

Celebrities Have Loved This Private Island for Decades — **TRAVEL+LEISURE** THE NEW YORK TIMES MAGAZINE

It's Home to the Wellness Retreat of Your Dreams



Ken Hayden Photography/Courtesy of COMO

JACKIE COOPERMAN MARCH 11, 2019

“You appear very calm, but your brain is like fish,” says Dr. Parth Mahajan, the Ayurvedic expert counseling me at Parrot Cay’s COMO Shambhala spa. He’s smiling, mimicking the sibilant sound of fish quickly darting around a pool, his hands carving speedy arcs in the air. “You think a lot.”

Guilty as charged. I’ve arrived here, at this serene Turks and Caicos retreat, with three days to decompress and a few nagging problems, including a newly diagnosed case of plantar fasciitis. Now, Dr. Parth, who’s spent 18 years studying with the foremost yogis and monks in his native India, is taking my pulse with his fingers, asking whether I grind my teeth at night,

crave sweets, have mood swings. Questions answered and pulse established, Dr. Parth creates my Ayurvedic profile. He suggests meditation and dietary changes to help restore my internal balance and later emails me steps to take at home, including recipes for a warm tonic of cumin, coriander, and turmeric, and a coconut oil massage regimen.

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“I’m committed to the preventative approach. Making people understand how the mind functions is my major work,” says Dr. Parth, who also offers reiki sessions. “Most of my clients here are materially successful, they’re healthy, they’re famous, but they are not content, they are not living in this moment. We can learn to be content by creating distance and observing our thoughts as a third party.”

A leader in wellness since it opened 20 years ago on a private, 1,000-acre Turks and Caicos island, Parrot Cay is known for its Asian-inspired aesthetics (nine of COMO’s 14 resorts are in Asia) and its bold-faced names (Donna Karan, Bruce Willis, and Keith Richards, among others, own private villas on the island). In the past year, Parrot Cay has boosted its health credentials, adding a team of experts including Dr. Parth; a veteran Chinese medicine practitioner; a renowned therapeutic massage therapist; and a killer Pilates instructor. The spa holds free weekly cardio, yoga, Pilates, and meditation classes and hosts “wellness hour” talks on stretching, meditation, and Eastern medicine. The resort’s restaurants and bars offer healthy menu options that are simultaneously virtuous and satisfying.

Practitioners say it’s important to pick a retreat that suits your own wellness approach, and to stay open minded about how much visitors can achieve in a short time.

“There’s no golden bullet, and coming here for a few days won’t ‘cure’ you, but there is definitely a benefit to starting,” says Paula Choi, an immensely reassuring, smart woman with a quick laugh and a seemingly endless reservoir of information about how environmental, dietary, and hormonal factors affect health. After a long discussion about my lifestyle and medical history, Choi recommends acupuncture, a method I have long eschewed,

terrified by the needles. But Choi, who's studied acupuncture, dietary and herbal medicine for 20 years, inspires confidence, and I acquiesce. An hour or so later, after having needles applied to my stomach, face and arms, and later my back and shoulders, I feel warm, woozy, relaxed.

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“We're here to support your own healing ability. We're resetting the nervous system, which domino effects into circulation, cardio-vascular, respiratory and digestive system. What can you accomplish in one session? Actually quite a lot. We can start to imprint where we're going,” she explains. “Health is a dynamic expression, it's not static. The goal is cultivating sustainable energy to help you navigate your life with comfort.”

To be sure, even this Caribbean idyll included real world distractions — in the middle of my Pilates class, a well-known Italian stylist on the mat next to mine posted a selfie to her 148,000 Instagram followers — but access to the spa's estimable staff and classes, combined with swims in the limpid turquoise sea, were indeed restorative. My brain may be full of fast moving fish, but at Parrot Cay they learned, slowly, to float.