

TRAVEL

More than 250 named scuba-diving sites put the Cayman Islands on the map as a tourist destination, and while Cayman Brac and Little Cayman have stayed true to their dive-centric roots, Grand Cayman has emerged as a luxury destination in its own right, supplementing nature with a decadent dose of nurture.

Start with resorts. A top-notch Ritz-Carlton overlooks Grand Cayman's famed Seven-Mile Beach. Although the rooms are lovely with their dark wood and oversized marble baths, the real draw here is the celebrity-studded amenities. Topping the list is the restaurant Blue, a seafood restaurant headed by Eric Ripert of the famed Le Bernardin in New York. Mirrors, curving spaces and a gorgeous outdoor patio radiate sexy elegance; dishes like yellowfin tuna layered with foie gras and sautéed cobia with a coconut-scented avocado cream sauce showcase the collision of perfect ingredients, faultless technique and well-honed creativity. There's also a La Prairie Spa, Greg Norman-designed golf course, children's environmental program run by Jean-Michel Cousteau and a tennis center overseen by the legendary Nick Bollettieri, who coached, among others, Andre Agassi and Maria Sharapova.

Nestled into a grove of sea grapes beside a small private beach in the West



GRAND

DIVE *into the*
LUXURY

CAYMAN



Bay area, the two-year-old Cotton Tree hotel may not have Ritz-Carlton's splashy facilities, but, what it lacks in size, it more than makes up for in verve and luxury. Each of the four plantation-style cottages has two bedrooms and two bathrooms, a full kitchen outfitted with stainless-steel appliances and a front porch set with Adirondack chairs. There's a sleek pool and, tucked onto the garden, an outdoor spa cabana. Original artwork by Caymanian artists — paintings, sculptures and historic black-and-white photographs of the island — fill the rooms, as do cookbooks brimming with recipes for island fare, historic texts, chic furnishings and modern conveniences like flat-screen televisions and wireless Internet. Owned by Heather Lockington, who was born in the Cayman Islands, was raised in the UK and moved back to live her dream of creating a hotel, Cotton Tree embraces island style and celebrates Grand Cayman.

Dining options are equally varied. Some waterfront restaurants are all about the view. And while Calypso Grill's panorama is right up there, diners flock to this cozy West Bay



restaurant for the food, too. Fish—wahoo one day, perhaps snapper the next, all with sauces that range from chipotle and cream to zesty—has a starring role, but lobster bisque, tuna carpaccio, the daily tart and even grilled steak are all artfully handled as well. Located within Camana Bay, the island's high-end shopping plaza, trendy Abacus, is worth the trip for its creative takes on island favorites, like jerk salmon, which arrives with a rum-scented salsa. For more traditional island fare, head to Over the Edge, a slightly scuffed cafe perched on a bluff near Rum Point. Don't let the isolated location deter you. The fish is fresh and beautifully prepared and the Caribbean specialties like Jamaican codfish with ackee, conch fritters, turtle steak (a Caymanian delicacy) and fish escovitch—it's similar to ceviche—are wonderful. Beach bars line the coast: try Calico Jacks on Seven Mile Beach and Kaibo in Cayman Kai for casual grub that's as good as the drinks and the scene. Need a break from fish? At Pappagallo, pastas are homemade; the meaty Bolognese sauce is thick but not overly tomato-ey.

Even if you don't dive, Grand Cayman's water is worth

exploring. Snorkeling is straight from the movie Nemo, especially at Smith Cove and West Cemetery beaches, where you can wade right in and catch site of zillions of colorful fish just a few yards from shore. Adventurous types should take the trip to Stingray City, a popular sandbar where, upon hearing the approaching boats, dozens of stingrays hurry over, in their graceful, floaty way, eager to trade interaction with humans for a free meal. Or just drift in the gin-clear water. Even on popular Seven Mile beach, there are gorgeous stretches of undeveloped beach nirvana that feel remote but aren't.

On top of all of this, Grand Cayman's infrastructure makes getting around a breeze. The roads are smooth and well-marked, towns and beaches are safe and the water is drinkable. Even better, catch a flight from Atlanta and you can be on the beach in time for a late lunch.

If you go:
www.ritzcarlton.com
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