

## East Side & East End



Colorful new condos are popping up along the south east coast

Many of the sites here are among the most famous in the Caymans. Located far from major towns, this area has a laid-back atmosphere. There is a lot of shipwreck history here as well – much of it memorialized at small parks along the side of the road. Development is now coming to the area and condos, a major grocery store and some very nice restaurants can be found.

The diving offers rich marine life on walls full of crevices and swim-throughs, along with a good chance of seeing pelagic marine life.

East Side and East End sites are not usually as crowded with boats and divers as other areas, so chances are good that if you want to visit a given site you will be able to.

<i>East Side &amp; East End Site</i>		GOOD SNORKELING	NOVICE	INTERMEDIATE	ADVANCED
39	CRUSHER'S WALL	•		•	
40	BIG HOUSE WALL	•		•	
41	IRONSHORE GARDENS	•		•	
42	PLAYING FIELD	•	•		
43	SHARK ALLEY	•	•		
44	THE MAZE	•		•	
45	MCKENNEY'S CANYON	•		•	
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Beautiful tube sponges at Big House Wall.

### 39 CRUSHER'S WALL

**Location:** Southeast of Half Moon Bay

**Depth:** 65-130ft (9-15m)

**Access:** Boat

**Range:** Intermediate



For this dive, local dive shops actually drop an anchor in a large sand chute. Head down the line and then over to the wall. There is a beautiful outcrop just over the wall loaded with attractive marine life.

Look for bright red rope sponges on the outcrop. Deepwater gorgonians can

also be seen quivering in the current here, surrounded by blue chromis. Look too for a few purple gorgonian sea fans, finger sponges, star corals and hovering sergeant majors, along with a large branching anemone nestled in the hard corals on the reef.

Heading back, there is a deep swim-through canyon lined with purple sea fans, which takes you back up to the reef. There are some large sea fans here, while fish include marauding jacks, a number of great barracuda and some colorful bicolor damsels.

Make your way back to the anchor line and do your safety stop, as this is a pretty but quite deep dive.

### 40 BIG HOUSE WALL

**Location:** Southeast of Half Moon Bay

**Depth:** 65-130ft (9-15m)

**Access:** Boat

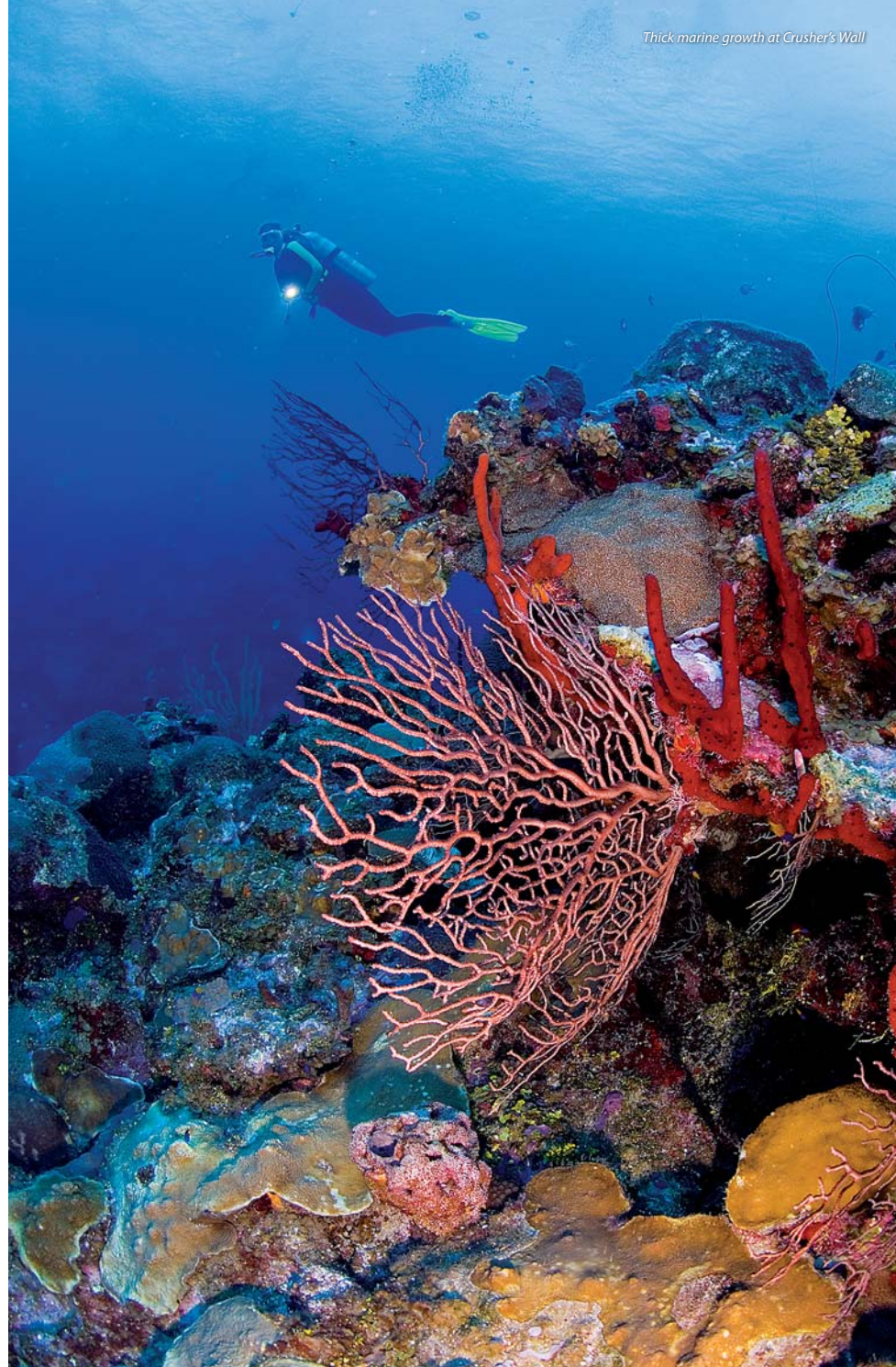
**Range:** Intermediate



Local dive shops are referring to an actual big house (not the federal jail) on the shore line when naming this site. This reef has a deep mooring, so head down the line where you will see a large coral-covered groove with sand channels on both sides, along with a wall covered in big, yellow tube sponges and a good swim-through.

On the reef look for large sea plumes which sometimes hide a trumpetfish or two. Large brain corals are accented by purple gorgonian sea fans, while long, erect rope sponges grow here too.

Keep an eye out for hawksbill sea turtles on the reef, along with spiny lobsters hiding in nooks and crannies. Another deep dive with extremely clear water, it pays to keep an eye on your depth gauge and air supply here. Closer to shore, Big House Wall is also a good dive with shallow caverns.





## 41 IRONSHORE GARDENS

**Location:** Southeast of Half Moon Bay  
**Depth:** 30-55ft (9-15m)  
**Access:** Boat  
**Range:** Intermediate



The limestone coastline is referred to as the ironshore, and this interesting and shallow site is a favorite for those looking for tarpon and small fish. There is a mini-wall covered in hard corals and purple gorgonian sea fans, along with an exciting area of winding tunnels and caves.

This maze is where divers go to photograph and observe tarpon and small schools of horse eye jacks. One particular cavern is home to a rare (for the Caymans) school of glassy sweepers. Smaller fish include four-eye butterflyfish, juvenile French angels and schoolmasters in the shallows around the elkhorn corals.

In the dive briefing, your guide will show you a cavern called the Ear Hole, west of the mooring. To dive this ear canal-like swim-through, follow your guide, as it is fun but somewhat hard to find.

## 42 PLAYING FIELD

**Location:** Southeast of Half Lower Bay  
**Depth:** 30-50ft (9-15m)  
**Access:** Boat  
**Range:** Novice



The top area of this interesting little patch reef has been somewhat hurricane scoured, so the beautiful elkhorns are not what they once were, though they still attract schools of grunts, schoolmasters and snappers.

A series of spurs feature sea fans aplenty up top and undercut areas below. Look for decorator crabs on the flowing purple gorgonians, which sometimes look just like a piece of brown algae.

Spotted scorpionfish, longspine squirrelfish, beautiful juvenile spotted rums with flowing fins and triplefins are all seen here. One extremely cute little guy is the spinyhead blenny, which occupies a hole in the coral and makes various faces from his home. This fishy spot also has French angelfish, four-eye butterflyfish, chubs and Creole wrasse schools.



*A spinyhead blenny*



*Caribbean reef shark with a fish hook*  
 photo: J. Dietz

## 43 SHARK ALLEY

**Location:** South Sound  
**Depth:** 40-65ft (13-21m)  
**Access:** Boat  
**Range:** Novice



This site first came about when progressive dive shop Ocean Frontiers wanted to start a shark education program and a shark feed to go with it. The program once entailed an hour and a half of education and presentations before the dive, and then a half-hour debrief afterward. However, the whole experience had to be dropped, as Cayman law states 'no one may feed, attempt to

feed or provide or use food to attract any shark in Cayman waters'. (Never mind that the stingrays fed elsewhere are members of the shark family.)

The good news is that sharks don't easily forget where they get a free meal, so while you'd be extra-lucky if 10 sharks showed up at a time, as they once did, divers can now usually expect to see a Caribbean reef shark or two heading back in from the blue at the sound of their boat's arrival. Sit still on the bottom and don't chase the sharks; they may get close enough to see and if you're very lucky, close enough for a photo.

If the sharks don't show, look out for lobsters, angelfish and spotted drums on the reef. There is no buoy here; just an anchor drop in the sand.





#### 44 THE MAZE

**Location:** Southeast of East Point

**Depth:** 40-100ft (12-30m)

**Access:** Boat

**Range:** Intermediate



This dive is pretty much as its name promises, and starts in about 40ft with the wall topping out at around 65ft. This is the beginning point for a playground of passages, swim-throughs and steep, plate-coral adorned canyon walls that soar like the side of the Grand Canyon.

The wall is just outside the South Channel, making it a good location for spotting pelagic fish, so look out for Caribbean reef sharks, blacktips and even a bull shark or rare manta ray. A pretty well-known large green sea turtle also lives in the area.

Whilst keeping an eye on the blue, don't neglect the main wall, with its outcrop pinnacle adorned in plate and brain corals, rope sponges and dancing chromis.

When finishing this exciting dive, head back up via one of the many canyonways.

#### 45 MCKENNEY'S CANYON

**Location:** Southeast of East Point

**Depth:** 60-130ft (18-40m)

**Access:** Boat

**Range:** Intermediate



This was once the favorite haunt of the late underwater filmmaker Jack McKenney, who brought us diving dogs and his own style of abalone iron. Vertical canyons lead to the deepest drop-off in the northern hemisphere, which plunges 25,000ft down, down, down... Some

say it is also the East End's number one dive site for sharks and eagle rays.

The dive starts deep with the wall crest by the mooring pin at 70ft, with beautiful canyonlike terrain sliced with tunnels and overgrown swim-throughs. Some immense purple gorgonian sea fans are found here, along with giant yellow and brown tube sponges. Normally seen at shallower depths, flamingo tongues like the bases of gorgonians down here.

Being on the island's southeastern-most point, look for pelagic life, including dogtooth tuna, Caribbean reef sharks and blacktips out in the blue.

Remember just how deep this dive starts, as the water here is normally very clear so it's easy to lose track of depth. When heading up, make sure you have at least 700 pounds and more than 50 bar for your ascent and deco stop.

Reef octopus flashing color





## 46 PAT'S WALL

**Location:** Southeast of East Point  
**Depth:** 60-100ft (18-30m)  
**Access:** Boat  
**Range:** Intermediate



This site was named in honor of Patricia Shar, a manager of the Cayman Diving Lodge in the 1980s. One of the most exposed areas of the East End wall, it is also as exciting as most of the dives here, with an intricate series of passage-ways to explore. Be sure to watch the briefing and follow the guide through the terrain, if its your first dive here.

Big, bushy sea plumes in this canyon country hide trumpetfish and tiger groupers. Deepwater sea fans are abundant and healthy, as are lush black coral trees and sponge communities of yellow and brown tubes.

The largest schools of fish hang out right by the mooring pin on a very pronounced buttress of coral. The wall plummets straight down between 100ft and 150ft, and then down to 6,000ft and more – wild country. Enjoy this site, but manage your time and depth well. As it's quite an exposed location, take care when getting into the boat, as seas can kick up at any time.

Huge whip corals are at Pat's



## 47 SCUBA BOWL

**Location:** Southeast of East Point  
**Depth:** 70-100ft (22-30m)  
**Access:** Boat  
**Range:** Intermediate



Once described as a structural slalom course, this deep plunge winds divers in and out of a craggy coral wall and out to the main drop-off. Here, two large pinnacles and a massive mushroom formation resembling a church spire can be explored.

Deepwater gorgonians found here are among the largest in the Caymans.

## Wreck of the Ten Sails Park

Part of the craggy coastline at the eastern tip of Grand Cayman, this park commemorates the island's most legendary shipwreck. On a fateful night in February 1794, the *Cordelia*, leading a convoy of merchant ships bound from Jamaica to Britain, ran aground on the reef at East End.

In a tragic case of crossed signals, the warning issued from the *Cordelia* to the other ships was misinterpreted as a call to follow more closely, and so one by one another nine ships crashed into the reef.

Fortunately for the imperiled sailors, the able mariners living on the island's craggy East End sprang into action, showing great heroism in ensuring that no lives were lost. Popular legend states that as a reward, King George III granted the islands eternal freedom from taxation. Even though actual records do not entirely support this story, the tale seems permanently ingrained in Caymanian lore (and possibly served as an inspiration for the contemporary tax code).

Scorpionfish are masters of camouflage



Black coral, star coral and tube sponges also thrive amid dancing schools of Creole wrasse and blue chromis. Reef sharks often patrol the blue water.

The area dive shop, Ocean Frontiers, sometimes make a great drift dive here; as it is so deep, a little more time can be spent enjoying the terrain. An open water deco is done before a boat pickup.

## 48 GROUPER GROTTO

**Location:** Southeast of East Point  
**Depth:** 25-50ft (8-15m)  
**Access:** Boat  
**Range:** Novice



This is a good site for macro and fish photography. Grouper Grotto is located just to the east of the South Channel and could be described as a classic Cayman East End reef. It has a tabletop and corals coming up to within 20ft of the surface, and sea fans, sea whips, elkhorn corals and big brain corals all adorn the reef.

A honeycombed reef of canyons, chutes and archways, this place is teeming with fish. Look for such usual suspects as the Nassau, black and tiger groupers, great barracuda and yellow-tail snapper.

There are silversides here, and tarpon can usually be found too. The tarpon school here can be quite large depending on the time of year. If you are lucky, you may get to watch them working together to drive the baitfish into a tight ball before darting in for a meal. A squadron of eagle rays resides here as well, when there is some current running along the outer reef.

## Grouper Spawn

Groupers usually live an isolated existence around the Cayman Islands. However, after the first full moon in January, and for about a month after that, they gather at specific reef locations to form huge spawning aggregations.

Line fishing for groupers at the spawning sites around all three islands is restricted to persons normally resident on the islands.



A banded coral shrimp

#### 49 SNAPPER HOLE

**Location:** East of Colliers Bay  
**Depth:** 35-65ft (11-20m)  
**Access:** Boat  
**Range:** Novice



Yet another eastern classic, this site has long been a haunt of underwater photographers looking for a lot of bottom time in a scenic area.

A labyrinth of tunnels, cuts and coral-laden caverns filled with striped snappers, schoolmasters and tarpon hanging around for silversides (when they're in season), it is also a spawning area for some of the year.

Snapper Hole also features an 1872 Spanish anchor and a rare formation of pillar coral. For the macro shooter, there are lettuce leaf nudibranchs, flamingo tongues and roughead blennies.

#### 50 VALLEY OF THE DOLLS

**Location:** East of Colliers Bay  
**Depth:** 65-130ft (20-40m)  
**Access:** Boat  
**Range:** Novice



Someone had a sense of humor when naming this beautiful and dreamy reef after the bestseller pulp fiction (and later major motion picture) by author Jacqueline Susanne.

A wide angle delight, healthy coral growth makes this an East End underwater studio. Highly photogenic, it features lots of props like barrel sponges, yellow tube sponges and an array of rope sponges entangled on the wall. Feather plume growth on the reeftop is very tall and broad, including an eight foot high growth that can dwarf a diver, found just north of the mooring pin.

The site's main navigation feature is a huge canyon that splits the main coral buttress and serves as a perfect entrance on to the wall. Fish life here is very good with big grouper and the occasional reef shark. A number of black coral species can be found here, with some very big coral trees.

#### 51 BABYLON

**Location:** North Shore, East of Old Man's Bay  
**Depth:** 55-100ft (17-30m)  
**Access:** Boat  
**Range:** Intermediate



Offering a deep sea pinnacle and some very nice wall cover, this boat dive is one of the premium dives at this end of the island, and is considered one of Grand

Cayman's best. It is becoming a regularly requested site from repeat divers. Ocean Frontiers runs a day-long three dive trip it calls the Three Tank Safari, which includes this dive along with whatever is available along the east and north sides of the island.

One of the finest walls in the Caymans, divers have reported a range of pelagic activity, including a large manta ray doing barrel roll feeding on plankton flowing off the reef.

There is a beautiful pinnacle off the wall, along with thick, diversified black coral growths and large deepwater gorgonians. Barrel sponges six foot around, multi-colored rope sponges and red encrusting sponges all make for a colorful dive. Schools of black durgon are thick in the water column and Creole wrasse make endless trains across the reeftop.

This dive isn't that deep, although if you swim over the wall crest at 50ft it can be a deep dive. There's a lot you can do at this Cayman highlight.

#### Silver Tarpon

There are some very good sites for viewing the large tarpon that like to school in valleys and open cave mouths along the Caymans' pocked terrain. Members of the *Megalops atlanticus* family, these creatures are famed as catch-and-release game fish, being strong fighters. When spawning the females release 13 million eggs.

Photographing these highly reflective fish can be a challenge. Choose a low strobe power setting and try to use it just as fill, while attempting to expose for both the fish and natural light around it. This should keep hard glare to a minimum and show the fish in its natural habitat. Alternately, expose just for the highly reflective fish and the background will likely go black or dark blue – this can be effective for portraits.



Spotted drum in transition

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