

undercurrent

The Private, Exclusive Guide for Serious Divers

May 2000

Vol. 15, no. 5

Grand Cayman's East End

bargain basement diving at Cayman Diving Lodge

IN THIS ISSUE:

Cayman Diving Lodge . . .	1
Travel Tip	2
To See in the Sea	4
<i>Sun Dancer II</i>	5
Report Forms	7
Pollen in Your Tank . . .	9
Palau's Corals	10
Releases	11
Reverse Profiles	12
Talk to TACA	12
Aluminum Tank Explosion	13
Why Divers Die, Part 1 When Divers Panic . .	14
Thumbs Up: Philippine Air Baggage Plan	15
Cayman Travel Tip . . .	15
Flotsam & Jetsam	16

Web Site address is:
<http://www.undercurrent.org>

Editorial Office:

John Q. Trigger, Editor
editor@undercurrent.org

Subscription Office:

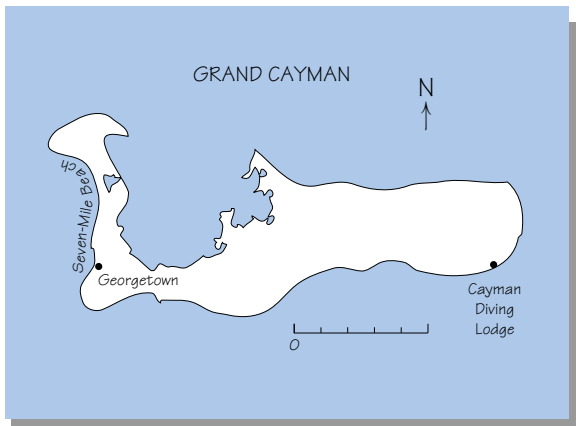
Ben Davison, Publisher
P.O. Box 1658
Sausalito, CA 94966

Back in the 80's when I was newly certified, I was a single guy who traveled alone. Those trips were full of salty, new-diver adventures: checking my equipment sixty-two times on the way out, diving with my nose on my console. Everything was an adventure; everything was spectacular. One of those sweet early trips was to the funky Cayman Diving Lodge on Grand Cayman's East End: phenomenal walls, schools of tarpon, cool swimthroughs and tunnels -- all great memories. Since then, as I've explored scores of other places, I've often wanted to return to yesteryear to see how a decade affected my perception of the place. Furthermore, it has about the least expensive dive package in the Caymans, and that alone is worth revisiting.

While these days I travel with my diving wife, this was to be a guy's night out, so I booked a second-story ocean-front room for my brother and me. Included in the forms the Texas office sent was a medical form that seemed a study in paranoia. I had a condition included in the bold-faced type -- hypertension well-controlled by medication -- so I called them to explain that I'd taken this medication for 15 years and had 500 dives on it. They insisted on a release from my doctor, an annoyance, but I did it.

I arrived on a late November Saturday under cloudy skies and spent the week under a stationary storm that organized itself into Hurricane Lenny right after I left. The wind blew; it rained cats and dogs, but, as any serious diver knows, it's always wet underwater, so what the hey?

The East End of Grand Cayman, contrasted with the popular West End/Georgetown area, is undeveloped, sparsely populated, almost entirely residential. The Lodge sits on the main coastal road, and the office backs onto it. After a 45-minute ride in from the airport (gratis with a 7-day package)



I was greeted by Tim, a deep-diving Lodge staffer and assistant chef who turned out to be a great spinner of tales, including some about stints as a safety diver at free-diving contests. The place was running at capacity, each of its twelve rooms full of U.S. divers plus one English couple. My roomy quarters had two double beds, lots of drawer space, plenty of outlets, a nice-sized closet with a safe inside, and a generously sized vanity table where I spread stuff out. It was a bit down at the heels: a ripped lamp shade, broken floor tiles, and old, dirty window shades. The room passed the "if my wife were here" test, but

she would have called it "depressing." Still, it was about what I expected from a place that markets itself as a Spartan, land-based live-aboard and charged me \$170/night for the full Megillah, including diving and food. (Since these were the high-end accommodations, best always go for the upgrade.)

Double doors framed a nice view of the lagoon and opened onto a deck that led from my building (which contained most of the rooms) toward the dining room and office, where there were piles of books and a computer for guest e-mail. Nearby were the tee-shirt/dive-accessory boutique and the equipment room, with rental cameras, gear, and enough staff talent to fix most broken stuff. From there the deck led to the large dock, recently rebuilt after the last hurricane. Like my room, the Lodge itself was comfortable and adequate, though frankly, the girl's getting old.

But I hadn't returned to the Lodge for luxury. I was here for East End diving. Unlike Seven Mile Beach to the west, the East End gets some surf, and this wave action has carved swimthroughs and cuts that make the diving dramatic. The walls are beautiful, with plenty of nooks and crannies. My first dive was No Name Corner near the Lodge. We motored out and split our 12 divers into two groups. After I stepped to the stern, the staff helped me gear up, then I strode off the platform -- ah, 80-100' viz, 82' water, despite the weather.

Here were the walls I remembered: consistently steep, peppered with relief features, and chock full of beautifully colored coral. While I had few chances to see the sun playing on sculpted and healthy coral, the spectacular wall, big schools of fish, and cool little tunnels and cuts rank among the best in the Caribbean -- even without sun. While ten years ago these swimthroughs left me breathless, I've become a bit jaded by the walls of Puerto Rico, Little Cayman, and the Turks and Caicos. They're in the same league, maybe "a little more equal" than Grand Cayman.

Dives during the early part of the week included Jack McKenney's Canyon, a beautiful hunk-of-a-wall with fantastic relief features and an array of colors. The shallow dives near the Lodge were good, too. At High Rocks, I spent about 5 minutes floating a few feet from a school of 20 silvery tarpon. At Playground, another shallow dive, I was impressed by big schools of the usual Caribbean suspects and a

TRAVEL TIP: It's not just what you say that counts; what you don't say can speak volumes. Take this recent ad for a great new diving hot spot — *the Dominican Republic*? At first glance the quote from underwater photographer and dive journalist Stephen Frink sounds like he's found something to write home about. In fact, he waxes on about the place: "with extraordinary underwater clarity, an impressive portfolio of shipwrecks and extensive coral reefs, the Dominican Republic offers what may be the last great undiscovered Caribbean dive destination." Apparently the fact that these waters were long since fished out is a minor detail that's not worth mentioning. When you thumb through the glossies and their hyperbole, checking out the ads that catch your eye, be sure to read carefully — between the lines.

Breakfast started at 7:30, but I could get coffee earlier, and my room had its own coffee maker. Breakfast was toaster-fare plus cold cereal and a ton of fruit occasionally relieved by soft-boiled eggs, French toast, or Egg McMuffin-type dishes. The buffet lunch came after two morning dives. Chef Felicia spread out salads a-plenty along with pasta or grilled ham and cheese sandwiches. We ate in groups at several large tables. Bakery breads and desserts were top-notch, and dinners, though not high cuisine, were good enough -- high points were Cornish game hen, spare ribs, and fresh fish, the not-so-low point fried shrimp. Food was a bit spicy, but given advance notice the kitchen tempered the heat.

Midweek the weather lightened enough for us to steam to the North Wall, the great stuff of East End diving. Babylon, a primo site, is a huge bold wall, well-pummeled by wave action. I remembered it since it's one of the eyes-closed wall dives I do at home when I dream of diving. Sheer, full of cuts and curves and character, it's crowned by a huge pinnacle. I was so anxious to revisit it that I was first off the boat, jumping in and heading to a sandy bottom, where I said hello to the small schools of chromis and wrasse. Viz was down to 80', and though I wished for more natural light, when I swam to the edge of the craggy wall and started down, it was an exciting reunion -- brilliantly colored flower and starlet coral, tube sponges, deep water gorgonia, barrel sponges, and a healthy profusion of black coral. I glanced up at the prominent overhang jutting from the top of the wall, then at the pinnacle, backlit by blue water. Beautiful! Three spirals around the pinnacle and down the massive wall and I was still in awe of the stunning relief features and colorful coral. Like the Siren's song, it's a wall you don't want to come back from. But eventually I headed for a safety stop, hovering amid a few butterflyfish and damselfish, touched with their cute neon spots.

Group pressure brought us back to Babylon for a repeat performance, then, for a different perspective, we did Black Forest, a 60' site over the pinnacle at Babylon. The wall/pinnacle formation, healthy schools of fish, vivid colors on the wall, and lavish black coral made this a great dive. Cinderella's Castle, Jayne's favorite, is a graphic example of what makes East End diving special. The wave action at this 50-60' site has carved swimthroughs and little tunnels connecting big, room-like spaces -- ah, a great swim. Kelly's Cavern, named for a keltie who was at the Lodge for my first trip, featured beautiful cuts and canyons. Other sites included Grouper Grotto, a grouper bust that yielded a school of tarpon (pretty much the only big fish around) and two dives where I swam with a turtle, Skinny Palm and Black Rock Drop Off, another beautiful and "worth-wall" dive.

While Stingray City and other northern sites were closed most of the week because of the weather, these closer sites were good, sometimes great, though all could have benefited from more sunlight. Still, despite the weather, we did 16 of the week's 17 scheduled dives,

To See in the Sea

Good news for divers who have had — or are interested in having — radial keratometry surgery to correct nearsightedness.

In a study performed at the Long Beach California Memorial Medical Center, doctors tested several RK subjects in a hyperbaric chamber with a control group that had not had the surgery. RK eyes are unstable at high altitudes — high-altitude corneal edema associated with RK causes a temporary structural change in the cornea with subsequent visual loss. This was highlighted during the 1996 Mount Everest disaster, when Beck Weathers lost his sight, and nearly his life, when his vision changed at high altitude because he had RK. Doctors were concerned that increased pressure might have the same effect.

However, they found no change in the eyes of people who had the RK surgery compared to the control group and concluded that "RKR patients can engage in recreational scuba diving without encountering deleterious visual changes." (N. Timothy Peters, MD, Robert C. Borer Jr., MD, Michad B. Strauss, MD, *Journal of Cataract Refract Surg* 1999; 25:1620-1623 0 1999 ASCRS and ESCPS)

including a couple at night. East End diving, especially at North Wall, should be on any Caribbean diver's dance card. Though the Lodge facilities need sprucing up, it nevertheless offers a very pleasant way to dive the East End, and their dive operation is ace. If you're ready for a low-frills trip with Class A Caribbean diving, the Lodge is an excellent low-cost destination.

— K.B.



Diver's Compass: Cayman Diving Lodge: 800-TLC-DIVE or 806-794-3466; fax 806-798-7568; e-mail info@divecdl.com; website www.divecdl.com. My 8-day/7-night package ran \$1,191; current prices for off-season weeks are \$1,290, upgrade \$154...other East End options include Morritt's Tortuga Club (800-432-8894), a few miles away, which offers snazzy condo living with a first-class dive operation. An independent operation, Ocean Frontiers (800-544-6576; website www.oceanfrontiers.com), gets good reviews from readers...Nitrox available...snorkeling available in the shallow lagoon off the dock; night snorkels there reportedly produce a thing or two...Delta Atlanta-Grand Cayman \$471.50...nearest photo processing in Georgetown, 45 minutes away...bring bug juice...no TVs or phones in rooms, guest phone in office...smoking permitted throughout the Lodge.

Diving Palau from the *Sun Dancer II*

the coral's been ravaged, but the fish are still there

The deplaning passengers were staring at us. You'd think they had never seen people wearing lobster, parrot, and pig noses before. But we were just a covey of crazy divers out to have the dive trip of a lifetime -- luxurious and unforgettable diving aboard Palau's *Sun Dancer II*.

Arriving a day early, I spent my first night at West Plaza, a step down in elegance from the Palau Pacific Resort but at one-third the cost. The room was simple, the staff pleasant and helpful. Next day it was the Palau Pacific, where Peter Hughes arranges day rooms for incoming guests to ward off jet lag. My group of eighteen made up the bulk of the twenty passengers, the boat's full complement. A *Sun Dancer* staffer picked us up at 4 p.m. He didn't seem impressed by our animal noses.

The *Sun Dancer* was squat and ungainly from the stern, but from the side, a sleek 138-ft. study in elegance -- or it would have been, except that it was sitting in a scummy harbor filled with land/sea containers, with the *Star Dancer* tied off on the side. *Sun Dancer's* polished wood, curtains, and glassware seemed too opulent for saltwater-soaked wet divers, though I could get used to it, if the crew wasn't too highbrow to put up with a gaggle of woo-hooing divers. The dive deck had lots of room, plus rinse tanks, hang bars for wetsuits, two hot showers, two camera rinse tanks, and twin camera tables complete with compressed air and camera towels. The uppermost deck, the shaded Lido deck, held deck chairs and hammocks. We socialized on the main deck, where there's a briefing room (with insufficient room for 20 divers) that has a drop-down erase board and a bright and spacious dining room, with tables, booths, and chairs. They serve breakfast and lunch at the large island bar. On the other end of the room were a small coffee bar and a comfy sofa in the TV area. An area is set aside for smokers.