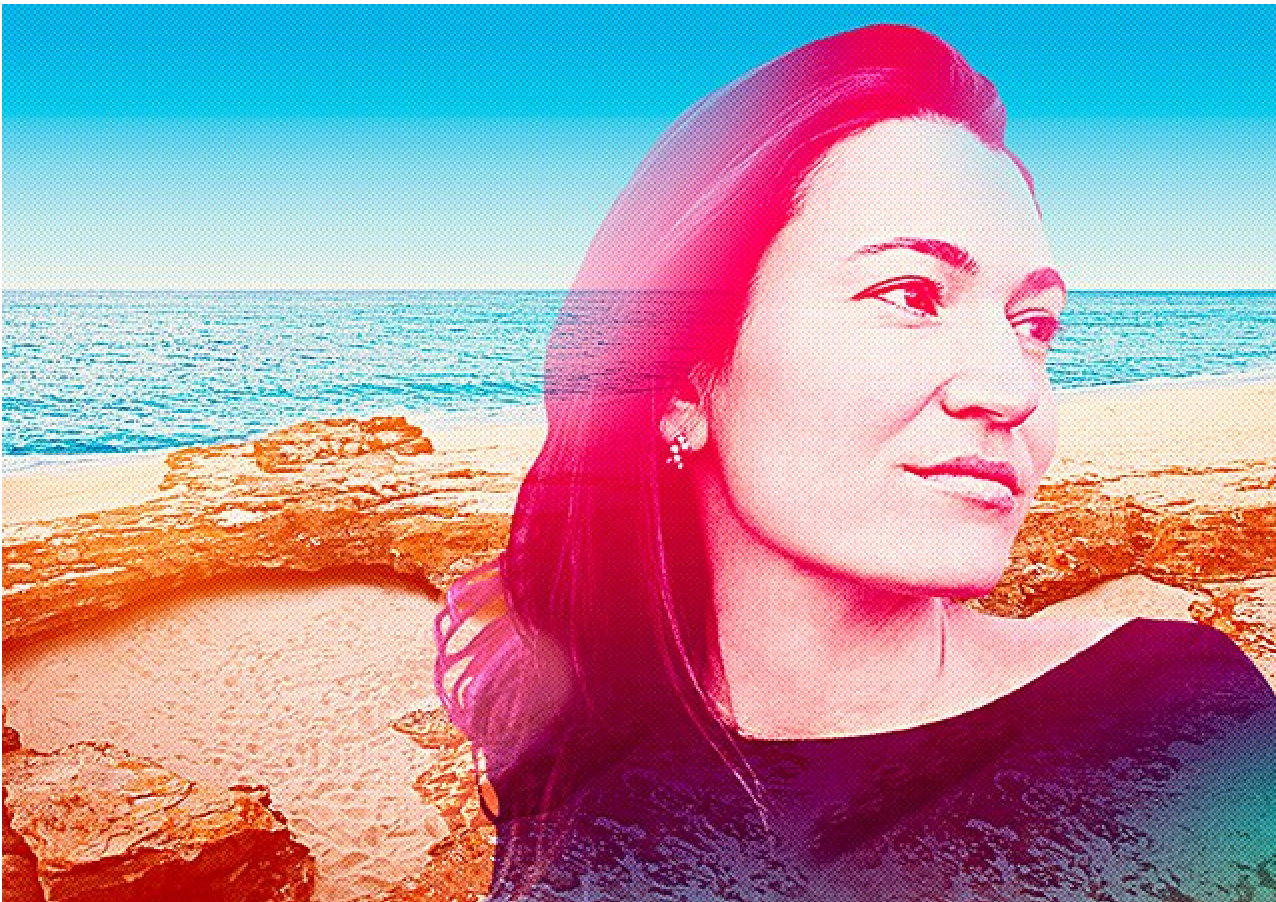
Condé Nast Traveler

Stranger in Paradise

The Art of Relaxation in Turks and Caicos

She'd taken her kids to the Atacama Desert, to Sarajevo, even (in utero) to the Arctic. It was high time for some simple sea, sand, and sun. NICOLE KRAUSS applies herself to the art of doing nothing.



ESCAPE FROM NEW YORK Author Nicole Krauss found her thoughts turning to the Garden of Eden en route to the Turks and Caicos.

By Nicole Krauss
June 2013 Issue

Before my children were born traveled widely, and after they were born I continued to travel widely, carrying more things. I took my older son to the Atacama Desert in Chile for his second birthday; during an earthquake, my husband lay over his crib to protect him from falling objects. My younger accompanied me

in utero to the Arctic; six months pregnant, I tossed and turned with him on the top bunk of a Russian icebreaker. In automobile-restricted Capri, my older son split his chin open on a marble floor and had to be taken to the hospital in the back of a luggage cart. He brought home lice for all of us from his nursery school in Tel Aviv, then a nasty case of foot-and-mouth disease. One winter we took him to Sarajevo, and for a week he survived exclusively on stale bread.

It was that chilly trip to a city still depressed by war that I thought of one day last year as I stood on our stoop in Brooklyn and listened to our next-door neighbors describe their vacation in St. Barts: how beautiful, how relaxing, how white the sand and turquoise the sea—paradise for the kids, they said. Giddy with vitamin D, their eight-year-old twins were bouncing up and down the sidewalk on pogo sticks, gilded by sun. If someone were to have painted us all, my children, who were pushing old slush around on the steps, could have been rendered with the same palette used for the concrete sky, the dirty snow.

I'd always been set against beach vacations; they seemed indulgent, lazy, and uneducational. Now it dawned on me that they were all of those things, attractively so; that a vacation was something entirely different from traveling, or even taking a trip, which is what I had been doing all these years, first on my own, and then with my family. Traveling has always been about throwing myself into the unknown—an expansive intake of experience, a bracing and heightened exposure. At the bottom of my wanderlust is the hope that, freed of the ordinary, alert and alive to even the tiniest things, what I find in that other place will be revelatory enough to change me. But vacation—that was something else entirely. To want only to rest and recuperate, to be removed from it all, to enjoy oneself effortlessly—was that really too much to ask? What did I have against paradise?

I'd heard that Bali was paradise, and also the Seychelles and the Maldives. But no place is paradise if to get there one has to take a long plane ride with young children, so our patch of white sand would have to be no more than a few hours away. I'd never even heard of the Turks and Caicos until about five years ago. With a name like that, it could have been a Disney cartoon or a pub in England, but it turned out to be a chain of islands in the Atlantic, at the southern end of the Bahamas Bank. And no sooner did the name pass people's lips than they started going into paroxysms about the extraordinary color of the water.

A few weeks before our trip to paradise, I started attending a study group on Genesis. I hadn't meant to prepare in this fashion; it was pure coincidence. Busily secular, I'd never gotten around to serious study of the Bible. Finding myself in the fallow period between novels, I decided to do so now, and, after some shopping around, ended up forming a group with an old friend, a professor of Jewish studies who believes in a systematic approach to knowledge. He wanted to begin at the beginning. So it was that I found myself in his office at Columbia University, discussing Adam and Eve's banishment from the Garden of Eden.

Life, which mostly rushes haphazardly, sometimes catches on an idea, and for a while everything that happens seems to take shape around it. On the plane, my children already enjoying the paradise of unlimited cartoons, I discovered in that week's *New Yorker* an essay about Göbekli Tepe, an Early Neolithic sacred site on a hilltop in southeastern Turkey, which a recent theory suggests might be the historical location of the Garden of Eden. The megalithic stone monument was built by hunter-gatherers, and archaeologists believe it may pinpoint the shift to domestication and agriculture (the need to build such a complex religious site, the thinking goes, precipitated the need for a sedentary existence and stable food source). Overwhelming evidence now suggests that agriculture brought a steep decline in the standard of living and health of early man, *The New Yorker* explained, and the theory that assigns Göbekli Tepe as the

site of the Garden of Eden depends on a reading of the expulsion as an allegory for the loss of the free, easy life of the hunter-gatherer in exchange for grueling dawn-to-dusk farmwork, with little to show for it but disease, malnutrition, economic vulnerability, social hierarchy, and the oppression of women.

Closing the magazine, lulled by the jet engines advancing us toward the island of Providenciales, I thought about how, no matter the angle from which it's read, the Eden story seems to establish nostalgia as inherent in the human condition. More than that, it suggests that nostalgia is one of the first costs of self-consciousness, of becoming aware of our autonomy and separateness. This innate nostalgia involves not only the sense that at some point life was better than it is now, more perfect. It is also a form of homesickness—the original meaning of the word, coined by a physician in the seventeenth century to diagnose the acute sufferings of Swiss mercenary soldiers. It is the persistent sense that we are removed from the place we come from, or the state we are meant for, and to which we profoundly belong.

The battery of the computer died then, and my two-and-a-half-year-old started to chant, with the controlled, almost leisurely setting-out of a long-distance swimmer, for more *Curious George*. I have enormous admiration for his stamina, but fifteen minutes later, as his voice drilled deeply into my cerebrum, it occurred to me that if one were to read the story of the Fall allegorically—the least interesting way to read it—one could just as easily see it as a reflection of the shift from the free, easy life of the childless to the dusk-to-dawn demands of parenthood. After all, in the very next line after God drives man out of the Garden, Eve gives birth to Cain. Paradise, the story seems to say, is only possible without children. Or, to read it another way, paradise is only for children, which is all Adam and Eve are until they eat the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge and become the parents of Cain. Either way, no parent ever dwelled in the Garden of Eden. So much for allegory.

The first thing people always tell you about the Turks and Caicos, and often the only thing they tell you with any specificity, has to do with the water. I heard so much about the color and clarity of the water that upon landing in Providenciales, at thirty-eight square miles the longest island in the Turks and Caicos, I expected something on the spectrum I'd never seen before, activated by some secret fluorescence. I wasn't disappointed, though I don't think it’s possible for the sea to disappoint—it's like suggesting that the stars in the night sky could disappoint, or any timeless feature of nature which offers us a view onto eternity. The water that laps at the white, large-grained sand is indeed a startling electric blue, somewhere between turquoise, celeste, and cyan, though as it deepens it becomes something else entirely. And, yes, it is very clear; as people will repeatedly tell you, when you walk out in the water and look down, you can see your toes. But you can see your toes in the bathtub, too.

What is important about the clarity is that it allows for one of the most extensive barrier reefs in the world, which stretches sixty-five miles across and two hundred miles long: The lack of murk in the water lets the sunlight filter down to the symbiotic algae that coral need to survive. And where there is coral, still relatively healthy, there is sea life—so wide a profusion of delightfully colored parrot fish and angelfish, spiny lobsters, silvery schools rocking in the currents, eagle rays, and little blennies poking in and out of their tiny abodes that divers flock from all over the world to see them.

There are even sea turtles, one of which graced me with its company as I snorkeled alone one day. Turtles move through the water as birds move through the sky, only more slowly, and being with one was stirring. Later, when I couldn't stop thinking about its beauty and fragility, it was also haunting: Much of their nesting ground has been destroyed by development on the island, and what eggs they do manage to lay

are usually eaten by a growing population of stray cats and dogs. As always in paradise, if one wishes to dwell there, one cannot allow oneself to know too much.

Tourism arrived in Providenciales only in 1984, when Club Med opened a large hotel and casino there. Since then, it has grown at a breakneck speed, and the shallow bow of Grace Bay, where most of the hotels lie shoulder to shoulder, looks like the crowded properties of someone who is about to win at Monopoly. The Amanyara resort, however, sits far away from the busy hub of Grace Bay, on ninety-nine acres of an eighteen-thousand-acre private reserve on the otherwise uninhabited northwest coast. The reserve is owned by the Turks and Caicos government, which had the foresight to prohibit development until it was approached by the Amanresort chain ten years ago (the hotel is in its seventh year of operation). In keeping with the policy of its resorts worldwide, Aman agreed to preserve the natural terrain, landscape only with native species, and build in as unobtrusive and environmentally thoughtful a fashion as possible. So it is that if you stand on the teak deck of the infinity pool—one of the most stunning I've ever seen, made of volcanic rock brought over from Indonesia, textured just enough to prevent slipping—and look west to the sea, you won't see any sign of human life except for the occasional white yacht gliding past. The same is true when you walk down the narrow path hedged on both sides by a tangle of lantana, sea grape, coco plant, and buttonwood to the blinding-white beach, and look out to the north, where the shallow water declines gradually until the reef wall suddenly drops away to seven thousand feet. To the east, there is only wild coast.

Each room is a private pavilion set deeply into the vegetation, made of plate glass framed by teak and steel, overlooking either the sea or a private lake. If you stand naked in the middle of your room or take a bath in the enormous freestanding tub, you can't see anyone, which means no one can see you.

After the initial shock of its beauty, and the toe-curling sense of serenity, my first impression of paradise was that it is nothing like where I come from, nor is it in any way a place where I profoundly belong—not at an unspeakable sum per night, which is what the Amanyara runs for even the most basic accommodation during the Christmas week. All the same, the idea of making a certain kind of person feel as if he or she is at home was, the general manager later explained to me, one of the original ideas behind Amanresorts, whose twenty-six properties in Asia, Africa, Europe, and North America are considered, by the lucky who have been to them, to be some of the most beautiful hotels in the world.

Guests are never asked to sign for anything, or even for their room number. Staff must be familiar with who is who, and magically, within hours of our arrival, everyone in a crisp white shirt and khaki pants seemed to know our names and the names of our children, whom they joked with and doted on with genuine kindness. (Whether or not such a high standard of service makes one comfortable or uncomfortable is a good measure of whether one is going to feel "at home" in such a hotel.) Amanyara keeps no hours—everything is available always—and the kitchen, which employs chefs from Indonesia, Thailand, Italy, Macedonia, Switzerland, and Morocco, is prepared to cook anything within the scope of human craving. Menus are deliberately small, because it is not expected that anyone will order from them.

To illustrate the lengths to which the hotel will go to fix something that is bothering a guest, the general manager tells me that if, as recently happened, someone complains of a smell coming from a concrete wall, the engineers will blast down the wall to find the source. The most a manager from a normal hotel will usually do for a "recovery"—to ameliorate a bad experience—is send a fruit basket. "A fruit basket," the general manager says, sipping a glass of sauvignon blanc, "has never once made anything better for

anyone." (As we watch the setting sun slip into its pocket in the ocean, I reflect on the fact that it was a fruit basket of sorts that got Adam and Eve kicked out of paradise in the first place.) What it means to feel at home, he tells me, is that no one says no to you, ever.

And there, precisely, is where the problem lies for someone like me. Home, as I know it and as my children know it, is a place where *no* is said with such constancy that on some days one might forget that the affirmative is even a possibility. We have come on vacation, in part, to be relieved of all those endless *nos* of living a safe, responsible, productive, and moral life, and also the many things—views, habits, circumstances—that, by their monotony and fixedness, seem to become a kind of no because they cancel out all other possibilities. If staying at the Amanyara is blissful—and I am coming around to the fact that it is—it is because it is so radically unlike being at home.

But maybe the sense of returning to a lost, original place may be answered, simply, by the sound of the waves breaking on the shore (evolutionary theory must offer reasons for why it is a sound so universally soothing and peaceful). Regardless, it would seem that the idea of feeling at home in the most prosaic sense has nothing to do with paradise. However, the question of restrictions, of what is allowed and not allowed, which the Aman management has so carefully considered, is very much at the heart of the story of the Garden of Eden. It is a story about the nature of freedom, yes, but the allegorical reading of the Göbekli Tepe archaeologists, which interprets the story as a reflection on the loss of freedom—the utopic freedom of the hunter-gatherer—gets it completely backward. It's a story—*the* story—of the costs of human freedom and choice. God has forbidden Adam and Eve to eat from the Tree of Knowledge: Far more important than what has been prohibited is the fact of the prohibition itself, the requirement that Adam and Eve obey the divine command. The act of breaking it is a rejection of obedience in favor of free choice, of human beings living "by their own lights, learning solely from their own experience," as Leon Kass puts it in *The Beginning of Wisdom*. God attempts to prevent man from pursuing freedom and its correlative, autonomous knowledge, but is unsuccessful. In choosing freedom, Adam and Eve also discover that it will be, from now on, the source of all their unhappiness.

So perhaps the Amanyara people have gotten it right by getting it wrong—that much of what makes people happy about being in a place like this is not that there are so many choices but that there are almost none. A vacation at a resort on the beach means that there is nowhere to go every day but the beach, and there is nothing much to do every day but lie in a lounge chair looking out at the sea, read, swim, and occasionally drink something tropical. Opening one's eyes in the morning, everything is already decided: Today will be like tomorrow, and tomorrow like yesterday. There is nowhere to go and no one to see, nothing must be addressed, nothing hangs in the balance or requires action, and therefore nothing is consequential. At last, we are happy.

Except we keep thinking about the trees. Here they are mahogany, flown in from Florida. Mahogany is native to the Turks and Caicos, but they never grow very large here, and Jean-Michel Gatthy, the Franco-Belgian architect who works out of an office in Kuala Lumpur, wanted large ones for Amanyara's enormous reflecting pool, around which the reception, restaurant, bar, and library pavilions are gathered. Their beauty is marred, however, by the rough wooden crutches nailed to them, four or six to each tree. For days we wondered aloud about these sad braces, which brought with them a whiff of all not being well. Perhaps, as in Japan, the trees were being trained to take on some ideal aesthetic shape? No, the general manager explained, when I finally asked. As global weather patterns change, the resort has had to adjust to being pounded by hurricanes: Irene alone took out sixty-five trees in 2011. The water table rose so high that the

floor of the reflecting pool, which is simply rubber matting laid over dirt, began to undulate. The Miami mahoganies were vulnerable in such conditions.

So, between dips in the sea and the batu candi (Indonesian volcanic rock) pool, when not digging very deep holes in the sand with my children or just enjoying their relaxed, joyful faces, I found myself thinking about the construction of paradise. The question of what is natural and unnatural preoccupied me to what might well be an unnatural degree for someone who is supposed to be enjoying herself on vacation. That tranquil lake which stretches out from the dock of our bedroom, where we sat drinking wine one night after the kids were asleep: unnatural?

Leaning over the edge the next morning, I made out the vulcanized-rubber bottom and noticed the hyper-green netting, meant to look like leaves, that holds the bank in place. We get up early—our kids wake at six o'clock whether they are on vacation or not, and there is no miracle that the kind Amanyara staff can work to change that (though now that I think about it, we didn't ask)—and our walk around the grounds finds a flurry of quiet activity. Every day, the team of twenty gardeners in green shirtsleeves are out with their hedge-cutters, carrying out their Sisyphean work of pruning back exuberant nature. When I ask the general manager about this, he points to the gently undulating vegetation that provides a bottom frame for the view of the sea, and explains that even that seemingly careless line is perfectly calculated: shoulder-height here, hip-height there, and so on, in the instructional code of the office of Jean-Michel Gatthy. The buildings are made up of three kinds of teak, all from Indonesia. In order to keep them in pristine condition, the hotel has to close for a month of renovation every year. Last year, $225,000 was spent on the annual restoration of the four main pavilions alone, to say nothing of the forty guest pavilions and twenty private villas. Without such constant effort and expense, nature would very quickly deconstruct the place.

And yet, in spite of myself, it was a wonderful vacation. This will come as a surprise to no one. At a bonfire on the beach one night, my older son looked at the moon through a telescope for the first time, as well as iridescent Venus and Jupiter with its own moons. My younger son learned the feeling of floating, which he did wearing water wings and remaining stick-still, no matter how many times we told him to move his hands and legs; occasionally, he fluttered his fingers. I went out snorkeling and met the sea turtle. My husband wondered how the staff would respond if he asked them to procure a challah for Friday night—"you know, the braided bread eaten by the Jews," he said to the eager-to-help concierge, who the following day found us down at the beach to tell us that the hotel was incredibly sorry, no challah could be found anywhere on the island. We were oddly relieved to be told that something was impossible, and, anyway, a day of rest has little meaning when one has been resting a whole week.

Nor will it come as a surprise to anyone that a week of rest, of being outside of and apart from life as it is lived at all other times, is a gift. Sprung from the usual routines, pared of distractions, deepened by the perspective of nature, and widened by an opening in time, thinking itself feels different. Freedom of mind, after all, is difficult to find. But it was in paradise, in the first place—or so the story goes— that we first discovered its possibility. True, it meant we couldn't stay. But leaving paradise made for some of the greatest stories ever told. It made us interesting. Or so I tried to tell myself in the tiny, hot, overcrowded airport of Providenciales. My slumbering two-and-a-half-year-old grew heavier and heavier in my arms as we waited our turn to board the plane home, where, full of knowledge, sand still in our shoes, we'd find the refrigerator empty.