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Ben Davison's **In
Depth**

The Personal Diving Report . . . for Traveling Divers

Diving and Dining on Little Cayman

Pirate's Point, where the eating's good and the diving's lazy

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Dear Fellow Diver,

What comes from Texas but has migrated to tropical waters, tells a mean story, cooks a meal that will make you groan with pleasure, and offers an adult-oriented, bed-and-breakfast-type atmosphere for divers? Gladys Howard, of course.

Sure, the diving was why I was on Little Cayman. But the real pièce de résistance at Pirate's Point Resort is the gourmet fare. Gladys Howard operated an international cooking school and deluxe catering service for 20 years in Texas, having studied the art abroad with such luminaries as James Beard and Julia Child. Then she came up with the idea of finding a small resort and using her skills to delight her guests. That's exactly what she did and has been doing for the past 10 years.

During my week at the resort she managed to present a variety of mouth-watering dishes at each meal with virtually no repeats, despite the expense and travail involved in importing fresh raw ingredients to the island. The guacamole she served at our first cocktail hour gave me a hint of the care with which Gladys concocts even the most routine of dishes. And my raised expectations were not disappointed by what followed. But first . . .

Oh, Yeah — Diving, That's Why I Came

Diving at Bloody Bay is justly famous, offering walls as spectacular as any in the Caribbean. I know of nothing else that can give such an intoxicating sensation of flying over the edge of infinity. This experience is the most distinctive aspect of Little Cayman diving, with its plunging vertical wall starting near the surface. Both the visibility and the underwater life have diminished a bit over the years (though they

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can still be downright exciting), but that powerful sense of conquering gravity above the benthic depths is still very much there. One Little Cayman tradition I sadly missed: Molly the Manta, who up to a year ago had put in an almost daily appearance, is no longer seen. But the population of turtles and eagle rays is as rewarding as ever.

On my first dive at Jackson Wall and Reef, I dropped down on a wall decked with enormous barrel, basket, and pipe-organ sponges, a moonlike landscape with abrupt cuts and canyons interspersed with underwater cliffs. In such topography you can combine in a single dive the excitement of a wall, the charm of shallow bommies, and the chance to study the smaller, less obvious creatures in and about the sand flats. Once again I attempted to outwait the garden eels and sneak a quick picture when they finally decided it was safe to reemerge from their holes -- and once again they were too quick for me. Looking into a crevice in the coral, I was mesmerized by a juvenile spotted drum that was happily swimming around and around in his own small realm. A moderate current at Donna's Delight carried me into a prolonged close encounter with a large and friendly grouper. Since feeding the fish is forbidden, I was surprised by his attentions, but I supposed he was recalling pleasant memories of the days of abundant cheese whiz.

Gladys's dive boat, the *Yellow Rose II*, is brand new, having been acquired only a few months ago. It's 42 feet long and 16 feet wide, with a two-tier camera table under cover, a fully comfortable head with clearance to turn around, and an upper-level lounge area with partial shade on the pilot deck. Tank holders are located in separated pairs above benches along the sides of the main deck, with adequate room for donning the tank while sitting and compartments underneath for gear. At the forward end of the cabin, under cover, there's a wide shelf for storing dry articles.

Sinking a Ship to Raise Money

Underwater cinematographer Bill Lovin was shooting some footage in Cuba when he came across a 330-foot Russian destroyer sitting at the dock. Turns out the Cayman government has bought the abandoned destroyer and wants to sink it off Cayman Brac.

This \$275,000 dive site, purchased through the Russian embassy in Havana, is to be sunk in 110 feet of water about 600 feet offshore of the Brac to provide a new dive attraction. Why the Brac and not Grand Cayman or Little Cayman? Grand Cayman has its own wrecks, and Little Cayman will be happy if the Brac has its own diving attraction instead of hauling additional divers over to Bloody Bay. Another reason is that Brac's economy is slow. The Cayman government is trying to jump-start things by sinking the ship.

Why the money crunch on the Brac? Maybe because for years they've been hauling divers over to Little Cayman. It took me just one trip to figure it out: why stay on the Brac to dive Little Cayman when you can just stay on Little Cayman? Now that Little Cayman Beach Resort is advertising, divers are jumping straight to Little Cayman and bypassing the Brac. Will the wreck help? I don't know. I still wonder if sinking it in 110 feet of water will make divers break Cayman's 100-foot rule. J. Q.

Get with the Program

Around 10 a.m. each day we gathered for the first dive, piling ourselves and whatever gear we'd not left on the boat into the pickup for the five-minute ride to the dock.

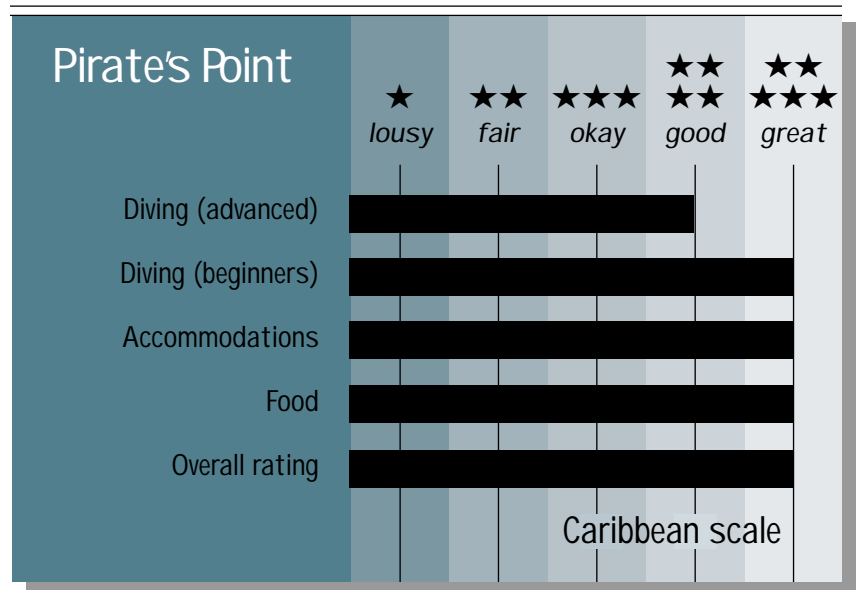
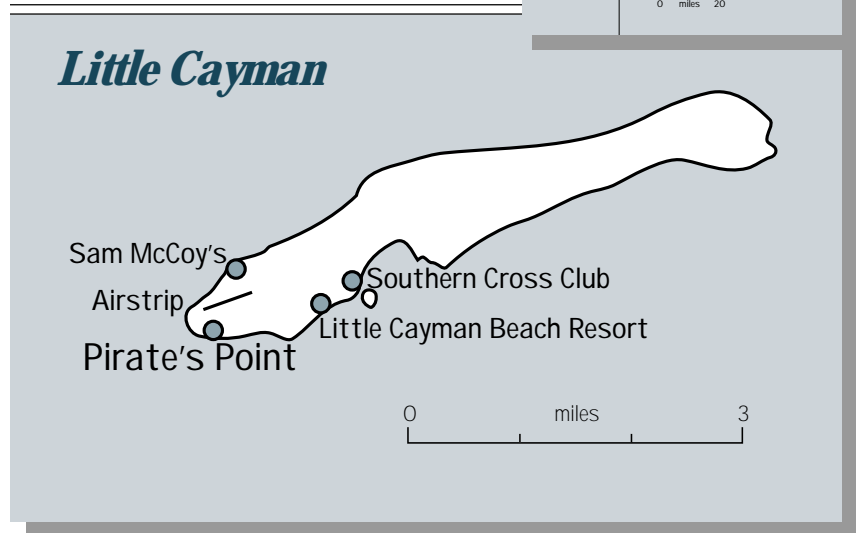
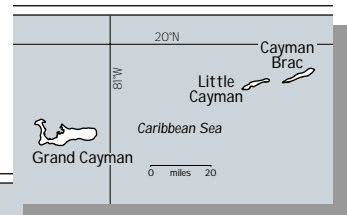
In theory it was a morning dive trip, returning for lunch with the afternoon free for leisure, exploring the island, and so forth. In practice, we were seldom back before 3 p.m., so the afternoon leisure was largely illusory.

One of the best dives was a night dive next to the dock. I jumped off the dock (lights off at the start to guard against stinging jellyfish), dropped down to 20 feet, and, following one of two fingers of coral out a short distance, encountered a small spotted moray eel, then a large green one, then several octopuses, one a vividly iridescent blue. The divemaster found one fascinating thing after another, including a comparatively rare tessellated nudibranch and tiny scallops. A large basket star glowed like a golden web in our lights, and a baby squid undulated away into the shadows. Giant lobsters waved menacing feelers in our direction, and shrimps and crabs joined the show. Somehow during all this I followed the second finger of coral back and explored the rich fauna lodged in the cracks and crevices of the dock wall, exiting carefully on the cement stairs.

Natural Habitats Ashore

Rooms at the resort were as spacious and comfortable as an upscale modern hotel: an enormous bedroom, a deck overlooking a superb ocean view. The bed, too, was enormous beneath copious folds of mosquito netting that, fortunately, turned out to be unnecessary -- though it contributed a certain romantic aura to the room. An ample ceiling fan and several smaller table fans were available to supplement the natural ventilation of the louvered walls on both sides; a private shower and toilet area completed the arrangements. (Air-conditioned units are also available if you prefer, but we enjoyed the sea breeze.)

Grounds have been left almost completely natural, with sea grapes, spider lilies, tropical pines, a mixture of tropical flowering vines -- and the ubiquitous "Tourist Tree" (the bark is red and always peeling). Sometime during your stay Gladys leads you on a nature walk, pointing out and describing much of the local flora and fauna as well as an ancient cenoté she has discovered. Gladys herself is a mainstay



Things have changed a lot at Pirate's Point since I was there nine years ago. Gladys is even adding a freshwater swimming pool and spa. When I was there, it didn't even have a rinse tank.

J. Q.

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of the National Trust for the Cayman Islands, whose projects include both the local Red-Footed Booby Pond Nature Reserve and a small turtle hatchery-nursery whose purpose is solely the protection and release of baby turtles (none are sold for meat).

Guests can help themselves to their choice of drinks in the cozy, if somewhat constricted, bar. The television screen is available for professional scuba diving videos as well as amateur efforts. It's also, unfortunately, available for showing a number of raucous movies that compete with conversation and socializing, something of a blot on an otherwise harmonious interval. A light, cheerful dining room is adjacent, decorated with stained-glass portrayals of exotic underwater creatures.

Don't Touch Me!

Although the dive operation was not overly restrictive -- we were asked merely to respect the official Cayman Island limitations of 100 feet on the first dive and around 50 on the second -- a major problem did arise. Several divers experienced the officious supervision of divemasters who seemed obsessed with a duty to teach us perfect buoyancy down to the last tiny bubble of air. It is not a happy experience to have someone come up behind you and suddenly add or subtract a burst of air from your inflator hose.

Let me hasten to add that, as I commented to another diver the first afternoon, the four divemasters were awesomely competent. "Yes", she replied, "but they're soooooo bossy!" And yes, both things were true. I was frequently put in mind of the boy scout who determinedly escorted the little old lady across the street -- where she didn't wish to go. Guests advanced various theories to account for this phenomenon, ranging from overwork burnout to inexperience with any but the most incompetent of beginning divers.

My partner and I had joined a group of 20 other divers from various scuba clubs for this week of diving at the relaxed tempo of one boat trip (two dives) per day. It was this number that caused a problem. Much of the area dived is a marine sanctuary, within which no more than 20 divers are permitted off the boat at any one time. With our full party of 22, this meant two divers would have to sit out some dives. I damn sure didn't want it to be me.

Other Places, Other Names

Pirate's Point is not the only resort on Little Cayman. The Little Cayman Beach Resort, a larger complex, neatly landscaped with a swimming pool plus adjacent bar and tennis court, has significantly less funky island atmosphere than Pirate's Point but boasts its own private dock and several handsome boats. The Southern Cross Club is less impressive but it, too, has a swimming pool and outdoor bar and is said to cater more to fishermen. Paradise Village consists of units with kitchenettes where you can do your own cooking or, if you wish, dine at the Hungry Iguana next door; it has a dive operation as well. Sam McCoy's is more oriented to fishing and uses a much smaller dive boat

with a minimum of shade. Sam flies divers and fishermen over from Grand Cayman for the day and returns them that evening.

And About That Cuisine . . .

I'd intended to check out the food at these other places, but I was frustrated both by the leisurely pace of Pirate's Point's daily schedule (which allowed me less time than I'd expected for exploration) and, frankly, by my reluctance to miss one of Gladys's marvelous meals. The first night's unmissable feast included an assortment of tacos and enchiladas, two kinds of rice, beans, a number of different sauces, and a salad mix with broccoli, raisins, and pine nuts -- rounded out by chocolate-apple cream cake. The next night, I didn't want to pass up roast beef with Yorkshire pudding, roast potatoes, peas and carrots with nuts and exotic seasonings, two kinds of salads, and frosted chocolate cheesecake for dessert. The following night I was loath to forgo marlin with johnnycakes, calalou (a Caribbean vegetable), breadfruit, and for dessert frosted gingerbread. (There was almost always vegetarian fare for those requiring it, and red or white wine with dinner.) Somewhere along the line I enjoyed deliciously grilled Mahi-Mahi, two kind of curried rice, and chilled chocolate bars. And on, and on.

Breakfasts were delightful, as were lunches, which might be an artfully concocted mixture of curried vegetables, fish or other meat or shellfish salads, conch ceviche, or Mahi-Mahi fritters. Neither calories nor cholesterol were spared, needless to say. The overall effect was fantastic. The only time a meal was less than special was at the picnic -- not Gladys's finest hour -- when we lunched on ham, turkey, or vegetarian sandwiches at a flat, sticker-infested nearby island with no seats or shade. But things picked up on the way back when divers were encouraged to snorkel for conchs to be made into chowder (shells could be kept as souvenirs). Gladys offers a book of her own personal recipes, inscribed to the purchaser, for \$15, money donated to the Little Cayman National Trust.

I did chat with some of the locals who were fortunate enough to get one of the few openings for a Pirate's Point dinner (reservations must be made before ten in the morning), and the consensus was that none of the other resorts came up to Gladys's standards, though the Hungry Iguana was a respectable runner-up.

So the answer to your obvious question is yes -- I'd go back to Pirate's Point for the food. Oh, yes, and the diving.

X. A.

If a divemaster came along and touched my inflator button, I would be outraged . . . I mean downright rabid. Nor would I find it acceptable to sit out a dive because of too many divers. Expect to hear more on these subjects in upcoming issues.

J. Q.

Ditty Bag

Total cost of the one-week package, per person and including diving, food, lodging, and unlimited bar (a major item in a land where one beer costs \$5) is \$1,150, plus \$35 for each night dive. The demand is great enough to recommend reservations well in advance for Pirate's Point. A 15% "gratuity," which is in fact required, is added to the bill, as is a 10% hotel tax. The resort closes August 3-24. Pirate's Point: 345-948-1010 (as of Sept. 1, Cayman's area code changed from 809 to 345). . . . Shore snorkeling is free except at the PP waterfront, but possible only during reasonably calm weather. The area remains shallow out to the fringing reef, with not much to see. . . . The resort was surprisingly free of bugs, with only occasional sand fleas and mosquitoes in the early evening. . . . Beware of meals at the Grand Cayman airport, which ran us over \$25 for a couple of sandwiches and beers. . . . Excess-baggage charges above 50 pounds of luggage may or may not be assessed.
