

Turks & Caicos

by Simon Higton

The Turks & Caicos islands pride themselves with the beautiful surroundings they have to offer to the outside world. “Beautiful By Nature” is the slogan they use in their official advertising campaigns with “Clean by Choice” being the tag line. If you visit the main Island of Providenciales then this soon becomes apparent as you walk the length of its award winning grace bay beach. When the sun sets to the west it creates the classic Caribbean image with a long clean sandy beach, lazy palm trees, crystal turquoise water and the sun drops in at the end of the bay, almost as if it was engineered to be perfect.

The islands continue to show off their colours as you drop beneath the surface. The majority of dive sites around the islands are designated marine parks and have permanent moorings in place for boats to tie to. Most of my diving life has been spent diving the northern Red Sea, which has a fantastic array of hard corals. When I started to work here in the TCI I was blown away by the variety of soft corals I was presented with.

The islands all sit on top of a large lime stone plateau fringed with coral reef and sandy Cays. Off to the east the capital Grand Turk serves as a hub for passing cruise ships and has some great dive operations to accommodate. Throughout the middle islands there are some scattered named dive sites including its very own ocean blue hole. The main hub for diving though is based in Providenciales, which boasts a number of land based operations and sustains two live-aboard vessels! North west



The colours available from the reef are truly breathtaking and offer great opportunities to frame the sea life. Nikon D600, Tokina 17-35mm, Hugyfot Housing, Fisheye Dome, 2x Inon 240z Strobes. ISO 320 1/80th f16

point is often the first port of call but is the least glamorous of offerings around the islands. A number of big wall sites are available and an old steel structure by the name of “The Thunder Dome” offers protection for an array of schooling grunts and jacks alike.

West Caicos is possibly the most famous area to dive and offers divers protection from the consistent easterly winds, which enables calm

diving all day long. With just over 2 miles of wall diving you can spend a while exploring this island. This area in particular is known for its gully’s, coral outcrops and tame encounters with the local reef sharks.

French Cay is the final stop for most dive operations and sits right on the southern edge of the Caicos bank. It’s a small sandy outcrop but the reef alongside stretches for miles. The few named



*The lionfish population has made its way down here but unlike some Caribbean islands they are not actively hunted due to the shark population
Nikon D600, Tokina 17-35mm, Hugyfot Housing With Fisheye Dome, 2x Inon 240z Strobes. ISO 320 f18 Shutter 60*

sites available offer the best of the islands diving with dramatic walls but fantastic top reef to compliment it. This combination attracts a number of nurse sharks to the area along with other large pelagic animals such as eagle rays and Caribbean reef sharks.

The reason the Turks & Caicos appeals to so many people around the world and the reason they book to come back to these islands year on year is that there is always a wide range of diversity guaranteed when

you get below the waves. Throughout the year the western fringing reef of the Caicos bank offers divers, and specifically photographers, the opportunity to see large pelagic animals, macro creatures and a healthy backdrop of coral reef in the same dive. West Caicos, for example, has a shark population that has become rather comfortable with the divers visiting their habitat and will allow photographers to spend some intimate time getting the perfect wide-



*The sea life are used to having divers take their picture and will often behave by facing in the right direction.
Nikon D600, Tokina 17-35mm, Hugyfot Housing With Fisheye Dome, 2x Inon 240z Strobes. ISO 400 f20 Shutter 60*

angle shot. Down towards French Cay there are often sightings of Eagle rays that are spotted out in the blue but also fly over the top reef of the named dive sites. From late December through to early April there is also a chance of having an encounter with a passing Humpback whale on its migration to and from its breeding grounds in the southern Caribbean.

For something a little easier to capture, the colourful reefs of the islands are breathtaking and allow

the aspiring photographer a chance to practice framing shots and playing with a rich background to frame the fish life against. The rich corals play host to a strong display of Caribbean Macro life. Spider crabs are abundant here along with a strong range of decorator crabs, cleaning shrimps and banded coral shrimp to name a few. As the seasons change we often see an increase in Nudibranch with the White Patch Long Horn being very common, Leach Head Sea Slugs and even the



Turtles often feed in front of the camera and allow divers to spend great amounts of time getting the picture just right.

Nikon D600, Tokina 17-35mm, Hugyfot Housing With Fisheye Dome, 2x Inon 240z Strokes. ISO 320 f20 Shutter 125

rarely found Painted Elysia being spotted.

There are not many wrecks to be found on SCUBA here but there are a number of old grounded ships which offer a home to sea birds and can be snorkelled on a calm day. Beneath the sea there are a few tales of history to be found. Possibly the most famous is The Thunder Dome found at North West Point. Once home to a free diving French reality TV show

(See Youtube for the trailer),

it now lays dormant in thirty feet of water. Hurricanes have since broken it into pieces but it offers refuge for large schools of posing Grunts and a hotel for turtles to spend their evenings undisturbed, that is until the night dive begins. One of the oldest features to be found is the Spanish anchor at West Caicos, found on a dive site of the same name. Suspended at the end of a small gully on the reef wall it has been wedged in place since the 1600's, they say, and is



The sharks are relatively docile but take interest in divers, often getting close enough for some practice with the wide angle.

Nikon D600, Tokina 17-35mm, Hugyfot Housing With Fisheye Dome, 2x Inon 240z Strokes. ISO 320 f18 Shutter 125

now home to a variety of corals and sponges. Now a feature of the area it offers a great opportunity for divers to get their photo taken with a famous feature of history. All in all the Turks & Caicos offers a great variety of sea life and the conditions allow an aspiring photographer to practice a full range of techniques in relatively consistent conditions.

During my time living here in the Islands I have only just begun to scratch the surface of the photographic

opportunities here and the possibilities truly are endless. The only real variation in conditions is when the eminent threat of the hurricane season is upon us. If you time it right then being here during the stormy season can work in your favour as people reduce their prices and very often the dive operations are naturally a little quieter. The sea temperature only fluctuates by a couple of degrees centigrade throughout the year but I just dive a 5mm wetsuit year round



*Practicing framing is a lot easier when the subject is stationary.
Nikon D600, Tokina 17-35mm, Hugyfot Housing With Fisheye Dome, 2x Inon
240z Strobes. ISO 320 f20 Shutter 100*

and it keeps me warm. The air temperature fluctuates very little with highs of thirty two and lows of twenty five centigrade, but being a Caribbean island there is often a consistent breeze from the east.

There are a large number of named dive sites here on the islands and there are a lot more being added over the coming months too. The REEF foundation, www.tcreef.org, have been working to not only maintain present moorings but also to install new ones. The moorings

get damaged by the boats that use them, some times they get damaged by accident and some times it's from natural wear. A quick email to REEF and the majority of the time the mooring is fixed on the following weeks visit. Their aim is to protect the wonderful environment on offer and by installing new moorings is one way to achieve it. They use what is known as a sand screw, rather self explanatory, and then attach a line and buoy with a breaking strain to hold anything from day boats to live-

aboard's. Diving new sites is always exciting and can bring up some fantastic surprises. It also ignites that sense of exploration that is naturally found in any diver.

People have been diving here for many years and with the support of such foundations they will be here for many years to come. I think the main attraction of the islands is its consistency to deliver an all round diving experience. From all the photographers I have met here, who come back for that reason, they tell me that the results are always good. If your just a beginner, like myself, or an established professional then there is always something here to keep

you interested. Not only that but its in a consistently warm and relaxing environment.

Simon Higton



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Issue 76/84

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contact me first before putting pen to paper.
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