

Northwest Point & West Bay

Sunset along Cobalt Coast beach



Dives in the Northwest Point and West Bay area are numerous, due to this side normally being protected from wind and swell, allowing diving here pretty much all year around. Moorings can only have one dive boat at a time on them, so the only problem is that someone may beat you to your preferred site and you'll have to settle for another site nearby. This is a good area for photographers to engage a knowledgeable local guide to help out with spotting macro subjects and point out reef life behavior.

Northwest Point & West Bay	GOOD SNORKELING			
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Drop-offs, walls and big fish are all main attractions along the deeper dives at this scenic bay, which takes in Seven Mile Beach plus some fascinating iron-shore (rocky limestone shoreline) dives and snorkeling sites on either end of West Bay. Fish and invertebrate variety here is good, with everything from eagle rays and sea turtles to squid, jawfish and lots of big sponges all added to the list of usual suspects to be found along the West Bay reefs. There are also some good small shipwrecks on many sites, a couple of statues and some great snorkeling venues.

Cayman Turtle Farm



Hundreds of sea turtles entertain visitors

Near the dive site is the brand new Cayman turtle farm, now called 'Boatswain's Beach' (www.boatswainsbeach.ky). It is the only one of its kind in the world. This operation raises green turtles for purposes both benign – increasing their population in the wild – and slightly more base – selling their meat and shells. It is located across the street from the storm-ravaged remnants of the old facility.

The new and improved complex is huge, with wild iguanas running around, a plethora of turtle tanks, a Caiman croc, a bird aviary, nature trail and snorkel lagoon. With a restaurant and gift shop, it is intended as a place where people can spend a whole day.

Visitors can see and hold turtles which are hatched and raised in captivity here for conservation, research, education and utilization. This is why you'll see local restaurants on the island selling turtle steaks and turtle soup – it's all farm-raised turtle meat. Turtles of different ages are on display, ranging from newly-hatched animals to adults, with some breeders possibly over 100 years old. During summer the artificial nesting beach shows signs of sea turtle nesting and the hatchery displays all the stages of hatchling development.

A popular addition is the Predator Tank, which showcases sharks and large predatory fish to be found around the Caymans. Sharks on display include sandbar and nurse sharks, while fishes include tarpon and jacks. These predators can be viewed from above, from underwater in the boatswain's lagoon and from inside the freshwater swimming pool through gigantic 4in thick acrylic windows. During feeding time visitors can see sharks feeding just a few feet off the main viewing window.

11 TURTLE FARM

Location: Boatswain's Point

Depth: 20-60ft (6-18m)

Access: Shore or boat

Range: Intermediate



Only 20 minutes north of town, this site makes a pleasant getaway from Seven Mile Beach. Being a popular shore and night dive, many divers do this site by land, but it can also be dived by boat. There are two main attractions here: a mini-wall and a tarpon cave.

DiveTech@Turtle Reef is a dive facility located on the northwest tip of Grand Cayman. Part of a complex that includes the Cracked Conch restaurant and bar, it's a short walk from the newly renovated turtle farm facility. There is a good outdoor bar and eating area right on the sea; divers actually walk right by the bar to reach a ladder. Tanks can be rented here as well as all dive gear. If you're all dived out and just want to watch other divers and the water, grab a table or a barstool.

Head down the ladder in the protected channel that leads out to this dive. It's normally calm, but if there is a swell, time your entry so the wave pulls you out into the middle of the channel where you can put on your fins.

A roughly 50 yard swim over a flat reeftop leads to a vertical mini-wall that runs from 25ft to 60ft. Elephant ear, tube and vase sponges adorn the wall, as well as gorgonian fans and curious gray and queen angels. The sandy area below has both southern rays and patterned little lemon rays, while eagle rays are often reported here too. To get to the tarpon cave, take a right and swim along the wall until you reach the obvious cave area on the left. It's about a five-minute swim from the buoy marking the drop-off area.

There are a number of coral islands of various sizes off the wall in sand at 50ft to 60ft. Along with lots of fish in the mini-islands and nice coral cover, you may also find hawksbill sea turtles.

The cave holds the biggest thrill here, where 40 to 50 tarpon can usually be seen in the cave. Approach this cave slowly at about 45ft and they should remain in place. The cave isn't especially deep or dark, so one can enter a little way and watch the school of 3ft to 6ft long silvery fish for quite a while. When finished, have a look at the coral islands on your way back to the cut.

It is best not to go deeper here, as there is a plain further down where currents can kick up and create problems. Do the deeper reaches as a boat dive either at **Northwest Point** or **Dolphin Point**.

It is normally easy to get out of cut via the ladder, but as with entry, you'll need to time your exit in order to grab the ladder and step up quickly if there is a strong swell.

Tarpon file out from the cave at Turtle Farm



12 NORTHWEST POINT

Location: West Bay
Depth: 70-130ft (18-30m)
Access: Boat
Range: Intermediate



This is a deep site at the far end of West Bay. Depending on the wind and waves, this dive isn't always possible, as being at the far tip of Grand Cayman, currents can be strong at times. This is good, however, for attracting sea life.

Head down the mooring line to the 60ft to 70ft range, then head out to the wall. There are some well-adorned spur

and grooves here with marine growth that includes a couple of immense star coral heads, orange elephant ear sponges, some nice brain corals and large purple-tip sea anemones.

Fish life can include eagle rays and even Caribbean reef sharks out in the blue. Look also for resting nurse sharks and roaming green sea turtles. There are many cleaning stations along the wall and up on the grooves. Other fish to watch for include small blennies (including the beautiful diamond blenny) and some big honeycomb cowfish.

Keep in mind how deep the start of this dive is and watch the currents. Your air can go quickly at these depths, so give yourself plenty of time and air to get to the mooring and ascend.



Creole wrasse feed at the drop-off

13 BONNIE'S ARCH

Location: South of Northwest Point
Depth: 30-80ft (9-22m)
Access: Boat
Range: Intermediate



Named after popular Cayman photographer Bonnie Charles, this is a great site that should be dived at the 80ft and above region, as the current-swept plain below can make things uncomfortable. There is so much to see here that a diver needs to only go about 60ft or so to take in a lot. Features to see include an arch, a partial cavern and a mini-wall leading to the sandy valley at 70ft to 80ft.

This site is best suited for smaller groups, as the more interesting features here are easily stirred up by bubbles and too many fins. A good site for macro and fish photos, wide angle folk may find that once they've shot the arch there's not much in the way of other features that are particularly appropriate for their lenses.

Most divers head first to the arch for a look. A well-adorned natural structure with some sponge and coral growth on top and hanging in the window, the arch itself is rather narrow and divers should watch their breathing so as not to scour the marine life with rising bubbles.

The arch is usually a magnet for horse-eye jacks and tarpon, which hang at about 60ft to 65ft inside the open cavern and can make for some pretty shots in here, if the light's right. Look around for smaller juveniles too. To the right of the mooring over along a mini-wall there's also a small cavern at about 50ft to 60ft. This is a very good place to see macro creatures like arrow crabs, brittle stars and neon gobies, as well as black coral. The silt is very fine, however, so shoot fast then get out, as bubbles hit the top of this indent and rain down fine silt.

Go to Hell

The jagged limestone rock formations in Grand Cayman's northwest once inspired a local official to exclaim, 'This is what Hell must look like.' Since then, the local post office has been painted fire-engine red and contains a resident 'devil' who asks 'How the hell are you?' as he dispenses souvenirs. He's quite a character, who likes to pose with pretty women and even has postcards of himself at **Stingray City** for sale.

But most visitors come here not so much for a free gander at the rugged limestone fields out in back of the facility, but to mail a card or letter from inside the gift shop so it has the postal mark from Hell. It's not every day your friends back home get a message from Hell. Or if you prefer, you can also bring them a T-shirt from Hell, or take a photo of one of the road signs on the island roads pointing to Hell.

A great variety of juveniles can be seen here, including baby queen angels, soapfish and flamingo tongues. Look too for rock beauties, lobsters walking about the reef, lots of small coral heads and other growth like sea plumes and gorgonian fans. There is usually a large great barracuda or two around here as well.



Juvenile queen angelfish

14 ORANGE CANYON

Location: South of Northwest Point
Depth: 50-130ft (18-40m)
Access: Boat
Range: Intermediate



Although a deep dive, this is a popular site thanks to the colorful beauty of the huge elephant ear sponges to be found on this healthy and active reef.

Head down the mooring line and then out to the wall, which becomes apparent at around 100ft where it drops off into the blue. The deep grooves that lead out to the wall have varied sponge growth, including nice rope and barrel sponge growth – it's along these groove faces that the big elephant ears also grow. Fish life is also very good with lots of blue chromis, Creole wrasse schools, turtles and eagle rays.

The site is full of deep crevices and many swim-throughs. One particularly scenic spot is a round spire of rock with lots of fish to see. One of photo pro Cathy Church's favorites, this popular and fun site has lots going on both deep and at the top around the mooring.

Active deep drop-off attracts fish and sea turtles



15 SENTINEL ROCK

Location: South of Northwest Point
Depth: 70-130ft (22-40m)
Access: Boat
Range: Intermediate



Located near **Orange Canyon**, this is a deep site that shares some of the same characteristics, such as good sponge life and a small pinnacle that attracts an interesting mix of marine life.

The mooring is secured in 70ft of water. There can be currents at this site, so it's best to exercise caution here or follow your guide, who can take a route that may offer some protection. There are some good swim-throughs here, as well as big rope sponges, sea plumes and purple-tipped sea anemones.

Look for green sea turtles, yellow jacks and silvery bar jacks, lots of black durgons and Creole wrasse, as well as dog snappers moving through the water around the pinnacle and above the wall. A large great barracuda likes to hang in the canyon near the mooring.

As this dive starts at 70ft, be sure to watch your air and time.



About Shore Diving

Seven Mile Beach



Several factors combine to offer Cayman Islands visitors some excellent shore diving opportunities. There are a number of easily accessible marked entry points to choose from, the Grand Caymans' normally calm west coast waters make entering the water safe and easy, and with a reef or drop-off no more than 50 yards offshore, surface swims are kept to a minimum.

Often you can just dip in at the entry point and swim out whilst enjoying the scenery, as the reeftop will have small sea fans and herbivorous fish pecking around. Freedom-loving divers are sure to enjoy the unlimited shore diving packages some dive centers offer.

Note that while auto break-ins are not common here, they can happen, so it's best to not leave valuables in the car, especially not in plain sight.

16 BIG TUNNEL

Location: Southeast of Northwest Point

Depth: 55-100ft (17-30m)

Access: Boat

Range: Intermediate



This site is known for its maze-like features, along with the big tunnel to swim through which provided its name. This honeycomb of a dive starts at 55ft and if this is a new dive site, you should follow a guide, as the many holes in this maze are best left to someone experienced to help you negotiate. Head down through canyons to the wall face – the tunnel mouth is at about 100ft and is perhaps 35ft wide. There may be silver-sides inside in season and it's also home to silver tarpon.

The wall is very good as well, with sea anemones, bright orange elephant ear sponges, brown and yellow tube sponges, rope sponges, large barrel sponges and black coral trees. Horse-eye and yellow jacks are commonly seen in the area and this is also a good spot to see eagle rays.

Up top around the mooring, there is nice hard coral here French and queen angelfish, cruising bar jacks and grunts around the sparse sea plumes, and other soft corals up shallow. You may also encounter southern stingrays in the sand.



Tube sponges



A diamond blenny peers out from a sea anemone

17 LITTLE TUNNELS

Location: Northwest West Bay

Depth: 60-100ft (18-30m)

Access: Boat

Range: Intermediate



Another site where the honeycomb of this coast becomes a fun sport dive, there is a swim-through about 70ft away from the base of the mooring. Follow your guide from the field of garden eels at the sandy flats 65ft down to the outer wall at approximately 85ft.

Divers emerge beneath a canopy of plate coral patrolled by Spanish hogfish, coney and stoplight parrotfish. A nearby pinnacle also has a lot of marine life, and the reef slope is thick with deepwater gorgonians, huge masses of orange elephant ear sponges and drum-sized barrel sponges, some six feet in diameter.

A large variety of fish are seen here, including the beautiful scrawled filefish, queen and rock beauty angels, endless processions of Creole wrasse being cleaned and moving along the reef and, if you're lucky, an eagle ray. Keep an eye out in the blue for turtles and other blue water critters. Up in the shallows, sea plumes hide trumpetfish.

18 ROUND ROCK

Location: Northern West Bay

Depth: 60-80ft (18-24m)

Access: Boat

Range: Intermediate



The two moorings here lead right down to rich reef life. Designated Round Rock East and West, in-between these two is a large, broad pinnacle, cut with swim-throughs that are easy to navigate. The reeftop has finger corals, sea anemones and lots of small fish life, including colorful juveniles and blue chromis.

Round Rock is a nicely landscaped site that is very good for wide angle photos as there are many spots here with beautiful overlapping plate corals. Numerous elephant ear sponges and other encrusting and tube sponges are to be found along the wall, which is covered in sea plumes, black coral trees and rope sponges.

Divers often check one particular large elephant's ear sponge to see how it is doing, as it was once broken but still manages to thrive.

Don't Touch the Coral

Wonder why touching the coral is such a big deal? Stony coral is the only animal in the world that can be injured or killed simply by being pressed against its own skeleton. Unlike the rounded bones of other animals, the skeleton of stony coral is razor sharp, and the slightest contact slices living coral against itself.

The coral animals that create a coral head are only a few cell layers thick. To visualize this, imagine a tissue draped over a razorblade, misted with water. Just as any contact would tear the tissue against the razorblade, in the same way contact with stony corals pushes coral tissue against its own razor-sharp skeleton.

To avoid coral damage, divers are asked to not wear gloves in the Caymans.

19 TRINITY CAVES

Location: Northern West Bay

Depth: 60-80ft (18-24m)

Access: Boat

Range: Intermediate



These open caverns are very popular, being well-lit and full of life. Actually very deep and somewhat tight canyons starting at about 60ft, they drop down to the wall's edge at 100ft. Hard corals are abundant and schooling fish can be found in the protected areas.

The east canyon has a stunning arch that makes a good prop for wide angle photography, while the drop-off has an outcrop-type pinnacle with quivering deepwater gorgonians, large black coral growths and Creole wrasse all around. The pinnacle also holds very good sponge growth, with massive barrel

sponges and some nice basket sponges dominating the topography.

Returning upwards again, follow one of the 'caves' back up to the shallow part of the reef, where sea whips and plumes hold cover for groupers and trumpetfish.

20 SAND CHUTE

Location: Northern West Bay

Depth: 70-100ft (9-15m)

Access: Boat

Range: Intermediate



One of the more striking deep dives along the wall, this is easier than those up at the northwest part of West Bay, as currents are not normally strong here.

An extremely broad sand plain here spills down through the wall. So broad it appears to be the width of a football field, it makes a veritable palace for the garden eels which have taken up residence. Hogfish can also be seen picking through the sand.

The edges of the spillway have good sponge life and black coral in some spots. This is all in the 70ft to 80ft range area and deeper, with many overhangs and pockets in the reef that provide good habitat.

Your guide may decide to get back to the mooring by taking a coral tunnel back up the 35-degree slope. Look for sleeping turtles here and check the cleaning stations for action.



Filefish hide in soft corals



21 DOC POLSON WRECK

Location: West Bay
Depth: 40-60ft (18-30m)
Access: Boat
Range: Intermediate



This sunken tug is very good for both macro photography and wide angle images. Stripped of almost anything that could hang up a diver, penetration is simple, as there are many openings and there is always a lot of light.

Depending on who's been there before you, the first thing that may greet you is a toilet. Perhaps this feature blew into the area from Hurricane Ivan, but in any case it's certainly not a ship's head. Often moved around, it can be found at various places on the ship, but if someone has put it on top of the bridge (wheelhouse), it will be the first thing you see when descending.

Since it has been cut and cleared for penetration, carefully swim inside and try not to stir up too much silt. Fin lightly, be neutrally buoyant and move with small movements. Inside there are many good macro subjects, including lettuce leaf nudibranchs, barber pole shrimp sitting in sponges, corkscrew anemones and mantis shrimp.



A Nassau grouper uses the wreck for refuge

Underwater Weddings

Tying the knot down under can be done on a private charter boat trip, shore dive or even a night dive. Dive shops and hotels are used to having not only brides and grooms but also entire wedding parties coming to dive, stay and have the reception, with many dive shops assisting in planning and having packages. Some divers have a land wedding plus an underwater ceremony. Consider inviting a few stingrays to your service – they won't drink much, but they'll wipe out the calamari!

Be careful, as there are still a few stray wires in the bow and aft hold, along with one in the bridge which could hang a diver up, though they are pretty big and avoidable. Some nice light shafts come into the aft of the ship, and while its upper surface isn't overly covered in coral, it does have some fans, sponges and sea plumes on it. Look for slender filefish in the sea plumes at the bow.

Outside of the ship fish, the not-so-common Nassau grouper can be seen here at times, along with French angels and yellowtail snapper. The reef across from the wreck is also not bad, and the sandy flat has garden eels, many juveniles and lots of roaming parrotfish.



Lobsters like the West Bay reefs

22 MITCH MILLER'S

Location: West Bay
Depth: 35-70ft (18-30m)
Access: Boat or shore
Range: Intermediate



This site was named for a famous TV show pioneer who had the show *'Sing Along With Mitch'*. A highly popular show in its time, it afforded Mr Miller the luxury of a house in the Caymans, right on the beach by this site. While Mitch Miller's is sometimes shore dived, a boat is easier.

Shallow and sandy with many coral heads, gulleys, deep undercuts and a few small swim-throughs, the site has beautiful white sand and at 60ft to 70ft the plain spreads out with garden eels and scattered coral heads. The area around the reef drop-off is the best locale to explore. Lobsters hide under the overhangs and walk about the reef, and this is also a very good place to see corkscrew anemones and Pederson shrimp. Yellowhead jawfish can be seen bobbing up and down from their holes.

Schoolmasters, striped grunts, goatfish and other schooling fish circle the coral heads at 30ft to 40ft. The corals

also include large brain corals, gorgonian sea fans and scattered plate corals. Almost anything can pop up here, and scrawled filefish, eagle rays and southern stingrays are apt to be seen.

23 AQUARIUM SOUTH & NORTH

Location: West Bay
Depth: 30-50ft (9-15m)
Access: Boat
Range: Novice



The site has many corals, sponges and fish, including the ever-popular midnight parrotfish and queen angelfish. Being shallow, long dives can be made which allow you to enjoy all the marine life on offer.

Head down the mooring and you will probably be joined by some ubiquitous yellowtails. Sporadic coral growth in the form of purple sea fans, sea plumes and some star and brain corals can be found along all of the ridges and side walls with small undercuts and sandy grooves. Some yellow tube sponges and encrusting sponges thrive here as well.

This is a great incubation site and a good fish lens or macro set-up will garner good shots of tropical juveniles. Look for boxfish, cowfish, juvenile butterflyfish, adult four-eye butterflyfish, slender filefish, yellowtails, a school of soldierfish and some very curious mutton snapper that appear to be waiting for a handout. Marauding schools of blue tang sometimes come through looking for algae patches to devour – they make a colorful photo subject if you anticipate their movements and get close enough for a photo.

Such varied fish life here, along with the shallow and clear water, certainly make The Aquarium live up to its name.

Wreck Diving in the Caymans

The Caymans is a good place to get a wreck certification. The water is clear, most wrecks are small and open, and they're also not all that deep. While the islands have a history as a major place for ships to hit, the wrecks that many divers encounter in West Bay have been sunk with diving in mind. Having been cleared of wires and doors that can trap divers, they are considered pretty safe to explore. They are also magnets for marine life, with many unusual and colorful creatures to be found in and around them.

24 PETER'S (GOVERNOR'S) REEF

Location: West Bay
Depth: 35-50ft (9-15m)
Access: Boat
Range: Novice



Many divers enjoy this shallow dive daily. There are plenty of fish here, possibly partly due to the reef's namesake, dive operator Peter Milburn, who liked to feed the resident fish. Known for his conservation efforts, the reef is also close to the governor's beachside residence.

There is a mooring here in about 35ft and the terrain around it is similar to that of The Aquarium, with coral covered spurs and small coral heads, sponges and plenty of fish life.

The site is known for its angelfish with French, gray, queen and rock beauties all to be found. All are friendly, so Peter's Reef is also a very good site for photographers.

The reefs also hold big green morays, parrotfish and spotted rums (look under ledges for these). Great for long and leisurely dives, this place is ideal for getting plenty of fish portraits.



The engine room of the Oro Verde

25 ORO VERDE

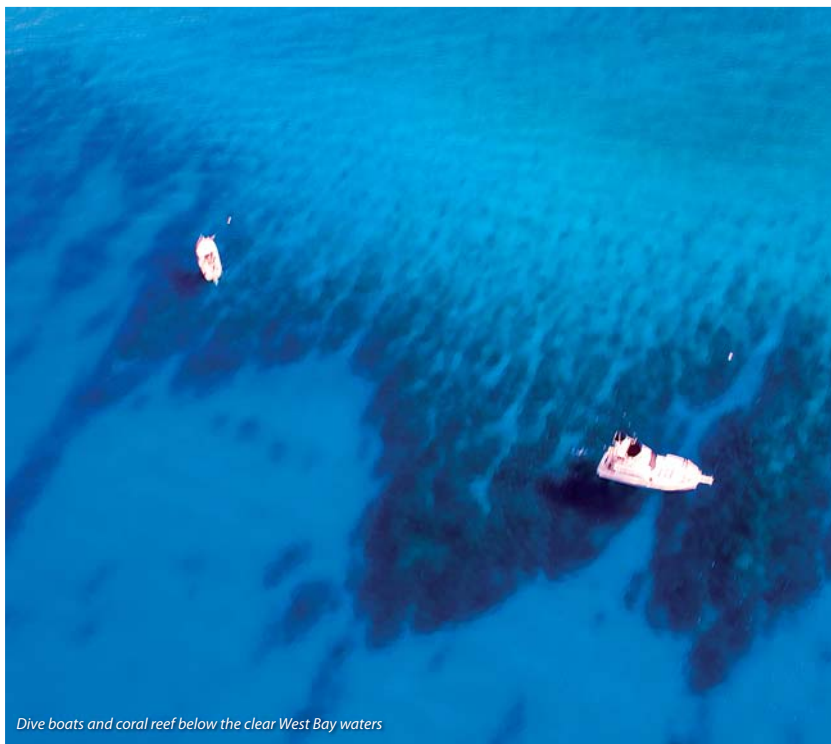
Location: West Bay
Depth: 25-60ft (7-18m)
Access: Boat
Range: Intermediate



While this wreck is pretty much broken up due to storms over the years, its proximity to **Peter's Reef** in the shallows above it and the fact that it still provides a lot of habitat for fish and small creatures makes it an interesting dive site. Its depth is also attractive, allowing long dives to be made on the ship and reefs nearby.



The bow of the Oro Verde



Dive boats and coral reef below the clear West Bay waters

Cayman dive pioneer Bob Soto sank the ship in 1980 to purposely create an artificial reef. Legend has it that it was a drug smuggler's ship and the name means 'Green Gold' in Spanish, so you can speculate as to what the cargo was. The ship was a little over 180ft in length, but the bow is now separated so it spans a much greater distance across the sandy plain. The bow still sits upright and has a mooring buoy on it, and there is usually little or no current at the site.

Don't be surprised if you're greeted by French angels on descent. While fish feeding isn't practiced all that much in the Caymans away from **Stingray City**, divemasters sometimes take a bit of fruit down, such as orange pulp, to entice fish in close to divers. The angels seem to like this and it seems pretty harmless. It certainly makes it great for photography.

The rest of the wreck also has a buoy leading down to it. As the sides have collapsed somewhat, it's easy to swim around and explore. Take care though, as some of the metal is jagged. The ship is not overly covered in growth on either section, but there's a little gorgonian on what appears to be the compass, and the engine room is splayed wide open, exposing the big machine.

The reef nearby has some nice macro critters, including yellowhead jawfish that have holes in the sand at about 50ft. Garden eels also live in the sandy 50ft to 60ft plain. Huge mutton snapper float about the wreck and there are also big tiger groupers here. Jacks, yellow coney, lizardfish and scrawled cowfish all make good photo subjects.

This is also a good night dive – look for arrow crabs and wandering hermits.

26 HAMMERHEAD HOLE

Location: West Bay
Depth: 30-50ft (9-15m)
Access: Boat
Range: Novice



This is a shallow dive that can provide a lot of bottom time. It's not clear exactly how the hammerhead moniker came about, but nurse sharks seem fond of the site. Scalloped hammerheads do like to eat stingrays, so they are around Grand Cayman but they're not necessarily seen here with any regularity.

You're more likely to see French angels, parrotfish and snappers as you descend to the pin at 30ft. From there, coral spurs and sandy grooves hold various holes, undercuts and encrusting corals.

Approximately 10 to 12 minute's swim south out to a long coral spur, the fifth one from the mooring line, is an area that nurse sharks seem to like. If you are lucky, one will be resting under a ledge or near the reef in the sand. Eagle rays also like to hunt in the sand past the reef. Head out here first if you're into sharks, then make your way back up to the shallows.



Stoplight parrotfish

27 CARIBBEAN SANDCHUTE

Location: West Bay
Depth: 50-130ft (16-40m)
Access: Boat
Range: Intermediate



This is a beautiful site to see, with a broad sandy plain spilling out to a drop-off at 100ft. The mooring buoy sits in 45ft of water and the chute is quite obvious. Visibility and the reflective power of the sand combine to make this a site that allows you to see a long way.

At the drop-off, a small coral island attracts a lot of marine life, including a school of horse-eye jacks. The island also has a few large vase sponges and growths of plate and castle coral. Look too for black coral trees a bit deeper.

High ridges rising up to 45ft on either side of the chute have a lot of fish life – green eels and toothy great barracuda join schools of chromis and blue-striped grunts.

The chute itself is a pretty place to swim over at the 60ft to 70ft level. Beautiful waves have naturally formed in the sand and southern stingrays move silently, floating like alien hovercraft.

28 RHAPSODY (MESA)

Location: West Bay
Depth: 30-60ft (9-18m)
Access: Boat
Range: Novice



Rhapsody is a good dive for colorful angels and parrotfish in the shallower waters. Located along the same upper reef area south of **Oro Verde**, it is called a mesa due to its high, flat, tabletop coral formation.



Flamingo tongue cowries can be found at the base of gorgonian corals

Drop down to the mooring at 35ft and head for the reef sides which form a good mini-wall, adorned with hard corals, some sponge life and wire corals. The coral cover attracts blue-striped grunts, silver schoolmasters and snappers, while yellowtail also hang in the water column.

There are many cleaning stations. Look for coney, tiger grouper and French and gray angelfish being cleaned or roaming the wall. Golden hamlets can also be found. Night diving is popular here, but there is some fire coral so be careful after dark and wear a skin suit for protection.

29 ROYAL PALMS LEDGE

Location: West Bay
Depth: 40-55ft (12-17m)
Access: Boat
Range: Novice



The Royal Palms Hotel is no longer, but the ledge and its namesake site remain. The reef forms a horseshoe shape where divers can swim down to 40ft and start exploring.

This sandy u-shaped channel runs through the reef and is almost tunnel-like, being undercut quite deeply.

Sponge life here is good with big barrel sponges and tube sponges, while schooling horse-eye jacks and snapper are found around the channel. As you follow the channel, look for one particular spot where an undercut about 15ft high goes in quite deeply. Fish here swim upside-down, orienting themselves to the bottom.

Macro creatures include file shells, juvenile lobster, tunicate colonies and small shrimp. Royal Palms Ledge really shines at night with all this smaller life crawling around – keep an eye out for squid too.

30

CHEESEBURGER REEF

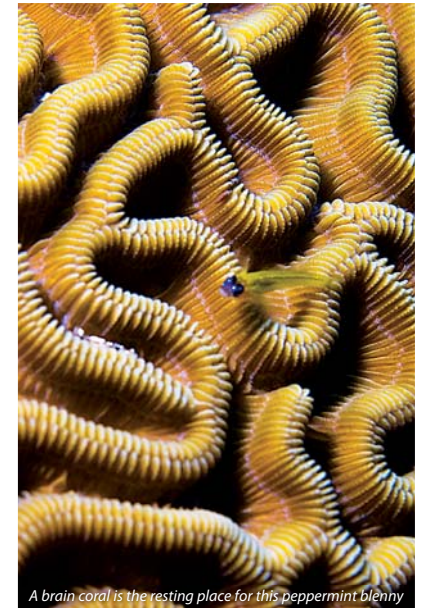
Location: George Town Harbor
Depth: 20-30ft (6-9m)
Access: Boat or shore
Range: Novice



Also called Soto's Reef, this site is frequently used for intro dives, instruction and newer divers. Snorkelers are also taken here and it can get quite crowded with visitors from cruise ships late morning through into the afternoon.

The site has nice staghorn and elkhorn coral stands that attract schooling fish. Sitting right at the entrance to the harbor, the mooring is in only 12ft of water, but there are a lot of fish around here, with everything from schooling surgeonfish to big tarpon.

Keep an eye out for boat traffic. It's less crowded later in the day and on night dives.



A brain coral is the resting place for this peppermint blenny

Bring the Kids

For people travelling with kids, some dive shops will customize a package appropriate to the child's age, as well as the needs and experience of the individual. Some of the programs available are in-water programs by SSI Scuba Rangers/PADI Seal Team, Jr Open Water certifications and SAS Y Snorkeling.

Program	Age Range
SASY Snorkel Programs	5 and over
Scuba Rangers/Seal Team	8 and over
Jr Open Water Cert	10 and over

Check before you go to see if your dive operation is offering any or all of these programs. The clear water and calm inshore conditions, plus availability of pools at just about every locale, make the Caymans a good place to give youngsters proper ocean training and skills.

31 BALBOA

Location: *George Town Harbor*
Depth: 20-30ft (6-9m)
Access: *Boat or shore*
Range: *Novice*



A freighter that was sunk in the 1930s following a hurricane, the *Balboa* is pretty much broken up now. However, the big props are still there and metal from the wreckage has spread out over a shallow area, creating habitat for a lot of different fish and invertebrates.

The ship was nearly 400ft long, and the debris area includes parts from the boiler room and stern. At night, orange ball coralimorphs (which look like orange tipped anemones) come out, and octopi, coney and lizardfish also reside here.

Even though nearby **Cheeseburger Reef** gets a lot of action, the *Balboa* isn't dived as heavily and marine life is very diverse. This is because permission must be given by the harbormaster, and in these times of tighter security, that can sometimes be a problem. Check with your dive shop about making this dive, as normally they can either call on the phone or by marine radio channel 16 to ask for permission. You don't need much notice, so this formality isn't as big a drawback as it might seem. If the harbormaster has a big cargo ship scheduled to enter the port, however, diving is likely to be restricted.



Saddled blenny

32 EDEN ROCK & DEVIL'S GROTTO

Location: *South of George Town*
Depth: 20-40ft (6-12m)
Access: *Shore*
Range: *Novice*



The limestone at Eden Rock is pocked with grottoes and caves, and there is plenty of fish as well. Entry can be made via the dive center located here, where you can ask about the layout of the reef. They'll not only show you a map but rent you a tank right then and there too.

This isn't a hard dive as there is usually no current and the fish are well fed, so snorkelers can enjoy the site as well. Since fish will approach closely, it's good for photographers too.

A hard reef flat and some corals and small fans make up a reef area high-



A tiny but colorful mantis shrimp

lighted by fish. Rock beauties, stoplight and red parrotfish, lots of sergeant majors, chubs and even tarpon can be seen.

Divers may find the caves interesting, especially if they are full of silversides and baitfish. Tarpon roam this pocked reef area as well, and the cracks and streaming light can make for good wide angle photos.

Seahorses

The seahorses found around the Cayman Islands aren't always that easy to see. They don't move much and normally aren't found on popular sites, instead living in the mangrove areas. Commonly called the longsnout seahorse, they can be brown, yellow, red and black with tiny dark spots evenly spread over the body. The snout is relatively long and they grow to be six inches tall, securing themselves to sea grasses or gorgonians with their tail to feed on plankton that drifts past.

While found throughout the Caribbean, this seahorse is rare north of Cuba. Divers and snorkelers seldom see them, however, because they mostly inhabit docks, pilings, floating mats of sea grass and other places people don't often explore. Check the dock at Rum Point or the sea grasses nearby – you might get lucky.

Continuing farther down the iron-shore, Devil's Grotto can be reached in the same shallow dive and offers some of the same features, with little caves, grottoes and sunlit tunnels that have tarpon and schools of baitfish. Wide angle photos with interesting light patterns can be made in the cracks and caves.

33 DON FOSTER'S REEF

Location: *South of George Town*
Depth: 12-50ft (4-16m)
Access: *Boat or shore*
Range: *Novice*



Located at the southern edge of the West Wall, you can shore dive at Don Foster's and observe its sand flats with intermittent coral fingers leading down to the wall.

Don Foster's is located at Casuarina Point, which is also a good snorkeling and shallow dive area. Entry from the cement pier incorporated into the iron-shore is easy. Do a giant stride in and then swim out along the protected finger to the upper reef area. There are offshore mooring buoys to swim to and go down if you want to save air.

Used by many as a check-out dive spot to get used to equipment again after a layoff from diving, the reef is part of the Cayman's Marine Park and is just an extension past the Devil's Grotto site, but with different terrain. It's an easy dive with easy access where you can see eels, turtles, lobster and scorpion fish, and if you make it to the big wall, there is great coral and sponge life. This can be a long swim, however, so it may be best to do the actual wall dive by boat.

Foster's has very good macro photography offerings as octopi and juveniles live here, so take the time to look around the coral growths atop the spurs and at the undercuts.

34 PARROT'S REEF

Location: South of George Town**Depth:** 20-50ft (6-16m)**Access:** Boat**Range:** Novice

Found about 90ft off the dock at Parrot's Landing, snorkeling and diving can both be done at this shallow site. Just swim out past the volcanic rock iron-shore and start looking for critters.

The site has good growths of star and brain corals, while angelfish, snapper, French grunts and plenty of other fish find the reef appealing. Barrel and tube sponges are also part of the terrain, even though it is a fairly shallow dive. Look also for octopi here.

As the name implies, parrotfish often feed here and stoplight, queen and red-band parrotfish are all to be seen. They like to feed upon the algae on the coral rocks. Consider making a night dive here to look for roaming octopi and parrotfish sleeping in their protective mucous domes within the reef's cracks.

35 SUNSET REEF & LCM DAVID NICHOLSON

Location: South Sound**Depth:** 30-60ft (9-18m)**Access:** Boat or shore**Range:** Novice

This site is the house reef for Sunset House hotel, with a small fee to dive here and use their pier facilities. Tanks and weight can be rented right at the dive window near the pier. Entry is easy and there are a couple of good photo opportunities at the site, including the statue of the Mermaid Amphitrite and

Queen Conchs

These large snails are afforded total protection in all three of the marine parks, as well as partial protection through the marine conservation laws which restrict the catching of conchs. Traditionally, conchs have formed an important part of the Cayman cultural cuisine, but increased human populations and the relative ease with which these creatures can be caught has depressed their numbers considerably all over the Caribbean.

Marine parks around the islands support a large population which is responsible for restocking the open areas, both through migration out of the park and the supply of larval conch which are dispersed by the ocean's currents.

Seagrass forms a vital role in the early stages of the conchs' life cycle. Snorkelers may also see young conch in mangrove and seagrass areas.

the shipwreck LCM *David Nicholson*. Both can be visited in the same dive.

As noted, shore entry is easy with a couple of places on the pier for a high giant stride or a water level giant stride. Once in, swim out along the sandy grooves looking for lettuce leaf nudibranchs and scorpionfish that may be in the area. You will soon see a nice reef area running from about 30ft to 55ft with some spurs and grooves. The reef has large brain corals, yellow tube sponges, sea plumes and many small hard corals. This is real macro country too, with Christmas tree worms, mantis shrimp, flamingo tongues, bristleworms and many other tiny creatures.

This is also a great night and dusk dive, so come here before sunset to watch the hamlets do their mating rituals. Once they start circling one another they don't seem to care if the camera is flashing away – shameless!



The mermaid statue at Sunset Reef



The wreck sits near the outer drop-off

Barrel Sponges

Barrel sponges in the Caymans can reach a diameter of more than six feet around and six feet high, providing habitat for cleaning shrimps and other small reef creatures. With a lifespan of over 100 years, sponges feed by pumping water in and out, gleaning nutrients from it in the process. Be very careful when diving near barrel sponges, as their rims are quite brittle and can break off easily, despite their size. This can seriously inhibit the sponge's ability to filter. Suppress the urge to climb inside to show how big a sponge is, as this is an easy way to damage one – pose beside it to give some size perspective.

Most barrel sponges are found in deeper water below the 50ft mark.

On the right side of the reef you can see the statue of the mermaid in the distance. Amphitrite has been overseeing Sunset Reef for several years now, and has graced the covers of *Skin Diver Magazine*, *Sport Diver Magazine*, *Scuba Diving Magazine* and numerous others. The creation of Canadian sculptor Simon Morris, she is a nine foot tall bronze mermaid, well anchored in 55ft of water. This statue makes for great wide angle photos, with yellowtails and French angelfish coming around to pose as auxiliary models.

Heading straight there, the swim to the mermaid from the entry takes roughly ten minutes. If you plan on diving both the mermaid and the shipwreck in the same dive, this is a good start as the wreck is another five minutes swim further out from the mermaid. Looking from the beach, it is the farthest buoy

straight out from the entry. From the mermaid you'll have to angle across the sand a bit, but it is normally easy to see in the distance if conditions are calm.

The *Nicholson* is a former US WWII landing craft with some fish life and good purple tube sponges on it. It's not too grown over with marine life and makes a good wide angle photo prop, as does the mermaid.

The ship sits at the start of the deep wall (which is probably better done as a boat dive) and it should be your turning point for a pleasant shallow recreational dive. Swim back up to the reef and enjoy the fish life and occasional sea turtle that comes in here. Exit is easy with a long ladder, though if you have a camera you may have to hand it up to someone. There is usually little surge here, but if there is, time your exit to get on the ladder safely.

36 EAGLE RAY ROCK

Location: North of Southwest Point

Depth: 50-100ft (16-30m)

Access: Boat

Range: Intermediate



The mooring here is in a little over 50ft and marks out a deeper dive with a big sand chute and some good coral spurs. Near the southern tip, this site isn't dived as much as some of the calmer inner bay sites. This can be good, as there seems to be a decent amount of fish life and eagle rays (which gave the site its name).

Head down the anchor line to the reeftop and the chute will become apparent. This has garden eels in residence, and there may also be southern stingrays hunting or covered in sand.

Head down through the groove to the canyon, which has healthy corals and some beautiful tube sponges.

This continues on the reef wall, which is beautifully adorned with barrel, rope and bright red encrusting sponges. Look too for black corals in well-formed trees.

Fish here include blue parrotfish, gray angels, blue chromis and an occasional moray eel.



A hawksbill sea turtle roams the reef

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