

Cayman's warm in winter

BY JUDITH DONER BERNE
SPECIAL WRITER

Tiny Grand Cayman Island, together with its even tinier sister islands of Cayman Brac and Little Cayman, seem a good destination for these times.

Just southwest of Cuba and only about an hour's flight from Florida, they are an easy, foreign, warm-weather getaway for metro-Detroiters. That's despite the fact that the Caymans' status as a British protectorate somewhat overwhelms their Caymanian roots.

Only at Australia's Barrier Reef have I seen waters so clear that you can see stingrays from as high up as the second deck of a boat. I have rarely swum in ocean waters so warm. In fact, the best part of the Caymans is under water.

Ship wrecks, tunnels and shark alleys beckon divers. Stingray City, colorful fish and coral gardens are available to even the most novice snorkeler. And the bounty of washed-up coral lures beach combers along the silky soft sands of Seven Mile Beach.

As more avid sightseers than beach combers, we couldn't help but notice how very abbreviated the number of on-land sights to see in Cayman were in the guide books we scanned ahead of the trip.

That was further documented our first night by the man seated at the next table to us at the wonderful Calypso Grill.

He and his wife have come for a week for each of the past eight years, he told us. "I love it because I don't like to sightsee."

But he does like to eat well. He proceeded to share with us his favorite restaurants — headed by Calypso Grill, and featuring Smuggler's Cove and Club Med.

The good news is we never had a bad meal in Cayman, also dining at Grand Old House and The Wharf. The bad news is that prices are high, as they are for almost anything for purchase in Cayman.

But Calypso Grill, owned by a delightful Englishman, was the best. The simple House green salad, was dressed from his wife's recipe of rice wine vinegar,



So cute: A stingray's face is friendly and love-able.

olive oil and onion. Our fresh fish entrees — yellow fin tuna and a crustacean, baked grouper with grilled fresh vegetables — were outstanding. And don't miss the sticky toffee pudding, that I can still taste.

I would amend our eight-time Cayman-goer's no sightseeing statement by saying that the sightseeing is better than the shopping.

No bargains at all — and little that you can't find at home. But there's at least a day's worth of sights to take on a 22-mile-long, eight-mile-wide (at its widest) Grand Cayman.

Renting a Jeep, while remembering to drive on the left, is the best way to go. We saw very few motorcyclists and bikes on the road, although they are available.

Highlights for us were the row of historic fishermen's homes in West Bay and Pedro St. James, the island's oldest building. This restored plantation home with its pleasant grounds and ocean views is where both democracy and the abolition of slavery were declared. The multi-media presentation that runs about 25 minutes is worth seeing.

To be fair, the sights in the Caymans' capital of George Town — the national museum, government buildings and the banking houses that make Grand Cayman the seventh largest international banking operation — were closed on Saturday afternoon when we visited. And the Cayman Turtle Farm, billed as the island's most popular tourist attraction, had been wiped out by the early November hurricane that hit Cuba even harder.

Naturalists might want to

journey over to Cayman Brac or Little Cayman, where people and amenities are at a minimum. On Grand Cayman itself, the Mastic Trail and botanical gardens got good reviews.

We stayed at the Westin Casuarina Resort, on the nicest section of Seven Mile Beach. The rooms were nice, but not special considering the price. We heard people complaining that although the hotel was just a quarter full, they refused to upgrade those who had braved the airways to come. We stopped in to see the top hotel, the Hyatt. It is luxurious and has its own golf course. However, most of it is on the other side of the road from Seven Mile Beach. A Ritz Carlton is on the rise, but construction, we were told, has been hampered by environmental problems.

Native Caymanians come in every color. Any island tensions, we were told by a 20-year-resident, are mostly between the ex-Patriots who came to the island to take the higher-skilled jobs and the Caymanians. But it generally takes the form of jealousy, since crime is almost non-existent.

Is it my favorite island? No way. But its crystal clear waters, fine restaurants and a beach that you can run in your bare feet sound pretty good about now.

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