

## Island delicacy: Conched out in the Caribbean

Mark Rogers, Special for USA TODAY 8:02 a.m. ET March 25, 2017



(Photo: Turks & Caicos Tourist Board)

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I grew up with a pink and cream conch shell on the living room mantel, and would hold it to my ear to listen to the sound of surf reverberating in the shell, pure magic. Little did I know as a kid that the conch — especially in the Turks & Caicos Islands — had so much more to offer.

First, for those who might not be familiar, conch (pronounced “conk”) is a sea snail that over the years has been a culinary staple of the Turks & Caicos Islands and is served throughout the Caribbean. Conch factors so much in the local culture that a conch shell is featured on the TCI flag.

Any visitor to TCI will have ample opportunity to try conch, in a variety of preparations. If you’re looking for a snack on the run, conch fritters accompanied by a local hot sauce and a cold beer hits the spot. For something light, there’s conch ceviche (locals call it conch salad), which is fresh conch “cooked” in lime. Other easy-to-find dishes are conch chowder, stewed conch, cracked (fried) conch and curried conch.

“Conch is one of the best sources of protein in nature,” said Karel Rodney, general manager of popular TCI eatery Da Conch Shack. “Conch eats the algae off of the turtle grass that is abundant on the banks surrounding the Turks & Caicos Islands.”

Local chefs on TCI outdo themselves with inventive takes on conch during the annual Conch Festival, which takes place during the last weekend of November, in the Blue Hills area of Providenciales, TCI's third-largest island and the largest in population. The festival is right on the beach, with chefs serving up everything from conch wontons to conch sushi as they compete for the honors of best dish.

The best way to get your bearings is a visit to the Caicos Conch Farm on Providenciales, open for tours to small groups Monday through Saturday. The farm is situated seaside, and a glimpse of conch cultivation competes with views of the startling blue sea and a wide expanse of Caribbean sky. This is the only commercial conch farm in the world and has been in operation since 1984. During the tour, visitors learn about the biology of the sea creature, as well as techniques used in cultivating the Caribbean Queen Conch, the variety raised at the farm (their tagline is "Caribbean Queens fit for a King"). The Conch Farm is a low-key experience, but an informative one, and will add some context to a visitor's next serving of conch.

One of the best places to try conch is the toes-in-the-sand eatery Da Conch Shack, which often finds itself on lists of the world's best beach bars. Da Conch Shack is located on Blue Hills Beach and has local divers on tap who gather ultra-fresh conch daily from the ocean pens in front of the eatery that supply the kitchen. In addition to all of the common varieties of conch, Da Conch Shack also offers a "Pirate's Pot," a preparation of local conch, lobster, fish and shrimp in a bracing ginger broth.

Guests can try a "pistol" from a conch, a part resembling a translucent straw. "Pistols are thought to have aphrodisiacal properties," said Rodney. "Pistols are mild, tasting faintly of the ocean, and are usually washed down with our house rum-based shot, the Conchknocker."

"Conch also pairs well with champagne; high-rollers opt for cracked conch and Dom," adds Rodney.

There are several ways to enjoy TCI's affinity for conch without a knife and fork in your hand. The Snorkel and Conch Cruise offered by Caicos Dream Tours takes passengers out on a catamaran for a snorkeling tour of a coral reef. The four-hour cruise departs twice a day, seven days a week. The trip is topped off with a beach picnic at Half Moon Bay, where passengers dine on conch ceviche prepared with super-fresh conch gathered during the excursion. Departure times are 9:30 a.m. and 1:30 p.m., from Grace Bay Beach.

The Race for the Conch Eco-Sea Swim is an open-water swim that takes place each July on Providenciales at Grace Bay. The race attracts hardy locals and international competitors alike. At the trumpeting of a conch shell horn, swimmers compete in a variety of races: a 1/2 Mile, 1 Mile, and a 2.4 Mile ironman swim.

One of the best occasions to sample conch, accompanied by the island's signature ripsaw music, is TCI's Island Fish Fry, held every Thursday night at Bight Park in Providenciales. In addition to conch, there are many other island dishes offered, everything from peas and rice to festival, a kind of deep-fried, not-too-sweet cruller. The island Fish Fry culminates in a junkanoo, a parade with colorful costumes and rhythmic music.



### **Where to eat conch in the Turks & Caicos Islands**

The Turks & Caicos Islands consists of 40 different islands and cays, only eight of which are inhabited. [Ocean Club Resorts](#)



## **Where to eat conch in the Turks & Caicos Islands**

Ocean Club East and Ocean Club West are good examples of the family-friendly resorts on TCI. *Ocean Club Resorts*

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