
Divi Tiara Beach Resort

On the way to Little Cayman

Dear Fellow Diver,

For the third consecutive August day, the conversation at the bar was about weather. All day long, six-foot waves broke offshore, making the cut through the reef nearly invisible. Dives at E's Chute and the Greenhouse off the Brac were in rolling seas, knocking one diver to the deck. A black sky darkened the water to a murky gray. In the driving rain on the return to the dock, 16 divers stood under the flying bridge, clinging to overhead handles like so many subway commuters.

"You know," said a fellow tippler, "I come here just to dive Little Cayman. When we can't get over there, I just get plain ornery. Brac diving's okay, but Little Cayman's where it's at." Others dourly nodded their heads.

I don't get it. Why do people come to the Brac if all they want is to dive Little Cayman, with arguably some of the best Caribbean diving? Why not pick one of two fine resorts on Little Cayman? After all, in the winter you may never make the five-mile crossing.

One reason is that the Peter Hughes dive operation is one of the best in the Caribbean. It was good when I dived it five years ago -- when Peter actually supervised it -- and it's good now (even though he's long gone after selling his name). Daily they offer three tanks from their several large, fast, comfortable, stable, photo-friendly boats, with solid tank racks, bench seats, and rinse tanks. Departures and arrivals are as punctual as a Swiss commuter train.

I checked in at the dive shop (across from the photo shop, which does afternoon E-6 processing), got my numbered mesh bag for gear, and meandered down the dock to the chalkboards to sign up for the next day's dive. If weather is favorable, up to three boats may roar to Little Cayman, while others dive the Brac. (Tip: As soon as you get back from the morning dive, sign up for the next day so you get your choice.) Hang your mesh sack on your assigned hook, and the next day the crew loads it into your boat.

Not Tight Cheeked, but the Dive Police Are Watching

On dives, limits are strict, but some fudging is permitted. First dive: 100 feet for 20 minutes. Second: 50 feet for 40 minutes, with a 45-minute surface interval -- or when your computer says 50 feet for 50 minutes. If you're a computer diver, "you can follow your computer," said dive manager Stevo, a Richard Simmons lookalike, "but respect the depth limits and don't keep people who have left the water waiting for you too long." To me, that means get in the water first, then squeeze another 20 minutes out of both dives.

With three Caymans to choose from — Grand, Little, and the Brac — Ben Davison heads to the Caribbean to check out why divers continue to flock to the Brac's Tiara Beach Resort.

J. Q.

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Buddies dive unguided, if desired, though divemasters police behavior. I'm embarrassed to admit that I got chastised for inadvertently putting a fin on coral (yes, bad form). And my buddy was cautioned (she says "yelled at") for not switching to the Navy tables when her computer blanked. (Time, depth, safe dive profiles -- especially on the very first dive -- are pretty damn intuitive after years of diving, but there's no way for the guide to know, and a reprimand was in order.) But the operation is not rigidly tight checked. When my Delphi stopped indicating my psi I told the guide, checked the tank with another gauge, and dived with my buddy, knowing I had as much air as she unless a hose burst.

Unlike everyone at the bar, I didn't come here just to dive Little Cayman. I had two 17-year-olds with me who a week before had completed their certifications in the cold water of Monterey, California. I wanted them to get a well-organized introduction into tropical boat diving. I wasn't disappointed, and neither were they. As I expect of those who have yet to get a grip on their own mortality, they got so caught up in the joy of diving they paid no heed to such trivia as time and depth and rate of ascent. But they soon proved remarkably capable in the water and, unlike me, didn't get scolded by the dive police. They buddied up and told their mother and me to buzz off.

On Brac, the first daily dive is typically the better dive, with walls, large coral mounds, and other dramatic features. Occasional schools of jacks, streams of blue chromis, and a turtle or two can offer some unique element. The second dive, in shallow patch-reef territory, usually has more tropical fish in modest numbers well suited for fish photography.

Ditty Bag

Most travel wholesalers and agents book Tiara Beach Resort, or you can call Divi Hotels direct at 800-367-3484 or 919-419-3484. At the Divi number it took a minute for them to figure out what I was talking about when I asked for rates at Tiara Beach Resort. Even-

tually I was told that it had a new name, Cayman Brac Tiara Beach Club. Whatever its name is, a six-night package in a luxury room with two boat dives a day and no meals runs \$2,286 (plus 20% service charge); add breakfast and dinner and it's \$2,810, or add all meals and bar for \$3,260 (\$2,852 with standard room or \$3,108 deluxe). . . . Look for airfare bargains; out of Miami it can run as low as \$200 and up to \$400. Direct flights are now available into the Brac.

Our night dive was mostly devoid of anything but a few blue tangs and soldierfish. The only highlights: a slipper lobster grunting along the floor; a dormant parrotfish, sans cocoon; two distant diamonds glittered in my light; a stingray leaving a smoky trail as it nosed in the sand. Best of all: my buddy waved her light to signal a glimmering aqua octopus, octating along. It

huffed and puffed, spread its loose skin, and billowed like a circus tent, one tire-sized membrane with a sack of grey matter hanging limply. We watched it for ten minutes as it morphed into endless shapes and colors. Then we climbed into the boat and returned to shore at 8:30 for one of the better dinners: a moist roast turkey with giblet dressing, mashed potatoes, mixed vegetables right out of the pack, a big salad, and underaged cheeses.

Thankfully, after four days, the weather broke. You see, for a diver, nothing tops the thrill of finning across the coral at 25 feet, then free-falling over the Bloody Bay wall into inner space. I'm left breathless seeing the endless azure give way to a bottom 6,000 feet below. I leveled off at 105 feet, hoping for something big and eerie to appear in the blue. Of course, nothing did. Though the wall is nearly devoid of fish, it still thrills me to explore it. After 15 minutes, I edged upward and moseyed back in the general direction of the boat, amid a much broader range of tropical and fine coral.

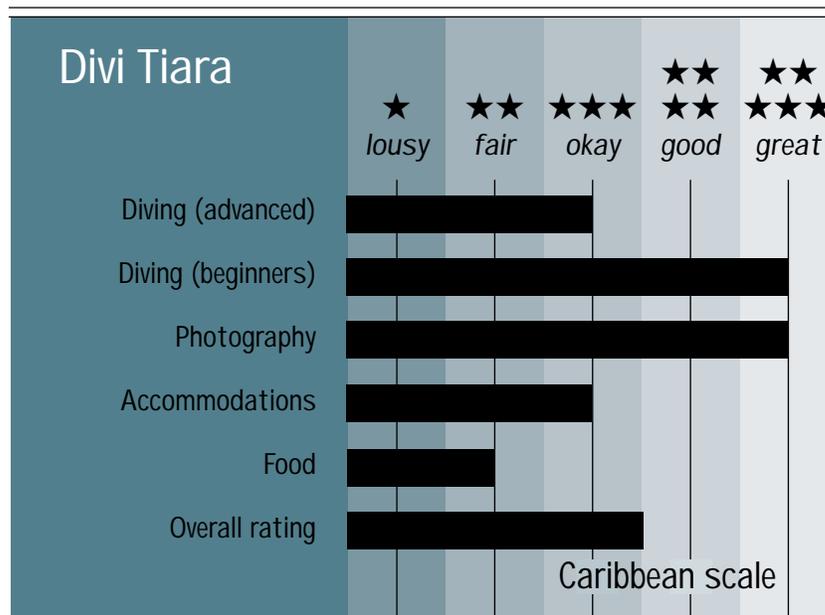
Our second dive, which had several moorings and several names (e.g., Cumber's Cave), was an enormous, coral-encircled patch of white sand. At forty feet, cuts, nooks, and crannies are carved into the reef. I watched a patch of garden eels, then headed to wall's edge and 60 feet. A small turtle finned for the sur-

face, lay dormant on top as it oxygenated itself, then spiraled to the bottom to resume grazing. I saw occasional hamlets, a large, soulful grey angel, a couple of small Nassau groupers, all amid beautiful and pristine coral galore.

On the next day's wall dive, hundreds of calico wrasses streamed downward to 100 feet, circled all three barrels of a tube sponge -- the local cracker barrel? -- then finned back up. In the flats, several small southern stingrays, accompanied by hovering jacks, sifted sand, occasionally chasing a peacock flounder from its resting place. My buddy spotted a flaming scallop, but I was too busy fiddling with my camera. At dive's end an enormous barracuda floated beneath the boat, using it as cover until a coney appeared 20 feet below; he darted to the bottom, but the coney escaped. I'll bet this is the same guy I saw here five years ago.

Come and Get It — Deep Fried, Frozen, and Canned

And back in time for lunch. With the exception of the entree -- deep-fried fish (breaded, frozen, something like Mrs. Paul's), another day deep-fried scallops -- it was unvarying: fake crab salad, tuna salad, bread (shipped unbaked from Grand Cayman), iceberg lettuce salad, canned soup of the day, cold cuts, a Sara Lee-like dessert. Frankly, I found the food inexcusably mediocre. Although divers piled plates sky high from the buffet, virtually everything was prepared somewhere other than Cayman Brac and shipped by barge from the



Tiara Beach is geared for photographers, with its quick-turnaround E-6 processing and photo amenities — an excellent choice for someone who wants to spend a dive trip working on photo skills.

J. Q.

big island, and probably from Miami as well. Ribs and chicken and steak ("I like Sizzler a lot better," said the 17-year-old) were passable at dinner, but sorrowful were a pasty conch stew made with ground conch in dumplings, with no conch distinguishable; fried coconut grouper, which got frozen and breaded somewhere else, I suspect, and served lukewarm; iceberg lettuce; frozen, overcooked veggies. Breakfast: cereals, pancakes in a steam tray, eggs to order (if you could find the cook) -- the usual fare, but the breakfast roll staled of freezer burn and the fresh fruit was often green, though one rotten peach was offered three days running until my partner trashed it. At \$45 a day for meals, I expected better.

While Pirate's Point has made a name for itself with high-quality, fresh food (now Little Cayman Beach Club too), and Grand Cayman Hotel cuisine compares to U.S. hotel cuisine, Tiara skimps on quality and preparation with canned and frozen food -- ordinary, unfresh, and fatty. (I reread my article for *Undercurrent* from five years ago; the food was the same.)

As I contemplate the cuisine here, I worry about my fellow divers who become DAN statistics: too many male divers, over 40, overweight, out of shape, with hidden heart disease, buy the farm in a stressful diving moment. But who's to judge? For the aging, the obese, the infirm, those who gave up aerobic fitness long ago, diving is a democratic sport, available to anyone who can clear a mask. Divi Tiarais a good destination.

Tiara Beach Resort in a Clamshell

It's a lovely setting on a sandy, palmed beach, with several ocean-front rooms, plainly equipped, and six large time-share condos that can be rented (they're the best of the lot). Divi is an aging property that needs more attention. The staff is generally pleasant, the bar lively, the tennis courts lit, the pool warm, the island quiet (except for the 6:15 a.m. Cayman Air flight from a strip 100 yards away), but this place is about three dives a day and three giant plates of food.

So why come to the Brac instead of Little Cayman? Until the arrival of Little Cayman Beach Club, it was the only way to get three tanks a day and a shot at Bloody Bay. Until the arrival of Island Airlines, now serving Little Cayman twice a day, Brac was much easier to get to. And, until the arrival of Little Cayman Beach Club -- owned by the people who own Brac Reef Hotel next door -- Divi was the only one with enough advertising money to entice unknowing divers. During my stay, a lot of divers were repeat customers, happy to be remembered by bartender Leonard, pleased with the convenience, the lack of hassle, the good photo shop. For them, it's an old, well-fitting shoe. And if they don't get to Little Cayman today, there's always tomorrow.

Ben Davison

In Depth is the consumer newsletter for sport divers that reviews scuba destinations and equipment. We accept no advertising. Subscriptions are \$60 a year (addresses in Canada, Mexico, and the Caribbean, add \$15; other foreign addresses, add \$30).

In Depth (ISSN 0895-2302, USPS 001-198) is published monthly, with the December and January issues combined, by Ben Davison, Elephant Socks Publishing, Inc., 125 East Sir Francis Drake Blvd., Larkspur, CA 94939. Second-class postage paid at Larkspur, CA and additional mailing office. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to *In Depth*, P.O. Box 1658, Sausalito, CA 94966. Copyright ©1995 Elephant Socks Publishing, Inc.



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Printed on recycled paper 

**In
Depth**

Oct. 1995 Vol 10 No. 10