



*Charmaine had everything sorted in Exuma, just as the storm picked up.*



*The group from Santa Domingo.*

# Part 2 Cruising the Caribbean

As Douglas Adams said, it can hardly be a coincidence no language on earth has ever produced the phrase 'as pretty as an airport'. Well, he obviously never got to Constanza as Kathy Mexted discovered on the final part of her report on a big group flying safari to the Caribbean.

Constanza is the Dominican Republic's cool alternative and is in the throes of promoting itself as such. For this reason, a group as large as ours attracted a lot of attention, with many aviation officials travelling up from Santo Domingo to accompany our group.

The recently formed Airport Commission is entrusted with promoting the region, and in particular, access via its airport.

By mid 2011 it is hoped commercial flights will commence between Constanza and Puerto Rico, eventually forming a loop through Miami. There is currently no ATC at Constanza, and customs officers were deployed from Santo Domingo so we could depart straight to Puerto Rico.

Though domestic traffic is regular, twenty or so aircraft at once was quite unusual, judging by the crowd of onlookers at the fence. As the area gains publicity however, the locals hope more aircraft will seek it as a destination.

## Puerto Rrrrico

After flying in and out of islands with almost no elevation, departure from Constanza required careful planning. Aerodrome elevation at 4000 ft and warming temperatures, took density altitude to above 7000ft.

Suddenly, all the pilots were reacquainted with their takeoff performance charts. Most aircraft used the entire 1km long runway then circled out of the beautiful wide valley past the surrounding 10,000ft mountains.

As one obviously delighted participant put it so poetically, "... tropical conditions with building cumulus and brilliant sun requiring us to climb and turn through the glorious landscape that clouds provide."

And that's the difference. Me? With club seating, I was facing rearward in the Cherokee 6, and as on the trip in, I had my eyes firmly shut waiting for clear skies.

The three hour flight to San Juan did traverse magnificent mountainous terrain, fringed by long crisp palm-fronted coastline.

This leg of the journey was the most challenging for communications, brought about by an overwhelmed young controller based in Miami, possibly exacerbated by language difficulties.

When one pilot called several times for permission to descend from 7,500ft the controller eventually replied "um, I don't know".

Transferring to the destination tower many pilots reported difficulty. That controller was flat out attending to the ten aircraft in his circuit, compounded by the added confusion of our inbound group. Everybody landed safely.



*Above: Organisers Catherine Tobenas & Camil Dumont take time out for a Salsa at the BFO*

*Palm Fringed coastline*



Puerto Rico is U.S. territory – some locals hope it will be annexed to the United States. Others hope for independence. It currently lies somewhere in between, but there was no doubt we were back under American influence as we were greeted on the tarmac by a (friendly enough) sniffer dog, a bomb detecting Geiger-counter, and then watched in surprise as one of the aircraft whizzed by attached to a small tractor. This, we later learnt, is the most efficient method of transferring aircraft from the customs apron down to the FBO apron. For a casual Aussie it all seemed a bit surreal.

After toiling across a boiling tarmac, stepping into the FBO was a surprising contrast. The punch was flowing and the band was playing. We had arrived to the land of Salsa, and t'was a very pleasant way to wait for the bus. And a tour of the old Spanish city with its colourful buildings, clean narrow streets, and ancient customs.

I really liked San Juan, and having photographed it as we rounded it on approach, then enjoyed the waterside walk through a 70 acre park to the world heritage listed El Morro fortress. It is from here that the Spaniards repelled in turn, the Brits, French, Dutch and a smattering of pirates.

### Websites

- [International Air Rally - www.airrally.com](http://www.airrally.com)
- [www.godominicanrepublic.com](http://www.godominicanrepublic.com)
- [www.turksandcaicostourism.com/](http://www.turksandcaicostourism.com/)
- [www.gotopuertorico.com](http://www.gotopuertorico.com)
- [www.bahamas.com/bahamas/private-flying](http://www.bahamas.com/bahamas/private-flying)



## Grand Turk, Provo, Exuma

So then it all got a bit hazy as we departed Puerto Rico and headed north-west, back to the islands, where the days began to blend, and we all began to get weary.

The Turks & Caicos cluster of islands are 499 square kilometres of land scattered across hundreds of kilometres of water running east of Cuba and boasting the third largest coral reef system in the world.

Grand Turk is the administrative capital of the Turks and Caicos chain, which is a British Crown Colony, and has some beautiful and well-maintained colonial architecture. The lovely long airstrip on Grand Turk begins and ends at the beach, and there was none of the "formality" of the day before.

Roughly 10,000 cruise ship passengers pass through Grand Turk every day, and seem to confine themselves to the terminal precinct. But it was the beach beyond that beckoned, and from the quiet of a small pier we watched the ships slip away, backlit by the setting sun. The British Governor of Turks & Caicos Islands, Gordon Wetherall, hosted a dinner where permanent secretary to the Governor, Dr. Kingsley Been detailed his own flying experiences.

Those experiences culminated with stalls and spins over shark infested waters and forced landings above a cemetery. He finished his licence, but soon returned to an office job, which included a posting to Canberra.

Grand Turk is listed among the world's top diving locations, and though diving and flying don't usually mix, a shallow dive at 70ft and a 45 minute flight 24 hours later at 2,500 ft to Provo proved no problem.



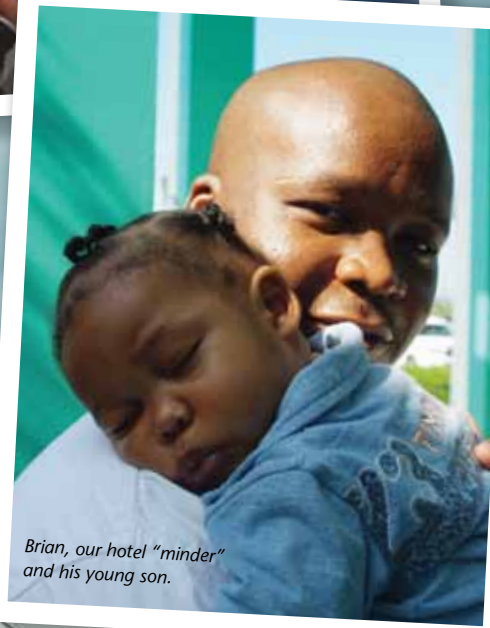
*The best restaurant! Beachfront on Grand Turk, away from the cruise ships.*

## Provo

By now the flying was easy (says she from the back seat), and as we made our way north, the delightful beachy surprises kept coming. Most of us were being lulled by the lifestyle and hospitality.

From quiet and cosy little Grand Turk, it was a whole new world over at Provo, the gateway to the islands. Our hotel was a cluster of plush apartments where curvy paths wound through tropical gardens to the shapely pool with the sunken bar, meals and plenty of room to move.

This was all within 20 metres of the beach, from where we disembarked the catamaran after snorkelling. The beach fronts Grace Bay, and is often voted as one of the world's best beaches. By now it was Day 9, and it all looked pretty good. Nobody felt much like moving – but Treasure Cay, Bahamas and the final leg of the rally awaited.



*Brian, our hotel "minder" and his young son.*

*The photographers on the trip were (L-R): Mark Helseth, Robert Sirdey and Kathy Mexted, shown working in Grand Turk.*



## Groundhog Day

The briefing room was abuzz as the forecast painted a challenging picture with a storm front approaching.

Three scout aircraft reported a heavy line of storms approaching our intended lunch reception on the Island of Eleuthera, Bahamas. Inflight, the decision was made to divert to Exuma. Back to where we started.

With that inimitable Bahamian smile, and before you could say "storm in the tropics," and "can you find beds for 50 people please?" Sharmaine Devereaux from the Ministry of Tourism and Katie Roach from Odyssey Aviation sorted aircraft, fuel, customs and transport. Suddenly we were back at the Peace & Plenty Hotel in our old rooms – beside the pool and the bar overlooking the ocean.

As the heat of the day fled, we sat on the waters edge and let the cooling tropical storm which had caused our diversion sweep over us. Dinner was by the pool and sadly, the holiday was over. ■

For all the jokes we Aussies like to make about American tour groups, we both agreed this was one of the best holidays we'd ever had. There was a balance of great flying, exotic adventure, camaraderie, and beachy luxury. Though each pilot is responsible for his/her own decisions, there is a lot of group support. The itinerary alters a bit each year.

Call Denis for a run down if you are interested in discussing on 0423 404 233.