

THE CAYMAN ISLANDS

Dive Guide

**“An excellent
investment for
divers.”** —Tampa, Florida,
Tribune and Times

**“A must-have.... At once
beautiful and infinitely
practical.”**
—*Rodale's Scuba Diving*



STEPHEN FRINK **and**
WILLIAM HARRIGAN

Many Cayman reefs are suitable for snorkeling, with healthy coral formations in shallow water.



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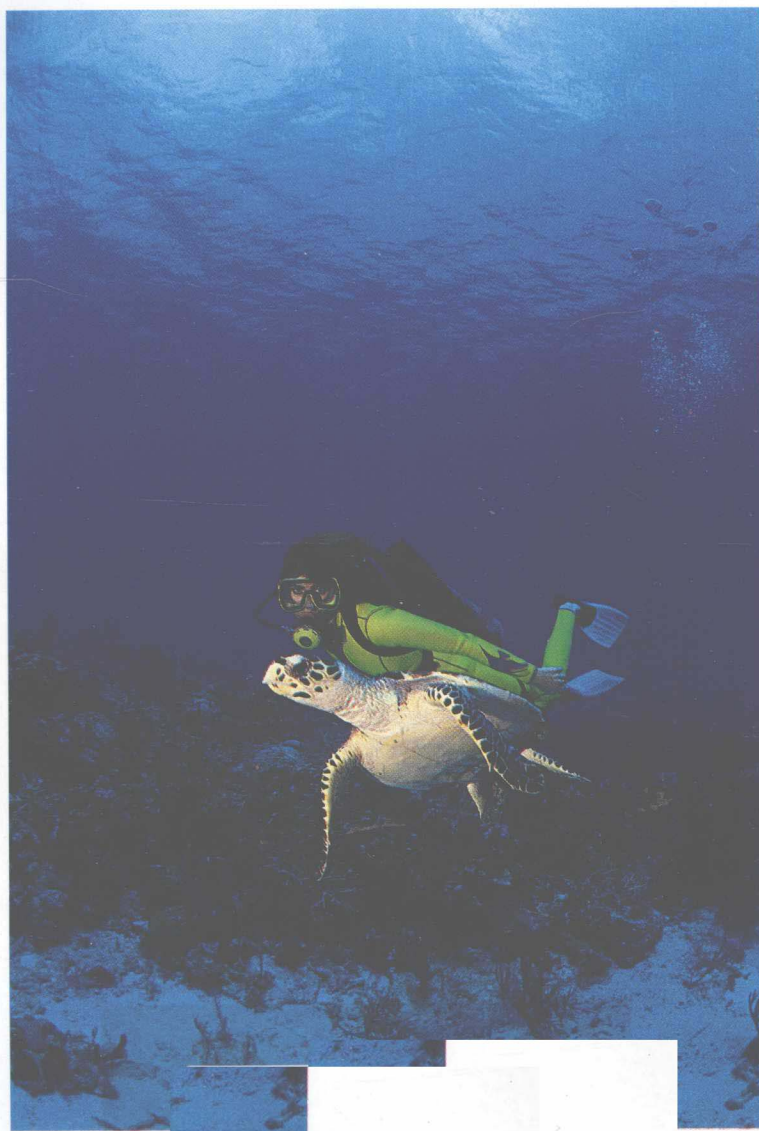
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THE CAYMAN ISLANDS *Dive Guide*



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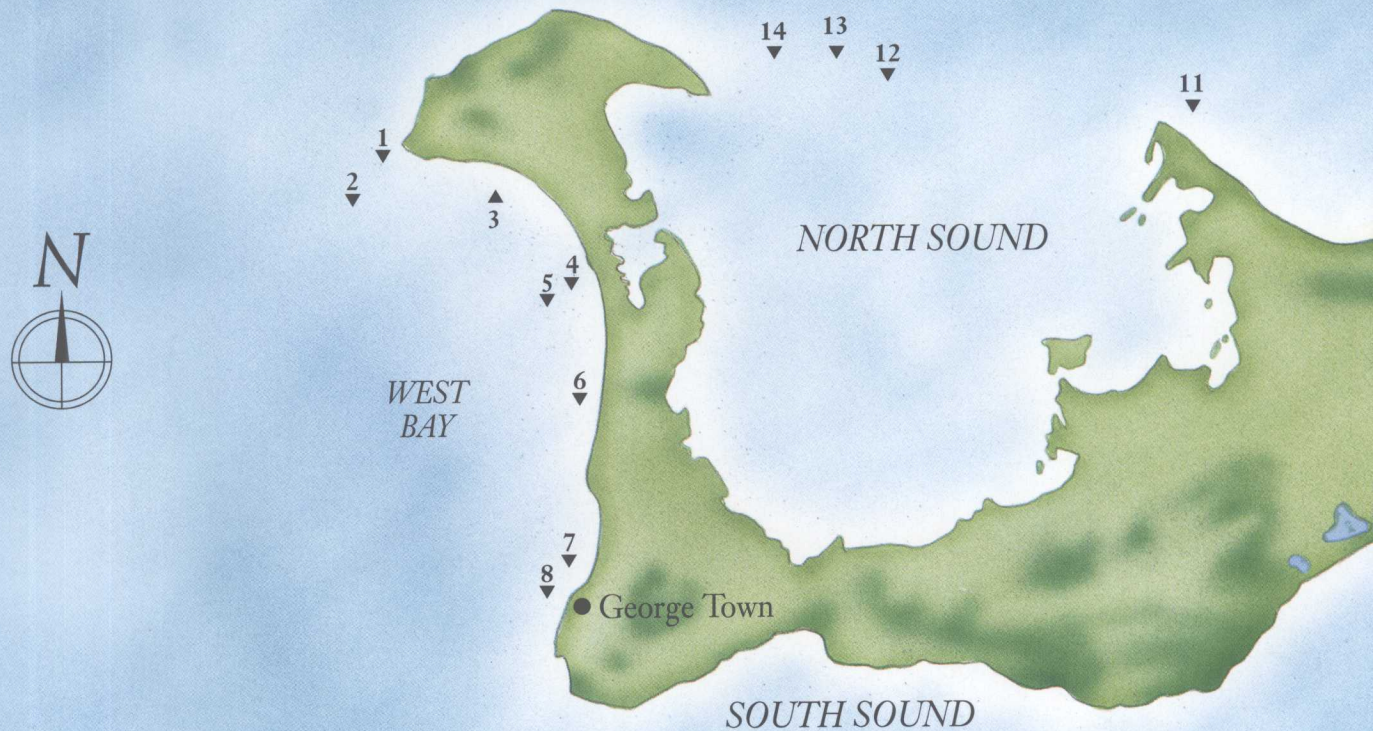
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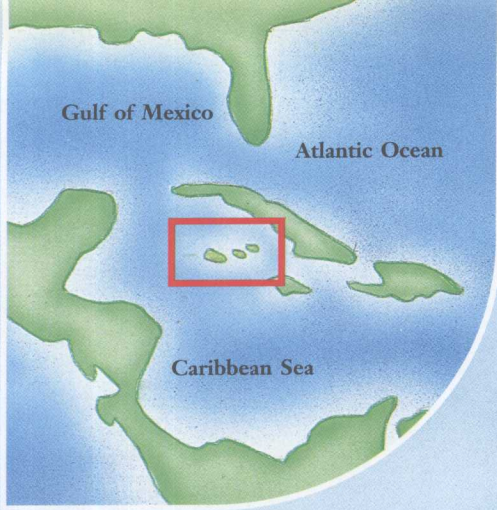
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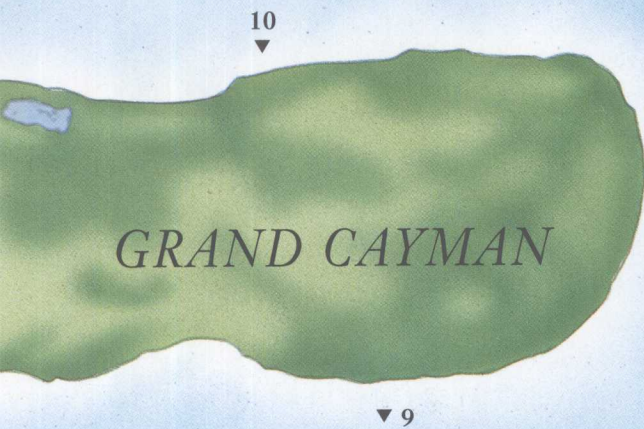
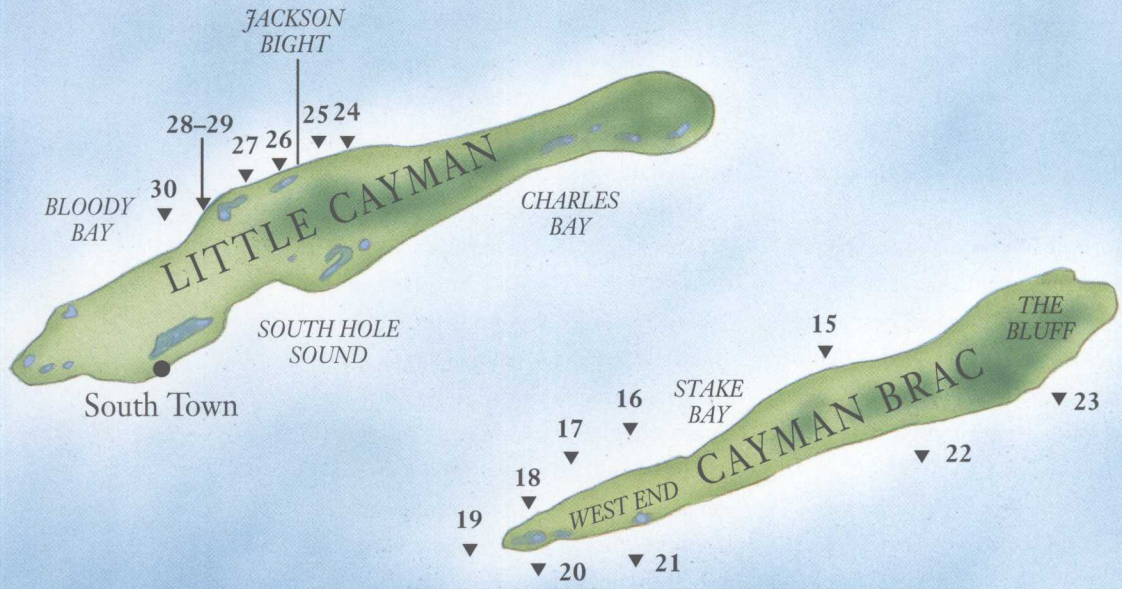
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Page 1. A diver swims together with a hawksbill turtle at Aquarium, Grand Cayman.

Pages 2-3. Aerial view of the east end of Little Cayman, showing Sandy Point, a popular spot for picnicking and snorkeling.



CARIBBEAN SEA

INTRODUCTION

If there is any place on earth created just for divers, it must be the Cayman Islands. Geologically, the three islands are uniquely suited for diving, with clear water, vertical walls, shallow coral reefs, and miles of superb sandy beach. Fortunately (for the divers at least) numerous shipwrecks have also come to rest here, some by accident and others by design. Weather and sea conditions are excellent year-round, and the dive sites require typically short boat rides for access.

Historically, these islands remained undeveloped for centuries, as though waiting for a future that was certain to arrive. In the early 1970s, as destination scuba diving first became a viable industry, it was the Cayman Islands that set the standard.

Here were natural resources more than sufficient to attract dive travelers, and a government and private sector

prescient enough to realize that their underwater world was worth promoting.

Fortunately, the Cayman Islands also realized this massive tourist attraction was worth preserving as well, making marine conservation a national priority far before it became fashionable in other destinations.

Today a full one-third of all tourists to the Cayman Islands arrive specifically for the dive and snorkel attractions.

The dive resorts are very diver-friendly, and the dive infrastructure is among the world's most sophisticated and professional. No matter where you choose to dive in the Cayman Islands, you can count on a fascinating underwater world and reliable dive services.

The highest point on Grand Cayman is just 49 feet (14.7 meters), and even the tall bluff of Cayman Brac rises only 140 feet (42 meters), but from a diver's point of view the Cayman Islands are lofty mountaintops, the pinnacle of the recreational dive pantheon. Only small slivers of land actually extend above the surface of the sea, but the islands are the upper reaches of an impressive submarine ridge extending from Belize to Cuban Sierra Maestra, forming the northern edge of the Cayman Trench.

Created by volcanic activity 70 to 50 million years ago, the Caymans are remnants of a prehistoric cataclysm that also created the south coast of Cuba and the central regions of Haiti and Puerto Rico. The nature of the Caymans' geologic origins is significant to divers for a number of reasons.

First, the violent upthrust of the earth's plates created the spectacular vertical walls that ring all three of the islands.

Second, because of its volcanic origins, the porous substrate has no rivers and is covered by very little sediment. This fortunate situation minimizes freshwater runoff and keeps the water extremely clear. Even when the weather brings wind and rain, the visibility tends to stay high and clears quickly.

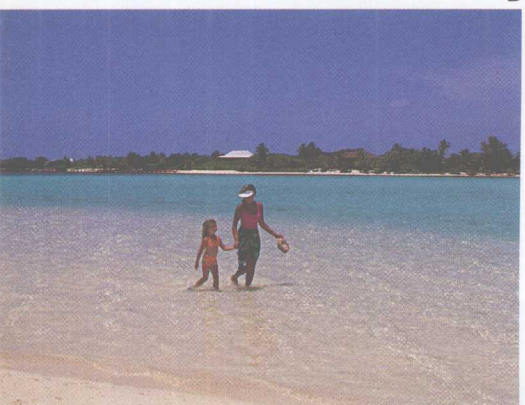
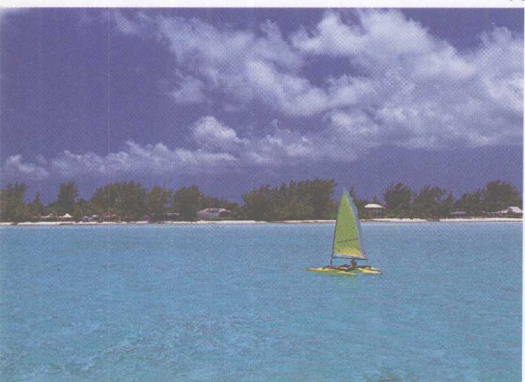
Third, the islands are well situated to attract marine life. Many large adult



pelagic species arrive from the surrounding deep water, and the shallow sounds inside the reef line provide nursery areas for the many fish and invertebrates that ultimately migrate to the coral reef.

THE DIVE SITES

There are well over two hundred named dive sites in the Cayman Islands, and many more unmarked and unnamed sites that are visited by various dive operators. Incredibly, in spite of the high level of diving activity over the past three decades in the Caymans, many





areas have yet to be explored. Maybe that's not so surprising when you consider the massive coral reef and drop-off that surrounds all three islands.

The Cayman dive portfolio is so huge and of such high quality, we can only look at a small vignette within the context of this book. The thirty dive sites selected for this book were chosen to represent the range of diving experiences available on Grand Cayman and the Sister Islands.

You'll find your own favorites as you explore the Caymans, from among these sites and many others.

MARINE ECOLOGY

At the heart of this complex and wonderful submarine world is the tiny coral polyp. The largest of these colonial animals is about the size of the tip of your little finger; most are much smaller. In spite of their diminutive size, coral polyps build miles of massive yet intricate reefs.

Much of the reef-building ability of hard corals is due to their unique symbiotic relationship with tiny algae called zooxanthellae. The zooxanthellae are responsible for the golden brown, yellow,

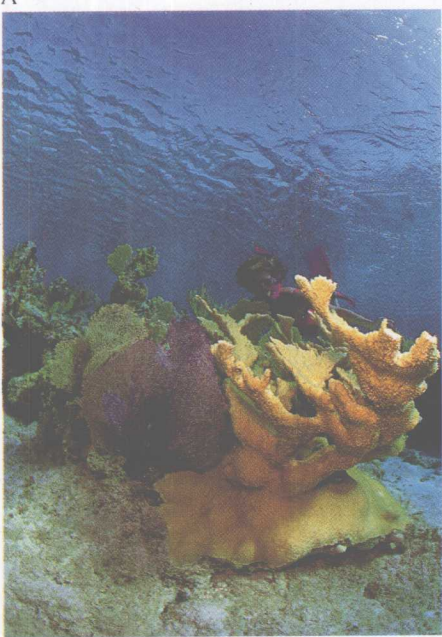
A. A green sail interrupts the blue expanse of the sea at Rum Point Beach, North Sound, Grand Cayman.

B. The crystal clear waters of Little Cayman are attractive not only to divers.

*C. Many Cayman reefs are suitable for snorkeling, with coral formations in shallow water. The white tips and golden brown color on the branches of this colony of elkhorn coral, *Acropora palmata*, indicate a healthy and growing formation.*

or green colors of many corals and contribute significantly to the energy production of the polyps. In the process of photosynthesis, the zooxanthellae use the carbon dioxide and nitrogen waste of the polyp and produce oxygen and nutrients that are in turn used by the polyp. Photosynthesis requires sunlight and is one of the reasons corals only grow in clear and reasonably shallow water.

When the zooxanthellae remove the carbon dioxide and nitrogen, they also act as catalysts in the secretion of calcium carbonate by the polyp. This calcium carbonate forms the skeleton of the reef. Coral polyps obtain the remainder of their nutrients by trapping plankton from



the water with their tentacles, which contain stinging cells called nematocysts.

The hard corals' tentacles are normally withdrawn during the day, when plankton are scarce. During this time, polyps rely on the zooxanthellae to produce food. At night, when photosynthesis is not possible and plankton comes up from deeper water, the tentacles extend and the polyps feed actively.

Soft corals, which generally have eight tentacles on each polyp, as opposed to six in hard corals, are found in great numbers on the reef but are not reef builders. Lacking symbiotic zooxanthellae, they form flexible skeletons instead of the hard calcium carbonate skeletons

of the boulder and branching corals.

The tentacles of soft corals are normally extended to feed during the day as well as the night.

MANGROVE FORESTS

The shallow waters of mangroves are not generally visited by Cayman dive operators, but from an ecological standpoint they are vitally linked to the reefs. Coral reefs need clear, warm water in order to survive. They also need water that does not contain too many nutrients, or faster growing organisms like algae will successfully compete with them for space.



The plants onshore, particularly the mangroves, are essential in preserving the necessary water quality. Mangroves are uniquely structured to live on the boundary between land and sea. Special adaptations allow them to tolerate salt water, and long roots let them actually grow past the shore and right into the water.

The tangled miles of mangrove roots along the coast stabilize the land and prevent runoff from making the water turbid and overloaded with nutrients. They also provide a protected habitat for many species of fish and invertebrates, particularly during the juvenile phase of the life cycle.

SEA GRASS

Unlike algae, sea grass actually has roots. It grows underwater, but is much the same as the grass on a lawn. The Cayman reefs, particularly along the north wall of Grand Cayman, benefit from the presence of several species of sea grass, most notably turtle grass and eelgrass. These two grasses often grow in the same area, but can be easily differentiated: turtle grass has flat blades, and eelgrass has round blades.

Sea grasses are incredibly efficient at trapping particles in the water and binding up sediment. The root system can be as long as 3 feet (1 meter), with

A. Golden branches of elkhorn coral, *Acropora palmata*, can be found on many Cayman reefs. This relatively fast-growing coral can be found in greatest abundance on the shallow reef crests, in the strongest sunlight and highest wave action.

B. Multibarreled tube sponges make a colorful foreground on Cemetery Wall, Cayman Brac.

C. A school of grunts slides along the wall at Three Fathom Wall, Little Cayman.

D. A diver lights the colors of an unusual combination of azure vase sponges, *Callyspongia plicifera*, strawberry vase sponges, *Mycale laxissima*, and a colony of giant star coral, *Montastrea cavernosa*, at Babylon, Grand Cayman.

E. Divers can observe southern stingrays at very close quarters at Stingray City.

F. This wall at Fantasy Island, Grand Cayman, is rich in life forms, particularly sponges and corals.

many wandering tendrils that weave the bottom into a thick mat. The blades of grass also trap sediment, giving them a typically fuzzy appearance. This helps keep the water clear for the corals on the reefs. Like other green plants, sea grass employs photosynthesis for its energy needs and releases oxygen, which is also vital to the coral reef ecosystem. As you snorkel or dive near a sea grass bed, you can actually see oxygen released as bubbles. Sea grasses also function as nurseries, providing homes for many of the juveniles of fish and invertebrates that later make their way out to the reef. Finally, sea grasses are an important food source. Herbivores of all types graze regularly on sea grass, including a variety of fish and turtles. Many of the fish that reside on the near shore reefs during the day leave the shelter of the reefs at night to feed on the surrounding sea grass.

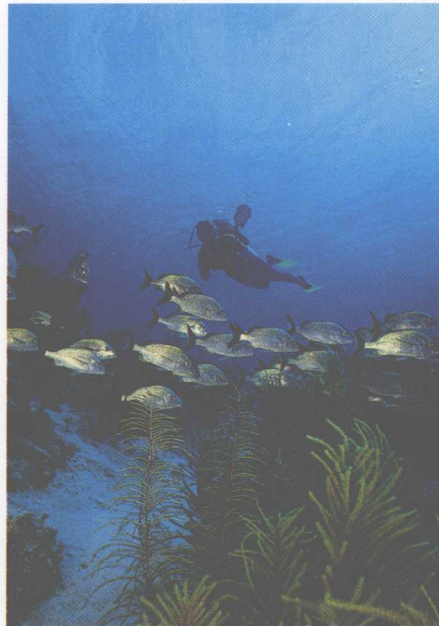
The shallow Cayman reefs, located between the deep wall and the islands, are composed of a series of coral ridges and sand channels commonly called "spur and grooves." The ridges are formed by the accumulated calcium carbonate secretions of thousands of years of coral growth. On top of these ridges, living corals are contributing their own tiny amounts of calcium carbonate, or limestone, to the reef each day. The ridges always run perpendicular to the shore, from shallow water to deep water. Knowing how the ridges are oriented makes navigation simple. When swimming parallel to the shore, just count the ridges as you cross them. When swimming perpendicular to the shore, keep track of whether you are going toward shallower or deeper water.

MARINE PARKS

The Cayman Islands Marine Parks consist of three zones, a Marine Park Zone, an Environmental Zone, and a Replenishment Zone. Examples of all three are established in the waters surrounding Grand Cayman, while Cayman Brac and

Little Cayman have only Marine Park Zones and Replenishment Zones. The Environmental Zone along the eastern shore of North Sound on Grand Cayman has the strictest rules. All in-water activities—anchoring and the taking of any marine life—are prohibited. In addition, there is a 5-MPH (8-KPH) speed limit for boats crossing the area.

The Replenishment Zone has prohibitions against spear guns and taking conch or lobster. Line fishing and anchoring is permitted. Marine Park Zones include much of the West Bay of Grand Cayman, and the north and south walls of Cayman Brac and Little Cayman. Most of the dive sites are in this



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area. Except for cast nets and line fishing from the shore or beyond the wall, no taking of marine life is permitted. Anchoring is not permitted except for boats less than 60 feet (18 meters), and then only when anchored properly in the sand. Get a copy of the Cayman Islands Marine Park regulations and boundaries at the Port Authority office in George Town. The information is contained in the booklet *Guidelines for the Use of Coastal Waters in the Cayman Islands*.

WATERSPORTS OPERATORS

Most dive operators in the Caymans are members of the Cayman Island Watersports Operators Association (CIWOA), formed in 1981 to encourage safe and environmentally sound business practices. One of the first projects undertaken by the CIWOA was the installation of mooring buoys to reduce anchor damage on the reefs. Before dive computers, the CIWOA instituted a 100-foot (30-meter) depth limit for sport diving. Some operators have begun to allow computer profiles at greater depths, but

you should expect to encounter depth and bottom time limitations on many Cayman dives.

CAYMAN DIVING

Wall diving is the prime attraction in the Cayman Islands, but there are many dives on shallow reefs and wrecks as well. And, of course, there is Stingray City, one of the most unique and exciting dive encounters in the world—and it's only 12 feet (3.5 meters) deep! The most common dive schedule is a two-tank dive in the morning and a one-tank dive in the afternoon. The second morning dive and the afternoon dive are generally on shallow reefs or wrecks.



A



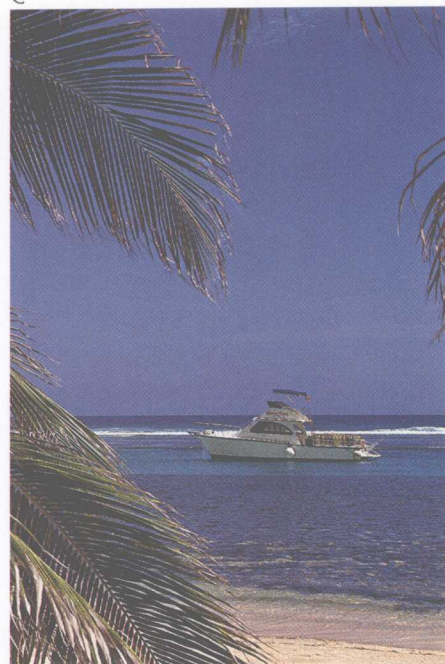
A. Treasure Island Divers boat Gatlin ventures over to the southeast corner of Grand Cayman during a spell of calm weather.

B. A Red Sail Sports instructor conducts a Discover Scuba Diving introductory course in the pool at the Westin on Seven Mile Beach, Grand Cayman.

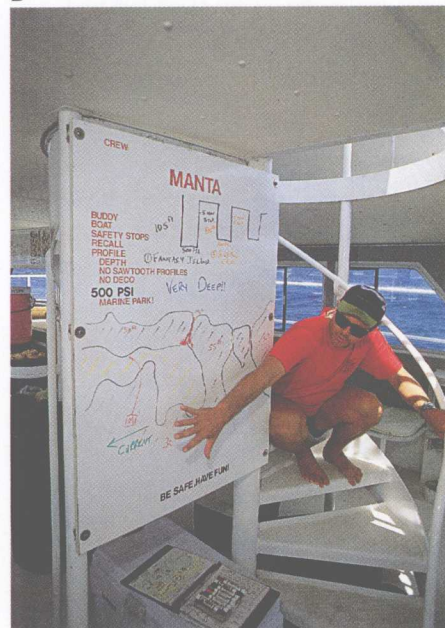
Some operations also feature two-tank dives in the afternoon. A few operators also run three-tank dive safaris that include two deep dives and a shallow dive. Lunch is normally provided on these trips.

Most boats on Grand Cayman pick up divers either directly from the shore of Seven Mile Beach or from canals or marinas in the North Sound. Only a few docks are available to dive boats along the popular west side of the island. The beach boats commonly dive West Bay sites, which are all within the 6- or 7-mile (10- or 11-kilometer) stretch of water along the west coast. Under certain wind conditions, the south coast or north coast will also be accessible to these boats, but the hull design that makes these vessels ideally suited to a beach pickup also limits their use to calm seas. Boats that operate from the North Sound tend to dive primarily on the North Wall and West Bay, although they are generally capable of going nearly anywhere under the right weather conditions. A relatively small group of dive operators visit the east end of the island, due to the distance from most shops and the generally rougher sea conditions. When the weather cooperates, the East Wall is definitely worth the trip, offering lots of fish and excellent coral and sponge life. Boats on Cayman Brac and Little Cayman not only operate all around their own islands, they frequently cross the short distance between islands. However, off Little Cayman the most frequently dived sites are along Jackson Bight and Bloody Bay Wall, both of which are normally on the lee side of the island. On Cayman Brac most of the diving is concentrated around the west end of the island, providing short run times for the island's two main dive walls along the rugged bluff at the east end of Cayman Brac, but the walls typically begin deeper there. Since it is nearly as easy to cross to Little Cayman as it is to dive the east end

C



D



walls, boats from the Brac often visit Little Cayman rather than dive their own island's more remote reaches.

RECOMPRESSION CHAMBER

There is a recompression chamber located in George Town, Grand Cayman. A 24-hour-a-day medivac service from Cayman Brac or Little Cayman assures that a quick response to a dive emergency is possible anywhere within these islands. While about 700 treatments have been rendered in the chamber since it was installed in 1972, given the number of divers visiting these

islands, the safety record is excellent. Still, careful attention to safe dive profiles and the maximum depth limits imposed by the Cayman Islands Watersports Operators Association should ensure that your Cayman dive holiday will not include a visit to the chamber. Phone 345-949-2989 for more details about the chamber (but hopefully not for reservations).

GENERAL DIVING CONDITIONS

There is good diving around the entire perimeter of all three islands. However, because the trade winds are usually blowing from the northeast or east, most of the diving occurs on the western ends of the islands, where there is shelter from the wind. The landmass of the islands provides such an efficient lee that many dive sites are in perpetually flat water. Strong currents can be present from time to time, but they are not generally a problem in the Caymans. This is especially true in West Bay, which offers mild surface and subsurface conditions most of the time.

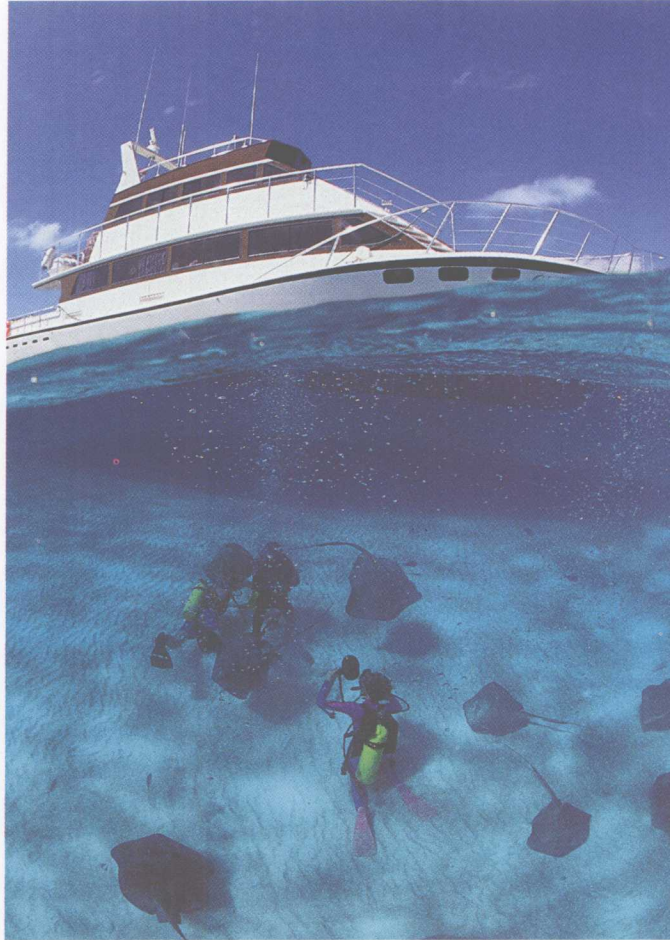
SHORE DIVING

Most shore diving occurs on the west coast of Grand Cayman, just south of George Town. The reef is very close to shore, and divers can easily reach sites like Eden Rock and Devil's Grotto. There is excellent shore diving just a short walk away from dedicated dive resorts like Sunset House and Coconut Harbor, which makes them especially popular among visiting scuba enthusiasts. Some dive operations may require that you rent tanks from them in order to enter the water from their property.

BOAT DIVING

The sophisticated level of service provided by dive operators in the Caymans is reflected in their boats. Generally these are well-equipped, well-maintained,

E



C. A dive boat awaits at its mooring on Cayman Brac.

D. Captain Kevin Dobbs conducts a dive briefing for Fantasy Island aboard Manta, Sunset Divers' luxurious dive cat.

E. Stingray City is one of Grand Cayman's most popular attractions.

F. Red Sail Sports' custom dive boat, a triple-hull, diesel-powered craft with all the modern diver amenities, designed for beach pickups.

G. Sunset harbor tour; George Town, Grand Cayman.

F



G



and custom-built for diving. Boats operating primarily in West Bay tend to be catamarans, which are suitable for beach pickups and for the flat water that prevails. Boats operating along the north, south, and east walls are mostly monohulls in the 35- to 45-foot (10- to 14-meter) range, capable of handling rougher sea conditions. Diver capacities of 12 to 24 are common. Amenities generally include freshwater showers, camera rinse barrels, marine heads, drinking water, shaded seating areas, and large swim platforms with long, sturdy dive ladders.

MOORING BUOYS

Any time an anchor is dropped, there is potential it will fall into coral or drag across the reef. Misplaced anchor chain and line are also potential causes of reef damage. The dive boat captains in the Caymans are very sensitive about protecting their coral reef, and none would intentionally drop the hook in coral. However, the wind could shift during a dive, and with divers down, the captain may not be able to maneuver the boat to avoid potential coral damage. Mooring buoys are a much safer, more environmentally friendly alternative. The mooring buoys used in the Cayman Islands are

white balls that float on the surface, tethered by a line and secured to the seafloor by an eyebolt fastened directly into the bottom. A short line floats on the surface so that the dive boat can simply pull up to the mooring and quickly attach its line to the float. This system not only reduces anchor damage to the coral but is a more efficient way to secure the boat on-site.

About 250 mooring buoys have been installed at dive sites among the three islands. This number changes as new dives are added to the portfolio, moorings are temporarily lost, and sites are temporarily “retired” to allow recovery. Even though mooring buoys mark most of the dive sites discussed in this book,

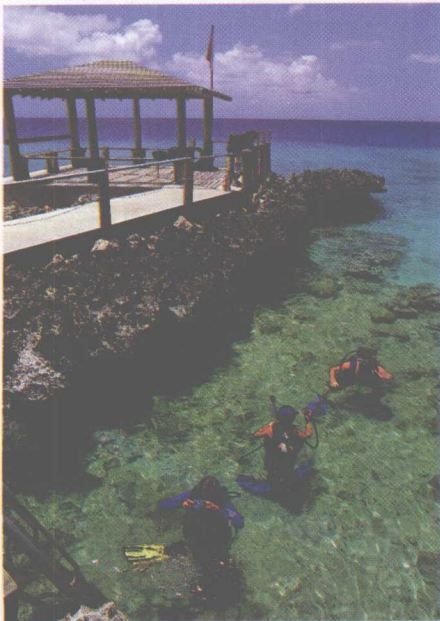
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some may be dived as an “anchor drop” either because the mooring ball is presently gone or because the site has never been moored. If an anchor is dropped, rest assured the captain knows how to place the anchor carefully in a sand patch where the chain and line is unlikely to impact coral.

However, if you notice an anchor potentially dragging or apparently ready to damage coral, the captain will appreciate polite notification.

SCUBA ETIQUETTE

Some special considerations apply to diving in the Cayman Islands due to the

popularity of diving here and the fragile nature of coral reefs. Part common sense and part marine park rules, diving etiquette is a set of guidelines for divers that is easy to follow and should not make your diving any less enjoyable.

In fact, following these simple guidelines will ensure that you have the best dive possible and help preserve the reefs for others:

1. Avoid all contact with living coral. No one visiting a palace would tramp through its splendid rose garden; a coral reef should receive the same respect.

The impact of fins, tanks, or knees can crush the septa of coral polyps or remove their protective mucus coating.

E



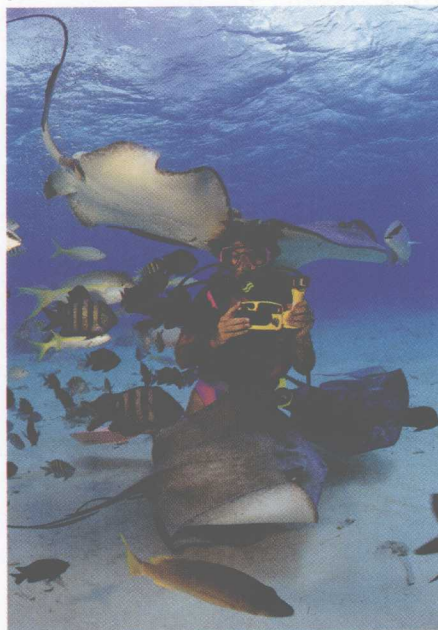
The damage caused by one diver is usually not visible, but the cumulative damage from hundreds of divers visiting the same reef year after year becomes obvious. Good buoyancy control will keep you clear of the coral as you swim along the reef.

2. Do not wear gloves on reef dives if possible, to avoid the temptation to touch unnecessarily.

3. Use sandy areas for contact with the bottom.

When you must steady yourself or stop underwater, settle into one of the many sand patches. Sometimes you may need only to put a fin tip or hand down to control your motion. When this

F



G



A. Two scuba divers preparing for shore diving at Grand Cayman

B, D. Grand Cayman dive boats are usually well-equipped and are generally vessels especially built for diving.

C. Divers leaving for shore diving in the northern part of West Bay, Grand Cayman.

E. The photographer completely surrounded by a gang of rays at Stingray City. Divers always have to respect

these friendly animals, even if the rays often get too close.

F. A diver approaching a narrow passage at Babylon, Grand Cayman. You must always control your position carefully in order to avoid damaging sponges and corals.

G. When diving on a wreck, you can have interesting encounters: the wreck of the Oro Verde is home to several large groupers, including this Nassau grouper, *Epinephelus striatus*.

happens, look for sand. However, when you rise off the sand, do so gently. The silt from a clumsy, over-weighted diver rising off the sand can smother the fragile coral polyps and reduce visibility for other divers.

4. Keep all trash aboard your boat. Plastics in particular are a problem because they last so long and can get wrapped around the coral. Most littering is inadvertent—a sandwich wrapper whipped off the side and similar accidents—so extra care is needed on the water. Even biodegradable trash like apple cores and orange peels should not be discarded on the water, if for no other reason than aesthetics. To the person

who comes behind you and sees it floating on the water, it's still just garbage.

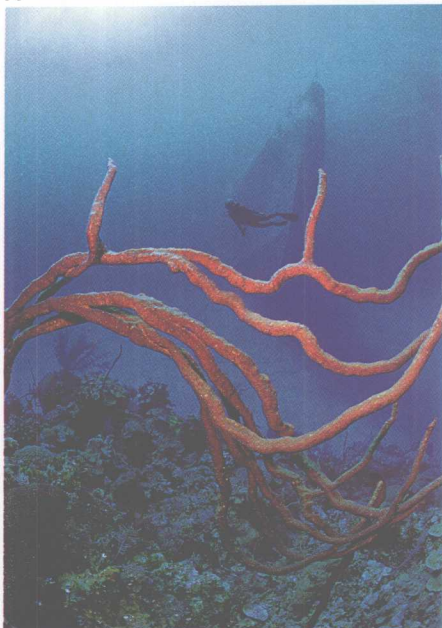
5. Respect the marine life. Harassing turtles or other sea life causes unnecessary and life-threatening stress. Enjoy your encounters with them, but do not attempt to ride them or touch them.

UNDERWATER PHOTOGRAPHY

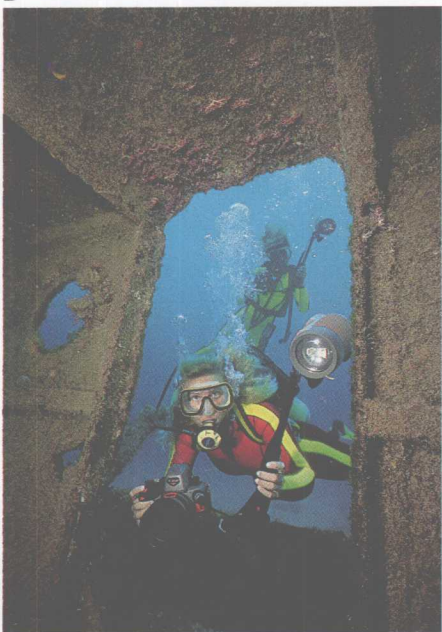
Some of the most striking underwater photographs taken anywhere in the Caribbean come from the Cayman Islands. Here are some of the reasons :

1. The exceptional clarity of the water minimizes the problem of white particles,

A



B



A. Wide-angle photography is very good for getting images like this, where the Oro Verde wreck hovers over the bottom, which is rich in marine life.

B. The Cayman Islands offer many advantages for underwater photographers. In addition to clear water, abundant marine life, and interesting wrecks, the islands also have convenient photographic services for film developing, camera rentals, repairs, supplies, and instruction.

known as "backscatter," appearing in the photos.

2. The clear, shallow water allows photographers to make use of strong ambient light for bright backgrounds and an almost three-dimensional look.

3. The Cayman Islands have an enormous variety of marine habitats, from reefs to wrecks to walls, providing countless photo opportunities.

4. High-quality rental cameras and accessories are available at dive shops on all three islands. Quality E-6 slide film and C-41 print film processing is readily available to help quickly evaluate photo progress.

5. The marine life at Stingray City and the Sandbar, including stingrays, moray eels, barracuda, conies, Nassau groupers, yellowtail snappers, and angelfish, is exceptionally tame and can be easily approached for photographs. Other dive sites on all three islands feature marine life that either has been hand-fed or is long accustomed to the benign presence of divers. These fish do

not associate divers with spearfishing, and even normally shy fish like a Nassau grouper will swim right up to a photographer and pose.

6. Photographers are welcome aboard Cayman Islands dive boats, which provide conveniences such as camera tables, rinse barrels, and assistance in handling gear.

7. Customs and Immigrations officials are used to tourists arriving with multiple camera systems, eliminating potential problems entering or exiting the country.

There are so many photographic possibilities on each reef, it may be difficult to decide whether to set up for wide angle, normal, or macro. Here are some tips for what works well in the Caymans:

WIDE ANGLE

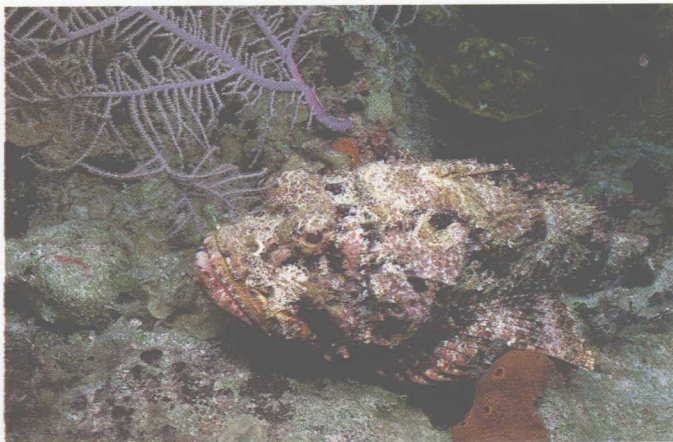
Wide angle is a good choice for the middle of the day, when there is plenty of ambient light to brighten up the background.

C



C. Photographers can easily find good subjects, like this green moray eel, *Gymnothorax funebris*, by looking carefully in the crevices of the reef.

D



D. A spotted scorpionfish, *Scorpaena plumieri*, lies camouflaged on the bottom at Eagle Ray Pass, but the photographer's lens has found it.

From about 10 A.M. to 3 P.M. the sun is high in the sky, and more of the sun's rays penetrate the water. During this period you can easily balance the background available light exposure with the foreground strobe exposure.

This is especially true for wide-angle photography on the deeper wrecks. Good sunlight will give you that intense blue background that makes the subject really stand out.

If you happen to be in the Caymans when the weather is not cooperating, wide angle can still be a good choice, as long as you work close. Get in as tight as the lens will allow, and you'll bring back some superb wide-angle shots. Just don't depend too much on the ambient light for your composition or exposure value.

NORMAL LENS

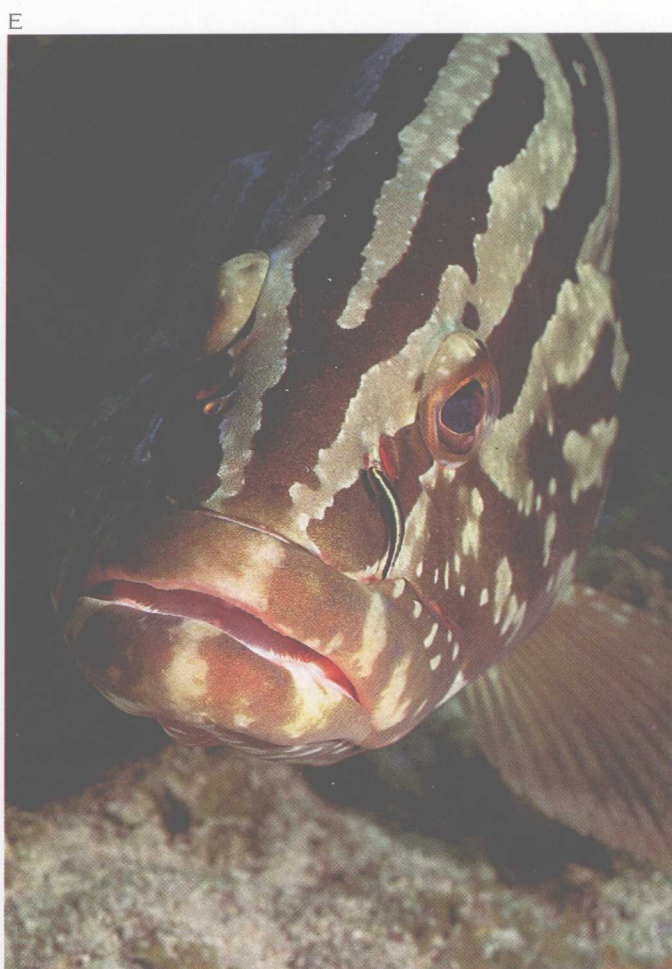
For the best results, shoot from about 3 feet (1 meter) away, or even closer if your lens and the fish behavior will allow. Move in slowly and carefully to avoid spooking the fish, and you'll be able to capture those head-on, closely packed fish photos that are so appealing.

In addition to schools of fish there are many good single subjects that are the right size for normal-lens underwater photography. Sea turtles, nurse sharks, moray eels, and many coral formations are suitable subjects.

Don't expect to get good pictures of six of your dive buddies or the entire bow of the *Oro Verde* shipwreck with a 35mm lens. You'd have to be too far away to get subjects like this in your viewfinder, and the results will be disappointing. If that's what you want to shoot, rent a wide-angle lens so you can move in closer and still capture a large subject.

MACRO AND CLOSE-UP

You could jump in the water in the Caymans anytime and anyplace with a macro setup and come back with outstanding photos. Some of the most productive areas, though, are the shallow



*E. Thanks to the calm waters, it is not hard to take close-ups of Nassau groupers, *Epinephelus striatus*.*

*F. The clear waters of the Caymans let you photograph silver schools of fish like these horse-eye jacks, *Caranx latus*.*

*G. The light of the strobes creates silver reflections on the bodies in a school of tarpon, *Megalops atlanticus*, which gather in groups within the protective culls-de-sac of Tarpon Alley, Grand Cayman.*

