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## Botswana: On Safari in the Okavango and Kalahari



APPROXIMATELY THE SIZE of Texas, Botswana has a population of just over 2 million people. From the country's southern border, the arid grasslands of the Kalahari extend northward for more than 800 miles, eventually meeting the waters of the Okavango and Cuando rivers flowing down from the rainy highlands of Angola. This unlikely encounter creates a vast network of marshes and lagoons — including the extraordinary Okavango Delta — that forms the greatest wildlife area in the whole of Africa.

The principal gateway to this inspiring region is the dusty desert outpost of Maun, located an hour and 45 minutes by jet northwest of Johannesburg. From there, it is another 60 minutes by light aircraft to Selinda

Reserve, a 320,000-acre private concession centered on the Zibadianja Lagoon, a two-mile-long body of fresh water teeming with crocodiles and hippos and home to impressive herds of elephant.

**ZARAFSA CAMP** opened in 2008, the brainchild of celebrated filmmakers Dereck and Beverly Joubert, five-time Emmy Award winners and Explorers-in-Residence at *National Geographic*. For more than 25 years, the Jouberts have chronicled the wildlife of northern Botswana in classic films such as “Eternal Enemies: Lions and Hyenas,” “Eye of the Leopard” and, most recently, “The Last Lions.” Drawing on their decades of experience, they decided to create the perfect safari camp in an ideal location. Perfection is hard to pull off, however, and prior to our visit, we feared disappointment.

We arrived at the camp after a bumpy 45-minute drive from the airstrip. Greeted at the door of our vehicle by a group of extremely friendly African staff, we were ushered into the main lounge area of the camp. There, we found spacious and atmospheric living and dining areas housed beneath a steep, coffee-colored canvas roof and decorated in a French neocolonial style with dark woods, polished leather, framed maps and shelves of hardback books on African history and wildlife. One entire side of the structure opened onto a huge deck that commanded a

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spellbinding view of the lagoon. Less than 100 feet from its edge, around 40 elephant were happily squirting one another with water.

The guest lodgings at Zarafa comprise just four magnificent 1,000-square-foot tented suites, each with a private plunge pool, shaded by massive ebony trees. The interiors are divided into three “rooms.” Large living areas come with leather sofas and armchairs, polished wooden floors, Oriental carpets, antique chests and old-fashioned writing desks. Beyond a canvas screen, equally expansive bedrooms feature king-size beds draped with mosquito netting, and gas fireplaces with burnished copper chimneys. Beyond that, baths provide glamorous copper-clad tubs and effective indoor showers. (Each also has an outdoor shower at the end of a wooden walkway directly overlooking the lagoon.) The suites have electric lighting, but are not air-conditioned. (We visited Zarafa at a hot time of the year, but thanks to the shade of surrounding trees, the ceiling fans proved entirely sufficient.) In an imaginative touch, each “tent” is provided with its own Swarovski binoculars, plus a top-of-the-range Canon camera with 35-135mm and 100-400mm zoom lenses. Guests’ photos are then burned to a DVD at the end of their stays. Overall, Zarafa’s accommodations provide exceptional levels of privacy, comfort and style.

Having taken tea on the deck, we were driven a short distance to the edge of the lagoon, where the camp’s pontoon boat was tied up. Its upper deck was furnished with leather sofas and Oriental rugs, providing an environment fit for a lounging pasha. We began to cruise slowly and almost silently along the shoreline, watching hippos and elephant at a distance of little more than 50 feet. Our blissful voyage ended only with the rapid descent of the sun, a colossal orange fireball, into the darkening waters of the lagoon.

The Selinda Reserve enjoys a unique location, being virtually equidistant from the Okavango Delta, Linyanti Swamp and Savuti Marsh, the three legendary wildlife areas being connected by the Selinda Spillway and the Savuti Channel. This makes for exceptional year-round game-viewing. The local Selinda pride numbers 15 lion, but it has a large territory, and a sighting is not guaranteed. A pack of rare wild dog can frequently be tracked down, however, and leopard sightings are relatively common. (One morning, we were lucky enough to find a mother and a full-grown cub strolling through the trees at the edge of the spillway and were able to follow them for nearly 20 minutes.)

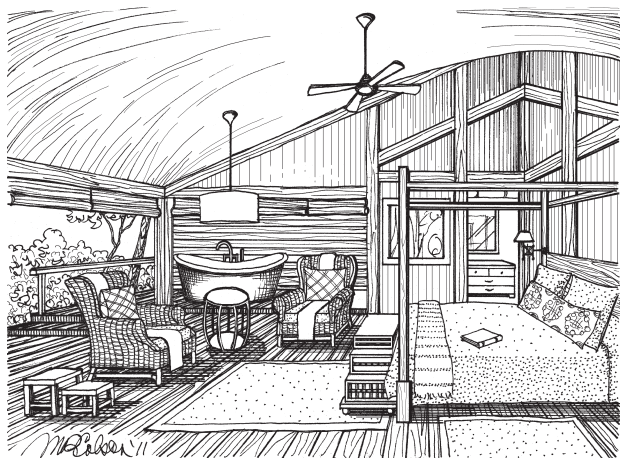
By the time of our departure, Zarafa had fully lived up to our expectations. It is an idyllic camp, with delicious food and superior service. And with a maximum of eight guests, it provides a semi-private safari experience. However, it is important to understand that this is a true wilderness area. Zarafa does not offer air-conditioning, television, Internet access, cell phone coverage or a spa — though there is a small gym. Some people may find this frustrating, or even unacceptable, but others will relish their temporary escape from the modern world. **98 Tented Suite**, from \$2,298 for two (all meals, house beverages, scheduled activities and park fees included). Tel. (27) 11-807-1800. [wilderness-safaris.com](http://wilderness-safaris.com)

It is a 40-minute Cessna flight from Selinda to the heart of the Okavango Delta. There, over the past 20 years, **ABU CAMP** has acquired a reputation as the preeminent place to ride on African elephants. Now partly owned by Paul Allen, co-founder of Microsoft, Abu reopened in April 2011, having been completely rebuilt and refurbished. Set on a 500,000-acre private concession, it has just six accommodations. Overlooking a tranquil lagoon and shaded by hardwood trees, the suites are idiosyncratic canvas-and-beam structures that are part tent, part cabin. Like those at Zarafa, they are not air-conditioned, but are effectively cooled by ceiling fans. All have been individually decorated, so it is impossible to generalize, but ours came with cream walls, bleached wooden floors covered by sisal matting, wicker screens, a four-poster king-size bed, wingback armchairs, a large writing desk, dramatic framed black-and-white photography and decoration that ranged from traditional African sculptures to a tower of Louis Vuitton steamer trunks. The huge and splendid bath provided a walk-in shower, twin basins set in a black marble vanity, electric lighting and extravagant amounts of hanging space. In fact, if you didn’t know that you were in the Okavango,



you might fancy yourself in Los Angeles. A glass door opened onto a deck with a soaking tub, where it became my habit to lie, up to my neck in foam, watching the fish eagles that live nearby. (One one occasion, this blissful reverie was interrupted by the unexpected arrival of an elephant, which proceeded to rip branches from a tree no more than 15 feet away!) Although the suites at Abu do not have plunge pools, they do offer attractive sundecks with loungers. Overall, they provide an exceptionally elegant and relaxing environment. Once comfortably settled with a good book and a pair of binoculars, I felt little incentive to leave.

The lavish public areas at Abu are contemporary African in style and include a tranquil library and an adjoining communications center. Uniquely for the



Suite at Abu Camp in the Okavango Delta

Okavango, and presumably thanks to the personal intervention of Allen, the latter provides a reliable Internet connection, and hence phone calls via Skype. During our visit, the standard of the cuisine was consistently high and was equal to that you might expect at a good restaurant in Johannesburg or Cape Town. In fact, at the end of our stay, the only aspect of the camp that seemed deserving of criticism was the rather lackluster swimming pool. Set on a cramped deck overlooked by a pizza oven, it seemed little more than an architect's afterthought.

As at most camps in the Okavango, game-viewing at Abu is by customized safari vehicle, or, at the time of the annual flood, by *makoro* (local dugout canoe). The large game species, including lion and leopard, are relatively common, and the birdlife is prolific. The big difference at Abu is the opportunity to ride on, or walk with, the camp's trained herd of elephant. This includes mature animals of over 30 years old, as well as youngsters standing little more than 4 feet tall at the shoulder. We had no idea what to expect and feared that we might encounter

a circus-like atmosphere, but the reality could not have been more different. The elephant *boma* (enclosure) is impeccably well-organized, and you don't have to be any kind of expert to see that the animals are extremely happy and well cared for.

On our first afternoon, we opted to walk rather than ride, so, as soon as the heat of the sun began to diminish, we set out into the bush accompanied by eight or nine elephant and several guides (including one with a rifle). A 2-year-old elephant opted to stroll beside me, enabling me to pat his head and tickle his ears as we ambled along. Occasionally, however, if we fell too far behind his mother, he would give me a slight shove with his trunk as a gentle inducement to catch up. The most extraordinary thing about walking with elephants, however, is that other wild animals are unfazed by human presence. Creatures that would not have let you approach to within 300 yards unaccompanied stand their ground and gaze imperturbably, presumably confident that if the elephant believe you are safe, then you are unlikely to prove a danger to them.

For those who wish to take their Abu elephant experience to its ultimate conclusion, the camp now offers a "Star Bed" overlooking the boma. Here, you can sleep high above the ground, disturbed, apparently, only by the snoring of the elephant below. **98 Tented Suite**, from \$3,875 for two (all meals, house beverages, scheduled activities, laundry and park fees included). Tel. (27) 11-807-1800. [wilderness-safaris.com](http://wilderness-safaris.com)

Until about 20,000 years ago, the rivers Okavango and Cuando flowed directly into Lake Makgadikgadi, an immense body of water covering an area larger than Switzerland. Then, as a result of seismic shifts, the lake drained away, creating the Okavango Delta and the vast Makgadikgadi salt pans. Today, the eerie white flats extend for over 6,000 square miles.

**JACK'S CAMP** is located on a low island at the edge of the pans, an hour by light aircraft southeast of Maun. On our first visit more than 15 years ago, it was an atmospheric place of silence and emptiness, overseen by the immense and cloudless Kalahari sky. But back then, its tents were too basic to appeal to most Harper members. However, over the years, reports reached me that Jack's had become more sophisticated, so I decided to take a second look.

We were met at the airstrip by Super, an employee for more than 20 years, who politely (if implausibly) claimed to remember us from our previous visit. A charming and articulate man, he drove us to camp by a leisurely and

circuitous route. It was toward the end of the hot, dry season, but the Kalahari grasslands were scattered with zebra and wildebeest that had arrived in anticipation of the rains, which, in a matter of days, transform the desert into a vast meadow of nutritious green grass.

Jack's was founded by the adventurer and filmmaker Ralph Bousfield in memory of his father, a larger-than-life pioneer whose scarcely credible resume includes a stint as a lion tamer for the movie "Born Free." The enormous main living and dining tent reflects the men's shared passion for Africa's most elemental places. A stuffed lion in a glass case stands guard over a treasure trove of animal skulls, fossils, eggs, spears, arrows, hundreds of books and maps, 19th-century etchings, and framed posters for exhibitions by the artist and photographer Peter Beard. The tent itself is dark-green canvas on the outside, but its interior is lined by a voluptuous canopy of pale raspberry-pink cotton. The dark wooden floor is covered by sisal mats and Persian carpets, while the easy chairs come with kilim-covered cushions. Down the center of the tent, a dining table seats 20 in comfort, and looks as though it might originally have been intended for army officers on some far-flung Victorian campaign.

The 10 guest tents share the same nostalgic décor, with four-poster beds, writing desks, antique furniture, brass-bound chests and bookshelves crammed to capacity. However, now they are also extremely comfortable, with large electric fans, en suite baths, effective indoor and outdoor showers, and spacious verandas.

Aside from the significantly upgraded accommodations, the camp's other most obvious innovation is a splendid

swimming pool, shaded from the desert sun by another flamboyant cotton canopy. Close by, a waterhole has been dug — paradoxically, just a few feet beneath the surface of the Kalahari lies an abundant supply of pure water — which, along with elephant, zebra, wildebeest and various antelope species, occasionally attracts a wandering pride of lion. Wildlife sightings at Jack's are much more prolific during the December to April wet season, but the waterhole now ensures that there is something to look at year-round. (It is possible to visit northern Botswana at any time of year, as the rainy season generally involves brief downpours between extended periods of sunshine. However, October and November can be unpleasantly hot during the day, and in the June-August high season, the nights are often chilly.)

After a delicious lunch, accompanied by icy homemade lemonade, Super proposed a late-afternoon visit to a nearby meerkat colony, whose occupants have become habituated to human visitors. Meerkats are endearing small mammals belonging to the mongoose family that characteristically use their long tails to stand upright to spot predators such as jackals and large eagles. After a short drive in a Land Rover, we came to their network of burrows and sat down to await their return. Within minutes, around 20 of the creatures had arrived, squeaking excitedly. Being in constant danger of attack, meerkat groups appoint sentries, and the designated animals then seek out the highest vantage points from which to keep watch. To my amazement, one meerkat identified an ideal observation tower and promptly ran up my arm to stand on top of my head, where it remained for more than five minutes!

Some activities at Jack's Camp are seasonal. For example, during the dry season, guests can venture out onto the Makgadikgadi pans to search for Stone Age artifacts, to gaze at the overwhelming night sky or to undertake longer mobile safaris. (At this time of year, a second camp is erected immediately adjacent to the salt flats.) However, some equally memorable experiences, such as walking with the local San Bushmen hunter-gatherers, are possible year-round.

For those of a romantic and adventurous spirit, Jack's Camp cannot be recommended too highly. It is a unique and unforgettable place, one, moreover, that is extremely well-run and well-organized. And its epic Kalahari setting provides an astonishing counterpoint to the tangled waterways of the Okavango Delta. **96 Tented Accommodation, from \$2,550 for two (all meals, house beverages and scheduled activities included). Tel. (27) 11-447-1605. [unchartedafrica.com](http://unchartedafrica.com)**

## Best Cats, Best Birds

THE OKAVANGO DELTA IS ROUGHLY 135 MILES LONG BY 100 miles wide and contains around 40 small camps. The most frequent question I am asked is "Which place do you recommend if I just want to see lion and leopard?" Surprisingly, there is a simple answer. Even its competitors concede that the delta's best cat-viewing is at **MOMBO**, a Harper-recommended property for many years. If this is your first visit to Botswana and you plan to stay at only one camp, then Mombo should be your choice. A second recurring question is "Where is the best place in the delta to watch birds?" The Okavango boasts 444 confirmed bird species, but the greatest densities are in the wetter areas. Again, by common consent, the best bird camp is **XIGERA**. Both camps are represented by Wilderness Safaris, Tel. (27) 11-807-1800. [wilderness-safaris.com](http://wilderness-safaris.com)

## New South African Luxury Lodges

OVER THE PAST 20 YEARS, SOUTH AFRICAN lodges such as Londolozi, Royal Malewane and Singita have evolved into lavish resorts in the bush, where the sophistication of the suites and the standard of the cuisine are as crucial to the experience as the quality of the wildlife-viewing. Recently, these properties have been joined by two worthy rivals.

Susan White Mathis, a native of Atlanta, had long been in search of a place to build an African retreat, and after an extensive search, she settled on Madikwe Game Reserve, a 185,000-acre tract of arid bushveld located an hour by light aircraft northwest of Johannesburg. Enclosed by a 95-mile fence, it is home to 66 mammal species, including lion, leopard, cheetah, elephant and wild dog. Having identified a suitable site at the center of the reserve, she set to work. After a while, however, it became clear that the home she had constructed for herself and her friends could also function as a small, ultra-luxurious game lodge.

Set around a rocky outcrop, **MATEYA SAFARI LODGE** comprises just five huge air-conditioned suites. These are astonishingly opulent, with four-poster beds, deep armchairs, large fireplaces and artwork ranging from tribal sculptures to contemporary African landscape paintings. The marble baths feature soaking tubs positioned to allow a view of passing wildlife, and interconnecting indoor and outdoor showers. From a sun lounger on your private rosewood deck, all you can see is a stretch of tawny grassland extending beyond your infinity-edge pool to a ridge of distant hills.

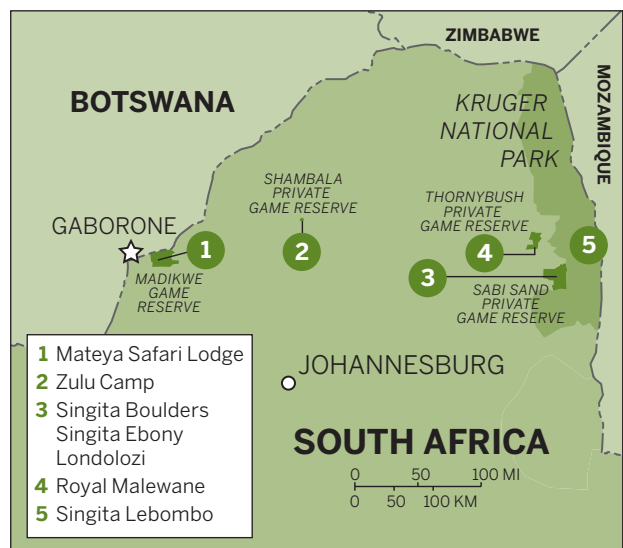
Public areas at Mateya are equally lavish and include an exceptional library, plus an expansive living area that provides a gallery-like space for White Mathis' vast collection of African sculpture. A formal dining room is complemented by a wonderful outdoor deck with a view of a waterhole, plus a private dining area in the 8,000-bottle wine cellar. During our stay, the food was uniformly delicious and the service prompt and exceptionally obliging.

Facilities at Mateya include a small spa. The wildlife-viewing is well-organized and the game prolific. **97 Suite**, from \$1,865 for two (all meals, local beverages, game drives and park fees included). Madikwe Reserve, Molatedi, North West Province. Tel. (27) 14-778-9200. [mateyasafari.com](http://mateyasafari.com)

Shambala Private Game Reserve lies a three-hour drive, or a 45-minute helicopter flight, directly north of Johannesburg. The 30,000-acre estate is the property of South African insurance magnate Douw Steyn, owner of the Saxon, Johannesburg's preeminent hotel.

**ZULU CAMP** comprises just eight thatched cottages overlooking the Sterkstroom River and surrounded by rushing streams. Their air-conditioned interiors are atmospheric, comfortable and sufficiently spacious, while the adjoining baths are lavish, with soaking tubs, glass-enclosed shower stalls and outdoor showers on adjacent private decks. Public areas include a stylish lounge/library with a log-burning fireplace and an attractive riverfront deck with a small rock swimming pool.

During our stay, we enjoyed exceptional South African cuisine. The property's principal amenity is a small spa. Shambala contains a wide range of wildlife species, including lion and leopard. A comparatively small and enclosed reserve, it also provides an ideal environment for the protection of black and white rhino, which are currently being killed at the rate of one a day elsewhere in South Africa. Zulu Camp offers its guests the opportunity to ride on an African elephant. However, the highlight of our stay was an ineffably tranquil evening cruise on the reserve's 75-acre man-made lake, sipping a glass of chilled wine, watching the hippos and casting a lure for the obliging bass and catfish. **94 Cottage**, from \$2,240 for two (all meals, South African wines, game drives, one elephant ride and unlimited boat trips included). Vaalwater 05330, Limpopo Province. Tel. (27) 11-292-6030. [shambalagamereserve.com](http://shambalagamereserve.com)



## A Fresh Look at the Turks and Caicos Islands

WHEN WE FIRST VISITED THE TURKS AND CAICOS more than 30 years ago, few people had ever heard of this British Overseas Territory tucked just south of the Bahamas, a 90-minute flight from Miami. On our inaugural visit in January 1981, we had to fly to Grand Turk, which then contained most of the archipelago's 7,500 inhabitants, to catch a puddle jumper to the island of Providenciales, a process that took two days, thanks to the pilot initially taking off with insufficient fuel and being obliged to return!

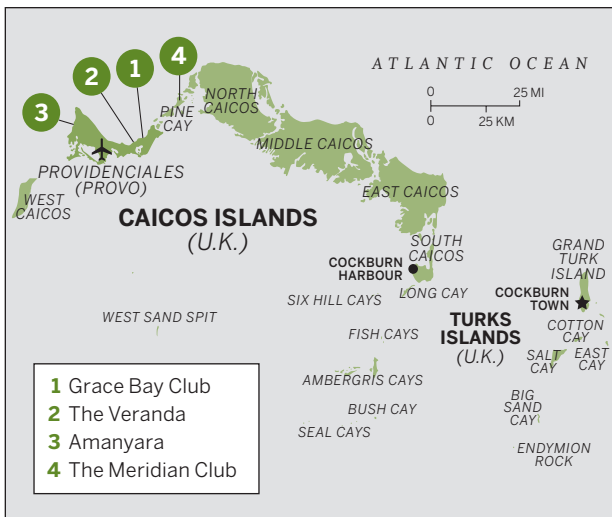
The island had yet to be discovered and offered about 100 beds in a half-dozen inns and cottage colonies, most tucked along Grace Bay, with its beautiful and relatively deserted 12-mile white-sand beach. Today, all that has changed, with Provo being a prime example of development and corruption run rampant. (Things got so out of hand by 2009 that Britain took the unprecedented step of suspending self-rule in the islands and taking over day-to-day control of the government, alleging that the premier and other Cabinet ministers illegally sold Crown land to developers for their own personal gain. New elections are expected this year). High-rise hotels and condos now stand cheek by jowl along the beach, and the once-barren interior of the island is dotted with malls, restaurants and vacation homes. (Like that of so many other resort destinations, however, the Turks and Caicos real estate market collapsed during the Great

Recession, and construction was halted on many grand hotel projects that were eventually to be managed by high-end companies such as Ritz-Carlton and Mandarin Oriental.) That said, the political brouhaha seems to have had little or no impact on tourism. The beach remains as inviting as ever, and for those who prefer a livelier vacation ambience, Provo serves up an admirable array of dining, entertainment, shopping and recreational options. Be forewarned, however, that prices for rooms, food and beverages are sky-high because everything is imported and subject to crippling duties. The airport terminal is also long overdue for a major overhaul.

Readers requiring the bells and whistles of a full-blown resort will prefer **GRACE BAY CLUB**, snuggled amid 11 lushly landscaped acres right along the calm and translucent waters of Grace Bay Beach. Lodging options include an adults-only all-suite hotel with 82 units, a newer compound featuring 38 family-friendly one- to three-bedroom villas with full kitchens, and the exclusive Estate enclave with 22 custom-designed three- to four-bedroom residences. Several restaurants, pools, a comprehensive spa and a myriad of water sports round out the first-class facilities. **88 One-Bedroom Hotel Suite**, \$995-\$1,325. Grace Bay Circle Road, Providenciales. Tel. (649) 946-5050. [gracebayresorts.com](http://gracebayresorts.com)

A new resort with appealing options for families is **THE VERANDA**, an all-inclusive property managed by the same group as the Grace Bay Club. Open since early 2010, The Veranda occupies a choice spot on the beach, with 800 feet of oceanfront. The 168 accommodations are located in three buildings. Studios and most of the one-bedroom suites are set within the main Veranda House, a pleasant if undistinguished four-story structure. These are nice enough, but they are decorated in a bland contemporary style, and couples will find better options elsewhere. I do not recommend them.

The two- and three-bedroom suites are a different matter. These are housed in two "villages" of charming two-story buildings, which appear to be a cross between the Caribbean and Nantucket, with creamy yellow clapboard siding augmented by balcony railings and window frames done in a complementary shade of blue-gray. The interiors come with traditional colonial-style furniture, rich fabrics, full modern kitchens, washer-dryers, flat-panel TVs, Sony PlayStation 3s and Wi-Fi.



Choicest among The Veranda's offerings are the eight beachfront cottages, steps away from the ocean and each with its own plunge pool. These are done in the same appealing style as the "village" buildings — with the addition of a white picket fence! The interiors provide the same amenities as the "village" accommodations.

Aside from easy proximity to the beach, other attributes that make The Veranda a fine choice for families include a dedicated pool for children and an attractive Kids Club, where parents can leave children ages 3 to 12 for supervised activities. Teens can sign up for kiteboarding, scuba and other excursions.

Another plus for those with children is that meals in the main restaurant, *Marin*, are served buffet style — with themes from Chinese to Mexican — so all can eat at their own paces in a casual atmosphere. The other restaurant, *Grill Bleu*, offers an appealing multi-ethnic à la carte dinner menu that includes tandoori dishes and fresh local fish — we had an especially good yellow snapper with capers — but is better suited to grown-ups.

Those who can't put aside their regular workouts will appreciate the fully equipped fitness center, while guests in pursuit of something more relaxing will find a full range of treatments in the Sabai Spa, with products by Elemis. **87 Two-Bedroom Suite**, from \$1,340; **Three-Bedroom Suite**, from \$1,620; **Three-Bedroom Beach Front Cottage with Pool**, \$3,600. *Princess Drive, Providenciales*. Tel. (649) 339-5050. [verandatci.com](http://verandatci.com)

If you desire more seclusion and quiet sophistication on Provo, **AMANYARA** is the perfect, if pricey, choice. The dramatically designed, cottage-style resort nestles along a seaside bluff at the island's isolated northwest tip, a long 30-minute drive from the shops and hotels lining Grace Bay Beach. Entrance is through a temple-like reception pavilion, where a huge reflecting pool leads to a striking tower-like bar-lounge and Asian/Mediterranean restaurant set on a headland separating a lovely half-mile beach from the guest cottage pavilions.

Enhanced by exotic woods, the contemporary accommodations (reminiscent of Amankila in Bali) feature all the expected amenities, the Ocean Pavilion junior suites occupying breezy rocky outcrops that definitely afford the best sea views. Leisure choices include a snorkeling/dive center for exploring the coral reefs of an adjacent marine park, a 165-foot freshwater pool, tennis courts and a delightful fitness and wellness spa offering a full menu of massages and body treatments. The resort's visually appealing architecture, delectable food (including many fresh seafood dishes) and charming staff

## Provo Restaurants

ALL OF THE RESORTS COVERED IN THIS ARTICLE HAVE fine restaurants, but part of the fun of visiting an island where it is easy to get around — whether you drive or use taxis — is to try some of the local restaurants. On our most recent visit, we particularly enjoyed the following.

The one place that locals invariably recommend is **MANGO REEF**, which is part of The Alexandra Resort, just a few minutes' walk from The Veranda. The main restaurant has an open deck set in the dunes, which affords sweeping views of the ocean. It is a wonderful spot for lunch. The fare is casual, with pizzas, excellent salads, a fine lobster club and other sandwiches, plus the island specialty, braised oxtail! Although scarcely a light dish suitable for the tropics, I tried the latter out of curiosity and found it absolutely delicious. Tel. 946-8200. [mangoreef.com](http://mangoreef.com)

Another good spot for lunch, especially if you are traveling with children, is the **TIKI HUT**, in a delightful setting beside the marina in the enclave of Turtle Cove, just a short drive from Grace Bay. The menu is a delightful mix of Caribbean and casual. We started with spicy conch fritters and then enjoyed a mild but flavorful curried chicken, with a generous portion of sautéed vegetables and rice with beans. The younger set will enjoy the chicken fingers, ribs, burgers and choose-your-toppings pizzas. Tel. 941-5341. [tikihuttci.com](http://tikihuttci.com)

Two places are best saved for dinner. **COYABA** is an enchanting restaurant with an interior that is stage-set perfect: The airy pavilion comes with gingerbread trim and opens into lovely gardens. Chef-owner Paul Newman's cuisine is superb, with especially fine seafood. Among the standouts from our meal were a thick, smooth gazpacho and a perfectly cooked swordfish steak with Asian peppers. Yield to the temptation to try the Key lime pie. Tel. 946-5186. [mangoreef.com](http://mangoreef.com)

The other choice dinner spot, **COCO BISTRO**, is set in a pomegranate-red adobe-style house with a garden of towering palms. Chef Stuart Gray has fashioned a sophisticated menu that combines island and international dishes. Among the starters, the ahi tuna sashimi is excellent, served on crisp tortillas with chopped onions, tomatoes and scallions and given zip by a wasabi mayonnaise. My main course, a nicely spiced jerk pork tenderloin with a rich mango-Port reduction, ratatouille and mashed potatoes, was outstanding. Tel. 946-5369. [cocobistro.tc](http://cocobistro.tc)

## Turks and Caicos

CONTINUED

will please most Aman aficionados, the only drawback being the short hike from the cottages to the main beach. **95 Ocean Pavilion**, \$1,800-\$2,050. *Northwest Point, Providenciales*. Tel. (649) 941-8133. [amanresorts.com](http://amanresorts.com)

For an authentic tropical getaway at half the price of Amanyara, opt for **THE MERIDIAN CLUB**, ensconced on the privately owned island of Pine Cay, a 30-minute launch ride from Provo. This is the crown jewel of the Turks and Caicos for those seeking the relaxing and timeless spirit of the old West Indies, the intimate resort fringed by crystal-clear aquamarine waters and one of the Caribbean's last great untrammelled beaches.

In the last 30 years, we have recommended dozens of Caribbean resorts and seen most of them mushroom in size. The environmentally sensitive and purposely underdeveloped island of Pine Cay is one of those rare exceptions that has steadfastly maintained its original identity. On our latest visit, we were thrilled to see that there are still just 13 guest rooms tumbling out to the same spectacular, deserted white-

sand beach, along which we happily strolled in 1981. No cars are allowed on the island, with transportation strictly limited to bicycles and electric golf carts. Adding to the timeless bliss is the total absence of room phones and TVs, though guests may avail themselves of a daily *New York Times* news fax. In addition, cell phones are banned from most public areas, the only concession to the digital world being an Internet room equipped with a poky computer and laptop connections for those who must.

Decorated in a cheerful tropical style with vibrant Haitian paintings and colorful handcrafted furnishings, the comfortably simple accommodations come with king beds, refrigerators, wall safes, well-stocked bookshelves and separate sitting alcoves opening onto newly screened porches. Spacious baths feature two vanity areas, indoor-outdoor showers, lounging robes and mounds of fluffy towels. Overhead fans and louvered windows circulate the island's year-round breeze.

Under the direction of affable managers Beverly and Wally Plachta, a longtime, caring staff tends to guests' every need in a handsome clubhouse sheltering a convivial upstairs bar-lounge trimmed by a scenic veranda. Downstairs, an informal dining room

spills out to a terrace with tables beneath thatched umbrellas, a newly upgraded pool and alfresco bar. The superb kitchen is now overseen by chef Shane Coffey, who built his reputation at *Alias* on Manhattan's Lower East Side, and *Lulu Wilson* in Aspen, Colorado. For starters, we particularly enjoyed the chef's signature kale

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This resort is  
the crown jewel of  
the Turks and Caicos,  
fringed by aquamarine  
waters and one of the  
Caribbean's last great  
untrammelled beaches.

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and Parmesan salad, as well as his chilled avocado soup with sautéed shrimp, sweet chili sauce and a lime zest. Dinner entrées include a wide variety of grilled fish (chili-crusting wahoo, fresh snapper, mahi, mackerel and striped bass), plus Greek stuffed lamb loin, roasted Cornish hen, spice-rubbed steaks and more. Succulent barbecued ribs highlight the lively Saturday night jump-up.

Complementing the superlative two-mile beach and calm swimming waters, the resort provides a small flotilla of sailboats and kayaks, plus daily catamaran snorkeling forays to the nearby national park reef. A new tennis court, limited spa services and bonefishing excursions are also available. Admittedly, this tranquil and sensuous sanctuary will not appeal to everyone. But for romantic beach lovers who yearn to truly get away from it all in a uniquely unspoiled Robinson Crusoe setting, nothing quite compares. **95 Beachfront Club Room**, \$1,085-\$1,310, all meals included. Tel. (649) 946-7758. [meridianclub.com](http://meridianclub.com)

### ANDREW HARPER HOTEL AND RESORT RATINGS

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**95-97** An exceptional hotel/resort of great individuality and distinction  
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Also Recommended

- 90-91** A fine hotel/resort of considerable charm  
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Not Recommended

- 50-84** A hotel/resort that did not meet the Andrew Harper standard

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