
A Guide to Grand Cayman

Where to sleep, eat, rent cars, hang out, and dive

Dear Fellow Diver,

My intention is not to review Cayman as we would normally review a destination, but rather to give you a road map to help you pick accommodations and a dive operation that best suit your interest and budget. I'll give you a rundown on the Tortuga Club, where I think you'll find the best diving, and report on many properties and dive operations that I checked out in August. Though weather is generally good year round, it's not perfect. Unless you're caught in a hurricane, summer rains are usually short; winter rains can last a few days, especially December through February. On those days, only the most skilled dive operators will take you to the North Wall.

To understand Cayman, let's consider three distinct areas: Seven Mile Beach, which isn't much different from any town along the Florida Coast; North of the Beach, for more serious divers; and the North to the East End, the last of Cayman's laid-back tropical paradise.

The road that parallels Seven Mile Beach is lined with big hotels and a variety of condominium complexes. Even off season they're packed with both nondivers and divers because of the beautiful sand beach and warm, calm waters. On the beach, the **Radisson** and the **Westin** provide big-hotel style, service, and cuisine at big-hotel prices (e.g., I paid \$250/night for a beach-front room in the Radisson in August; don't ask me why; I couldn't justify it then, I can't now, I just did it). Across the road, on its own manufactured beach, is the luxurious **Marriott**. Along the busy highway are a few small shopping centers with fast-food outlets, dive stores, pharmacies -- all you need to feel like you never left home. You can find a range of "fun" restaurants, often with mediocre and expensive food, where you'll pay \$20 for a meal that would be worth about \$10 back home.

Many hotels have dive shops -- or at least a counter where you can arrange diving -- right on the beach. Boats that pick you up on Seven Mile Beach invariably dive along it, where the entire reef is badly abused and the fish population has declined markedly. For new divers, it's beautiful; experienced divers will get chased away in a day by the cattleboats, insistent divemasters, and declining reefs. Snorkeling isn't much here. For example, the Radisson emblazons its advertising with the "reef that's 50 feet from the shore," but this is only a skeleton reef, with a few damsel fish living off algae and an occasional patch of living coral the size of a silver dollar.

Most dive operations will pick you up and drive you to the marina to board their boat for the North Wall. Unfortunately, Cayman Dive Association rules typically short-change divers: dive no. 1 to 100 feet for 20 minutes, no. 2 to 60 feet for 40 minutes,

Grand Cayman is anything anyone wants it to be, other than a haven for big fish and dramatic action. In a one-week visit there's a good chance you'll see an eagle ray or two, turtles (thanks to the Turtle Farms breeding and release program), and tarpon, if you visit the alleys where they live. But I've made eight trips there since 1975 -- the most recent in August -- and read hundreds of readers' reports, and it's not likely you'll see anything else that doesn't live in the reef, sharks included.

regardless of your profile. You can find computer-only boats and operators, which generally charge more simply because the boats are out of the dock longer. And, no matter where you stay, you can always find someone to take you snorkeling at Stingray City. When my buddy went out, she counted nearly 40 boats with about 15 people on each. That's about 20 people per ray.

Over the years, I've noticed a few smaller operations that stand out in our readers' minds:

Cayman Marine Lab:
809-949-3873
809-947-5586 fax

Cayman Marine Lab is run by marine biologist Tom Byrnes, who provides intelligent briefings for people who might actually want to learn something. Two boats, maximum ten divers.

Fisheye:
800-887-8569
809-947-4209 voice or fax

Fisheye: Getting a little large, but well regarded by photographers, Fisheye's speciality. Five boats, 6 to 16 divers.

Seasports:
809-949-3965

Seasports: Captain Butch Sjostrom gets continuing highmarks for a personalized operation that does what you want. One boat, seven divers max.

Several condominium complexes continually get good marks. The better ones on Seven Mile Beach include the **Caribbean Club**, which has 18 beach cottages, the five-story **Lacovia, Plantana**, the classic **West Indian Club**, and **London House**. Less expensive: **Coral Caymanian, Grapetree** and the **Indies Suites**, not on the beach, but with its own dive shop and a one-minute drive from the boat. Ask your dive operator to book or let your travel agent. You'll be lucky to save anything booking direct.

Sunset House:
800-854-4767
809-949-7111
809-949-7101 fax

On another part of Grand Cayman you give up a beach but gain unlimited shore diving, though the reef is showing wear and tear. **Sunset House**, with six boats carrying 15 to 20 divers,

Computer Injunction

On November 30, 1995, the U.S. District Court in Sherman, Texas, filed an injunction prohibiting the sale of the Aladin Air X dive computer within the United States.

The injunction is the result of a patent infringement suit filed by Cochran Undersea Technology, the manufacturers of Nemesis, Aquanaut, Sherwood Century, and Beuchat Maestro dive computers, against Uwatec USA. The order cites Uwatec USA's blatant disregard of the court's discovery order and prohibits Uwatec USA from selling, marketing, servicing, distributing, or manufacturing in the United States the Aladin Air X or any diving computer utilizing the ROM code at issue in this case.

I have no guesses as to what the outcome of this suit might be, but it does raise some questions about who would service Aladin computers if Uwatec were to lose. Some caution might be in order if you are considering purchasing an Air X.

As an aside, Cochran Undersea Technology is promising to have a heads-up display for divers on the market by the end of 1996. A heads-up system? In essence, that means you'll be able to read your computer's data by looking into a prism at the bottom of your mask.

J. Q.

with is a ten-minute walk south of Georgetown, away from the hustle and bustle. Cathy Church, who established her photography credentials in the 1970s with then-hubby Jim Church, runs a well-regarded photo shop here. You can get private tutoring or sign up for one of several weeklong photo seminars (so intense that if you shoot up a roll during a dive you stay in the water while they change film for you). The property itself is ordinary and doesn't match the accommodations available on the beach, but if you want to shoot pictures or dive from your hotel beach, this is it.

In the same vicinity but on the other side of the road is **Ambassador Divers**, which caters to computer divers and

offers modest, diver-oriented accommodations. They offer one morning boat dive and afternoon shore dives.

A third locale is the long strip from Rum Point on the north to **Cayman Dive Lodge** on the southeast (which, by the way, has inconsistent management and tiny accommodations, the kind of place I used to frequent when I was in college). The best diving in this strip -- in my opinion, the best on Grand Cayman -- is reached by the newly constructed **Morritt's Tortuga Club** a time-share development on the northeast tip. A cluster of modern, three-story condominiums with comfortable and well-appointed rooms, it perches on the last deserted beach on Grand Cayman.

The old Tortuga Club, 14 funky beachfront cinder-block rooms and a lively bar, was destroyed in 1988 by Hurricane Gilbert. I happened to be there at the time. I locked my luggage on the top shelf of my closet, then weathered the storm by overnighing in the Community Center with 200 Caymanians. When I returned to the Club, I found that Gilbert had ripped out acres of grape-leaf trees and widened the beach. The cinder-block dive shop had disappeared. My room had been gutted; my suitcase was full of sea water.

Welshman Keith Neal ran the diving then and still does, though now it's part of **Surfside Watersports**. I was impressed, not only with the efficiency of his operation, but also with his polite and competent, all-British dive crew. His newest dive boat, a 42-footer, has a head and is beautifully outfitted for diving. Each person geared himself up and switched tanks between dives. One can either walk to the stern of the boat for an easy step into the water or avoid the walk and back roll off the side. My first dive was Three Sisters, large coral mini-mountains with swim-throughs, canyons, and cuts. The three divemasters aboard (for 12 divers!) gave us the option of going it alone, joining the group, or having a guided dive, which I took. The dives were to be 100 feet for 20 minutes and 50 feet for 40, but those with computers were told simply to follow their computers and take a safety stop. I took 50 minutes on the first dive and never got even a raised eyebrow.

It was dramatic, though not as sheer as the North Wall. Plenty of stacked plate coral created a fairyland atmosphere. Ten-foot wire coral coiled in many directions. I came across an occasional large basket sponge, clusters of tube sponges, and large patches of deepwater gorgonia. Near the end of the

Ambassador Divers:
809-949-8839 voice or fax

Morritt's Surfside Divers:
809-947-7449
809-947-7669 fax

Not many people would name their travel business Chuck's Chancy Travel or Risky Travel of Raleigh. I don't think Kirk Schanze knew what he was getting into when he christened his Florida-based diving and sailing business (you guessed it) Sea Safaris.

Kirk wants everyone to know that his company is not associated with the dive travel company Sea Safaris of Manhattan Beach, California. As *In Depth* has reported, the California-based Sea Safaris has taken the money from dozens of divers for international trips without forwarding it to resorts or live-aboards, thus stranding the divers abroad with little choice but to pay up a second time (numerous lawsuits and investigations are pending). Here's hoping Kirk can outlive the notoriety of his business name. (He also says the editor of *Undercurrent* told him they couldn't help him get the word out as they don't have enough readers to hurt his business!) Call him at 800-558-7245.

J. Q.

*What's in
a Name?*

dive, a leg-long grouper budged only when I reached out to chuck his chin.

On the second dive, a divemaster chopped conch for a fish-feeding exercise for the tourists, a typical Cayman show. While black durgons squabbled among themselves, snapper slipped in and carted away the big hunks. Leaving the circus, my buddy and moseyed back and forth across acres of softly swaying brown soft corals, ending in a sand-bottom cut where we stumbled across four scaly, shiny four-foot tarpon that let us get within a body length. Tarpon fishing has declined as a sport, so divers get to see tarpon more often. I saw small schools of them in several other canyons. Throughout the dive I saw all the common tropicals and a couple of watchful barracuda.

After two pleasant dives, we lunched in the bar on marinated conch, conch fritters, and a fresh salad bar, one of the better meals I had in the Caymans. For people who want three good dives a day, a beautiful beach, good meals, and condominium units facing the ocean, this is an excellent choice. It is particularly good for families with prepubescent children. While you may occasionally see the *Cayman Aggressor* anchored off the East End, it's rare that any other dive operation shows, so the reefs here are less trammled. The downside: no beach diving (though interesting snorkeling) and no overnight film development.

You might consider the lovely condos at **Rum Point** in Grand Cayman's isolated and most pricey neighborhood. Surfside runs an able operation here, though perhaps better suited for novice and intermediate divers. Since it's so close to the North Wall, they can make it when others can't.

Finally, there are inexpensive tour operators who put together cheap packages for nondivers. If you're interested in bargains, try these outfitters listed at left.

Ben Davison

Grand Cayman on \$100 a Day

Or do it yourself, as one of our correspondents did in November:

With the financial burden of the holidays approaching, my buddy challenged me to put together a trip where we could fly from Houston, sleep in a clean room, eat, and dive every day for four days -- for less than \$650 each. And Mexico was unacceptable. As it turned out, we upped the trip to six days in Cayman and spent \$750 each.

I began by searching out the best available airfares on Sabre, American Airlines' booking service on CompuServe, and found that Grand Cayman, via Cayman Airways, was very reasonable.

I'd heard about two likely places to stay: the **Seaview**, at \$79/night for two, plus tax (a big plus that you need to consider), and the **Enterprise Bed and Breakfast** at \$66/per night double, including tax and breakfast. I picked the Enterprise, a landbound location ten minutes east of Georgetown, clean, well

Tropical Adventures:
800-247-3483 or
206-441-3483

Island Dreams:
800-346-6116 or
713-973-9300

Landfall Productions:
800-525-3833 or
415-651-6499

Seaview:
809-949-8804
809-949-8507 fax

Enterprise Bed & Breakfast:
809-947-6009

maintained, and with a couple of pleasant ladies cooking breakfast between 7:00 and 9:00 and keeping an eye out for you. They offer a car rental and dive package, but I found better deals.

While **Hertz**, **Avis**, and **Budget** offer autos, **Andy's** and **Coconuts Car Rental** both offer a Subaru Alta for \$28 per day. This is nothing more than a rolling dive locker for two, exactly what we needed. (A Cayman drivers license is \$5, issued on the spot.)

Some of the best diving is accessible from the shore. We rented tanks (\$10 for one, including a tank and one refill) from the Seaview and Eden Rock, both of which have showers and dip tanks for after the dive. After checking out a site map purchased at **Eden Rock**, we headed out. With a carton of juice stuffed in our pocket, towing an inflatable dive flag, we took up a heading for a leisurely 30-minute float out to the walls.

On a typical profile, we went deep on the wall for 15 minutes, then worked our way up the shallower reefs to the shore, timing it to air out near the shore. This was an excellent profile; we never got close to our deco limits. Our dives included Eden Rock, Devils Grotto, Smith Cove, Eagle Ray Rock (deep), Turtle Farm, Waldo's Reef (deep), Spanish Reef (deep), and Soto's Reef. While we often found reefs damaged near the buoys, diving away from these areas put us in pristine locations without fear of being run over by a \$55-per-head dive boat.

We scheduled a trip with **Captain Marvin** to the North Central Wall, with a return stop at Stingray City, but as we arrived at the main channel, we found ourselves faced with three-foot seas and inexperienced divers on board, so our drivers decided not to venture out (although Fisheye blew past us and never looked back, and three other boats from Rum Point were enjoying the wall). The water at Stingray City was "too green," so we went to the sandbar in eight feet of water and watched everyone trash the coral, seafans, and sponges while they poked squid at the stingrays. Upon return, we demanded a refund, which, after we persisted and made a telephone call to the owner, we were graciously given.

While breakfast was covered by the Enterprise, lunch was normally picnic style on the beach, provided at U.S. rates from the supermarket deli. Dinner is a matter of getting out of Georgetown to local cafes in Bodden Town, West Bay, or Hell. We found the prices to be equal or less than in the U.S, and we got to meet the locals, who were pleased that there were Americans that were interested in the real Caymans.

For entertainment, I tried the **Lone Star**, and got my fill of watching divemasters play King of the Island while picking their nightly subjects. A place next to Eden Rock serves a nightly special, e.g., \$1 margaritas, \$2 rum punch, music, munchies, and ocean view. **Holiday Inn** has a band every night, but the drink prices will bring you to your knees. I also enjoyed an evening of pool at the **Inferno in Hell**. Nighttime at the **Seaview**, where divers meet divers, is also fun.

All in all, one my best trips. Yes, there is life outside the packaged tour.

CAR RENTALS

Andy's:
809-949-8111
809-949-6738
809-949-8385 fax

Coconuts:
809-947-4377

Eden Rock:
809-949-7243
809-949-0842 fax