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Turks and Caicos: Go for the food, enjoy the wigs

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THE RECORD

Unbelievably soft beaches, warm and welcoming locals, an interesting cultural history and relaxed pace — for all these reasons and a few more, Turks and Caicos Islands had made it onto my travel bucket list years ago.

In the last few years, the islands added a three-day gastronomical marathon to their celebrations calendar. And when the enthusiastic reviews started circulating, we decided to upgrade Turks and Caicos (TCI, for short) from a line on our list to a done vacation deal. It seemed pretty obvious: Mix sun, sand and swaying palms with meals created by celebrity chefs and master sommeliers and you've got the ingredients for a pretty extraordinary tropical getaway.

And that was before we added the wig people to the mix.

The wig people we couldn't have anticipated.

We'd gotten into Providenciales, the islands' capital, late on a Friday afternoon in October. We checked into our hotel, grabbed a quick dinner and, as darkness fell, were making our way to the beach bar when we noticed something odd. One of the women dancing to the music at the beach bar seemed to be having a very bad hair day. Big hair, all over the place, and strangely colored, too. With a second glance, the vision became clearer: It wasn't bad hair. It was a great wig.

She wasn't the only one with a great wig, we realized. Half the people dancing and drinking were also sporting great wigs. Crazy wigs: Flame-red ones, sparkly gold ones, neon blues, even a colonial-era model and one that looked like Wolverine, complete with sideburns.



A Junkanoo band plays at The Lounge at Grace Bay Club.



JERRY LUCIANI / STAFF

Da Conch Shack serves fresh queen conch right off of the sea.

Festival facts

Festivals are a great way to meet local people and experience a real slice of their culture. Turks and Caicos stages many festivals throughout the year to celebrate various aspects of food, music and island life.



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"What's the deal with the wigs?" I asked one wigged woman on the dance floor. She explained that a group of friends from around the country got together every fall for their annual "Wigtoberfest."

"This year two friends were getting married, so the party went international," she said. If it's good luck to see a bride, it's even better luck to see a wigged one. Anyone within the wig people's orbit was pulled into their gravitational field – and provided appropriate hair-wear.

Let's just say after you don a big purple afro it's hard not to have a good time.

Yes, this tropical experience was starting off in an extraordinary way. Let the food and wine fun begin.

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The official festival activities began with cocktails at sunset on Saturday, so we spent most of the day enjoying all the usual things we love about the islands. We headed straight for the beach and with our first steps understood why people called it remarkable. My feet were sinking into the softest sand I'd ever walked on (and I've walked on a lot). The beach stretched out to our left and right as far as we could see and beyond. Soon Mary, iPad in hand, headed off to slip into an umbrella-shaded chaise longue, and I made a beeline for the twinkling turquoise water.

This is what I love best about the islands: Floating along, just watching the wonders of the sea mosey by. A barracuda buzzing past, in a hurry; a huge starfish splayed on the sandy bottom; a flotilla of juvenile parrotfish sailing silently past, heads bobbing in unison.

Eventually I made my way to a cluster of artificial "reef balls" I'd heard about – Swiss-cheese-like cement structures placed about 100 yards offshore in 2007 to protect the beach from erosion, and also to serve as a home for sea life. Today snorkelers can enjoy the results of the project. The reef balls are covered with coral and teeming with marine life. I must have floated over that reef area for an hour, just watching the fish dart in and out.

My wife and I don't consider ourselves "foodies" – though Mary says I'm addicted to TV cooking shows. But we do appreciate good food – and TCI has been singled out for its lively dining scene: Away.com has it ranked as one of its top-10 foodie destinations in the world.

The food and wine festival was launched as a way to promote TCI as a major food destination in the Caribbean. It didn't take long for the festival to start making waves among those who travel with food in mind.

The 2013 edition of the Caribbean Food & Wine Festival is Oct. 31 through Nov. 2. Celebrity chefs scheduled to attend include Christina Tosi of Momofuku Milk Bar in New York, Tiffany Derry from Season 7 of Bravo's "Top Chef" series and Xoliswa Ndoyiya, Nelson Mandela's personal chef for more than 20 years. Info: caribbeanfoodandwinefestival.tci.com.

Turks and Caicos Conch Festival: The 10th annual fest is scheduled for Nov. 30; conchfestival.com.

Maskanoo: Held on Boxing Day (the day after Christmas), this year marks the fourth year for the celebration, a showcase of the islands' cultural roots. Maskanoo is a mix of Junkanoo (a parade linked to the islands' Bahamian heritage) and Masquerade, an African version of the masquerade ball tradition. Maskanoo includes a parade, local music, island food, crafts and cultural items for sale, and more. Held in Providenciales, along the Grace Bay strip.

MORE INFO ON VISITING THE ISLANDS: Contact the Turks and Caicos Tourist Board, turksandcaicostourism.com.

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It's also been able to draw big celebrity chefs and sommeliers to cook, lecture and give demonstrations. "By involving such a talented roster of experts and exploring new event concepts for guests, we are paving the way to make the Caribbean Food and Wine Festival one of the most sought-after events in the Caribbean," said Nikheel Advani, the festival's chief operating officer.

Brigitte Hasbron, who writes The Food Tease blog, had made the trip from her home in Ottawa specifically for the festival: "I couldn't go to Mistura — the largest food festival in the world [held in Peru] due to concerns of me traveling alone." She discovered the TCI fest in the course of researching alternatives. "The timing was perfect ... for me to attend this food orgy of sorts!"

The highlight of the festival is The Gourmet Safari, a movable food party complete with Junkanoo parade, with stops at five of the hottest restaurants in Turks and Caicos.

The Safari begins with a cocktail reception at The Lounge at Grace Bay Club. This is where we get the shiny beaded necklaces and feather masks that served as the official uniform of festival participants. The lounge offered great sunset views, periodically upstaged by the parade of hors d'oeuvres passing by: sweet and tangy lobster; Muscovy duck confit; corn and pumpkin quiche; crackling jerk-roasted pork belly; and lionfish pizzetta. I was surprised to see the latter on the menu; as a scuba diver, I knew lionfish were venomous. I had no idea they were edible ... and delicious.

As night fell we headed off to our first dinner course. At Coyaba restaurant we sampled zucchini, callaloo, onion baji, curried ackee aioli, roasted beet, love apple terrine, goat cheese quenelle and a shot of pumpkin soup, all topped off with a papaya brûlée. Next up was the fish course at Parallel 23 at The Regent Palms, starring a delicately poached Chilean sea bass in tomato broth with chorizo-topped Mediterranean couscous dotted with a yellow pepper and saffron sauce. The surf and turf entrée at the beautiful Seven Stars Resort included venison and langoustine paired with ultra-rich oxtail and foie gras cannelloni. The evening ended with a delectable dulce de leche parfait (spiced huckleberry compote, citrus shortbread crumble and crystallized Thai ginger served in a chocolate cup) at Stelle at Gansevoort.

By midnight we could barely crawl back to our hotel to recharge for day two on the food trail.

We didn't have to travel far the next morning to continue the trail. Our hotel was hosting the four food and wine tasting classes, led by the headliner chefs and world-class winemakers in attendance.

With guidance from Napa Valley winemakers, including Heidi Barrett of LaSirena wines, we learned how to pair various wines with foods like Humboldt Fog goat cheese, conch, grouper, hazelnut mousse, lamb and prosciutto.

JS Richer, the sommelier for our Wine & Chocolate class, admitted "wines can be pretentious, but what it really comes down to is what you like." Thanks to JS, I now know to grab a bottle of syrah whenever I get the urge to splurge on some dark chocolate sprinkled with bacon.

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There's plenty of gourmet grazing going on during the festival, but the down-home joints and local hero chefs also get their day in the sun. Save some room for a visit to the Island Street Food Fair in downtown Provo, where the big event is the barbecue rib cook-off. You can sample the entries of more than a dozen local chefs vying for the barbecue trophy or, if you prefer, seek out other popular fare available — jerk chicken, shrimp and fish, plus local beer and rum.

One last tip: Don't leave the country without trying the crown jewel of TCI cuisine: queen conch. The best place to get it is at da Conch Shack, a little open-air place by the sea on the Blue Hill side of the island. They pull the queen conch right out of the ocean ... and cook it up every way imaginable.

Sitting at one of the picnic-style tables overlooking the water, our toes in the sand, we sampled fresh conch salad (ceviche style), cracked conch (battered and deep-fried) and conch fritters (the classic fried food). We also tried their shrimp, spiny lobster and grouper and washed it down with some of their famous rum punch. Yes, by now we were well-practiced in the art of sampling everything

Once past the finish line, participants compared notes on the experience. I asked food blogger Hasbron for her review. "The event was stellar," she said, echoing the general consensus. "It exceeded all of my expectations and then some."

She smiled then and shared one bit of wisdom she gained from the experience: "I should have worn looser clothing." No big deal, I thought; anything looks great when accessorized with a flame-red wig.