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SUNKEN TREASURE

Discover world-class diving in diminutive Cayman

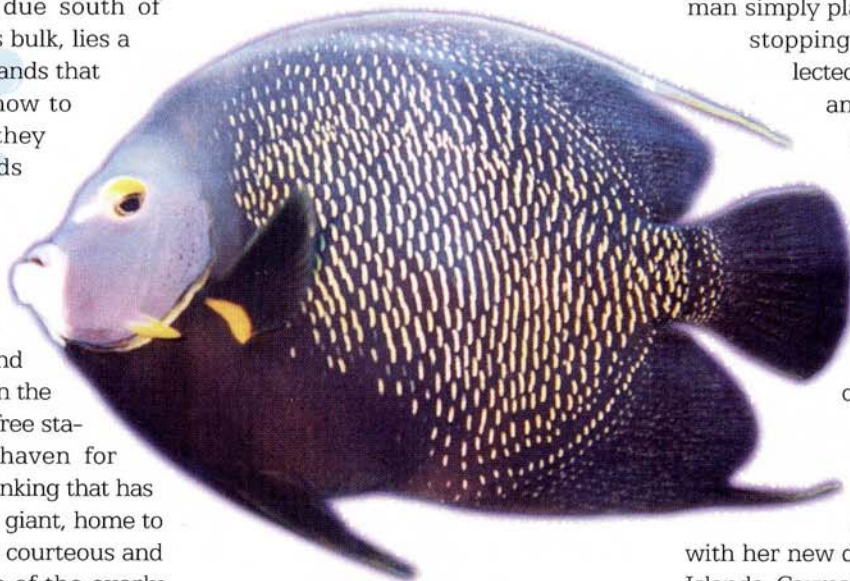
by Jill Lovelace
photos by Bruce Hensley

We all come with our personal package of assets and liabilities. Some, never pleased, seek to masquerade as what they'd like to be but aren't, with unappealing results. Others win our admiration by recognizing what they have going for them and developing it to full potential.

Less than 500 miles due south of Miami, just beyond Cuba's bulk, lies a trio of flat, unassuming islands that learned some time ago how to make the best of what they had. The Cayman Islands today are celebrated as clean, attractive, cosmopolitan, with low crime rates, a strong economy, solid infrastructure, stable government, and the best standard of living in the Caribbean. Riding her tax-free status, Cayman created a haven for investment and offshore banking that has made her a global financial giant, home to over 550 banks. Locals are courteous and matter-of-fact, with none of the overly solicitous, pesky street peddlers and panhandlers found on other islands.

Beyond her balance sheets, Cayman's other treasures lie beneath the crystalline waters of the Caribbean Sea. The outcroppings of a 26,000-foot-high submarine mountain range made of coral limestone, the Cayman Islands are too porous to maintain inland rivers or streams. That lack of runoff has abetted the formation of an underwater paradise — kaleidoscope coral

gardens, sheer drop offs, a plethora of marine life, visibility to an incredible 200 feet, and many a shipwreck still ripe for exploring years after succumbing to Cayman's treacherous reefs. This undersea Utopia has earned Cayman its distinction as one of the Caribbean's, and indeed the world's, finest scuba diving destinations.



It may not have the interesting topography (maximum elevation on the largest island is a mere 60 feet), glorious waterfalls, or rough-and-tumble third-world exoticism of some of its neighbors, but confident Cayman is sturdy above the surface, spectacular beneath.

Discovered for the New World by Christopher Columbus in 1503, the Cayman Islands were so surrounded by the rounded backs of partially submerged sea

turtles that the Italian explorer dubbed it Las Tortugas. That title eventually evolved into caymanas, the Spanish-Carib word for alligators reputed to inhabit the swampy interior here, though it was probably sightings of large indigenous iguanas that prompted the label.

For the better part of two centuries, Cayman simply played host to passing ships stopping for fresh supplies of collected rainwater and turtle meat, and to marauding pirates in search of a hideout. The first permanent settlers are thought to have arrived in 1655, deserters from Oliver Cromwell's army fleeing the Spanish conquest of Jamaica. Also came bands of Scottish fishermen, quiet and industrious. Fifteen years later, the Treaty of Madrid returned Jamaica to Britain, along with her new dependencies, the Cayman Islands. Cayman chose to remain a British colony when Jamaica claimed her independence in 1962.

Largest and most populous of the trio is Grand Cayman at roughly 22 by 8 miles and 32,000 residents. Sister islands Cayman Brac and Little Cayman, 12 and 10 miles long respectively, lie 89 miles northeast. Both are appreciated for their unspoiled nature and incredible dive sites,

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including Little Cayman's Bloody Bay Wall, a heart-stopping 1200-foot drop off that the late great Jacques Cousteau deemed one of the world's greatest dives. The Sisters are also prime spots for rare bird watching and fishing.

Grand Cayman's main drag is the mysteriously named Seven Mile Beach (actually five-and-a-half miles long), a renowned stretch of pristine, powdery sand backed by massive sea grape trees. No raucous parties or nude sections here — this is a very British beach, quiet and well-maintained, if a little crowded at times, and the only place on the island where beachwear is acceptable attire. Most of the islands' visitor accommodations are found along this strand, from do-it-yourself condos to the luxurious Hyatts and Westins to moderately priced stays like the Sleep Inn, where a clean, comfortable room is all that's desired by active water sports participants who just want a nice place to sleep and shower.

On an island where diving's the thing, it's not surprising to find myriad dive shop

operations on Cayman, some fine, but unfortunately not all of the same caliber. Any experienced diver knows that the quality of the operation that hosts you can make or break a dive trip, no matter how thrilling the site.

Best of the dive operations here is Treasure Island Divers (1-800-872-7552) on Seven Mile Beach, an established shop owned and run by divers who know what customers are seeking — spacious, well-maintained, and well-equipped dive boats; professional, responsible, and friendly staff members; equipment in good shape; a reliable dive schedule; and an agenda that varies. Customers have taken notice — Treasure Island Divers was recently rated as the #3 dive shop operation in the entire Caribbean and Atlantic by the reader's of Rodale's Scuba Diving Magazine, the bible of experienced scuba enthusiasts worldwide. They also ranked Treasure Island Divers' fleet — three sleek, 45-foot custom-made crafts — as one of the top 10 day-excursion dive boats in the world.

For curious non-divers who'd like to find out if this sport is for them, the best jumping-off point is a resort course, where a few hours of classroom and pool instruc-

tion gain you the privilege of diving that same day with an instructor. And for a first-class, positive taste of all that diving can be, Cayman is a natural choice of venue.

Treasure Island Divers' resort course begins with a short video and quiz (a breeze if you pay attention and have a modicum of common sense), then you're fitted for mask, snorkel, and fins. A snug mask that will seal to your face is essential for a good dive experience, likewise fins that won't slip off in water or leave you with blisters. Then it's on to the neighboring hotel pool, where you learn to get suited up and make proper water entry from the boat's stern (look, ma, it's a "giant step!"). The buoyancy compensator, or "BC," vest is the diver's friend, holding your air tank and inflating or deflating so you can float with all that attached weight or descend when it's time. The instructor explains the accompanying depth and oxygen gauges, some basic hand signals for communicating underwater, then asks you to insert the regulator through which you breathe. Next you spend some time getting used to breathing underwater — so simple, it turns out! — and swimming with arms crossed or close to your sides to prevent striking

sea life or fellow divers. If you do happen to have a regulator knocked from your mouth or a mask dislodged while underwater (a rare occurrence), you learn the proper steps that take only seconds for clearing water from both so you can calmly go on with your dive.

As the dive boat disembarks that afternoon, settle yourself by one of the tanks lining the boat sides while the dive masters go about the business of distributing weight belts — a little extra help staying down. Be sure to drink plenty of water before and after a dive to fight the decompression sickness that can come with dehydration. When you reach the dive site, the instructor explains what you'll see, how deep you're going (typically about 40 or 50 feet for a first dive), and how long you'll be down (most beginner dips last a half hour). Then the staff makes sure you're properly suited, turns on your air, and helps you off the back of the boat. From there, swim to the anchor rope at the bow and use that as your guide for descent and later making your way back up. The waters in Cayman are typically smooth as glass, a transparent turquoise. More experienced divers who have already reached bottom seem only a few feet away.

Yes, the gear feels cumbersome and awkward at first, and a mask sealed over your eyes and nose can give those predisposed a mild feeling of claustrophobia. If you stay calm and be patient, however, those feelings will subside, overridden by the awesome experience ahead. Your reward for a little discomfort lies just below the surface, and if you keep your eyes peeled on those who have gone down ahead of you, your sense that they're experiencing something wondrous will drive you to put any doubts aside and join them.

Sound recedes as you descend, pausing every few feet to hold your nose and blow out, thus equalizing ear pressure. By the time you reach bottom, only the sound of your breathing, steady and comforting, fills your ears, while another world for which photos are no substitute fills your eyes. Everything seems to have settled into a slower pace here, colors bloom at random, fish swim placidly by within



Top: A spotted moray eel peeps from its hiding place. Middle: A squirrel fish among the kaleidoscope coral. Bottom: The parrot fish in all its gaudy glory.

arm's length as if you're just part of the seascape. Gentle kicks are all that are needed to propel yourself along while you take it all in — sea fans waving brightly, mottled sea cucumbers hiding in basket sponges, an angelfish making a sudden striking appearance, a spotted moray eel peeping at you from beneath a rock. You may visit a shipwreck, where broken hulls wait in patient silence for rescues that will never come, letting the fish and the barnacles hang out with them in the meantime.

Thirty minutes disappears too quickly, and your instructor, who's been close by the entire dive, leads you back to the anchor rope and regulates the timing of your ascent so you'll feel no ill effects afterward. Once on the surface, return to the back of the boat, where more dive masters await to take your fins and help you up the ladder. Retake your seat, reposition your tank in its slot, and slide out of the BC. Now it's time to exult, and when the instructor asks if you'd like to go down again at the next site stop, your most likely answer will be an enthusiastic "Yes!".

There's one very important rule of diving for the welfare of both the diver and the marine environment — look, but be careful what you touch. Coral is a living thing, and though it might give you some nasty scrapes and cuts, you'll do it much more damage by contact. Likewise, while most sea life is harmless, some creatures will naturally defend themselves when molested. Remember what you learned in kindergarten, and keep your hands to yourself while you're down.

Treasure Island Divers will also take you to Cayman's most famous dive site — all 12 feet of it. At Stingray City, you can dive or snorkel in amazement among these rather prehistoric-look-

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ing creatures, some with wingspans of up to six feet, while they gracefully and very tamely glide by, taking squid from your hand while you touch their sandpapery tops and velvety undersides. Just don't lift them out of the water or grab them by their barbed tail, and you have nothing to fear from these snack-seeking "puppies."

For the rare time you're not in the water on Cayman — besides diving, there are snorkeling, parasailing, windsurfing, and sea kayaking opportunities — rent an open-air vehicle or scooter, apply sun screen and don a snug-fitting hat, and take off for a freewheeling road trip around the island. If you can get a handle on driving to the left, it's a fun and easy day trip. Head north along Seven Mile Beach, eventually leaving the resorts behind, and view instead some charming examples of typical Caymanian houses, dressed in Easter-egg pastels and gingerbread trim. In the soft morning light, residents calmly rake their sandy yards, which quite amazingly sprout lush gardens of hibiscus and bougainvillea.

Also on this route is the Turtle Farm, the world's only commercial facility where the green sea turtle, along with fellow species like the leatherback and loggerhead, is raised from hatchling to multi-hundred pound behemoth. Some are sold for consumption, while a percentage are released into the wild to help replenish the turtle population that has been dwindling here since Cayman was first sighted.

If you're not too sensitive, venture next door to the Cracked Conch by the Sea restaurant and try a turtle burger — very good, with a spicy salsa topping — or maybe the signature dish, prepared various ways from marinated to deep-fried. Conch is a delicately pink, firm-fleshed mollusk reputed — alas, falsely — to have aphrodisiac powers. It's quite tender when prepared correctly and makes frequent appearances on menus throughout the island.

Traveling south from Seven Mile, first stop is the capital of Georgetown, a small but bustling center of finance and shopping, most upscale and all duty-free. Avoid the tacky, touristy spots meant to lure passengers from the cruise ships lolling in Hog Sty Bay and discover instead Italian leather, fine liquors, Cuban cigars, French perfumes, chic European couture, and other niceties.



Pedro St. James House, birthplace of Cayman democracy.

Though one can pick out some fine jewelry emporiums here, many dealing in coral pieces and ancient coins recovered from shipwrecks, chief among them is black coral and ... , a showroom of creations by the world-celebrated Bernard Passman. This 70-something Iowa-born sculptor only discovered black coral upon retiring to Cayman 20 years ago. His subsequent journey into jewelry-making reveals the sculptor's eye for detail and shape, winning the approval of many notables and celebrities through the years, including British Royalty — Passman was commissioned to create Cayman's wedding gift to Charles and Diana of silver cutlery with carved coral handles. His rare medium, which grows only 3 inches in 10 years at great depths, creates the astonishingly beautiful pieces displayed here: an intricately carved rendition of Cayman's unofficial national symbol, the turtle; a tiny, perfectly formed guitar replica with whispery 18K gold strings; a bold candelabra of eerily twisting coral; and a weighty choker of the ebony treasure interspersed with diamonds. His exquisite work raised the use of black coral in jewelry and sculpture to the coveted art form it is today.

Continuing east, you'll soon encounter the Pedro St. James House. Originally built of quarried native rock around 1780, the house's base has survived hurricanes and numerous fires to become the islands' old-

est existing structure. A recent \$7.5 million restoration project created a historically accurate replica of the complete home, with wide breeze-catching verandahs encircling the entire three-story structure and providing a stunning view of the sea. Pedro St. James is prized locally as the birthplace of Caymanian democracy, where a meeting planning the first legislative assembly here was held in 1831; likewise, the Emancipation Proclamation ending slavery throughout the colonies was read from its steps in 1835. The site includes a surprisingly enjoyable 20-minute multimedia presentation of the islands' history, a state-of-the-art "virtual" show narrated by a Caymanian in the lilting brogue that belies these West Indians' Welsh, English, and Scottish ancestors.

Skirting the craggy coastline and sighting the occasional blowhole in the surf, you'll begin to see the private development along the northeast to north coast, evidence of a healthy real estate market that continues to boom. Things are quiet and roomy up here, away from the "big city" of Georgetown, and folks from all over the globe have staked their spots for the perfect hideaway vacation home. From elaborate to cozy, each bears a name that illustrates the importance their owners attach to this personal slice of paradise: most are fanciful, such as "A Reef

Romance;" a few just realistic, hence "No Snow."

You will eventually run out of road — and, delightfully, ambition — at an oasis dubbed Rum Point for the barrels of rum that reportedly once washed up here from a shipwreck. Let the name be a clue — this is the spot on Grand Cayman where you work diligently at capturing the essence of the Caribbean by doing nothing but feeling extraordinarily good. The only persistent peddlers here are dozens of sturdy hammocks stretched under whispering casuarina trees, tempting you literally every few yards with subtle demands of surrender to a languorous embrace. Before you submit, satisfy any touches of hunger or thirst. Perch at one of the numerous picnic tables and peruse the Wreck Bar menu, attached to a hollowed coconut shell to prevent it drifting away in the steady cooling breeze. Soon a waiter appears (perhaps a handsome blond beach bum of the first order) to take your order for conch fritters or sizzling, steaming Jamaican beef patties and strongly suggest you have a Mudslide drink. Obey him — this frozen concoction featuring Kahlua, Bailey's, and vodka is the signature here, impossibly rich and imminently effective for a subsequent hammock sojourn. Or escape the sun momentarily at the indoor bar, where you can eat, drink, and observe the antics of Alpha, the resident macaw whose aims in life are to be admired and fed. Scampering along his twisting wooden perch over the middle of the room, he dangles upside down from a branch or hangs by his claws, feet above head, from attached netting, squawking all the while. Other indigenous animal life includes Thomas the Cat — his aim in life, the staff claims, is eating Alpha. Cloaked in feline world weariness, however, Thomas doesn't appear to want to waste so much energy — he chooses to snooze in the bar window sunshine instead, enduring the stroking of strangers with nary a twitch of a whisker or blink of a sleeping eye.

If you can stay awake after indulging (don't feel obligated — a hammock is waiting), descend into a good book, borrow some snorkeling gear and hover around the close-to-shore reef life, or venture down the pier and catch a ferry to Stingray City or perhaps a glass-bottom boat tour. On an island where active watersports are the word, an afternoon here is the perfect counterpoint.

When you reluctantly start back to the hustle and bustle, turn at Old Man Bay onto the road that shortcuts across the island. On this route is the Queen Elizabeth II Botanic Park, a 65-acre preserve of Cayman's wondrous flora and fauna. Take a leisurely stroll through woodlands, wetlands, and floral gardens, keeping an eye out for the rare Cayman Parrot and visiting the enclosed habitat for Cayman's endangered Blue Iguana, aided here by the National Trust's captive breeding and reintroduction program.

Nearer to Georgetown, stop in for a visual treat at the galleries of Cathy Church, a world-class underwater photographer. Visitors can purchase or rent equipment for recording their own underwater adventures and pick up some tips for its correct use while browsing among her awe-inspiring work.

If it's nearing sundown time, wander next door to the aptly named Sunset Bar and enjoy the show. You can work up an appetite for dinner while rubbing shoulders with locals who stop by after work for a cold one and a serious game of dominoes.

Dining can be quite good here, whether you crave intimate elegance or an impressive outdoor meal accompanied by a breathtaking island sunset. Notable spots

include Lantana's, where local cuisine is successfully melded with spicy Cajun touches and a chic European atmosphere; and The Wharf, where sunset dining reaches its pinnacle. Ensconced in a prime seat on the white-latticed dock, you'll dine on gourmet dishes from the heavily seafood-slanted menu, served by a professional wait staff that represents most corners of the earth, while being serenaded by unobtrusive live music or just the sound of waves confronting the immovable "Ironshore." After the sun's down and you're sated, stick around for the torpedo-like tarpon that glide up to the dock for their nightly 9 o'clock feeding.

Note to the tasty: despite a year-round spraying program that relegates the many mosquitos to their swampy homes, if you're sweet enough, you may feel some nibbles. Most establishments keep a ready can of repellent behind the counter for those who aren't packing their own.

On Cayman, you'll discover all that the sea has to offer, plus some landlubber delights as well. Whether you're an aquaphile who has never sampled Cayman's famous assets or a neophyte who wants to learn scuba in a diver's paradise, put the Cayman Islands at the top of the list for your next vacation where the most fun comes when you're all wet. ▶▶▶



A great dive starts with a giant step.