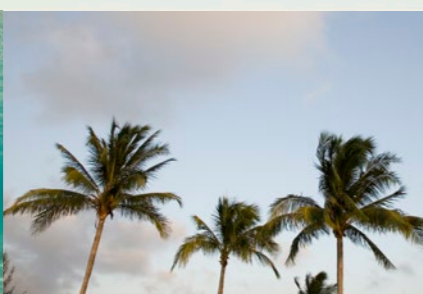


INTO THE BLUE

Seeking inspiration and rejuvenation, *Jill Dawson* dives fathoms down beneath the Caribbean surf to marvel at dolphins, coral reefs and shoals of tropical fish



Below: the pool deck at Pirate House in the Turks and Caicos Islands' Como Parrot Cay resort



The first dive I ever did was in Parrot Cay, a private island in the northern Caribbean, in the Turks and Caicos Islands. A friend had taken me as a birthday present. I remember getting kitted out, some rudimentary teaching, then tumbling backwards off the boat as instructed, plopping into the soft water, never suspecting what would happen once I ventured into that blue world for the first time. Forty feet down, and the colours were dazzling: furry purple sea cucumbers, violet sea fans waving softly, a yellow trumpetfish trying to hide behind the coral. Above me, an ethereal blue surface. A solitary turtle scooped through it – I watched its slow paddling legs waft away from me. My buoyant body tried to follow and I felt like the bubbles in a champagne flute, wanting to rise to the surface. Love at first sight. And a love that hasn't let up 12 years later.

So, here I am again. I've had a crazy few weeks publicising a book and I'm stressed and exhausted, and what I need is a complete overhaul: emotional, physical, spiritual. I've escaped my family with the excuse that the trip will be research for a new novel, but in truth I know that swimming, being by myself and nature are as essential to me as breathing. This time the journey is easier. It's seven and a half hours from Gatwick to Antigua with British Airways, a brief stop and then a further short flight to Providenciales, the tourist capital of the Turks and Caicos Islands. With the time difference between the UK and the TCI – they are five hours behind us – I can set off from London at the civilised time of 10 in the morning and be in that blue, blue world by the evening of the same day. And the magic is still there: the otherworldliness, the lost-in-space feeling, the instant letting go. Bobbing like a cork over the coral.

Actually, the water at that hour fringing the island of Parrot Cay is not so much blue as the palest green, like aventurine crystals. A few minutes of lazy breaststroke and the light begins its work on my pineal gland: I can feel my mood lift immediately. If you're a nervous sea swimmer, this is the place for you to try it. There's hardly a breeze to ruffle the surface and the visibility is so good, the sand beneath me so white and pure, I might as well be swimming over a cloud.

The Turks and Caicos Islands boast the third-largest barrier reef in the world, making it a prime destination for divers and snorkellers. Como Parrot Cay hotel can organise both, and the dive operators Big Blue will provide you with fins, masks and the lovely and knowledgeable Nicole to accompany you, pointing out (completely harmless) nurse sharks lying near the bottom and the grouper you're likely to enjoy grilled for your supper, while you drift over coral shaped like a brain one minute, antlers the next. It's a world of mesmerising beauty. Midnight parrot-fish, the vivid blue of lapis lazuli, rainbow-coloured triggerfish, and then a great shoal of black durgon all drift past, striped with fine bands of luminous silver.

The channel that separates the Turks islands from the Caicos islands is a deep passage that is also a major route for humpback whales, dolphins and eagle and manta rays. Since that first dive and falling in love with the Caribbean seas, I have swum in an area called the Silver Bank beside a huge humpback whale – thrumming in the water with me like a jumbo jet – but that was a few years ago and I'm now visiting at the wrong time in the season; humpback-whale sightings in the TCI are between January and April. There is always Jojo, a friendly local dolphin that you just might catch a glimpse of. During the same trip to the Silver Bank, an Atlantic spinner dolphin did suddenly appear in the water and stuck around for a while, frolicking

with us the way someone else's pet dog sometimes joins you and then takes off.

I could stay down here for ever but my eye is caught by something glinting on the surface of the sea like a string of hot-pink bunting. I pop my head out of the water just in time to see five flamingos alight in front of me.

If you're not as addicted to the sea as I am, there's plenty to keep you on land: Parrot Cay has a mile of private beach with sand so fine it feels like burrowing your toes into a bowl of warm flour.

There are bicycles to get around the island – there are no cars, only electric golf buggies – as well as daily yoga, Pilates, tennis and the Como Shambhala spa, where Balinese massage therapists will offer you treatments of incomparable grace and skill. My favourite, after a day in salt water and sun, is the Javanese Royal Lulur Bath: a massage and body scrub followed by a wrap of cooling yoghurt that returns your skin to baby-softness. It was traditionally offered to royal brides on their wedding morning and yes, you do feel like Cleopatra as you are handed a tiny cup of honey-sweetened ginger tea to drink and the scarlet hibiscus flowers and frangipani are scattered into your enormous bath...

It was the perfect place to be by myself, too: discreet, private, no sense of prying eyes or other couples or families thinking you're weird. My evenings were spent in Pirate House, a two-bedroom villa with a white-draped four-poster bed, colonial-style ceiling fans and its own private pool, in case I fancied more swimming. And, I admit, I did, while drinking rum punch and eating the local conch fritters and line-caught mahi-mahi – a restorative end to each day. As my skin turned toasty and my body seemed to visibly tone and lengthen in front of me, I reflected on the depleted person who had begun the week on dry land. You could probably do a year of therapy for the same cost as a week at Parrot Cay. But seven days of swimming in the sea, lounging and thinking on the sun-deck while lizards flickered in the corner of my eye restored me to myself. And yes, I did have an idea for a new novel while I was there, and that – as any writer will tell you – is priceless. □

Como Parrot Cay (www.comohotels.com), from about £720 a room a night. *Jill Dawson's trip was organised by Healing Holidays* (020 7843 3597; www.healingholidays.co.uk) and she flew with *British Airways* (www.britishairways.com) from London Gatwick to Providenciales. Her latest novel 'The Crime Writer' (Spectre) is out now.



Below: the master bedroom at Pirate House

