

# The Cayman Islands

by Paul Ives

The three Cayman Islands - Grand Cayman, Little Cayman and Cayman Brac, are a British overseas territory. Although about as British as a pair of Levis or a Ford Mustang, they have long been heralded as one of the best diving locations in the Caribbean. So finding myself over there working as an underwater photography instructor seemed like a dream come true, and certainly seemed a million miles away from shooting advertising and commercial work in the UK!

So what makes these Islands so popular with divers, and especially underwater photographers? Certainly not the inflated prices! You could easily blow a whole week's worth of your instructor's wages (and hard earned tips) on one meal out and a few beers. Even the wealthy Americans can be seen popping into 'Hurleys' for a sneaky bit of self catering or dining at Burger King for 'a change'!

What does make these Islands popular for divers are the deep ocean currents and dramatic coral walls. In fact these islands are really sea locked mountains with some of their most beautiful scenery under the water's surface. But it's not just the colourful walls that make diving here so interesting, it's also the huge diversity of shallower dive sites and well known wrecks. The Cayman Island authorities are well aware of the treasure they care for. Strong foresight and a strong line on conservation has led them to create marine reserves and permanent mooring buoys on all permitted dive sites. Add to that year round clear warm water (certainly a treat for a seasoned dry suit diver!) and this really can be a diver's paradise.

Cayman is saturated with professional and well equipped diving schools and you would have no trouble finding an operator to suit your needs, but from a photographers point of view it gets even better! With companies like Fisheye and Cathy Church providing a full menu of photographic services, from guided diving, private instruction on everything from an MX10 to a housed F5 system, E6 processing, and equipment rental, sales and service, it's all a long way removed from those isolated liveaboard adventures where even your backup camera doesn't want to work and there's nowhere for miles to hire a Nik 5!!

If all that does not satisfy your every desire, then the easy access to very deep water only yards from shore means there are many operators specialising in technical diving and rebreather technology. This could certainly add a new dimension to how you approach



*Cayman walls are sheer, dramatic and covered with colourful sponges and corals.*

*Housed f100 16mm fisheye with twin YS 120 flashes*

I don't usually keep a record of exact aperture and shutter speed combinations these days - but always shoot on manual exposure, and usually use ttl flash except in difficult situations.

The pictures were shot with a Sea & Sea F100 housing or a Subal F90 housing, and I tend to like Ektachrome 100S for W/A shots and Velvia or Ektachrome 100VS for Macro stuff.

your photography.

For me, one of the best features of Grand Cayman was the easy access to shore diving. Many dive shops have seafront locations and offer easy access to interesting and relatively unspoiled reefs all within a stone's throw of a bar! Some of these offer great macro photography opportunities. If you're feeling adventurous some of the best wall dives can be found at the North West point of the Island (my favourite being Orange Canyon). These sites can be accessed from shore with a minimal surface swim when the wind is in the right direction. I personally prefer this approach to



*The house reef off Sunset House has a 9ft bronze mermaid and a pair of friendly grey angelfish are always there to greet you.*

*Housed F100 16mm fisheye with twin YS120 flashes*

diving off the day boats as it offers the opportunity to really get to know the sites. I admit that this was easier for me as I could take off on my day off with a few full tanks in the back of the jeep and make several dives on the same site really 'looking' at and exploiting its photographic potential.

Most of my instruction was done on the house reef off Sunset House Hotel and after a couple of months I learned my way around the reef like it was my home town. Far from becoming bored with diving the same reef nearly everyday, it became like a welcome visit to my local bar, seeing friends that you know will be in the same seat or under the same rock and enjoying meeting those visitors that are just passing through.

This familiarity made you so relaxed that you really did start to see underwater. I suppose its a little like going on a scallop dive in a Scottish loch when for ages you just can't make them out in the silt, then all of a sudden you find one and realise they were there all the time, but you just weren't seeing them! However it came to the point where I started to give my familiar underwater friends names and started to have underwater conversations with the 9ft bronze mermaid that lies just off the reef. This must have been the start



*Trumpet fish are common and found trying to blend into the reefs.*

*Housed F100 16mm fisheye twin YS120 flashguns*

of island fever !!

Grand Cayman is one of the few places where encounters with prolific marine life is all but guaranteed. It's possible to dive with a group of Caribbean reef sharks at the East end of the island. Although it's not a full blown adrenaline boosting shark feed like those conducted in the Bahamas, it enables you, with a patient approach, to get an opportunity to photograph these beautiful creatures on their own terms. Some of the shallower dives like Armchair Reef and Tarpon Alley, as the latter's name suggests, harbour huge numbers of well fed and easily approachable tarpon. The seafront restaurants also see the attraction of these fish and publicise 'tarpon feeds' to attract customers. All of this makes these huge fish plentiful in Cayman waters, although they remain a challenge for the photographer with their mirror like silver scales.

Turtles are also common in Cayman waters. A large turtle farm is located on the North side of the island, and it's probably the biggest tourist attraction on the island. Thousands of turtles are reared there every year, and although many of them end up as the 'special' in the seafood restaurants, there is also a big turtle conservation and release programme in effect. As a



*Stingray city is one of the best 5metre dives in the world.  
Housed F90 16mm fisheye Housed SB26 flashgun.*

result it is possible to see turtles on most of your dives, although they remain wary of divers and a careful and unhurried approach is always needed to create a good picture.

The more remote and less dived North wall of Grand Cayman offers magnificent and pristine wall dives with unlimited wide angle photographic potential, and it's here you may encounter the eagle rays that fly gracefully along the walls during the day. Then in the late afternoon they can be seen heading through the channels of the outer reef into the shallows of the lagoon for the night. However after being based on the island for many years, world renowned photographer Cathy Church, was still waiting for her first great eagle ray shot ! So don't be disappointed if you don't get them on film in a week or two!

Stingray City however, will enable you to get as many shots of magnificent Southern Stingrays as you like! Most divers have heard of Stingray City, and it is often rated as one of the best 5 metre dives in the world! There's also the Sandbar, an even shallower site where the rays congregate. Both sites are hugely popular with divers and snorkellers alike, and require boat access - so unless you're able to charter your own boat for an early visit, be prepared to share the site with

hundreds of other divers and cruise ship day trippers !

It is however an exciting encounter, and once your buddy gets the hang of enticing the rays with a little bait (a little like watching a novice matador practising his art) you will end up with endless photo opportunities. The rays are plentiful and playful, and even with other groups in the water it is possible to find an area away from where the divemasters are organising their groups, and if you're careful not to stir up the sand it is easy to shoot a whole roll of film in a matter of minutes. But beware, tease them too much and they'll give you a nasty suck - leaving you with 'hickey' or love bite larger than anything you ever got behind the bike sheds at school!

So, although there is a place called Hell on Grand Cayman, from an underwater photographers point of view it certainly isn't ! With year round great diving, and unlimited photographic potential it's easy to see why it remains so popular. Just make sure you have plenty of pocket money with you for those apres dive activities, and I promise you your shutter release finger will be well exercised. My time working on Grand Cayman was certainly a great experience and, as Arnie would say, 'I'll be back' !!



*This young morey was very shy but still made an excellent subject.  
Housed F100 60mm micro nikkor with twin YS120 flashguns*



**Paul Ives**

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