

Diving in the Cayman Islands



Loading tanks at East End

Grand Cayman visitors can choose from a wonderland of more than 120 dive sites – almost all marked with moorings and having their own distinct features and attractions. The Sister Islands have roughly 80 marked sites. It's all here: steep, deep walls adorned with sponges and corals in a stunning array of sizes and colors; shallow reefs filled with schooling and solitary fish and small invertebrates; and wrecks featuring photogenic structures and curious residents. There's also the 'world's best 12 foot dive' – the unique **Stingray City**.

Diving here usually entails one of two types of diving, a deep outer reef wall dive or a shallower inner reef dive. The deep mooring may start anywhere between 40ft and 70ft, normally atop a

large coral spur. Much of the reef is what is known as a spur-and-groove system, where the undersea terrain is a series of perpendicular coral-covered fingers separated by sandy channels. These various formations can create high canyon-like walls along the sandy channels, coral-covered arches and tunnels called swim-throughs. All lead out to a vertical or steeply sloping outer wall that runs parallel to the shoreline.

A typical morning dive would be a visit to a deeper site and an exploration of the deep grooves and outer reef wall, where large sponges, diverse corals, large fish and ocean-going (pelagic) creatures can be seen. These dives tend to be short due to the short bottom time allowed for deeper depths.

The second dive would be much shallower, perhaps with a maximum depth of 35ft to 60ft, and much closer to shore. These dives allow more time to explore smaller reef life, schooling fish and most of the island's shipwrecks, and last close to an hour. A surface interval between the two dives may be as short as 40 minutes or as long as an hour. A large majority of dive sites are in West Bay, where travel time between dives is generally only 10 to 15 minutes. The popular East End and northern dive sites may take longer to reach and travel between.

Many dive shops offer 'dive 'til you drop' schedules, with two morning dives, a bit of time for lunch and then two afternoon dives. You can also do a night dive on top of all that. Others offer two morning and one afternoon dives,

while a few have a boat dive and unlimited shore dive program.

Note that most, if not all, Cayman dive operations are 100% computer-based. This means every diver must have and use a computer as opposed to using the tables. Computers are available for rent and sale at Cayman dive shops. Solo diving may not be condoned by your dive operation even if you have certification; check in advance if you're a solo photographer or lone barracuda type of diver.

Grand Cayman's reefs offer a variety of Caribbean marine life encounters in extremely clear water. Spearfishing is kept to a minimum and can only be practiced by adult residents with a license. Thus, many of the fish and critters are unafraid of divers. Big fish like tarpon are normally easy to approach,

The Best Dives

Wreck Dive

The **Oro Verde** is one of the nicest dives in the Caribbean with resident angelfish and a pretty reef area. On The Sister Islands, try the *Keith Tibbets*, a Russian trawler.



Wall Dive

The North Wall has lots of interesting spots including **Ghost Mountain** and **Babylon**. The **Great Wall** in Little Cayman is famous for its sheer face which starts in shallow depths and plummets to an abyss.

Reef Dive

Sunset Reef has lots to offer, including a healthy house reef with masses of macro action, a full-blown bronze mermaid statue and a small shipwreck.

Shore Dive

Turtle Reef, in front of the Cracked Conch restaurant and near the brand new turtle farm, has a mini-wall and a tarpon cave. It's nice with a full Caribbean moon as well.

Critter Dive

Stingray City has room for a lot of bottom time. You really can't ignore the stingrays and you can also explore the scattered corals heads in and around Stingray City's sandy flats for some interesting juvenile fish life.



Divers prepare their own tanks and BCs



sea turtles do their thing and the stingrays, of course, actually come to you ... at least at **Stingray City**. Underwater photographers will appreciate the clarity and warmth of the sea here.

The average water temperature is between 77°F and 83°F degrees; average visibility is an amazing 100ft year-round, though it can increase in the summer to 200ft and fall in the winter to around 75ft.

Most Cayman Islands' hotels have an affiliated dive shop. The majority of divers stay on Grand Cayman, which has a huge diversity of sites plus a number of other entertainment options and dining amenities. Recommended shops belong to the Cayman Islands Watersports Operators Association.

WHEN TO GO

The Cayman Islands are open for diving all year. Due to the large number of dive sites all around the island, there is always a protected place to dive. It can tend to be a bit windy October into December, closing out some sites. But there are also some bargains in this low season atmosphere from September through December. From mid-December into April things can be quite busy so advance planning is necessary. The rainy season is considered May to October but rain is sporadic, not constant. March and April are the driest and calmest months. There is little in the way of cold temperatures, so this is not really a factor.

WHAT TO BRING

The Cayman Islands' climate is best described as tropical, so dress casually. The outside temperature ranges from about 70°F to 85°F. The hottest months are July and August and the coolest is February. It can be a bit windy in November and December and rains more during the period from May to October than during the rest of the year. March and April are the driest months.

So for almost everything, it's island casual with shorts and T-shirt by day and light, casual dress for dinner. A light jacket or sweater is about all that's needed during the cooler or windier months. It may actually be cooler in restaurants and movie theaters than outdoors in the evenings. A few of the nicer or more traditional hotels have dress codes, so check this with the hotel you are staying at.

It is okay to dress in swimwear on the dive boats and along the beaches. If going into town, visitors are asked to dress modestly and cover skimpy swimwear with beach cover-ups or shorts and T-shirts.

WHAT TO BRING DIVING

The Cayman Islands is a good place to go for a dive trip because if you do forget something, there are many fully-equipped dive shops on the island that offer both rental and sales, parts purchase and even regulator repair. If you're not picky and don't want to carry dive gear, full rental of all kit is also available at most dive shops.

The warm Caribbean sea water is tropical and clear. There are no thermoclines as you go deeper, so water temperatures are fairly consistent at 78°F to 84°F (25.6°C to 28.9°C). All that is needed is a 1.5mm to 3mm wetsuit to be comfortable. Heartier folks just wear skins or T-shirts, while those acclimated, like divemasters, wear 5mm to 7mm.



Green sea turtle

Five Great Snorkeling Sites

- 1 **Stingray City** – This site can't be beaten for stingrays and lots of other fish in clear, blue water.
- 2 **SeaFans Reef** – Easy pier entry, beautiful corals and big fish make this a fascinating spot.
- 3 **Eden Rock** – Look for caverns, bait-fish schools and silvery tarpon at this George Town site.
- 4 **Sunset Reef East** – This East End site has some nice aqua waters and offers the chance to see big turtles.
- 5 **MV Capt. Keith Tibbetts** – The Russian wreck on the Brac's north side is a unique underwater site.

Normal scuba gear or snorkeling gear is fine for the Cayman Islands. Shore diving is common and fun in the Cayman Islands and is sometimes the best way to see certain sites. Make sure you have good booties for entering and exiting the water across a reef or rocky beach. The good news is that virtually all of the popular beach entries can be done in a giant stride from a pier or cement pier area built into the ironshore (rocky limestone shoreline). The same venues have exit ladders. So if you do like to use full foot fins, booties aren't a necessity.

Do NOT bring a speargun – they are illegal for tourists and fines are astronomical. If you try to use one and get

caught (highly likely), the fines are very stiff and you will probably have to leave the Cayman Islands. Bring a camera instead. You can also leave your gloves at home. While not a rule, most divers and dive operations frown on divers using gloves. They aren't really necessary.

Don't forget your 'C' card and dive log to show your host dive shop. Nitrox is offered almost everywhere, so bring your mixed gas card if you are going to use it. Rebreather diving, rental and training is also available in the Cayman Islands.

DIVE TRAINING & CERTIFICATION

Dive operators in the Cayman Islands offer all levels of training from snorkeling and basic scuba to full instructor courses.

PADI is the main agency represented on the island, but TDI technical diving courses are also offered. Check with your dive shop to see what courses you can take. The Cayman Islands is the perfect spot for Nitrox, wreck certification, marine-life courses and many other specialties.

Diving costs are pretty much the same across the islands. Remember, the cheapest package may or may not be the best and safest training. Ask questions and shop for the best situation for your needs.



Detailed maps and briefings are normally standard practice in the Caymans



Eden Rock is one of George Town's popular shore dives and snorkel spots



Examining a vacant conch shell

TECH DIVING

There is only one full-service tech facility on Grand Cayman, the aptly named DiveTech, although many others do offer Nitrox. DiveTech is meticulous in its gas mixes and offers technical training both at Turtle Reef and Cobalt Coast shops. It offers technical courses through the IANTD and TDI training curriculums.

Technical diving is, simply put, going beyond the recreational limits of diving. Want to dive to 130ft and stay for 45 minutes? Then tech dive training should be on your agenda. Tech training can include a graduated course starting with the use of twin/double tanks, side mounts and multi-level decompression stops. The courses start with Nitrox, then Advanced Nitrox and continue through the Advanced Trimix level.

During the Ice Age, the earth's water levels were some 200ft shallower than

they are today. This makes for some very interesting underwater topography on Grand Cayman's walls. Overhangs, where the surf used to break on the shoreline, create the perfect home for massive sponges, and chutes cut into the wall where runoff created erosion. This type of advanced, extended range of diving is not for everyone. It requires a commitment to safe, responsible, self-disciplined diving. A lot of training and practice and a little bit of an adventurous spirit also help. If this is for you, the deep world of the Caymans can be a spectacularly beautiful sight.

LIVE ABOARDS

Two live aboards are currently operating around Cayman Islands. Divers on these get to explore the walls and shipwrecks of Grand Cayman, and weather permitting, Little Cayman and Cayman Brac.

Diving Photography: Cathy Church



Cayman resident pro Cathy Church displays her newest book

Cathy Church is a legendary name in underwater photography and instruction, and is recognized as one of the world's foremost teachers and authors on underwater photography. She has been photographing underwater since 1967, holds a Masters Degree in Marine Biology and has received numerous awards over the years. She is on the founding board of governors of the newly established International Scuba Diving Hall of Fame, to be housed in the Cayman Islands, and was inducted into the Women Divers Hall of Fame in March 2000. She was also admitted to be a member of the Explorers' Club in 2000.

If you're heading to Grand Cayman and want to learn about underwater photography or need some coaching, Cathy offers private lessons through Cathy Church's Underwater Photo Center and Gallery at Sunset House Hotel, and has selected some great venues around Grand Cayman as her 'studio' in the sea.

Cathy is currently dabbling in black and white imagery and is considered a digital pro. Her coffee table book *My Underwater Photo Journey* was published in 2004.

SNORKELING

As the water here is very clear and bathtub warm, shore access is easy and the currents are normally mild, snorkeling is a very popular pastime. Many people come to Cayman Islands for the snorkeling alone. Remember, it is close to the equator. Wear a rash guard and some good waterproof sunscreen. It is very easy to get burned, even after just half an hour in the water.

Reef snorkels offer a look at juvenile fish, sessile invertebrates and perhaps a passing ray or sea turtle, while the mangroves are a fascinating web of roots and provide a completely different ecosystem than the reef world. The rocky limestone shoreline, called the ironshore, also offers a look at the tidal world where you can snorkel or reef walk and see small eels, crabs, urchins, anemones and lots more. If you've never tried snorkeling, the Caymans are a superb place to do it. If you want to see extreme snorkeling, world-record deep diving competitions using breath-hold only diving are held here annually.

UNDERWATER PHOTOGRAPHY

Underwater photography is a favored activity for many divers traveling to the Cayman Islands. Less particles in the water increases the water clarity as well as the number of good images a photographer can create in a dive. The brilliant orange elephant ear sponges, schools of chromis, ever-hungry sting-rays and roaming lobsters make this a diving photographer's delight. The marine diversity and unique topography make the Cayman Islands a great place for colorful wide angle lens work, medium focal length for fish and macro photos alike.

Most of the larger dive centers provide camera rental or have a staff pro who can provide instruction or shoot a personal video. E-6 slide processing



A snapper gets up close and personal



is becoming harder to find as digital takes over the photo scene by leaps and bounds. Ask if your dive center or live aboard offers it before you go if you want on-the-spot results. Print film is still processed commercially.

The main camera store in town is The Camera Store in the Waterfront Centre on the main drive across from the new cruise ship terminal in George Town. It offers a large selection of digital cameras, lenses, print film processing and printing, camcorders and lots of accessories and digital media. Cathy Church's Underwater Photo Centre at the Sunset House Hotel also offers a nice array of gear and housings, plus instruction from Cathy or Herb Rafael.

Doing boat dives and especially shore dives with a good Cayman Islands underwater photographer is highly recommended, as they can point out habitat and find that elusive fish, like the ever photogenic pike blenny.

In the Cayman Islands, most good dive boats have a camera table of some sort and a fresh water bucket that can hold around three housed point-and-shoot cameras and strobes (or one SLR system). If you want your own freshwater rinse, it may be best to head to Foster's or one of the main stores and buy a cooler big enough for your SLR to use for your dive week.

On land, the tanks dedicated to camera rinse can be rather crowded with both boat and shore divers all sharing the same bin. In some cases, masks and fins are allowed to be washed in the same water. Few operations have large specifically dedicated camera-only rinse tanks. As most divers use wrist lanyards, a crowded rinse bin and boat rinse tub can result in other users hastily pulling their gear out and snagging yours as well. This can cause latches to unlock and uncovered domes and ports to get scratched. While it seems like a good idea to keep your camera wet all the time, the lack of boat basins and the overcrowding at the shop can become a problem. Better to keep your camera wet with a damp towel on board and then soak it in your hotel room's bathtub.

Also, be warned that the sand here is very fine at most beaches. Since beach diving is a major part of the dive scene, entries in and out of surf zones with a lot of fine sand in the water can be harmful to the health of your camera. Even if you are going up a ladder at the ironshore (rocky limestone shoreline), that shallow surf zone is pretty well full of tiny sand particles floating around. After beach dives, carefully check and clean your o-rings to ensure fine sand particles have not gotten lodged in the o-ring slots and on the rings themselves. A little preventive maintenance in the evenings can be worth many dollars in replacing a camera due to a flooded housing from an errant speck of beach sand.



Conservation



Cayman's rich inner lagoon and mangroves

There is a great deal of value placed upon the preservation of coral reefs around the islands, which is reflected in the section of the law which makes it an offence for anyone without a license to cut, carve, injure, mutilate, displace or break any underwater corals, plant growth or formations. Few divers need to be reminded not to break off a piece of coral to take home as a souvenir of their Cayman vacation. Many, if not most, corals grow at a rate of less than half an inch a year, so if the underwater beauty that has taken centuries to develop is to remain for the future enjoyment of everyone in Cayman, residents and visitors must act responsibly.

Also prohibited is the use of spearguns (including the Hawaiian sling, pole spear, harpoon, hookstick or any device with a pointed end which may be used to impale, stab or pierce any marine life) or seine nets without a license from the Marine Conservation Board. Only Cay-

manians over 18 may be granted these licenses.

There is also a movement to prevent the establishment of any captive dolphin training centers and exhibits. Shark feeding is also illegal.

The Environmental Zone, Marine Parks and Replenishment Zones are all clearly marked around the islands by distinctive orange and white spar buoys. Dive sites are buoyed by one of two sizes of white buoys with a blue band surrounding them – the majority are single pin moorings installed in an environmentally friendly manner by the Department of Environment.

Signs giving information about marine conservation laws and regulations are located on the shores of most marine parks, and leaflets, laminated maps and stickers are also available. For more information, contact the Department of Environment (☎ 949 8469; Channel 17 on the marine VHF; PO Box 486GT).

Coral Facts by Dee Scarr



Sponge covered overhang in West Bay

The facts of life for coral:

- 1 Be aware that we use the word 'coral' for three things: the individual coral animal, called the polyp; the polyps and the skeleton they've secreted, also called a coral head; and the skeleton without its living polyps, also called coral rock. The first two of these are alive, while the last is not alive, which leaves a great deal of room for confusion.
- 2 A coral polyp (the living coral animal) is only three to four cell layers thick.
- 3 To create a model of coral tissue against its own skeleton, take a wet tissue and drape it across a bare razorblade.
- 4 Every individual coral animal in a coral head is a clone of every other coral animal in that coral head.
- 5 A coral head is started by a single coral larva which grows and begins to secrete a calcium-based skeleton, then clones itself, and repeats the process. Slowly.
- 6 A hemispherical coral head of 3ft diameter is two- to three-hundred years old.
- 7 The branching corals, elkhorn and staghorn, grow more quickly than the 'head' corals, such as brain and star coral. They thrive in shallower waters, so are more likely to be broken by wave action.
- 8 Look at a star coral head, or a starlet coral head. Every single little mound or indentation – every single little circle in the whole coral head – is an individual coral animal.
- 9 Look at a brain coral head, or a sheet coral. The polyps aren't as easy to distinguish as they are in the star corals, but a careful look will reveal the mouths of the polyps, day or night.
- 10 The tissue of every coral polyp in a coral head is connected to all the polyps around it. The entire surface of a coral head is covered with living coral tissue.

CORAL

Coral is perhaps the most important component of the Cayman Island's reef system. There are two distinct groups of corals: hard and soft. Hard or stony corals make up the majority of reef building creatures that are responsible for laying down the structure of the reef. While they may look like rocks, they are in fact colonies of tiny delicate animals called polyps, which grow by laying down a stony skeleton. Soft corals include the sea fans, sea whips, sea feather plumes and sea rods. Like their close relatives the stony corals, soft corals also possess tiny polyps, grow very slowly and are extremely delicate. Marine Conservation laws make it an offense to damage coral by anchoring in it or close to it. It is also illegal to collect coral while on scuba anywhere in the Cayman Islands.

Expensive Piece of Fish

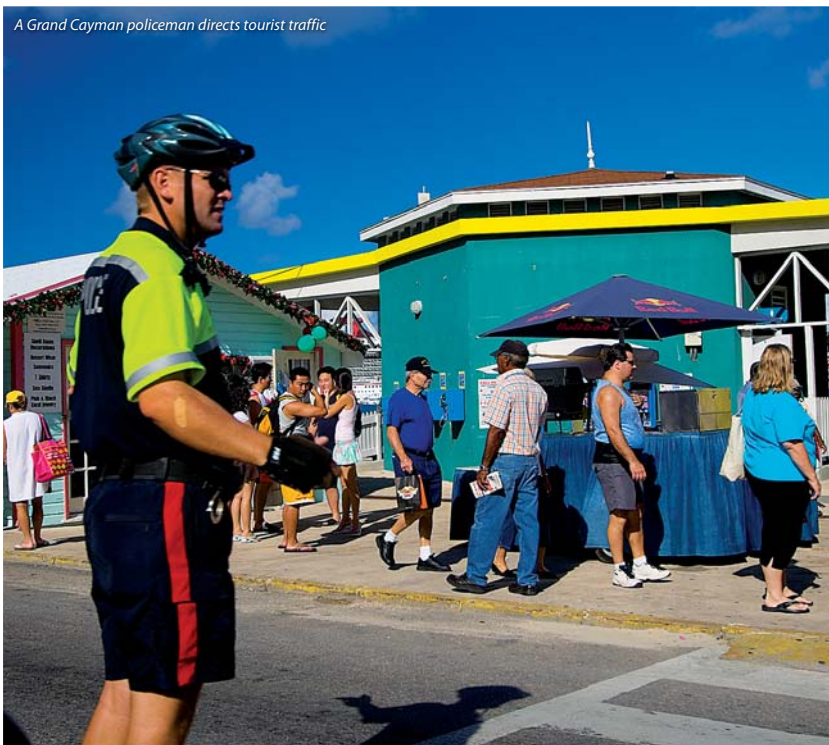
It is vital that any successful marine parks management plan adopts adequate surveillance and enforcement. The Cayman Islands currently has three marine parks enforcement officers operating under the Department of Environment to patrol the waters of the marine parks. Since there are so many boats on the water daily, local captains also help form a network to report an infringement that may be observed. Poaching is considered a serious offense and is not taken lightly. Stiff penalties are in place to deal with offenders; the maximum fine of CI\$500,000 (about US\$595,000), one year in jail and confiscation of boats and equipment is a pretty expensive price to pay for a piece of fish.



Lace corals at a south side site

Health & Safety

A Grand Cayman policeman directs tourist traffic



Overall, the Cayman Islands is a healthy destination to visit. There are no exotic diseases and the mosquito bites lead only to itching.

The main island has hospitals, a number of practicing doctors, and an ambulance plane on call for emergencies. George Town Hospital (Hospital Rd, George Town, Cayman Islands; ☎ (345) 949-8600) is the largest hospital in the Cayman Islands. It has surgical, maternity, pediatric and emergency units. A dental clinic, eye clinic and pharmacy are also found here. Due to the popularity of diving, the hospital also has a two-man decompression chamber. Ambulance paramedic services are available 24 hours by dialing ☎ 911 or

☎ 555. The main number is ☎ (345) 949-8600. Lilith McLaughlin Memorial Health Center in East End, Dica Brown Memorial Health Center in North Side and the West Bay Nurses Health Center also provide health services.

Chrissie Tomlinson Memorial Hospital (☎ (345) 945-1695) is a private outpatient/inpatient specialist hospital, also on Hospital Road close to the George Town Hospital. It has 18 beds, including a 24-hour urgent care and injury center, medical laboratory and pharmacy. It is open to the public as well. Contact: ☎ (345) 945-1695.

Faith Hospital is a small facility on Cayman Brac, and there is a satellite clinic on Little Cayman.

Rating System for Dives & Divers



A giant stride makes for easy shore diving

The dive sites in this book are rated according to divers at a particular time, diving at a particular place. These are not absolute ratings. For instance, someone unfamiliar with prevailing conditions might be considered a novice diver at one dive area, but an intermediate diver at another, more familiar location.

Novice:

A novice diver generally fits the following profile:

- basic scuba certification from an internationally recognized certifying agency
- dives infrequently (less than one trip a year)
- logged fewer than 25 total dives
- little or no experience diving in similar waters and conditions
- dives no deeper than 60ft (18m).

*An instructor or divemaster should accompany a novice diver on all dives.

Intermediate:

An intermediate diver generally fits the following profile:

- may have participated in some form of continuing diver education
- logged between 25 and 100 dives
- no deeper than 130ft (40m)
- has been diving within the last six months in similar waters and conditions.

Advanced:

An advanced diver generally fits the following profile:

- advanced certification
- has been diving for more than two years; logged over 100 dives
- has been diving within the last six months in similar waters and conditions.

Pre-dive Safety Guidelines

Regardless of skill level, you should be in good physical condition and know your limitations. If you are uncertain as to which category you fit, ask the advice of a local dive instructor. He or she is best qualified to assess your abilities based on the prevailing dive conditions at any given site. Ultimately, you must decide if you are capable of making a particular dive, depending on your level of training, recent experience and physical condition, as well as water conditions at the site. Remember that water conditions can change at any time, even during a dive.



PRE-TRIP PREPARATION

Shops in the Cayman Islands offer equipment for sale and rental, and also equipment repair. If you are using your own gear, get your regulator tuned up before leaving home if you haven't used it for over six months. You may also want to do some local check-out dives, even if just in a pool.

It's worth exercising prior to the trip in order to face the challenges of boat diving and the ins and outs and walks associated with shore diving. Swimming, hiking with a backpack and jogging will help increase fitness and stamina.

Make sure your passport is not about to expire or hasn't already expired. You can't get into the Cayman Islands without one and you can't get back home even if you do manage to get in.



Cayman guides take great pride in dive mapping

MEDICAL & RECOMPRESSION FACILITIES

It is highly recommended that you take out DAN or some sort of medical insurance prior to a dive vacation. Some dive operations now make it mandatory. Divers should consult with their medical insurance company prior to traveling abroad to confirm whether the policy applies overseas and covers emergency expenses such as a medical evacuation.

Grand Cayman has a recompression chamber in George Town Hospital staffed by physicians and technical staff familiar with diving medicine. There are no chambers in the outer islands.

Your DAN affiliate should also be consulted in the event of a diving accident, or diving illness symptoms, as well as your dive shop manager so they can react to the emergency and set things in motion for treatment. There is a system in the Caymans to get bent divers proper treatment. If you think you have a problem, don't mess around. Contact the dive shop, boat captain and DAN immediately.

Cayman Hyperbaric Services

☎ (345) 949-2989; email diveraid@candw.ky; PO Box 1675GT, Grand Cayman, B.W.I.; George Town Hospital. Chamber Director John Elliott CHT (☎ (345) 916 1198).

George Town Hospital

☎ (345) 949-8600 ext 2795) Doctors: Dr Fiona Robinson, Dr Robin Barnes and Dr Denise Osterloh.

DAN

Divers Alert Network (DAN) is an international membership association of individuals and organizations sharing a common interest in diving and safety. The network operates a 24-hour diving emergency hotline in the US at ☎ 919-684-8111 or ☎ 919-684-4DAN (which accepts collect calls in a dive emergency). DAN does not directly provide medical care; however, it does provide advice on early treatment, evacuation, and hyperbaric treatment of diving-related injuries.

All divers should have DAN or some similar insurance. Some dive companies and live aboards do actually require it, so take care of your diving insurance before you head to the Cayman Islands to avoid problems.

Marauding surgeonfish come in close to feed



Marine Life



The Caymans have a large fish population and an equally diverse invertebrate population, opening the door for the study of some very colorful and unique creatures. Fish, crabs and other marine creatures have specific habitats. Getting to know where a certain subject likes to live, when it likes to feed, when and where it mates and all of the other routines of life under the sea will enable the diver to find the subject with greater ease. This enhances observation, makes diving more interesting and also aids photography.

Colorful fish are perhaps the most sought in the Cayman Islands' waters. Beautiful angelfish, parrotfish, basslets and triggerfish all catch the eye of a diver or snorkeler. But there are more mundane fish that are also worth watching for their unique coloration or ability to camouflage, like a seahorse or frogfish.

The invertebrate world around the Cayman Islands can't be dismissed. The amazing sponge formations on virtually every dive site give the reef form and color. Cayman Island corals are healthy and very competitive. Crustaceans like shrimp, crabs and lobsters all have unique homes, and many have symbiotic relationships with other marine creatures.

Following is a small sampling of some of the Cayman Islands' undersea life.

HAZARDOUS MARINE LIFE

Many marine animals have developed chemical weapons to aid them in their struggle against each other, and these weapons are often effective against humans. Perhaps the most common venomous creature in Cayman waters is fire coral. These waters occasionally see jellyfish in the form of the Portuguese man-of-war, the long-spined black sea urchin and two worms – the fireworm and the red-tipped fireworm – are also capable of causing trouble. The sting-rays and the two kinds of scorpionfishes are the only venomous fish of concern in this region. Cone shells are also highly venomous. Some common creatures, like eels and barracuda, can deliver a nasty bite, although it is quite rare. Seeing a shark is not all that common, much less getting bitten by one.

Divers should read or ask about which creatures will be commonly seen and should know first aid procedures in the rare event that a person is wounded by a marine animal. Be especially careful on night dives. Carrying proper antiseptic ointment greatly helps in the event of coral cuts and minor abrasions.



Barracuda

Barracuda

Barracuda bites are quite rare. The fish tend to be attracted to shiny objects and have been known to attack in murky water. Like sharks, this is normally a case of mistaken identity and invariably an accident.

On Cayman Island reefs, small schools and individual blackbar barracuda will frequently be encountered. There are also a lot of the larger great barracuda. These fish should not be teased. Their bites can be damaging, so stop any bleeding, reassure the patient, treat for shock and seek immediate medical treatment.

Bristleworms

While they may seem soft and fluffy, they can deliver a painful sting. Each of the bristleworm's body segments has a pair of small parapodia, or paddle-shaped appendages. These have embedded tiny hairs or bristle-like pieces. Bristleworms have well-developed sense organs with a kind of head with eyes, antennae and sensory palps. Pick out the hairs using tweezers or duct tape and submerge the sting in very hot water for 30 to 60 minutes. If the victim has a history of venom allergies, seek immediate medical treatment.

Fire Coral

Fire coral looks pretty, with its caramel color, but it is like putting your hand on a cigarette. It actually has tiny 'hairs' that burn like crazy and can swell up afterward. This mechanism is to defend against munching parrotfish, but divers sometimes get tagged as well. If stung by their powerful nematocysts, the skin will burn and itch. Rinse with seawater or water and apply vinegar or methylated alcohol on the sting. In a severe case try antihistamines and seek immediate medical treatment.

Jellyfish

The stings of a jellyfish are released by nematocysts contained in the trailing tentacles. Nematocysts are the tiny stinging cells found in jellyfish, anemones and corals which are used both for defense and for capturing live food. They are triggered by a variety of stimuli, including contact with human skin. When fired a tiny spring-loaded dart is fired into the organism and venom is injected. Once fired, they can never be re-loaded and a new one must replace it.

The rule of thumb is the longer the tentacles, the more painful the sting. On the outer reefs, Portuguese Man-of-war are seasonally found. Larval jellies sometimes appear and can get into the wetsuit, which is a real pain. Most stings can be treated with vinegar. Some people do react adversely to jellyfish stings, similar to those who are allergic to bee stings. Be prepared to administer CPR and seek medical aid.



Bristleworm

Sea Urchins

In 1983, the long-spined black sea urchin suffered a Caribbean-wide mass mortality as a result of a waterborne pathogen. Numbers fell so low that the population is only now beginning to recover. These creatures form an important function on reefs by feeding on algae which might otherwise overgrow the slow growing corals. Their disappearance meant that many reefs were overgrown and killed by algae. The stings from the spines can range from irritating to highly intense. Spines can also break off inside the skin. Avoid contact with urchins and remain vigilant in the areas they frequent, especially at night. Treat urchin spines with a citric acid like lemon or lime juice to break down the spine. Treat by administering CPR until the pain subsides. Seek medical advice and use antibiotics where advised. Spines may have to be surgically removed.

Caribbean reef shark
photo: J. Dietz

Sharks

Sharks are encountered on few dives in Cayman Islands. Attacks are rare and usually only occur in some misguided feeding attempt or to fishermen spearing fish. In the event a shark does become aggressive, it is sometimes wise to rise to a shallower depth to get out of its territory. If it comes too close, stop and face the animal and watch it closely and quietly. Be prepared to push it away with a camera, knife, spear or tank. Treatment for bites is to stop any bleeding, reassure the patient and treat for shock, and seek immediate medical treatment.

Stingrays

Stingrays have one or more four- to eight-inch serrated venomous sheathed barbs that are sharp and can be used to ward off enemies. These can inflict a painful wound in humans that can quickly infect. If the barb breaks off, it must be surgically removed. Do not try to pull it out. Reports of stings and accidents at popular Cayman sites like **Stingray City** and **Sandbar** are actually very rare. The wound can also be quite painful with a lot of swelling. To treat, wash the wound, immerse in water as hot as the victim can stand for 60 to 90 minutes to break down venom, and seek immediate medical aid.

Stonefish/Scorpionfish

These fish will be seen commonly in sandy and rubble areas in Cayman Island waters and on night dives. They inject their venom through the spines on their back. The wound can also be quite painful with a lot of swelling. To treat, wash the wound, immerse in water as hot as the victim can stand for 60 to 90 minutes and seek medical aid.



Scorpionfish

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