Cayman Islands

- Blue iguanas, incredible reefs, spiky forest and unexpected floral abundance
- Fly UK - Grand Cayman via Miami (12hrs)
- Dec - Apr for the best weather; May & Nov for the cheaper prices
The Cayman Islands: just a pretty tax haven, right? Wrong. This idyllic Caribbean trio has prolific and wonderful wildlife both on and off shore.

Words James Stewart

“Like fishy wet lino”
Close encounters with stingrays at Southern City, Grand Cayman
here are plenty of easy ways to strike up a conversation on Grand Cayman – drive to North Side district and pull up a bar stool at Over The Edge restaurant, perhaps. But I chose to do it one heroically stupid way...

It was a beautiful afternoon in a botanic park made treacly by heat and tropical flowers. A teenager, pointed out to me earlier as Ruth, caught my attention and nodded; she was steely-eyed and exotic. I returned the greeting and she sidled closer. She nodded again. Flattered, I returned the compliment. She studied me, yawned, then sauntered into the vegetation: my first chat in the argot of the Grand Cayman blue iguana and it turns out I am a crushing bore.

Is anywhere in the Caribbean so maligned as the Cayman Islands? Here it is, a tropical destination with wildlife like B-movie monsters and all outsiders want to talk about is taxes. So, let’s deal with the awkward facts first. The Cayman Islands – Grand Cayman, Cayman Brac and Little Cayman, often known collectively as Cayman, never the Caymans – are the world’s fifth-largest banking centre and its leading offshore hedge fund jurisdiction. Six corporations are listed for each of the islands’ 50,000 residents.

George Town – the only town worth the name – harbours the financial centre but its heart isn’t in it. A Florida-lite of mirrored low-rises and clapperboard giftshops, it is built on Caribbean time and warm sea breezes. Feral chickens scratch among the officeblocks. Just across the main road is spectacular Seven Mile Beach, the only tourist resort on the island.

Blue is beautiful

The tax-free status of this British Overseas Territory dates back to Oliver Cromwell’s effort to lure settlers. Yet if history suggests anything, it’s that these islands are more nature haven than the tax haven they became in the mid-1980s. Columbus wrote about seas so full of turtles he could practically walk ashore, and the islands took their name from caiman crocodiles.

Nowadays Cayman has more species of flora than the Galápagos, including three orchids found nowhere else. New species are found regularly, botanist Ann Stafford explained as we walked through one of the Caribbean’s last undisturbed subtropical forests. We were on the Mastic Trail, which cuts across the east of the island, an empty green space on my map. Ann pointed out flora such as bloody head-raw bones and red birch, whose peeling bark leads Caymanians to nickname it the ‘tourist tree’. We paused at a spindly shrub: *Casearia staffordiae*, one Ann had discovered herself.

The fascination of Cayman is its interplay of nature and culture, Ann told me. “Plants are part of the identity of these islands; they make them unique. We don’t have large animals but because of these plants we have an interesting diversity of wildlife.”

The world’s smallest butterfly, the pygmy blue, was presumed extinct until it turned up in Grand Cayman in 2002. Over 180 bird species make merry carnival in the canopy. And then there are those iguanas.

A decade ago, all but a dozen blue iguanas had been swept away by bush clearances, cars, feral cats and local farmers who resented their taste for mangos. The species would probably have become extinct were it not for an expat National Trust officer who founded the Blue Iguana Recovery Program two decades ago.

In the Queen Elizabeth II Botanic Park, head warden John Marotta showed me the breeding pens like a proud father: there was 25-year-old Vegas with his teenage bride, Forrest; there was Billy and Deborah – she was about to lay. Some reptiles are aloof, others are sociable. He caught himself:

LOCAL VIEW

**Alberto, Blue Iguana Reserve warden**

“The east is authentic Grand Cayman. Walk, take your time and you’ll see parrots, nature, proper Caribbean stuff you’ll see nowhere else. And you have to come and see us, of course.”
‘Some iguanas are aloof, some sociable: each animal has its own personality’
‘There are over 100 wrecks to explore, from 18th-century merchant barques to the *USS Kittiwake* off Seven Mile Beach’
"I don’t usually anthropomorphise but each animal really has a personality, more so than a dog. Never would have thought I’d say that when I came here five years ago."

The iguanas’ party trick is to change from dirty grey to powder-blue according to body temperature and mating season. They also have baby-fat folds over clumpy feet and slow movements. If anything, they resemble clockwork dinosaurs. I was smitten.

Ruth – my first encounter – is one of the breeding programme’s successes. Around 600 iguanas have been released since 2009; bred from a gene pool structured for diversity, the reptiles are nurtured in captivity for two years until old enough to be safe from predators. Today, 50 blue iguanas potter around the park grounds; 600 more stalk two reserves in east Grand Cayman. No one is celebrating just yet – scientists suggest over 1,000 wild animals are needed to be on the safe side of genetic diversity – but there is steady progress. If only more people cared about Cayman wildlife, John sighs.

**Shooting fish**

Visitors are not entirely ignorant of local fauna. Teetering on the edge of a 7.5km void where the Caribbean and North American tectonic plates meet, these islands are loved by divers. Reefs are a carnival of neon-lit shrimps and molluscs frilled like Regency dandies. Carousels of fish whirl around coralheads and turtles scull in the shallows.

There are over 100 wrecks to explore, from 18th-century merchant barques to the 80m *USS Kittiwake* scuttled last year off Seven Mile Beach. A dream-like swim through cabins bathed in slippery light as barracuda cruise past portholes, it is already the Caribbean’s premier wreck dive.

You don’t even have to swim to have a close encounter of the aquatic kind. There’s a sandbar a mile offshore called Stingray City. Fishermen once cleaned their nets in its waist-deep shallows. Now all it takes is the sound of a boat’s engine to attract stingrays the size of kitchen tables. Like being
smothered in fishy wet lino, it is the weirdest wildlife encounter in the Caribbean.

Given that Cayman’s biblical motto – ‘He hath founded it upon the sea’ – sums up its tourism strategy, it was a fright when a red lionfish was discovered here in May 2008. Six breeding pairs capable of producing 500,000 young a year each were accidentally released from a Miami aquarium in 1994, and the Indo-Pacific super-predator had chomped its way along the Caribbean chain, guzzling native fry and the grazers that checked algae on coral. Marine biologists speculate lionfish may be more catastrophic than climate change for the region’s reefs.

At the fish market in George Town (actually, just a few stalls on the beach) there was no doubt about the scale of the invasion. “I been fishing ‘ere for 43 years and even five years ago, nothing,” said one fisherman. “Now every coralhead, they’re there, man. Charles” – he gesticulates to a guy in salt-bleached shorts – “he got one that were 14in; about 4lb.”

Charles shrugged: “Every one I catch is one I stop my son seein’.”

“Yeah man, but that’s a big fish – ‘im proper dangerous.”

Ah yes, danger. *Pterois volitans* is not just one of the most adaptable fish in the world, it is also one of the most venomous. The poison from its 18 feathery spines can induce delirium, breathing issues, even paralysis. Every satisfying wildlife adventure should provide a remote possibility of death or injury, I told myself as I signed the waiver to join a lionfish cull with dive operator Divetech. To combat the threat of lionfish, the Cayman government repealed an outright ban on spear-fishing for trained divers. Now dive centres run weekly hunts and anyone with a PADI licence can tag along as a spotter.

For a novice diver like me, the hour-long dive is a bargain at US$10. And when sold in Foster’s Food Fair supermarket, our catch will fund future hunts. It’s a win-win for everyone – except the lionfish, of course.

At Parson’s Reef I dropped overboard with Divetech’s Jeni Chapman, who held a spear in one hand. Flanked by armed divers, I felt like an extra in a James Bond movie. Jeni finned off so, spying a narrow channel, I kicked towards it, scouting beneath the coralheads where lionfish lurk.

The trouble was, distractions were everywhere. Blue angelfish drifted among the seafans. Under ledges there were scarlet squirrelfish and lobsters, groupers and gobies. I turned to see Jeni stab beneath an overhang then thrust her spear into a cylindrical fish-tank, depositing a large lionfish. I could have sworn it looked furious.

No thanks to me, we surfaced an hour later with 26 fish for the deli counter. Once over the quiet elation at getting away scratch-free, what surprised me was how protective I felt toward the reefs. “I am the most placid person you could meet,” Jeni agreed, “and now I’m an expert at slaughtering fish. But these culls really work – we see tangible results.” She adds sotto voce: “They’re also a little bit fun.”

The island before time

The next day I soar over those seas – palest aqua then azure, royal blue and blue-black –
I was disappointed – until we drove to the 80m cliffs of the eastern tip. Silver-thatch palms, the national tree of Cayman, burst above thick wild jasmine and the sky and sea busted the horizon on every side. Hundreds of brown boobies nursed puffball chicks on cliff-edge nests while frigate birds hovered on bent wings like pterodactyls.

“This part has probably changed least since Columbus came,” Wallace said. Only 500 years? It felt like the dawn of time.

Unprotected idyll

Little Cayman is wilder still. Ten minutes away on the Twin Otter, it is the same size as Brac but has just 150 inhabitants. Its airport is a large shed whose sign reads ‘Terminal A, Gate 1’; ‘Town’ is barely a hamlet.

Elsewhere all is swathes of undisturbed spiky green. I spent most of my time barefoot on a bike, zigzagging one-handed along empty roads.

What Little Cayman has in abundance is wildlife. Around 20,000 red-footed boobies squawk in and around Booby Pond and Jamaican whistling ducks flute in lagoons. Hawksbill turtles nest on dazzling-white beaches and there’s astonishing diving where Bloody Bay Wall drops into inky depths.

The island has its own iguana, too: the Sister Isles rock iguana, virtually extinct on Brac. The 1,000-odd reptiles have the right of way on roads I learned on another free tour. My guide, Mike, a dreadlocked Floridian, came on an iguana conservation programme and never left. “Only 4% of this island is developed,” he told me. “That’s incredible so close to the US. Yet it’s also worrying: there’s no protection for the other 96%.”

I was surprised a destination so protective of its marine environment seemed so indifferent to land use. But then I realised it may be because us outsiders also have a blind spot. Marine parks are created because people want to visit them. No one sees these islands as a place to experience tropical forests or wild beaches where turtles breed.

Mike turned down a dirt-track. There was nothing around us but silvery palms, wild jasmine and orchids that exploded like popcorn. An iguana dozed nearby. Not quite no one, I thought.

LOCAL VIEW

Mike iguana guide, Little Cayman

“Many people visit and only dive or think they have everything in a resort. Take a bike and see the island for what it really is: see its nature, its wild orchids and its tranquility.”
Cayman Islands

**Footnotes**

**VITAL STATISTICS**
Capital: George Town, Grand Cayman
Population: 53,000
Language: English
Time: GMT-5
International dialling code: +345
Visas: Not required by UK nationals
Money: Cayman Islands dollar (CI$), currently CI$1.3 to the UK£. US dollars universally accepted. There is only one ATM currently.

**Health & safety**
There are no big health issues. Grand Cayman has the most comprehensive healthcare facilities; medicines are tricky to source on Cayman Brac and Little Cayman.

**Further reading & information**
Cayman Islands (Bradt, 2008)
Diving & Snorkelling Cayman Islands (Lonely Planet, 2007)
www.caymanislands.co.uk

**When to go**

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**The trip**

Barefoot Traveller (020 8741 4319, barefoot-traveller.com) offers seven-night dive trips on Grand Cayman from £1,850pp, including flights, accommodation at Cobalt Coast Dive Resort, daily boat dives, unlimited shore dives and a lionfish cull.

**Getting around**

Cayman Airways (caymanairways.com) offers half-day nature tours (CI$240 (£148); www.caymannature.ky).

**Cost of travel**

Doubles in high season on Grand Cayman cost from CI$155 (£86), less on other islands. Food at a roadside grill costs around CI$6 (£4.50); mains at a mid-range restaurant from CI$18 (£13.50). A Caybrew Beer costs CI$4 (£3).

**Accommodation**

The Retreat Lookout (Grand Cayman; retreatlookout.com) is an authentic agritourism B&B; doubles from US$90.

Walton’s Mango Manor (Cayman Brac; waltonsmangomanor.com) is a relaxing colonial-style B&B; doubles from US$105.

Quirky Pirates Point (Little Cayman; piratespointreresort.com) offers week-long dive packages in airy villas from US$1,895pp.

**Food & drink**

Typical Cayman food is a taste of the Caribbean: conch, fish, coconut, mango, plantain, rice and peas. Try local restaurants such as Seven Fathoms, aged underwater.

**Cayman Islands: Top 10 Natural Highlights**

1. Mastic Trail A 4km hike through the forest of Grand Cayman’s spiky centre
2. USS Kittiwake The Caribbean’s newest and most impressive wreck dive
3. Stingray City Touristy but memorable aquatic encounter
4. Blue Iguana Recovery Program The easiest way to see Cayman’s enigmatic signature species
5. Rum Point Beach, bars and hammocks - a popular Sunday outing for locals on Grand Cayman
6. East End Birdlife and views on Brac’s cliffs, with caves by the road beneath
7. Brac Parrot Reserve Spot parrots (if you’re lucky) and ocean views at the trail’s end
8. Bloody Bay Wall Sharks and eagle rays on a 1,500m drop-off, just off Little Cayman
9. Point O’ Sand Perfect Little Cayman beach: pink-white sand, shallow turquoise water and nothing else
10. Owen Island Kayak to this textbook Caribbean castaway idyll off Little Cayman

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