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Ben Davison's **In Depth**

The Personal Diving Report . . . for Traveling Divers

The Cayman Islands Tour

From Grand to grandeur aboard the Aggressor III

With 940,878 tourists visiting Grand Cayman last year, the choices for accommodations and dive operations are staggering. Our reviewer chose to dive the Caymans by live-aboard — a choice affected by the rising costs of land-based food and accommodations, as well as her desire to do lots of diving and see more than one island.

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Dear Fellow Diver,

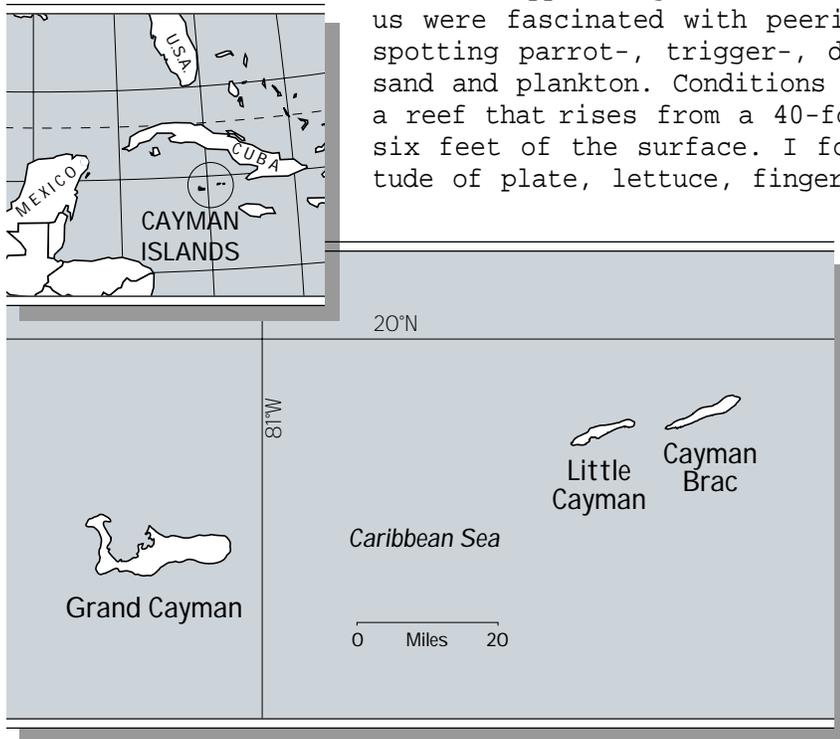
My night dive off Little Cayman had been pretty unproductive, and I was drifting back to the boat feeling mildly frustrated. Then a shadow detached itself from the darkness just beneath me. I watched it glide over the light sand near the boat and suddenly realized that Molly the Manta had come to call! Cautious but elated, I dropped down next to her, and we swam side by side in a broad circle. I reached out a tentative hand and patted her sleek and silky wing; she didn't mind at all. It was the high point of my week on the *Cayman Aggressor III*.

A Boat Designed for Divers

There may be an *Aggressor* somewhere, sometime, that has been inadequate for scuba diving, but I haven't found one yet, and I've been on five of them. Their smoothly tailored fit for scuba divers is one of the more reliable aspects of a diver's life. Some may be larger than others, and some equipped with special features for a particular area, but you can pretty well count on a gracious welcome at the airport, comfortable cabins, good food and snacks, space for camera equipment, E-6 film processing, sunny and sheltered areas for relaxing, stacks of warm dry towels on deck between dives, skillfully trained and congenial crew, and a jolly cocktail party on the final evening.

The *Cayman Aggressor III* is 110 feet long and has seven double cabins and a quad, each with a sink and reasonable storage space. There are two heads below deck and one above, and an all-purpose eating-TV-viewing-relaxing area next to the bar-kitchen; all this with air conditioning that's almost too effective. I had to ready my camera for action topside (in an area set aside for them) to keep the lens from fogging up.

... Diving began unspectacularly with the wreck of the Oro Verde, which, like many of the sites on the west side of Grand Cayman, is somewhat shopworn.



Cayman Islands

We had individual bins for dive gear, with aluminum 80 tanks strapped behind them where they were easy to don and doff. Two sets of steps at the stern lead down to the metal diving platform, from which you either giant stride into the water or sit on the edge and fall face forward into the 80 water. In addition to these typical *Aggressor* amenities, there's a spacious hot tub on the sundeck. (You might wonder who would need a hot tub in the sunny Caribbean, but it's a great way to finish off a cool night dive.)

The Strike of the Damselfish, the Sting of the Ray

The diving began unspectacularly with the wreck of the *Oro Verde*, which, like many of the sites on the west side of Grand Cayman, is somewhat shopworn. Visibility was not great (about 40 feet), and I found the paucity of invertebrate life on the wreck disappointing. On the other hand, the novice divers among us were fascinated with peering through the portholes and spotting parrot-, trigger-, damsel-, and hogfish amidst the sand and plankton. Conditions improved just a bit at Eden Rock, a reef that rises from a 40-foot sand bottom to peaks within six feet of the surface. I found some amusement in the multitude of plate, lettuce, finger, and antler corals and a number of enchantingly determined little damselfish protecting their territories against the enormous invaders. More urbane, or perhaps oblivious, a school of tarpon suddenly surrounded me and streamed past into the opaque distance.

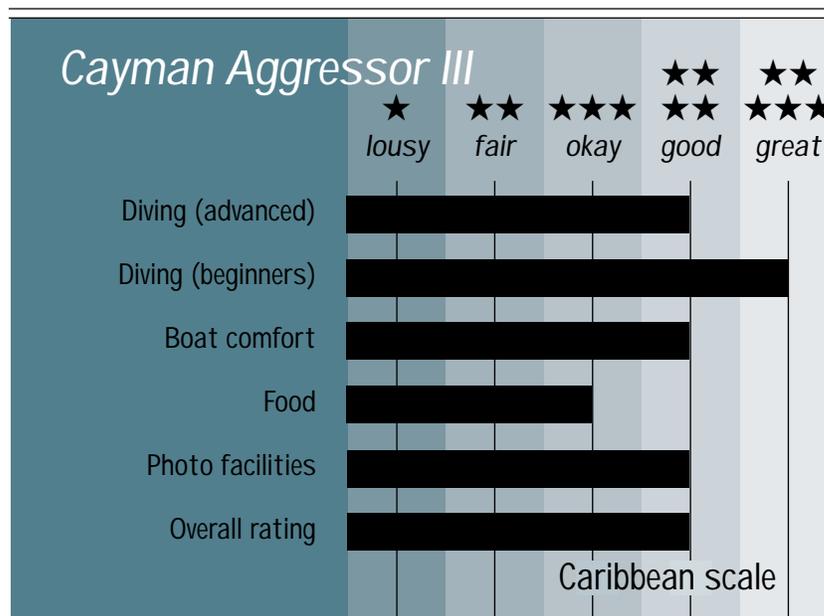
Devil's Grotto, still within the Georgetown area, was a dive I remembered fondly from previous years: a marvelous maze of caves, channels, and interstices, all bathed in blue light from the filtered sun. At one point a mass of silversides poured in and around the deep opening

of a tunnel in a glittering tide. As we worked our way gradually along the west side of Grand Cayman, the diving began to improve: spectacular dropoffs dramatically silhouetted with black coral, barrel sponges, and big seafans, along with an eagle ray and several large schools of jacks.

And then there was Stingray City, that experience for which Grand Cayman seems to have become most famous. The *Aggressor* staff prechoreographs this dive, sending all divers down to kneel in a large circle and await the visitation of the rays. (Not being all that stupid, many of the rays had been circling the boat in eager anticipation before we ever set up for them.) A crew member then distributes a handful of squid to each diver -- gloves are strongly recommended. And on they come! Stingrays are, in fact, large and muscular creatures,

and their motivation is not friendly curiosity but unabated greed. Their mouths, located ventrally, have hard, sharp plates to scoop up food. They are not gentle. I quickly settled for throwing my portion of squid into the approaching mouth and jerking my hand back. Another diver, not so quick, got a large, bloody bruise along her arm from the stingray's "teeth." Naturally, the photographers among us were snapping pictures, in between delivering squid and dodging the swooping shapes. All this activity stirred up clouds of sand, making photographs more of milky water than stingrays. But it was certainly an exciting experience, not to be missed.

The stingray encounter is not without risk. We met a vigorous young divemaster on Grand Cayman who had been caught between two rays fighting for food and had sustained a serious stab wound in his thigh -- the worst pain he had ever felt, he told us. He was out of action for more than a month, and his enthusiasm for Stingray City was considerably dampened.



The Daily Routine and the Nightly Dive

Each day the boat moved to an early-morning site and stayed until noon. I was free to dive as much or as little as I wished. Experienced divers were left reasonably free to do their own thing, as long as they observed the 110-foot depth limit. Diving crew were always available to advise or help or lead us to particular sites of interest; the atmosphere was easy and comfortable. In the afternoon we would move to another site and stay until early evening. Depending on the conditions and wishes of the divers, we might or might not go elsewhere for the regular night dive.

Our first night dive was on the venerable *Balboa*. This wreck is not really a single entity anymore -- mostly large piles of planks, shattered ribs, and unrecognizable chunks of metal -- but it makes a wonderful home for the creatures of the night. The first thing I saw was a beautiful blue octopus, with whom I dodged in and out of a heap of pipes. Lobsters, arrow crabs, and barberpole shrimp peered from cracks and crannies, and multihued parrotfish and otherwise elusive bluetriggerfish slumbered peacefully in their mucus nightwear. The triangular swim-through at the bow had a moray and an orange ball anemone. Since the *Aggressor* was positioned almost directly overhead, I could take all the time I wished without worrying about where I was or how to get back to the boat.

Here's how *In Depth* readers diving the Cayman Aggressor in 1994 and '95 rated it (5-star scale):
 Diving (advanced) — 4 stars
 Diving (beginners) — 4.25
 Food — 4.6
 Accommodations — 4.8
 Level of service — 4.6

J. Q.

Lean, Mean Crewing Machine

The crew is small but extremely efficient and multipurpose; that is, any one of them can and sometimes does function as cook, photo expert, cabin steward, or divemaster. In fact, we were blessed with not one but two captains: Bill Spencer and Allan Mitchell. Captain Bill is enjoying a second career, having retired from his United Auto Workers job and emigrated

to Grand Cayman. His wife Yvonne is the head cook, but does anything else required, including commanding the ship when necessary. Barry the photo pro, another all-purpose expert, offered a special photography course (at extra cost) for several ambitious new photographers, so he was generally occupied with guiding and instructing them.

Captain Bill did an impressive job with the certification of one young woman who

Is diving in the Caymans good or just well advertised? You can read about it almost every month in one of the slick diving publications. Cayman does have a lot going for it — it's clean, it's easy to get to, everyone speaks English, and it has wall diving. We'll be taking a look in upcoming issues at the ecstasies,

Caymans to Come

agonies, and options of diving the Caymans Islands, from the hustle of Grand Cayman to the laid-back Brac and the outback Little Cayman.

J. Q.

started out crying with terror and clutching him frantically over the prospect of submerging her face but by the end of the trip leaped fearlessly into the water for a night dive.

The crew were always congenial and ready to help. All lent a hand in the kitchen at one time or another, producing nourishing if not gourmet-quality meals. Breakfast was the usual eggs and bacon or waffles or pancakes, prefaced by assorted tropical fruits. Lunch was sandwiches, soup, and usually a dessert pastry. Dinner was meat or fresh fish, salad, and vegetables. We generally postponed our evening dessert (pie or cake with ice cream) until after the night dive and enjoyed it while watching videos of our day's diving. And, of course, there were snacks like cookies or brownies between dives. Beer and alcoholic drinks were available at extra cost on the sundeck, but only after the day's diving was done.

The other guests on the trip were from a Tucson dive club; they ranged from a rank beginner to veterans with many years' experience. One couple were prizewinning photographers whose slides impressed us each evening when we examined the day's film. They were regulars having made the trip several times in the last few years.

From Grand Cayman to Grandeur

I was fortunate to be traveling in May; from early spring to late summer, the *Aggressor* spends half the week at Little Cayman near Bloody Bay Wall. We made the move overnight. Although the passage wasn't the roughest I've experienced, those with delicate stomachs would be wise to take precautions. But the diving on Bloody Bay Wall was certainly worth the trip.

The first morning, we dove the Great Wall, a dizzying dropoff to infinity. The eagle rays were there, and the

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turtles were there, and the barrelsponges of large and exotic shapes and colors were there. The sites around Little Cayman were fresher and less murky than those at Grand Cayman. We did a lot of diving in and around Jackson's Reef, which offered not only beautiful walls but large coral heads and broad sandy areas close by. I would start each dive transfixed by the grandeur of the walls, then watch the jack-in-the-box performances of sailfin blennies in the sand, and finish up around the shallow bommies. The crew introduced us to the only known seahorse in the area; the strobe-hardened creature stayed still for flash after flash.

And this is Molly's realm. One night, anticipating her visit, the crew set up powerful floodlights, around which divers positioned themselves. Molly burst on the scene as expected, swooping down, up, and around in acrobatic circles as she scooped up the masses of plankton attracted by the light. The complex pattern of her bright white ventral surface flashed in and out of the light as she performed for ten minutes. A crew member recorded the whole scene with underwater videocam so we could watch it on the *Aggressor* whenever we wanted.

We moved back to Grand Cayman again one night, this time with calm seas, but the dives the next morning were anticlimactic, murky and riddled with capricious currents. I turned to my chores -- washing, drying, and packing -- while the crew created a feast of delicious hors d'oeuvres for the evening's farewell cocktail party.

This was my third visit to the Caymans. I made my first-ever scuba dive here in 1967 and discovered the wonders of the underwater world. My second visit was in 1978, when the waves of banks and tourists were already reaching flood tide. Now, of course, it feels like a major metropolis. With all due allowance for nostalgia, it's sad to see how the underwater life and visibility have declined. Just in case I was imagining it, I checked with Cathy Church, who runs her underwater photography work from a studio at Sunset House. She validated my impressions. Yes, there used to be a lot more fish, and yes, visibility used to run 150-200 feet. Now I would put average visibility closer to 50-75 feet. But it's still a beautiful, magical place to dive, with a wide range of underwater topography and living forms. And the *Aggressor* is certainly a delightful way to go!

Readers gave 3.8 stars out of 5 for the coral on Grand Cayman, 3.7 stars for tropical fish, 3 stars for large fish, and 3.8 stars for small critters.
J. Q.

To book the *Cayman Aggressor*, contact almost any travel agent or call Aggressor Fleet Ltd at 800-348-2628. Current rate for *Cayman Aggressor III*: \$1,495 per person. May to October is the rainy season, although showers usually pass quickly. Air temperatures average 75° to 80°F, water 78° to 82°F. The *Aggressor* usually travels to Little Cayman only during spring and summer, when the water is calmest. . . . The official exchange rate is C\$1 = US\$1.25. U.S. and Canadian dollars are readily accepted throughout the Cayman Islands. . . . U.S. and Canadian citizens must show proof of citizenship and a return ticket or proof of onward passage. Check your hair style before you go — the U.S. State Department notes that "people wearing their hair in dreadlocks have occasionally been refused entry to the Cayman Islands." . . . Airfare varies with seasons and specials. Check with travel wholesalers before buying a ticket. I paid \$571 from the West Coast for this trip.

Ditty Bag

X. A.