

Here: stingrays and tourists mingle along the sandbar in North Sound, Grand Cayman Island

TAXONOMY

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HAVEN

With crystal-clear waters made for diving and hundreds of bird species, the Cayman Islands should be considered as much a haven for wildlife as for tax exiles, writes Ben Illis

Clockwise from here: mangrove swamps are a wildlife haven; the giant hawksbill turtle is majestic beneath the waves; most of the islands barely rise above sea level; strict conservation policies protect the coral reefs

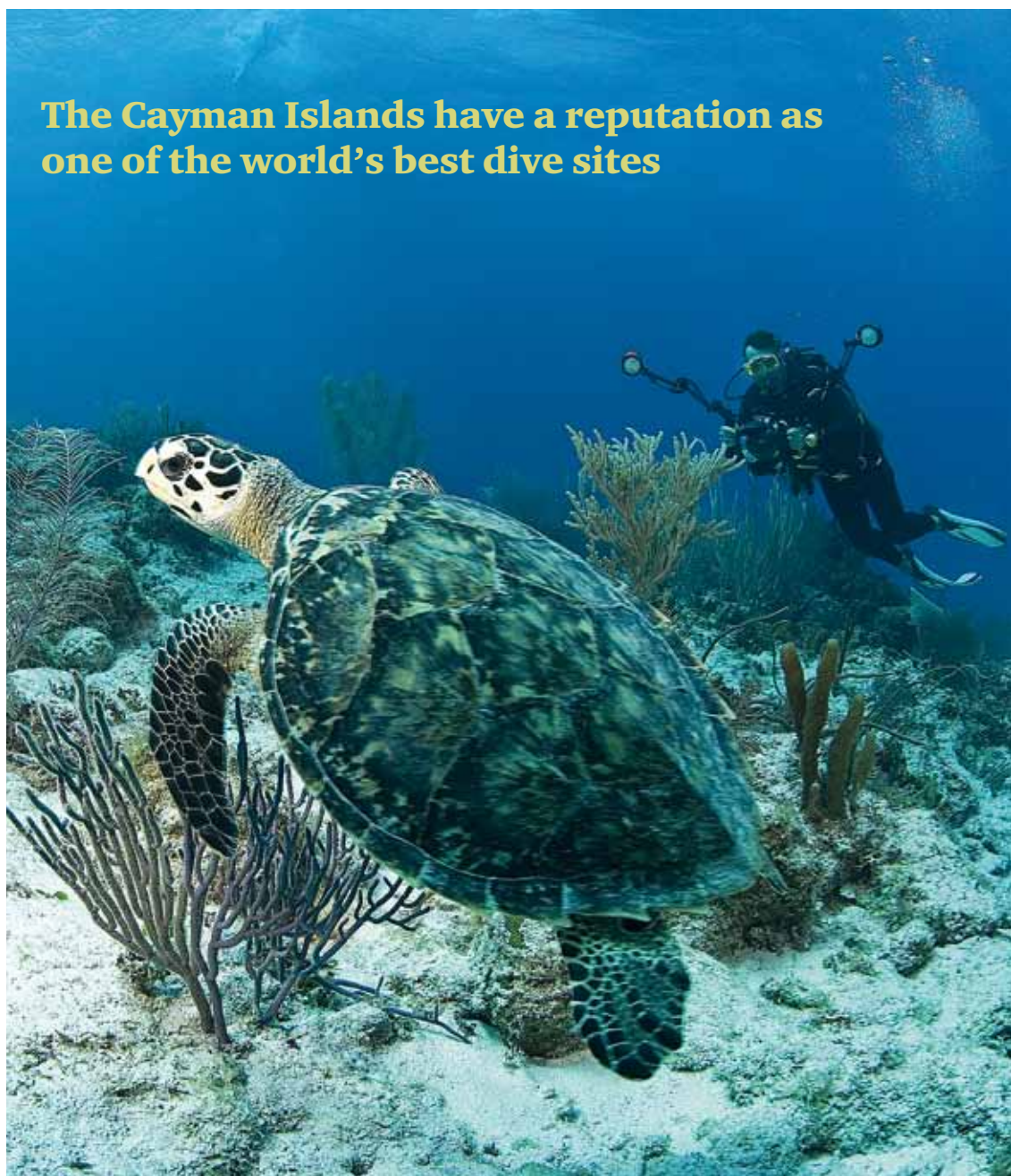


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xhaling, I sink gently to the soft, white sand of the seabed as a southern stingray ripples elegantly past. Scores of tiny, pearlescent yellowhead jawfish dart backwards into

their little burrows, spitting mouthfuls of sand in apparent disgust as they retreat. Ahead of me, myriad reef fish swarm around the coral stack that rises sharply, almost to the water's surface. Our guide beckons us forward and I scan the tower for some sign of the promised swim through, marveling at the diversity of coral. As I approach, a tunnel opens before me, and, checking the group is with him, our guide sinks into its cavernous maw. The tunnel levels out and, taking care not to damage the fragile orange sea fans all around, we swim towards the dappled light ahead. We emerge on to the wall, a metre-long hawksbill turtle drifting gently by on slow, powerful strokes of its flippers. It's awe-inspiring.

Located in the central Caribbean, the Cayman Islands are not, as one might expect, volcanic but rather the highest peaks of the underwater range that borders the 7.5km deep Cayman Trench that divides the North American and Caribbean tectonic plates. The group comprises three islands: the biggest, Grand Cayman, lies 150 miles south of Cuba and 180 miles west of Jamaica. Largest it may be, but at only 22 miles long and 8 miles at its widest point, it's far from huge. Tiny Cayman Brac and Little Cayman (the Sister Islands) are close neighbours and lie 90 miles to the north-east. Grand and Little Cayman are just



The Cayman Islands have a reputation as one of the world's best dive sites

12 metres above sea level at their highest points, while Brac's geography is a little different, with dramatic cliffs on the bluff at the east end and a more recognisably Caymanian flat coastal plain to the west.

The porous limestone bedrock of all three islands allows rainwater to filter through and out to sea at some depth, with no obvious water run-off to speak of. This means the sea surrounding the islands maintains its crystal-clear aquamarine colour whatever the weather and is one reason for the islands' reputation as one of the world's best dive sites. Another is the well-policed conservation policy on all reefs around all three islands, as well as year-round warm water and more than 250 separate dive sites, including world-famous wrecks and coral walls.

The clarity of water and predictability of



BACK FROM THE BRINK

Saved from extinction, the Caymans' endemic iguanas still need help

British-born biologist Fred Burton moved to Cayman in the late 1970s to take up a post at the Mosquito Research and Control Unit. While there he realised the ecological significance of the island's dry shrub-land, which holds a major part of the islands' biodiversity. He also met his first blue iguana - giving him the emblematic species he needed to protect this valuable habitat.

An initial survey of the wild population conducted in the early 1990s found between 100 and 250 breeding individuals. When Burton conducted another survey a decade later, he found the population had plummeted to fewer than 25 individuals. Thus, the Blue Iguana Recovery Programme was born and 20 were placed in breeding enclosures at the Royal Botanical Gardens.



Hatchlings were kept in cages and fed on their natural diet of native plants, until large enough to withstand attack from their only native predator, the endemic Cayman racer snake, at which point they were released into a protected reserve.

To date, some 850 individuals have been released and, with wild breeding, there are now

thought to be around 1,000 wild individuals. Biologists keep a stud-book to preserve the gene pool and all individuals are chipped and tagged before release. The reasons for the blues' decline are shared with its close cousin the Sister Islands rock iguana, found only on Little Cayman. Evolving with few natural predators, both lay few eggs in a

clutch and breed only a few times a year. However, the green iguana, an escapee from the wild pet trade, has evolved in a far more competitive environment and lays a greater number of eggs more frequently, breeding more efficiently and therefore out-competing its distant cousins.

This, coupled with predation from a rising population of feral dogs and cats, and the iguanas' habit of sunning themselves on tarmac, thereby falling victim to road kill, has led them to the brink. Ongoing funding for the programme is still urgently required but the rock and blue iguanas' survival seems likely. Visitors to the BIRP at the Botanical Gardens and to Little Cayman can learn more on free volunteer-based tours.

www.blueiguana.ky



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conditions also make Cayman an ideal location for novice divers. Learning to dive isn't what it was: the days of devoting long chunks of your holiday to the classroom are long gone. These days, the theory is done online prior to your trip, with practical skills easily mastered in a couple of sessions at your local pool. I trained with Oyster Diving (www.oysterdiving.com), who provide an excellent and highly professional service at multiple locations across the south of England. Once you've mastered the basics, you are referred to any local dive centre at the destination of your choice - most Cayman hotels either have on-site dive centres or an arrangement with someone nearby - and, after your four qualifying dives in the open sea (witnessed, if my experience is anything to go by, by a





From left down: a roseate spoonbill forages for food; swimming on horseback is a truly Caymanian experience; an invasion of lionfish is threatening native fish species

as the ‘Tourist Tree’, because its ‘skin’ turns red and peels. A caper plant producing gory looking bone-white fruit in a blood-red pod is known as ‘Bloody Head Raw Bones’.

Grand Cayman, with a permanent population of 50,000, is far and away the most developed island and easily earns its modern Caribbean reputation. George Town and its suburbs spread to the north and west and are filled with high-end shopping and dining, much of which centres around the new Camana Bay development. Head to the extremities of the island, however, and its wilder side is quickly revealed. West Bay is dominated by the pristine white sand of Seven Mile Beach (actually 5.5 miles long). At the north-easternmost end of West Bay is Barker’s National Park, home to a good variety of bird species, as well as a favourite destination for horse-riding, where you can have the unforgettable experience of riding a horse out to sea and swimming on horseback (info@ponies.ky). In West Bay itself, the friendly and relaxed Cobalt Coast Dive Resort has partnered up with Divetech, offering excellent diving at two locations – one eastward facing and one westward; both of which, uniquely among GC’s dive locations, have direct shore →



profusion of turtles and groupers and the like), your certification is in your hand.

But what of life above the water line? Cayman’s remote location makes it a great stopping point for many migrant birds (accounting for 80 per cent of records) and is also home to 17 endemic bird sub-species and several notable regional endemics. Birds aside, the islands’ unique flora, butterflies and reptiles alone make it worth a visit. Much of the islands’ fauna has evolved relatively unmolested and so even rarities are generally easily spotted. The diversity of flora is also extremely rich, with many plants bearing colourful local names: the red birch is known

LICENSED TO CULL THE INTRODUCED LIONFISH POSES SUCH A THREAT TO NATIVE FISH THAT CULLING (AND EATING) IT IS NOW ACTIVELY PROMOTED

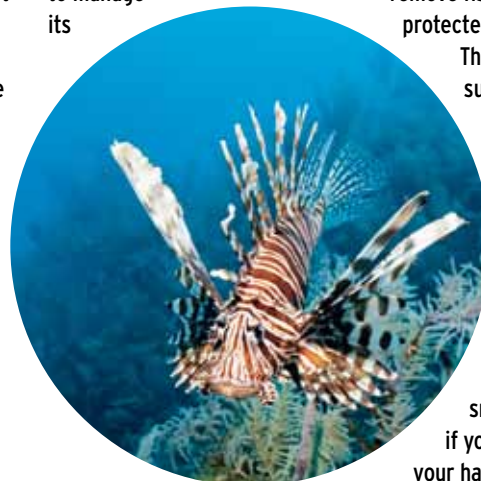
The beautiful, deadly and invading lionfish – venomous aquatic pet choice of any James Bond villain worth his salt – is both a ruthless predator and highly efficient breeder. Native to the Indo-Pacific, it was once thought that the lionfish was first introduced into Caribbean waters in the wake of Hurricane Andrew in 1992, when a south Florida aquarium was destroyed and six individuals escaped. A more recent report suggests it was around ahead of that, lending credence to the theory that its colonisation of the region is thanks to specimens outgrowing private aquaria and being released into the wild by thoughtless tank owners.

In any case, it is now widespread across the region and

due to a lack of predation by native species, a high tolerance for temperature variance, year-round breeding and the fact it reaches sexual maturity relatively young, it’s proving a significant problem. While native fish leave it alone, the lionfish gorges itself on their sexually immature young, meaning a deficit of sexually mature individuals and a bleak outlook for the natives.

The Little Cayman-based Central Caribbean Marine Institute is one of many organisations across the region that is behind a dedicated regional culling programme – a measure that has been shown to have great beneficial effect. Put simply: culling works. Divers and fishermen are given a brief

lecture on the history of the invasion and the fish’s habits, as well as important advice on how to manage its



extremely painful sting (plunge the affected region into water as hot as you can bear, as heat

destroys the proteins that make up the venom). Once licensed, cullers are free to spear and remove fish even those found in protected areas.

The second prong to this successful attack is to raise the fish’s profile on restaurant menus across the region. The lionfish makes not only great eating but an excellent alternative to often over-fished native species, such as snapper and grouper. So if you don’t want blood on your hands or, as was the case for me, you fail to find any once you get licensed, be sure to order the lionfish ceviche when you get home.

Clockwise from here: the Sister Islands rock iguana forages for flowers; a West Indian whistling duck; the Cayman Lucas's blue butterfly is one of five sub-species endemic to the islands



ENTERING STINGRAY CITY

Swimming with playful stingrays is an experience not to be missed

A century ago, Cayman was plagued by mosquitoes and the island's fishermen would stop on the sandbar that encloses the North Sound to gut their catch and clean their nets in the waist-deep turquoise waters, so as not to be eaten alive back home. Over time, large groups of southern stingray would congregate in search of an easy meal and so Stingray City was created.

Stingrays are cartilaginous fish, closely related to sharks. They have a barb on their tail, which contains venom glands that can be released as a defence mechanism, causing a painful and, in the case of a very few species, even lethal sting. For all their fearsome reputation, they are a docile and inquisitive fish,

known for brushing their fins against new objects (and people) and 'sniffing' at them with their blunt noses, where their sensory organs are concentrated. They feed on molluscs and crustaceans, though they do take carrion.

Five years ago, a spate of ill-informed newspaper articles implied that the rays were being coerced into playing with tourists and that this unnatural behavior pattern was detrimental to their health. The truth is all Stingray City excursions are licensed, feeding the rays is forbidden and the behaviour of tourists and tour operators alike is tightly controlled. Yet still the rays turn out in their droves, apparently for no better reason than to play.

Being marauded by a fish akin to a vast, tailed portobello mushroom is an exhilarating experience and a worthy addition to anyone's wildlife bucket list. The sandbar does get busy when the day-boats arrive, so for a more intimate encounter, get out before 11am or later in the afternoon.



access to the outer edge of the reef. The dual locations allow for comfortable shore diving, even when wind is kicking up some swell.

Across to the east is much wilder. A coastal road encircles the landmass, while the interior is dominated by mangrove swamp and low-lying limestone outcrops. Around the swamp lie a series of high salinity ponds, home to an array of bird-life, including large flocks of tricolored herons, many unusual migrant shore-birds and the occasional roseate spoonbill. Groups of Antillean nighthawks congregate here in summer too, gorging themselves on crepuscular insects.

Also in the east are the Royal Botanical



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The world's smallest butterfly – the pygmy blue – was rediscovered here in 2002

Gardens, home to Cayman's most emblematic species, the blue iguana. While it is the most well-known, the blue iguana is not the only endemic blue reptile here, with the delicate forest-dwelling blue-throated anole also widespread. The beautifully planted gardens contain habitats representative of all three islands and are also home to many of the islands' endemic bird sub-species, including loggerhead kingbird, Caribbean elaenia and Cuban bullfinch.

To the west of the Botanical Gardens lies the Mastic Trail. The two-mile trail, named for the critically endangered yellow mastic tree that lies along its path, crosses through two-million-year-old woodland and is home to some 180 species of bird, including the endemic Grand Cayman parrot. Other gems to look out for include the West Indian woodpecker, western spindalis, northern flicker and Caribbean ground dove. The trail takes around three hours to hike and is easy-going underfoot, taking in a vast array of

flora, many of which are endemics, with new species being discovered year after year. The butterfly diversity is also astonishing, with the world's smallest – the pygmy blue – rediscovered here in 2002 having long been presumed extinct. It's a treat to encounter such an easily accessible location for so many significant species.

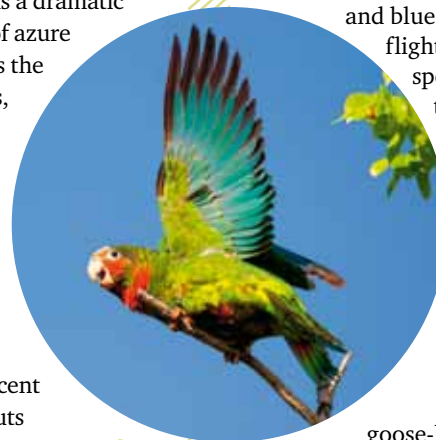
Flying over to the Sister Islands is a dramatic affair, with stunning aerial views of azure seas and coral reef. Cayman Brac is the most 'Old Caribbean' of the islands, with a permanent population of 2,500, living largely in traditionally built houses. It's very quiet and very pretty. The island is dominated by a rocky bluff, which forms a spine through the centre of the eastern half of the island, ending in dramatic cliffs where brown boobies and magnificent frigatebirds nest. A large reserve cuts across the bluff to protect the Cayman Brac →

TOP 5 BIRDS

Birders flock to Cayman for the 300 species found here

1 Cayman (Cuban) parrot

A bright green, noisy and gregarious short-tailed Amazon, with a pinkish face and blue wing band, visible in flight. Two endemic sub-species can be found here: the Grand Cayman parrot (left), best observed on the Mastic Trail; and the Brac parrot, often found gorging itself on fruit in gardens on Brac.



2 West Indian whistling duck

A tall, elegant, goose-like duck, the regional endemic West Indian whistling duck is a familiar sight, often found in large flocks on all three islands' waterways and even in garden ponds. It is the only duck to breed on the islands. Preston Bay wetlands on Little Cayman are a particular hotspot.

3 Red-legged thrush

Most easily seen during the British spring and summer months, when breeding and raising young, the striking red-legged thrush is an endemic sub-species of a regional endemic, restricted to Brac, where it can often be seen on the edges of the bluff forest, hunting for insects and foraging for fruit.

4 Northern flicker

Another endemic sub-species, the northern flicker is a beautiful woodpecker, easily spotted on the Mastic Trail. Often encountered with the buff and speckled endemic West Indian woodpecker. The flicker is easily distinguished by its bright yellow tail and red nape, while the woodpecker sports a larger red patch, from nape to crown.

5 Vitelline warbler

An engaging little yellow and olive warbler. Two distinct endemic sub-species of vitelline warbler occur, restricted to Grand Cayman and the Sister Islands, inhabiting almost any inland shrub and open woodland. Often seen on the walkway at the Brac Parrot Reserve and along the forest edge near the Mastic Trail.





Clockwise from here: an inquisitive red-footed booby chick; the islands are an idyllic tropical paradise; West Indian woodpeckers can be found on the Mastic Trail



It's a treat to encounter such an accessible location for so many significant species

parrot, easily spotted despite there being only an estimated 350 individuals left in the wild. There is an impressive wooden walkway across the reserve, allowing you to view two other delightful endemics: the vitelline warbler and the red-legged thrush. Tucked into the side of the bluff are several caves, home to roosts of Jamaican fruit bat. The flat, western half of the island is characterised by more brackish pools, which support a large population of regional endemic West Indian whistling ducks, among many other water-birds.

A short-hop across to Little Cayman and there is another significant iguana to track down. The Sister Islands rock iguana is still considered the same species as the Cuban, though momentum is gaining to declare this another endemic sub-species. Certainly the rocks look very different from their more widespread Cuban cousins. Again, high salinity ponds line the island's coast and one of these – the Booby Pond – is home to the Caribbean's largest breeding population of red-footed boobies, in both pale and dark morph, as well as more magnificent frigatebirds, yellow-crowned nightheron and double-crested cormorant.

With a population of just 250, Little Cayman is also one of the most unspoilt islands of the Caribbean. The Pirate's Point



Resort has earned its reputation as a stand-out dive resort with exquisite food and a uniquely eccentric style. No surprise then that the bulk of guests return. Little Cayman diving is also, for my money, the most spectacular of the Caymanian lot, with the justly famous Bloody Bay Wall taking the well-deserved crown.

There's a great deal to Cayman that belies its preppy, international banking reputation. The Caymanian Tourist Board offers free guided tours on all islands and private guides are available to take things further. With volunteer programmes helping to protect everything from plants to turtles, it's also a place where it's easy to see your tourist dollar make a difference. **WT**

TRIP ADVISER >>>>>>>>

COST RATING ★★☆☆☆

SAMPLE PACKAGE TOUR: Oyster Diving offers a 10-day package to all three islands, including return economy flights from London to Grand Cayman. The package includes a mixture of accommodation on Grand Cayman, Little Cayman and Cayman Brac (some self-catering, some full board), diving trips, car rental, internal flights between islands and transfers between hotels. The cost, based on two people sharing, is from £2,100 per person (with a £350 discount for non-divers). Oyster Diving also offers a free Scuba Review (refresher course) or trial dive for non-divers on all bookings.

HOW TO GET THERE: BA flies directly to Grand Cayman via Nassau four times a week. Cayman Airways operates several daily flights between Grand Cayman and the Sister Islands.

VISA REQUIREMENTS FROM UK: None.

TIPS & WARNINGS: Grand Cayman is very developed and has excellent pharmacies and other services. The Sister Islands are more basic, though, so be prepared for any medical needs ahead of visiting. Good hiking shoes are essential, as is sun-screen, a good mosquito repellent and a hat. Divers should check in with their dive centre and bring necessary certification. Where they occur, hiking trails, such as the Mastic Trail, are clearly marked and well cleared of any dangers. Avoid hiking off these trails as Cayman is home to several formidable species of plant, including the maiden plum and the manchineel tree, both of whose sap causes painful blistering and, in the latter case, occasionally even blindness. For more information visit www.caymanislands.co.uk or call the Cayman Islands Department of Tourism's UK helpline on 020 7491 7771 or by email on conciierge@caymanislands.co.uk

WHEN TO GO: November to April. The British summer months are hotter and more humid, with occasional rain showers, which generally pass quickly. Not on the main hurricane route, Cayman is rarely caught out.

TOUR OPERATORS

- **OYSTER LUXURY TRAVEL & DIVING,**
Tel: 0800 699 0243; www.oysterdivingholidays.com
- **CARIB TOURS,**
Tel: 020 3131 0172; www.caribtours.co.uk
- **WILDLIFE WORLDWIDE,**
Tel: 01962 302 087; www.wildlifeworldwide.com