Every menu boasts four or five different conch dishes. Even the flag that flies over the capital, Grand Turk, bears a pink-lipped conch shell. With all due respect to Key West, it is Turks and Caicos that is the true "Conch Republic."

To see this creature out from under the butter-garlic sauce, I follow Lucky into the water. The conch were searching for looks nothing like the porcelain souvenirs on sale at the airport. Edible adult conches bury themselves in the sand, their dusty, grey shells studded with barnacles. Watch carefully and you might see the creature slink out of its shell, first two beady eyes on stalks, then one thick black foot. That muscled foot propels the conch across the ocean floor and is its downfall. It's the foot, peeled of its black skin, chopped or sliced, that is sought by famous chefs.

But it's not local divers who keep the palettes of well-heeled restaurant patrons throughout the Caribbean and North America satisfied. Wild conch has been overfished and is now endangered. Instead, local divers supply small island restaurants, leaving larger orders to the world's only commercial conch farm on the island of Providenciales — also one of Turks and Caicos' top tourist destinations.

If following mollusks through a three-year cycle from egg to pink-tinted shell with tasty insides isn't on your tropical vacation to-do list, Chuck Hesse may change your mind. The Ben and Jerry-like CEO of the Caicos Conch Farm roams his seaside acreage barefoot, in wrinkled shorts. And the farm, a collection of ramshackle domes, Quonset huts and yurts, looks more like a hippie eco-village than a million-dollar business.

And who could miss an up-close-and-personal visit with two full grown conches, Sally and Jerry? On prompting by aquaculture technician Georgia Williams — "C'mon Jerry. C'mon. Show 'em what you got." — they ooze out of their shells, stalked eyes surveying the visitors, and like underwater flashers, show off the gastropod "biology" that allows this farm to export one million conches a year.

But the conch is more than seafood on this island. It does double duty as a national icon. The National Conch Festival in November rivals Canada Day in patriotic spirit. A one-day event on a stretch of beach in the Blue Hills area of Provo, this two-year-old conch low-includes conch blowing, a conch tasting event that brings in celebrity chefs from as far away as Belgium to judge dishes, and conch diving, with specially marked conches hidden in the shallow waters.



Diver Lucky Forbes takes visitors to see conchs in their natural Turks and Caicos habitat.

There's also a conch knocking contest. While tourists are invited to enter, they are reminded that locals can "knock" 30 to 40 conches in five minutes. Think oyster shucking, only tougher.

If vacationers aren't conched-out after all this, there's a whole afternoon and evening of music and dancing on the beach — complete with a local song about conch — played by the requisite steel bands that specialize in a local music called *combinas*, a mix of calypso and reggae.

Then there are those conch menus. Gecko Grill at the Ocean Club Resort serves up eclectic

dishes such as curry conch to clients including actor Morgan Freeman and NFL linebacker LaVar Arrington of the Washington Redskins. Or, across the road from the fest, there is Three Queens. A pink plywood shack with a sandy patio across from the sea, my taxi driver tells me it is "a bit of an institution," famous for its savoury conch Creole.

Just before sunset, the six bar stools were full of regulars and everyone was eating conch: conch fritter, conch salad and, of course, the specialty conch stew.

While Three Queens may not entertain A-list celebrities, there was

one local hero dining there. The owner, Dick Bain, pointed out one of the patrons and whispered to me, "That's Boogio. He invented conch salad." I was cautioned not to approach him with questions. Exhausted by fame, I supposed.

As for my conch-diving adventure, despite constant, gentle coaching from Lucky, I just could not grab the brass ring. My prize, the seashell author Tom Robbins calls "the original dreamboat... the voice of Buddha that draws lost mariners home from the sea," remained just out of reach.

Special to The Globe and Mail

Pack your bags

GETTING THERE
There are several daily flight connections from Miami to Providenciales.

WHERE TO STAY

Ocean Club Resorts: 649-946-5880; oceanclubresorts.com. This low-rise, low-key hotel is on what is reputed to be the top beach in Turks and Caicos — with some of the top food. Suites start at \$320.
Budget Turtle Cove Inn: 1-800-887-0477; www.turtlecoveinn.com. While not on the beach, the pastel-pink Turtle Cove Inn faces a marina, and there is a swimming pool. Rooms with balconies start at \$97.

WHERE TO EAT

Gecko Grill: Ocean Club Resorts; 649-946-5885. See and be seen at Gecko Grill, where Montreal chef Nicola Giordano gives Caribbean dishes an Italo-Canadian twist.
Three Queens: 649-941-5984. You're sure to meet the most interesting local people at this ocean-front hangout. Try the conch Creole and the red beans and rice, which is reputed to be the best on the island.
Clover's Sailing Paradise: 649-946-5885. This conch paradise is the project of Sam and Clover. Sam dives for conch in front of the restaurant and Clover cooks up the conch, sometimes even running on to the beach with her pan.

THINGS TO DO

Silver Deep: 649-946-5612; www.silverdeep.com. Snorkel or dive with Lucky Forbes and colleagues.
Caicos Conch Farm: 649-946-5643; www.caicosconchfarm.com. Open from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m., this farm offers 30-minute tours for \$6.
The Conch Festival: www.conchfestival.com. In November, the island celebrates all things conch.

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