

In Depth

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Consumer Reviews for Sport Divers

Little Cayman Diver II The Once and Future King?

For four years, the Little Cayman Diver was voted the "Best Live-Aboard in the Caribbean" by In Depth readers. Ads for the boat in slick publications often proclaimed this title in large type — that is, until we published reports of an autocratic captain who offended some passengers with his rude manner and rigid dive rules. Since the original Little Cayman Diver ran aground on the reef a couple of years ago and was replaced with a new boat, the Little Cayman Diver II (and a new captain), we thought it was time to send an editor to see if the title still held.

Grad School, Not Kindergarten

"We have procedures that we recommend, not rules, on this boat." This comment, early in the morning on the first day of the trip, set the tone; the days of the dictator were long gone. Our bedraggled group arrived at Cayman Brac via Grand Cayman at 2:00 a.m. after long delays at airports along the way.

Captain Jeff Seay met us at the airport and arranged with a taxi driver to get us with all our gear to the boat. Within minutes we were in our comfortable bunks, sleeping the sleep of wiped-out travelers.

Well before dawn, and not in accordance with usual procedure, the boat slipped away from the dock and steamed off to the world-class diving of Little Cayman. When I asked the captain why he had moved before dawn (knowing that the previous boat had been wrecked on a reef at night), he answered that he knew we had traveled a long way and would be anxious to get into the water and see the awesome beauty of Bloody Bay Wall. What a great way to start a great week!

Lifestyles of the Comfortable and Adventurous

The Little Cayman Diver II (LCDII) is a beautiful boat.

Converted at considerable expense from a private yacht named *MyIrma*, it has been in service in Little Cayman for two years. Ninety feet of sculpted aluminum and teak, with carpeting, upholstery, hanging art work, and drapery curtains inside, *LCDII*

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makes a dive trip an adventure with comfort. There really are no bad cabins, so undue emphasis on cabin assignment would be counterproductive. The mattresses are top quality, a comforter keeps off the air-conditioning chill, and sheets and towels are changed several times weekly. A nice touch is the reading light over each bunk.

Much of the main deck is enclosed, containing the salon, the galley, and the bridge. The salon is roomy and nicely decorated. A large teak wall unit holds TV, VCRs, and sound systems. The dining table seats a dozen people comfortably; between meals it's used for backgammon, camera work, or logbook entries. An upholstered settee surrounds the down stairway, which is another good place to read, listen to music, or watch TV. Along the aft wall is a wet bar with a soda system, a refrigerator, an icemaker, and an assortment of fish and coral reference books and paperback bestsellers. The galley and bridge are forward of the salon. Although the galley is pretty much off limits while the chef is working, the well-equipped bridge is always open for visitors and for questions on the radar, radios, satellite navigation, and charts. Forward of the bridge is a teak deck, good for tanning and for watching flying fish.

The flying bridge and open topside area is a good place to catch rays, listen to your Walkman, and watch sunsets and stars. There is plenty of room for drying skins and wetsuits. This is also the designated smoking area for those who still scoff at the Surgeon General's warnings.

Dive Ease

The shaded dive area is small but efficiently organized, with a

two-shelf camera table for storing (not working on) camera gear, and two freshwater rinse tanks. Seven built-in compartments hold gear; the tanks, with BCs and regulators, are mounted along the rear bulkhead on the dive platform at water level.

The dive procedure is simplicity itself. With weight belt on, carrying mask and fins, you descend a three-step ladder to the dive platform, sit on the edge, relax as a crew member puts on your tank, buckle up, fall forward, and dive. Nothing could be easier. Usually either Captain Jeff, an experienced Englishman named Jon, or an amiable Canadian named Wayne provided dive platform service.

The crew does not, however, provide underwater guide service. They did not lead dives. On request, and if duties allowed, crew would dive with

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passengers. Beginners should come with an experienced buddy.

Under the dive platform is a safety stop bar and a full tank with regulator. At the end of your dive, hand up your fins and walk up a wide ladder, grab a rail, and let the crew remove

your tank. Give the crew member your depth and bottom time to log. Two hot showers are available at the dive platform for a refreshing rinse-off. While you're taking off skins, filling out logs, and eating brownies, your tank is being filled from a below-decks compressor system. Because of the size of the dive area, a little common sense is helpful in spacing people for the dives.

Here are the "recommended procedures" on *LCDII*. Don't dive deeper than 110 feet; don't do decompression diving; log your times and depths; don't dive after consuming alcohol. The Caymans, of course, do not allow taking anything alive from the ocean. It all sounded pretty reasonable to me. There were no artificial time limits, no "follow me down and come up when I do" rules, and no talking down to the guests. No one policed the diving, divers were treated as competent and experienced (which they were), and solo divers dived solo if they preferred. I suspect that on occasion a diver may have gone deeper than 110 feet. If so, he was not harassed.

"Unlimited diving" translates to diving as your computer allows. Most of us were happy with five dives a day. Usually there were two morning dives, two afternoon dives, and a night dive, but a crew member was always available for dive-deck duty whenever anyone chose to dive. It was a pleasure to be free of regimented dive schedules on this customer-oriented boat.

The Legend Lives On

Our diving for the week was at the Bloody Bay-Jackson Point area of Little Cayman. This is Caribbean diving at its best; the wall here ranks as one

of the top dive locales in the Western Hemisphere. The dive sites are well known to Cayman aficionados: Eagle Ray Roundup, Mixing Bowl, Arch and Chimney, Sarah's Set, Nancy's Cup of Tea, Lea Lea, Comber's Caves, Marylyn's Cut, Great Wall, and Three-Fathom Wall. Sightings for the week included frequent looks at hawksbill turtles, a huge jewfish, lots of groupers prowling and getting cleaned, large green morays, spotted eels, snake eels, angel-fish, many yellow-headed jawfish, lobster, soapfish, butterflyfish, barracuda, squirrelfish, parrotfish, blennies, lobsters, ad infinitum. We also saw loads of arrow crabs, banded coral shrimp, bristleworms, nudibranchs (especially lettuce-leaf slugs), and anemones with commensal shrimp and crabs. Water temperature in June, '94 was 84°F. Tropical reef fish were plentiful.

What was not plentiful was sharks. For some reason, not one diver in our group saw a shark the entire week. I've seen sharks off the wall on previous trips and can't figure out their absence on this one. Contact with a diver on a trip two weeks before mine yielded the same negative results. Was there a shark convention somewhere else this summer? Also odd was the sighting of only one spotted eagle ray, usually a fairly common sight off Little Cayman.

A great joy was the nightly appearance of Molly the manta ray, attracted to the bright lights under the boat. She did her graceful acrobatics, scooping up her plankton meals despite the flashing strobes and groping divers. I noted several red spots on her white underbelly that looked like sores to me. A lot of divers (from both shore and the *Cayman Aggressor*) interact with her, and I'm afraid that touching with hands

and camera/video equipment may be causing her problems. I also heard a report that she was seen (and heard) crashing into the reef several weeks before my trip. I have to wonder whether all those strobes flashing in her eyes can be doing this magnificent fish any good.

The tunnels, caves, canyons, and crevices at the wall provide

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tremendous thrills. Slowly descending through a tunnel in the deep wall and finning out into the early-morning blue is one of the great experiences available in diving — nay, in life itself. The huge barrel sponges, the black coral trees, the sea fans and whips off the wall have to be some of the most spectacular creatures in the natural world. One of the beauties of Little Cayman diving is that you can finish deeper dives off-gassing in the shallow sand and reef areas, well entertained by colorful tube worms, baby spotted drums, sailfin blennies, peacock flounder, sting rays, and skates. Computer divers logged dives of well over an hour most of the week.

We all know the negatives associated with success. Besides the spots on the famous manta and the absence of sharks and

eagle rays, I also noted a bloom of network algae (*Microdictyon marinum*) on the wall reef top that was much more extensive than on my last trip in 1992. A seasonal occurrence? I hope so. I heard that Jean Michel Cousteau visited Little Cayman recently to discuss ecology and reef damage caused by divers. With day boats from the Brac, two live-aboards, and five dive operators at Little Cayman itself, a conservative estimate is that on a busy day there are over 300 dives — a lot of impact for a small area to sustain.

One of the bonuses of this trip was the presence of Professor Tom Bayer, a specialist in paleontology, marine biology, and geology. A scholarly chap with a good sense of humor, Tom is a keen diver, eager to share what he has learned in his years of diving. After dinner, and before the night dives each evening, he would give a little slide or video show and discuss various marine topics. Over the years, I have politely sat through many slide shows glassy-eyed, smiling grimly as photographers and videographers showed pictures of tails, fuzzy images, and endless unedited video. Tom's little shows were informative, and we all learned something more about our hobby. Among the topics were creatures living in the sand, life niches in the reefs, and geology of the area, with a lot of emphasis on plate tectonics and glaciation. His quiz on fish identification was fun, and most of us missed one or more questions, to our chagrin. No one walked out of any of his talks, so I guess the other guests enjoyed them as much as I did.

Comfortable, Adventurous, and Well-fed

One of the elements that make a great dive boat is the

cooking. It is also one of the least predictable — but our chef, Brady, seemed to have made the adjustment to a galley with ease. Professionally trained in Canada, he worked on Grand Cayman before signing on for life at sea. He is indeed a fine cook, rating best marks in both quality and quantity. Some of the dinner highlights were rosemary

chicken with potatoes and green beans; pork chops with mushroom-apple dressing; scallops with sesame ginger sauce, served with rice and fresh steamed vegetables; roast turkey with all the fixings; and a steamship round of beef. Lunches were out of the ordinary: a deli day with roast beef and fresh salad, quiches and feta salad, taco and burrito

fixings with pasta salad, and a clam sauce spaghetti with garlic bread and fresh salad greens. His breakfasts, available at 7:00 a.m., featured fresh cantaloupe, melon, eggs and omelets to order, French toast, and blueberry pancakes. Between-dive snacks included fresh-baked tollhouse cookie bars, cupcakes, and muffins. Although Canadian by birth, Chef Brady must have spent some time in the Far East because he seemed to respond to a mantra chant that went something like this: "OBRADYO OBRADYO U R THE KING!" Whenever our group chanted the mantra enthusiastically, Brady came up with an even better snack or dessert.

If Only I Had Listened

Whenever I sit under a palm tree on the beach, I can't help but fantasize about what it would be like to own a place in the sun. Seven years ago this month, *In Depth* published a sidebar on buying real estate on Little Cayman. While reviewing Pirate's Point Resort, another diver had regaled us with tales about lucrative land investments on Grand Cayman: "My father bought a piece of land for each of us kids 8 years ago near where Cayman Kai is now. He paid \$8,000 apiece for the lots. Now they're worth \$84,000 each."

We speculated then that Grand Cayman's little sister was also poised for a growth spurt. It was also true then that since Little Cayman was the smallest and least developed of the three islands, most Caymanians leaned toward keeping it as the nature reserve. However, the Caymanian government had lowered import duties on building materials to Little Cayman, which seemed to us at the time a sure spur for growth.

Hindsight is always the best sight, so we decided to check again and see if, had we only followed our own advice, we could be retired under a palm tree right now instead of sitting at a computer. The table below compares average prices from 7 years ago with those today. Oceanfront land prices on Little Cayman fall into three categories (all amounts in U.S. dollars per front foot):

	1987	1994
Ironshore	\$185	\$600
Loose Stone	\$225-\$300	\$900
Sand Beach	\$450-\$650	\$1,000-\$3,000

Building costs in 1987 were about \$52 per square foot for timber and \$46 for block. This year, it's \$100 per square foot for lumber and \$120 for concrete-block construction.

If you're still a dreamer, you can contact James A. Ryan Real Estate Company, P.O. Box 45, Cayman Brac, B.W.I., 809-948-2228, or fax 809-948-2408 for more information.

Inside Tips

One of the peculiarities of this boat is the lack of a supply of liquid attitude adjustment. If you enjoy a glass of wine with dinner or a cognac after the night dive, tote your own supply from home or an airport duty-free shop. Given advance notice, the boat crew can arrange to load a limited (albeit expensive) supply of beer at the Brac. Also, for a number of reasons including reef conservation, *LCDII* does not supply deck towels. I toted my own.

There is no E-6 processing on board. If you can't wait until you get home, or want to develop a test roll or two, make arrangements with one of the shore resorts or with the *Cayman Aggressor*.

Early in the week, consider buying Russ Loggin's book, *Dive Sites of Little Cayman*. It is an excellent reference book and has pages for dive log notes.

One of the things I like about this boat is the clientele that book it. It is the only dive boat

I know that screens its guests to ensure they come for the diving and not for a week of alcoholic partying. The motto of the booking office — “No sleaze on the high seas” — is only half humorous. At least one passenger I regret knowing personally was removed from the *LCDII* mid-trip some time ago because of his obnoxious and crude behavior. He is now permanently blacklisted. Here is a boat that provides luxurious comfort, great crew, great diving, and — although there are no guarantees — great guests. I suspect that the repeat ratio on this boat is the highest in the industry.

Details

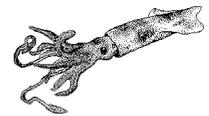
Booking: *Little Cayman Diver II*, P.O. Box 280085, Tampa, FL 33682-0058, telephone 1-800-458-BRAC or 1-813-932-1993, or contact a dive travel wholesaler. Total cost (except tips) is usually \$1,595 for a week. Check for specials for repeat guests or to fill the boat close to sailing dates.

Travel: *LCDII* boards passengers on Sunday (most a little after midnight, when the flight from Grand Cayman arrives). There are several options: (1) from the U.S. on Cayman Air via Grand Cayman (plan on a lengthy wait until the 11:30 p.m. departure for Cayman Brac; unless you are staying over on the Brac, departure is very early the following Sunday morning); (2) Gulfstream from Miami, two hours on a 19-seater with no toilet, overflying Cuba direct to the Brac (there have been reports of an excess baggage charge of \$45.00 by Gulfstream, although Gulfstream prices were very competitive when they started service); or (3) another carrier like American, USAIR, or Northwest to Grand Cayman and then Cayman Air or Island

Air in a very small plane to the Brac. Again, expect long wait time between flights in Grand Cayman.

Accommodations: There are five cabins with individual bathrooms on the cabin deck below, all of them different. They all have windows. Number One, forward, has less floor space, but has two long bunks. The washbasin area is separate from the toilet and shower, allowing shaves and showers simultaneously. Number Two, still forward, has the bathroom across a small hallway from the bedroom. Number Three is amidships, very roomy for two people, but — with an extra

upper bunk for a third person — could be the most crowded if the boat is fully booked. Number Three is also closest to the engine-room generator, so it has some noise at night. Number Four has a large double bed and large bathroom with bathtub. Number Five, aft, also has a double bed; it is very roomy, and well away from the engine noise. My suggestion for loving couples with considerable camera gear is Number Five. Two singles who are heavy sleepers would probably like Number Three.



How Safe Is Your Air? Or, How Well Do You Trust Your Dive Shop?

We've all been diving compressed air with confidence for years. We joke about “bad air” in some of the more remote dive destinations, but we generally take for granted that the air we get from our local dive shop is, somehow, certified as being — well, air. Are these warm fuzzy feelings about our air fills justified? What standards, if any, apply to compressed air quality?

The Compressed Gas Association (CGA) has published standard “G-7.1-1989 Commodity Specification for Air.” This is the reference standard for commercial compressed life-support air used by fire departments, hospitals, and industry. G-7.1-1989 (often called simply “CGA”) specifies limits for different “grades” of air that are

incorporated into compressed air standards set by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) for fire brigades, commercial diving, and many state fire agencies. Commercial divers and divers for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

For sport divers, air quality has been left entirely in the hands of the compressor operator.

(NOAA) and the U.S. Navy can be assured that their air conforms to CGA Grade E or bet-