

In Depth

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Consumer Reviews for Sport Divers

Little Cayman Beach Resort Three Dives a Day, Finally

Once the lawn mower on Little Cayman broke down. Without a paved runway, the grass on the airstrip grew too tall for the planes to land. Because the planes couldn't land, the part to fix the mower couldn't be flown in. I guess there could be a worse fate than to be stuck on Little Cayman for another week, waiting for a boat to bring a lawnmower part.

Little Cayman, arguably the best diving in the Caribbean (I'm one who argues in its favor), is the funky little sister to the slick Grand Cayman. Three small resorts and a couple of guest houses provided the only accommodations on the island until the recent construction of the 32-room Little Cayman Beach Resort. It would be hard for me to forsake the gourmet cooking and get-away-from-it-all ambiance of Little Cayman's Pirate's Point, but as our travel correspondent points out below, Little Cayman Beach Resort has several things to offer — most notably three dives a day, as opposed to the two-dives-a-day packages of the other Little Cayman resorts.

It was hard not to feel sorry for the flying fish that kept slapping haplessly against the hull, disoriented in the darkness. I was pleased, however, to have made it down to Little Cayman Island in time to catch a few rays on my pathetically pale corpse, and especially to be heading out for a night dive on the same day I arrived. Moments later, when I turned around and came face to face with a lovely manta ray, I knew I'd come to the right place.

Molly's Blessing

Night dives were offered about three times per week, and every time we went, the manta appeared. An immature female about 7 or 8 feet across with beautiful white markings on her black back, she would slowly perform back roll after back roll with her mouth gaping wide, indifferent to the nearby divers.

To be blessed by her presence, it is necessary to perform

a strange pagan ritual. Divers kneel in a semicircle, pointing their lights inward to await the manifestation. Soon she emerges silently from the darkness, a mysterious dancing goddess. She approaches divers, literally eye to eye at times, and permits her white belly to be gently caressed. Truly a sublime experience.

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The manta, Molly, apparently feeds on zooplankton attracted to the divers' lights, but after her performance she hangs around socializing. Every night dive was made to this site, Eagle Ray Roundup, or to the adjacent Meadows, because, of course, everyone wanted to see Molly. Both the *Aggressor* and the *Little Cayman Diver* live-aboards moor here at night. No doubt Molly will, at some point, venture off to seek her destiny elsewhere. Take heed.

Manta rays aside, there are plenty of reasons to dive Little Cayman with Little Cayman Beach Resort. I found the diving excellent, the best I've seen in the Caribbean. The famous Bloody Bay Wall deserves its reputation. There's something quite thrilling about cruising along 100 feet down on a vertical wall with a clear view of it disappearing into the benthic depths another 100 feet beneath you. I liked knowing that at any time some interesting pelagic could appear out of the blue vastness.

A Hammerhead Rush

On one afternoon dive at Eagle Ray Roundup, we were swimming along the wall at 60 feet with 100-foot visibility and minimal current, as usual. I kicked out away from the wall, curious to see what creatures of the deep I might find peering at me from beyond my limit of vision. The reward was immediate. Two 8-foot scalloped hammerheads casually headed downcurrent. Although I observed their leisurely progress for a full minute, I was unable to attract my buddies' attention. Certain they would be skeptical, I returned to the wall, both to alert them and to lessen the vulnerable feeling I'd suddenly developed. I darted over the top of the reef to catch my buddy's fin, and we

returned to the wall. As we peered over the edge, the two sharks bolted up from below with an agility and intensity that astonished us. I confess to experiencing a little tachycardia when they headed straight for us, not veering away until they were four feet from my buddy, whom I had strategically placed in front of me. The hammerheads reeled around like a couple of playful Labrador retrievers for a brief moment before returning to the depths, leaving us stunned. I wouldn't have missed it for anything.

Off the Wall

The advantages of this particular wall are considerable. One can stay at depth (110 feet with computer, 100 feet without) until ascent is necessary, then while away many more minutes examining the diverse healthy reef in 20 to 30 feet of water while off-gassing, a

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particularly safe way to indulge in deep diving. I enjoyed hovering above the very edge of the precipice, at 30 feet or so, enjoying the reef above while keeping an eye peeled for big critters below. A computer is an absolute must for maximizing bottom time in multilevel diving like this. All my dives were right around 60 minutes.

In the Jackson area, the wall is less steep and there are numerous tunnels and crevices to swim through, as well as sandy areas strewn with coral rubble, interspersed with coral heads or mini-walls. The variety of reef creatures here is amazing. We found different species on every dive, many that I'd never seen before or couldn't identify. Massive barrel sponges abounded. We often saw hawksbill turtles, eagle rays, stingrays, barracudas, permit, black and horse-eye jacks, and sleeping nurse sharks; squid, juvenile spotted drums and reef sharks were occasional treats.

Yellowhead jawfish males carried mouthfuls of eggs, as did their bizarre, toad-faced cousin, the banded jawfish. Rough file clams seemed tucked into every nook and cranny. Rosy razorfish readily demonstrated their ability to dive headfirst into loose sand, though green razorfish found unworthy my attempts to browbeat them into sand submersion — they merely swam away. In the shallow hardpack, sailfin blennies were plentiful but demonstrated their fandango display only to the patient. Huge rainbow or midnight parrotfish often allowed us to approach close enough to appreciate their massive beaks, sporting algae mustaches.

The Nitty-Gritty

The dive operation at Little Cayman Beach Resort was very well run. The comfortable dive boats left punctually. Eighteen divers were most they ever had aboard, and often there were far fewer. While I initially found the guides slightly aloof, I appreciated their never being intrusive or overbearing. Their laissez-faire approach never seemed unsafe. When approached, they were always helpful. They allowed buddy teams to go off

unescorted, and never required us to go on follow-the-leader guided tours (though if that is your preference, they will oblige). They rinsed and loaded BCs onto full tanks after every dive and even lugged them to the back of the boat for you. They did everything but push you into the water. True, I often came up with over 1,000 psi left in my tank because they didn't want to bring us back late for lunch, but three or four hours under water every day seemed adequate for a land-based operation.

Arriving seconds late for the night dive departure once, I whined pitifully to a guide who promptly drove me to the other side of the island and radioed the boat to pick me up. Another time, a guide dived to retrieve a watch dropped in 25 feet of water. This quality of service is rare anywhere. I was a little uncomfortable a few times during surface intervals when the dive guide would wax on about how *In Depth* was the only publication you could trust to tell the truth. It's an odd feeling, akin to eavesdropping, when you travel anonymously.

The diving crew were conscientious about environmental issues. All sites had permanent moorings, no gloves were allowed except for thermal reasons, and no one rode or chased the manta. (They might also consider banning the burial at sea of cigarette butts.) I met Michel Cousteau at the resort one night — he was there, rumor had it, to help the authorities find ways to preserve the ecosystem.

The Resort

Little Cayman Beach Resort is pleasant and well landscaped, with a tennis court, small pool,

jacuzzi, and very expensive bar. Lying in one of the hammocks on the small, sandy beach is always enjoyable, but unfortunately, ocean swimming is not good. Entry is via the dock, and the water is shallow. A swim out to the barrier reef is much too

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far and so, as is often the case, the "unlimited shore diving" is pure fantasy.

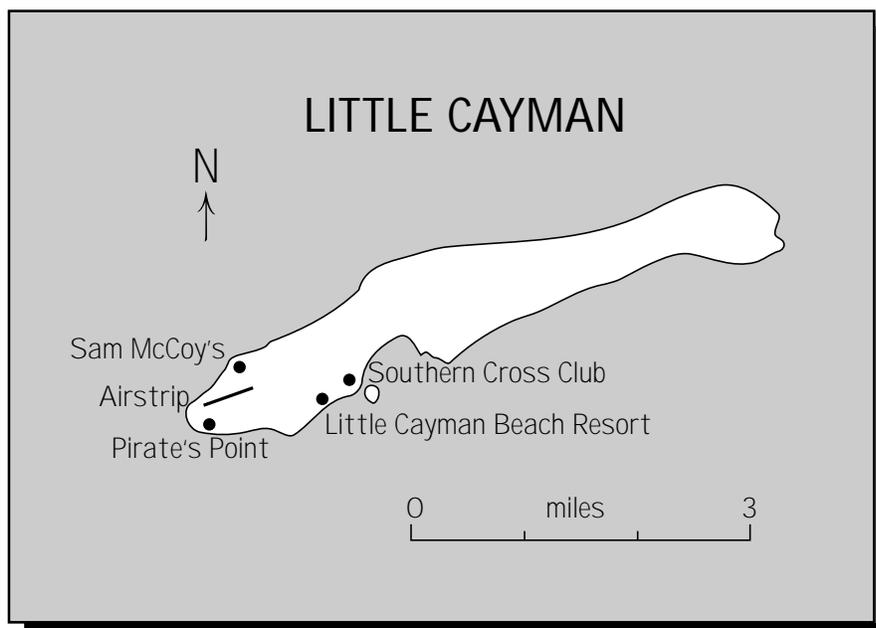
Many guests raved about the food. I was less impressed but found it acceptable, sometimes fairly good. There were plenty of vegetables and salads and breads, but the entrees tended to be too American for my taste. A new Jamaican chef has

arrived; perhaps he will serve more Caribbean cuisine.

Have Iguana, Will Travel

The island itself is rather dismal, though undeveloped. We rented a Jeep Cherokee (\$61.25 plus \$5 license plus \$20 for a half-tank of gas totals \$86.25 for one day) and circumnavigated the island, which wasn't worth the time or money. Point O' Sand, at the other end of the island, attracts day trippers, but the lovely beach was too trashed for my taste. The lagoon has some good snorkeling. Some Caymanians who happened by cut up green coconuts for us to drink and made pleasant company. When queried on the island's main attraction, they suggested we drive along slowly and perhaps we'd spot some iguanas. We weren't up for that level of excitement, so we went off on an unsuccessful search for the landlocked tarpon pond.

The rickety bicycles provided by the resort are the best way to look around. Nearby is the grass runway you came in on, where the plane blocks the only road on the island while load-



ing and unloading passengers — any traffic that might come along has to drive around the plane. A nature trail off the runway was widely reported to be less than worthwhile. Directly across the street from the resort is a thriving rookery of frigate birds and boobies. An evil-smelling, uncrossable mud flat prevents a close approach. Birdwatchers are said to flock to the island to see the rookery, although I didn't meet any.

Details

Cost: Rather expensive, as are the Cayman Islands in general, but virtually everything is in-

cluded — no surprises at check-out time except the bar bill. Ten nights double occupancy with three meals per day, three boat dives per day for nine days with one night dive included, and airfare from the northeast U.S. cost me \$2,442. The nondiver was \$715 less. Extra night dives were a pricey \$50.

The package was initially offered at \$205 more, each. This reflected an optional "all beverages included." We opted out. A tip: ice tea and lemonade were always available at no charge in the dining room. Quenching your thirst with soft drinks from the bar proved an expensive venture. Most dive travel wholesalers book the resort, or call Little Cayman Beach Resort direct at 800-327-3835.

Rooms: All were air conditioned, clean, and roomy, with cable TV. Some face the ocean directly; none were far away.

Time from Airport: 10 minutes walking backward slowly.

Dive Boats: Two fast, jet-powered, 42-foot custom dive boats, very easy to dive from. A bit loud.

Dives: Two-tank dive at 8:30 a.m., one-tank afternoon dive at 2:30, one night dive included with package, additional night dives \$50.

Time to Dive Sites: 20–30 min.

Rentals: Dive gear, E6, video/camera rentals all on premises.

Who Should Go: Those who appreciate fine weather, warm, clear water with generally calm seas and minimal currents, and a great variety of underwater habitats and animals. Little Cayman Beach Resort is for the avid diver, beginner or experienced, seeking peace, disdain-

ing night life, shopping, and even sightseeing. (Did you ever notice that the quality of diving is inversely proportional to the quality of shopping?)



Which Side is Your Bread Buttered On?

When divers get lucky and swim with big fish, what do they get besides a thrill? The Cayman Islands are offering a Grand Prize of \$250,000 for the "big one" in Cayman Islands waters, with cash and merchandise prizes totaling nearly \$1,000,000. Big fish, big money.

Fifty thousand dollars will be awarded for the one who breaks the local records for yellowfin tuna (189 lb. 4 oz.), wahoo (105 lb. 10 oz.), and dolphin fish (58 lb.); \$25,000 for the heaviest blue marlin over 300 pounds; \$5,000 for the heaviest yellowfin tuna, dolphin fish, and wahoo; \$5,000 for the heaviest eligible fish; and \$5,000 for the highest combined weight of dolphin fish, wahoo, and yellowfin tuna.

Sorry, it's the fishermen who get all this money in Cayman's 11th Annual Million Dollar Month International Fishing Tournament. Considering the number of dive dollars flowing into the Cayman Islands, they should be creating a million-dollar giveaway for those of us who get our thrills by looking at and photographing the big ones, instead of subsidizing their depletion.

Videographer Wanted

Mike Espinosa of Maluku Adventures is representing a resort that is interested in developing the diving in southern Sulawesi, Indonesia. They want to produce an underwater video that can be used to promote the destination in Europe and the United States. The video need not be *National Geographic* quality, but does need to be well done. In return for shooting, editing, and making arrangements to produce 50 to 100 copies, the resort will pay all expenses to Indonesia, including an open return ticket, room and board, all diving support, and some money.

The diving is relatively unexplored and virgin, and the videographer should also be an accomplished diver. If interested, send a letter or postcard with your qualifications to Maluku Adventures, P.O. Box 7331, Menlo Park, CA 94026.