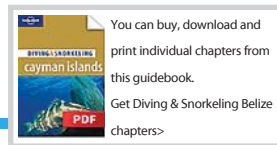


# Introduction



The Cayman Islands are synonymous with scuba diving. Lauded as the birthplace of sport diving in the Caribbean, the rather small and low Grand Cayman is big on marine features. It is blessed with deep drop-offs, the proverbial 'gin' clear water, and the protected bays that make a scuba experience somewhere on its coast a daily fact of life. If you want to get beneath the sea, there is always somewhere here to explore.

Endowed with a tax-free status, there is a bit of banking center bustle on the main island. This combined with a hotel row along a stunning beach makes Grand Cayman an active place to visit day and night.

The nearby isles of Little Cayman and Cayman Brac, often referred to as The Sisters, are equally blessed with underwater treasures. They are also geared for diving and visitors will find a much

more laid back atmosphere of sunsets and coconut palms than on the main island.

Hammered by a major hurricane (Ivan) in 2004, the Cayman Islands have bounced back with renewed vigor and Grand Cayman is seizing the moment to expand roads, hotel space and condominium development while courting an ever-increasing number of cruise liners and airlines. These deposit day trippers, and week- and month-long visitors to the main island and The Sisters.

At just a little over an hour's hop from Miami, the islands sit on a shelf of deep, blue water just south of Cuba. The water clarity and close proximity to the United States, combined with consistent warm ocean temperatures, make this an ideal destination for those wanting to get their gills wet. It is considered a must for everyone's log book.

This guide introduces various sites that can be dived both from the beach and by boat from the main island of Grand Cayman. It is known for its clear waters, sponge encrusted canyons and fish covered pinnacles highlight some the island's deeper dives. Shallow dives feature shipwrecks, caves with lurking tarpon and fascinating invertebrate life. At **Stingray City**, one of diving's most famous novelty sites, divers interact with amazingly friendly reef rays that arrive in big numbers at the sound of a boat.

Also featured are the sites of The Sister islands and their famous sheer drop-offs that are a magnet for all kinds of marine life. Nature-lovers will feel right at home while viewing Cayman Brac's rugged limestone cliffs and flocks of parrots and Little Cayman's amazing bird sanctuary and lazy iguanas. It's not hard to see



Red rope sponges extend from a Cayman reef

why snorkelers love these islands and divers rave about the sheer drop-offs, shipwrecks and even a 'lost city'.

The Cayman Islands have so many sites that they are too numerous for a single volume. We have attempted to select some of the most popular and action-packed dives the islands have to offer for this guide, in order to give divers and snorkelers a good feel for the broad offerings that the islands hold in store.

## CAYMAN ISLANDS DIVE HIGHLIGHTS

- 1 **Stingray City** – a favorite of snorkelers and divers who interact with dozens of amazingly gentle stingrays in only 12 feet of water.
- 2 **Ghost Mountain** – great undersea pinnacle on the North Sound, full of big groupers and other marine life.
- 3 **Bonnie's Arch** – beautiful natural arch with delicate corals, many juvenile fish and roaming lobsters.
- 4 **Doc Polson Wreck** – a shallow ship with very good macro life that's fun and easy to explore.
- 5 **Babylon** – one of the signature wall dives of Grand Cayman – beautiful sponges, fans, black coral and big fish can be found here.
- 6 **Turtle Reef** – a snorkel and dive site which has a great tarpon cave and can be visited by boat or walk-in.
- 7 **Orange Canyon** – large elephant ear sponges give the reef bright color and lots of fish and turtles come here.
- 8 **Bloody Bay (Great Wall)** – explore the most famous drop-off wall, with its rich sponge and coral life.
- 9 **MV Captain Keith Tibbetts** – a must dive, this former Russian frigate is intact with guns ready for photographers.
- 10 **Randy's Gazebo** – the formations and fish life make this an interesting immersion.



## Facts about the Cayman Islands

### OVERVIEW

The Cayman Islands aren't big, but Grand Cayman and the two 'sister' islands of Little Cayman and Cayman Brac are big time destinations on most divers' lists. The clear waters, wide range of hotels and training options, numerous and varied dive sites and established infrastructure combine with its close proximity to the USA to make it one of the most popular dive destinations in the world. The islands even claim to be the 'birth place of diving in the Caribbean'.

Grand Cayman, Cayman Brac and Little Cayman are also distinctly different and offer varying diving attractions as well as unique topside experiences. Grand Cayman's **Stingray City** is billed as 'the world's best 12-foot dive,' Little Cayman's 'Bloody Bay Wall' is legendary for its near-vertical drop-off, and Cayman Brac has the northern hemisphere's only diveable Russian wreck. This guide describes 68 of the Cayman's best dive sites.

Oddly, you may not see many Caymanians if you're in the Cayman's on a diving holiday. That's because many of them are bankers (with briefcases and cell phones), real estate brokers, or involved in the burgeoning hotel and condominium industry. Scuba divers are more likely to run into Brits, Americans and Canadians escaping the cold climes to earn their living working in wetsuits under the sun.

Rebuilding after the devastating hurricane in 2004 is at a frenetic pace, but there is still an island vibe despite the ubiquitous construction cranes and daily gaggle of cruise ships. The colorful coral reefs, ravenous stingrays, bright night lights, various eateries and soft reggae beats on the street make Grand Cayman keep Grand Cayman and its 'sisters' at the top of the diving checklist.



Grand Cayman has been heavily influenced by American culture, especially in George Town and the resorts along Seven Mile Beach. In the smaller villages and on Little Cayman and Cayman Brac, the culture is more traditionally West Indian, although the British influence is close to the surface. English is, after all, the only language spoken on the islands, and the Queen's birthday is celebrated every June with a parade and 21-gun salute. West Indian traditions are noticeable in the *soca*, calypso and reggae you'll hear emanating from locals' jeeps, clubs and bars.

Thanks to a thriving tourism and cruiseship industry, resorts and condos have sprung up everywhere, and you can count on every convenience, from air-con and cold beer to swanky shopping and ESPN. But if you want to get away from it all, it's easy to escape the satellite dishes and slickness. Just slip underwater.

## HISTORY

The Cayman Islands' history has an early blank space, but is well-documented after explorers started plying the Caribbean seas. Aboriginal inhabitants have left no trace of their existence. The first human known to have laid eyes on the islands was Christopher Columbus, who in 1503 spotted a swarm of turtles around Cayman Brac and Little Cayman and named the islands Tortugas (Spanish for turtles). The name actually changed a few times, but by the time Francis Drake got to Grand Cayman in 1586, the islands were commonly known as Caymanas, a Carib word for the crocodiles that live on Grand Cayman and were used as a food source for sailors along with the sea turtles.

For the next century or so, the Caymans were used by some pretty famous pirates. There are still legends of buried pirate treasure on the islands and there's a pirate cave to see on Grand Cayman. There were no permanent settlers until the 1660s, when a couple of deserters from the British army came over from Jamaica. In 1670, the islands became a possession of the British Crown, falling under Jamaican administration.

Aside from cotton farming and turtle hunting, the major early occupation was wrecking – salvaging the remains of ships that ran aground. The most famous of these disasters is the Wreck of the Ten Sails, which occurred when a ship struck a reef in 1794, causing a chain reaction involving nine other vessels. According to legend, the Caymanians went to such



Aerial view of George Town



A restored 1800s Cayman house

lengths to aid the shipwrecked that a grateful George III granted the islands a tax-free status. That is still in place today and has made Grand Cayman a world financial center.

After slavery was abolished in 1835, most freed slaves remained on the islands, and by 1900 the Caymans' people dealt in cotton, mahogany, sarsaparilla, thatch rope (mostly exported to Jamaica), fishing, turtle hunting and shipbuilding. Tourism and banking took over during the mid-20th century.

Divers then put the Caymans Islands on the international tourist map and continue to do so.

By the 1960s, tourists went from being seen as pests to being seen as cash cows. They began fashioning the

tax structure that's made Grand Cayman a center of offshore banking (there are more financial institutions here than in New York City) and the infrastructure that's made it a capital of Caribbean tourism. The 1960s also saw the islands shrug off Jamaican stewardship and place themselves directly under the British Crown.

This semi-independent country is the fifth-largest financial center in the world. After long being viewed as a potential haven for money-laundering activities, international observers now agree that it has effectively cleaned up its financial sector.

Cleaning up was also first on the agenda after Hurricane Ivan devastated Grand Cayman in September 2004.

## DIVING HISTORY

Recreational scuba diving began in the Cayman Islands in 1957, when dive operator Bob Soto brought the concept to Grand Cayman and opened its first dive shop. Up until that time, scuba diving was pretty much only done commercially or for marine research. His move transformed it into playtime for the general public, and is considered to be the birth of Caribbean sport diving. With Mike Nelson and *Sea Hunt* hitting US television and fueling interest in this adventurous sport, interest slowly grew. Soto also invented the concept of the dive package.

Today, the Caymans are one of the world's top dive destinations, with more than 40 dive operations and 200 sites. Locals were reluctant to accept diving, but when they saw that divers and their tourist dollars meant the construction of an airport, hotels and road improvements, they quickly got on board. In the 1970s, tourism really took off. Now, next to banking, it is Cayman's top industry.

The Caymans also came under the wing of the publisher of *Skin Diver Magazine*, Paul Tzimoulis, whose profound influence on the dive industry put the Caymans permanently on the map. Tzimoulis named and constantly promoted

**Stingray City** and helped Wayne Hasson start the live aboard Cayman Aggressor before live aboards were common. He also helped pioneer Ron Kipp build one of the world's largest dive operations on Grand Cayman. Don Foster's Diving was another pioneer operation that continues today in two locations. Captain Crosby Ebanks, in business for 44 years, is credited with being first to feed the stingrays by hand. Cathy Church pioneered dive photography instruction and still teaches today.

In The Sisters, Sam McCoy has also been a true pioneer, starting when there was no electricity on Little Cayman. Today, a new generation of forward-thinking people has taken the reins and the Cayman future looks bright and leads the way in the Caribbean.

## GEOGRAPHY

Grand Cayman Island is a small place with a big inner bay and not a lot of elevation. Sparsely populated, mostly flat and partly marshy, Grand Cayman, Cayman Brac and Little Cayman have a corner of the Caribbean all to themselves. The Sister Islands of Cayman Brac and Little Cayman, which lie approximately 89 miles east-northeast of Grand Cayman, are separated from each other by a channel about seven miles wide.



A huge bronze propeller and an old lead keel are attractions at the 1794 wreck of the Ten Sails Park.



7 Mile Beach's famous sunset attracts a dusk jogger



The largest island, Grand Cayman, is shaped a bit like the Little Dipper and spans about 25 miles (45km) from the lip of the cup on the western end to the tip of the handle on the eastern end. Little Cayman and Cayman Brac are both about 10 miles long and one mile wide (16km long and 2km wide).

The three islands are limestone outcroppings, the tops of a submarine mountain range called the Cayman Ridge. This extends west-southwest from the Sierra Maestra range off the southeast part of Cuba to the Misteriosa Bank near Belize. The islands lack rivers or streams because of the porous nature of the limestone rock. This lack of runoff is a boon for divers, as it normally gives all of the islands exceptional visibility, often well over 120ft.

Between the Cayman Islands and Jamaica lies the deepest part of the Carib-

bean, the Cayman Trough, which is over four miles deep. South of Cayman is the Bartlett Deep where depths of over 18,000ft have been recorded.

## CLIMATE

The Cayman Islands' tropical but pleasant climate is one of its biggest attractions. The weather is warm all year and winters are quite mild. High 80°Fs (low 30°Cs) are a regular occurrence virtually every day of the year, with temperatures rarely peaking above that. Evenings are also warm and mild. Rain tends to fall in short bursts between May and November, with the chance of hurricanes most likely between August and October. October and November into December can also have spells of wind, but these conditions are usually accompanied by blue skies.

## POPULATION, PEOPLE & CULTURE

There are about 44,000 permanent residents on the three Cayman Islands, though Grand Cayman is by far the most populous. As the islands were administered from British-held Jamaica from 1863 until 1962, Cayman islanders are a combination of Caribbean (mostly Jamaican) and European (mainly British) descent but are also greatly influenced by Americans. They enjoy the highest standard of living in the Caribbean and also have fine systems of education, health care and infrastructure.

The Cayman Islands' governor is appointed by the Queen of England. The legislators and ex-official members who are appointed by the governor make the laws of the islands. Politics is an active pastime on the islands.

It is estimated that more than 90 nationalities can be found in this small population base, making it a true melting pot. It is difficult to become a permanent resident and most work permits are granted for only seven years or less. This makes the transient population quite large and many of these people work in the tourist and dive industry. Many resident Caymanians are involved in offshore banking and real estate.



## LANGUAGES

The official language of the Cayman Islands is English, which is spoken most everywhere. There's a Caymanian twist to some English words which makes it a pleasant dialect to hear. Today there are many influences, as there are said to be more than 90 nationalities living and working in the islands. But English is by far the most used language and it will work most everywhere on all three islands.

## GATEWAY CITY

The first look many tourists, especially those thousands arriving by cruise ship, get of the Caymans is the bustling little burg of George Town. The face of the town is made up from a strange conglomeration of hip and chain bars like Guy Harvey's, beachside Hammerheads and the Hard Rock Café, traditional and historic wooden buildings that managed to survive the hurricane surge of 2004 and some newly erected waterfront shopping centers. Busy blocks inside the city hold numerous banks and high-end jewelry and watch shops, including black coral galleries which maintain they are harvesting the precious coral in a conservation-minded manner. The



The international sign at dive pioneer Don Foster's shoreline



Carved masks at the downtown craft market

artistic pendants and sculptures made from this black coral are truly stunning but awesomely pricey.

Government buildings, law firms and some realtors flesh out the remaining downtown scene. While busy during the day, George Town is virtually a ghost town at night, surrendering its customers to the nearby hotel strip of Seven Mile Beach.

Lots of marine experiences occur right along this waterfront including some touted snorkeling spots, SNUBA and scuba dives in the caverns, spurs and grooves. Dive boats also pick up passengers and whisk them to nearby West Bay for a dive or two.

Seven Mile Beach is also a contractor's delight, with all the top name hotels like

The Ritz, more time-share and personal condos adorned in satellite dishes than you can shake a stick at, and a good variety of those staple mini-malls. These then all give way to the urban areas of the less-developed shorelines and inner neighborhoods.

Low cost attractions include a modest historical walking tour which takes in the remains of the late-18th century Fort George and the Cayman Islands National Museum, situated in the town's oldest building. The museum features changing exhibits on the islands' human and natural history. The National Art Center is also located along the waterfront and has some eclectic visual displays in its cosy but functionally ground floor facility at Harbour Center.

## Author



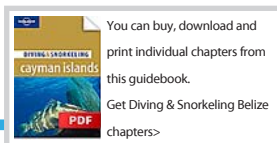
### TIM ROCK

Tim Rock attended the journalism program at the University of Nebraska–Omaha and has been a professional broadcast and print photojournalist for over 30 years. The majority of those years has been spent in the Western and Indo Pacific region reporting on environmental and conservation issues.

His television series, *Aquaquest Micronesia*, was an Ace Award finalist. He has also produced six documentaries on the history and undersea fauna of the region. Tim won the prestigious Excellence in the Use of Photography award from the Society of Publishers in Asia, amongst many other awards for photography and writing. He publishes a magazine and works as a correspondent for numerous Pacific Rim magazines. Tim is the author of many Diving & Snorkeling series guides including *Bonaire, Belize, Thailand, Chuuk Lagoon-Pohnpei-Kosrae, Bali & Lombok, Guam & Yap, Palau, South Africa-Mozambique* and *Papua New Guinea*, and is a major contributor to *Philippines*.

### FROM THE AUTHOR

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### FROM THE PUBLISHER

The Cayman Islands are one of diving's best-known destinations. Grand Cayman has made marine interaction famous with its **Stingray City**, and ushered many people into the amazing world of SCUBA due to its clear, warm waters and many training facilities. We are happy to present this new guide for the snorkel and dive sites of the three Cayman Islands and hope you enjoy the beautiful marine walls, reefs and creatures.

### PHOTO NOTES

Tim uses Nikon digital cameras, Aquatica underwater housings and Ikelite strobes. Tim's photographic work is represented by Lonely Planet Images ([www.lonelyplanetimages.com](http://www.lonelyplanetimages.com)), Double Blue Images ([www.doubleblue.com](http://www.doubleblue.com)) and other agents worldwide.

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