

Hideaways Life

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Paris view from Hotel Crillon—see page 4

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This canine ambassador at The Fairmont Copley Plaza™ in Boston is a guest's best friend—no bones about it!

Cruising Where Life Imitates Art

Those of us familiar with the works of French impressionist Paul Gauguin—especially his hauntingly beautiful images of Tahitian women and color-saturated tropical landscapes—will appreciate the exotic, romantic atmosphere aboard his namesake cruise ship, the *m/s Paul Gauguin*. This small luxury ship, hosting no more than 332 passengers, sails exclusively in French Polynesia and has become so closely associated with plying the languid turquoise waters of this region that a certain mystique envelops her. There's a sense of stepping back into Gauguin's world of the late 1800s, wakening each day to inspirational scenery, sampling the exotic tropical fruits often portrayed in his paintings, and reveling in the colorful culture of the warm Polynesian people.

Tahiti is a year-round destination of balmy weather, Bali Ha'i-like scenery, and crystal-

clear lagoons teeming with tropical fish. The nicest and most predictable weather runs September through December—and you'll pay predictably higher prices than as well. Low season is January through April, and can be rainy, hot, and excessively humid. A better bet is shoulder season from May through August, when the humidity has dissipated some and pricing has moderated.

We asked two *Hideaways* members—both of whom, quite coincidentally, cruised with family members on the same *Paul Gauguin* itinerary this past holiday season—to fill us in on some of their voyage highlights.

A Family Affair

Sometimes you just want to get away for the holidays—*really* away! For Christy Eisman, her husband, Paul, and their 6-year-old son, Cooper, of Denver, Colorado, that meant a trip halfway around the world to Tahiti. “We wanted to go somewhere exotic that absolutely *guaranteed* warm weather,” said Christy.

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Grand Cayman: A Lesson in Relaxing

This sand snob has found a new favorite in Grand Cayman. Since my family and I aren't divers—and this is dive central—I wasn't sure what we would do on a recent trip there. The island is flat, over-developed, and pretty expensive (everything is imported)—not my usual cup of tea. Or so I thought...

BY HIDEAWAYS TRAVEL SERVICES MANAGER DARCY ALLEN

In reality, I found a great reason to visit—the beaches! As a travel professional, I often feel pressured to see and do as much as possible; after all, my greatest tool for planning exceptional escapes is first-hand experience. Sometimes I run around so much, I feel like I need a vacation from my vacation. But not on this trip! Grand Cayman doesn't overwhelm you with a ton of historical, cultural, or even outdoorsy things that demand your time and attention. After a few days of sightseeing, you can pretty much say you've seen and done it all—and then, like me, just kick back and relax for the rest of your vacation with some guilt-free beach time.

"Must-Do's" on Grand Cayman

Here are some pleasant diversions if you like to break up your beachcombing with a few activities.

- Rent a car and explore the coastal areas outside the congestion of George Town and popular Seven Mile Beach (SMB). You'll find small communities, beautiful coastal scenery, and historic sites like Pedro St. James Castle. Note: Caymanians drive on the left side of the road. If you're not comfortable driving, book a tour or hire a driver through one of the many local tour companies.
- Boat out to Stingray City; it may be overhyped, but it's still a thrill to slide into the water with these fascinating creatures.
- Enjoy the gardens of the Queen Elizabeth II Botanical Park.
- Escape the crowds and snorkel off Cemetery Beach, located north of Seven Mile Beach in the West End.
- Experience Boatswain's Beach, a 23-acre

marine park and turtle farm. The kids will love it!

- Go underwater with Atlantis Submarine, a great way for non-divers to see the expansive ocean life (departs from George Town).
- Take the time to learn more about Grand Cayman's past at the Cayman Islands National Museum in George Town.

Hiding Away on Grand Cayman Island

We spent the first few nights at **Coral Stone Club**SM, a small, independently owned condominium complex on Seven Mile Beach. It has 32 three-bedroom, three-bath units available on a daily basis. Located in three buildings, each of these 1,800-square-foot condos has the same layout and offers views of the ocean.

A few things to note. First, because these units are individually owned, the decor, bedding, and kitchen amenities vary. And, unlike some of the larger condo complexes here, you can select and book a specific unit at Coral Stone. I recommend a ground-floor unit if your family has small children. We found this incredibly helpful; when our young son was taking a nap, I could sit on our terrace with a book, see the ocean, and still be within earshot. Those looking for a quieter location should select a top-floor unit, all of which have vaulted ceilings and unobstructed ocean views.

This is a true self-catering condo complex, and staff are virtually non-existent. When we arrived on a Saturday, one



Caribbean Club

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of the housekeepers let us into the unit with the instructions to check in at the desk on Monday. I also didn't find the front-desk staff very insightful when I asked for recommended things to see and do. Keep in mind, though, that the majority of people staying at Coral Stone are either owners or vacationers who have been visiting for years. I quickly discovered that hanging out by the pool is *the* thing to do in the afternoon, as the owners came together like long-lost friends and welcomed us newcomers. They were the real wealth of information on things to see and do while on Grand Cayman.

We stayed in unit # 5, which we found to be very cozy and well appointed. It had every kitchen utensil and gadget imaginable, something you'll appreciate if, like me, you frequently stay in condos or private homes with extended family. We also appreciated the screened-in porch, and spent a lot of time there enjoying meals and playing games. A grocery store is directly across the road, and you can feel free to push the shopping cart back to your unit. The store sends staff later in the day to collect their carts from all the neighboring condo properties.

The real highlight at Coral Stone Club is the beach, an incredibly wide and clear section of white sand with just the right balance of natural tree shade and beach loungers. I



Seven Mile Beach

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would recommend a stay here for families looking for an upscale yet down-home beachfront vacation, or for two to three couples sharing a relaxing holiday. Members receive four complimentary bottles of wine. Rates start at \$695 per night. Tip: Plan your visit for the summer months and get your sixth night free.

Our next stop was **Caribbean Club**, just a few doors down. If you've been to Grand Cayman in years past, you may recall the Caribbean Club of old, a series of cozy beach and garden cottages. After Hurricane Ivan hit, the new owners completely tore down the cottages and rebuilt three luxurious towers, bringing Caribbean Club to a whole new level of luxury. I admit I did not expect the opulence of Caribbean Club. Separated into three ocean-facing towers that form a U, all units are huge at 2,500 square feet, have three bedrooms and three baths, and are very richly appointed. Caribbean Club operates more like a fully staffed hotel with daily maid, concierge, and room service available. Its on-site restaurant/bar, *Ristorante Luca*, serves up a delectable mix of Italian cuisine and fresh seafood, and is a great spot to enjoy music in the evenings.

Each of the units is individually owned and decorated and features a large veranda facing either the pool or ocean. Because of the property's layout, be prepared to be right on top of your neighbors if you are in a pool-view unit—not much privacy. The ground-floor oceanfront villa suites are particularly fantastic, as you literally walk four steps off the veranda and have your toes in the sand. Our particular unit was very luxurious, but not that child-friendly (think glass tables and plenty of breakables). Overall, we thoroughly enjoyed

our stay at Caribbean Club, and I would recommend this property for those traveling with older children or young adults, or for several couples looking for luxury accommodations with more options in dining and entertainment. Rates start at \$650 per night for a Tower Ocean Suite.

A long-time favorite of *Hideaways'* members is the more moderate **Lacovia** in lower SMB. Closer to George Town, this complex almost resembles an apartment building, with ample parking, a central garden pool, and a range of units with one or two bedrooms and garden, pool, or ocean views. Each condo is individually owned and decorated; some are very modern and updated, others not so much. The units we saw were very clean and comfortable-looking, and included all the amenities you would expect of a rental. What makes Lacovia such an appealing option is its quiet atmosphere, fantastic beachfront location, and moderate price. One-bedrooms start at just \$290 per night, which is a good deal for this level of quality in Grand Cayman. It's a great option for couples, families, or single travelers looking for a quiet escape—and members save 5% when booking their stay with *Hideaways* Travel Services.

Another great find is the new **Cotton Tree**, located in a quiet residential community at the northernmost point of West Bay. The entire compound comprises four modern, Caribbean-style, two-bedroom and two-bath



George Town harbor

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cottages that in total can accommodate up to 16 guests and have either garden or ocean views—perfect for those looking for a family-reunion, corporate, or destination-wedding retreat. While the property itself is oceanfront, there's not much beach to speak of; they do, however, have a large freshwater swimming pool, a beautiful garden setting for weddings, and such a serene location that it makes up for any lack of beach. Plus, you're just a 10- to 15-minute drive to the heart of SMB. Rates start at \$650 per night, with special rates for weeklong stays or entire property rentals.

Also worth mentioning is **The Ritz-Carlton, Grand Cayman**, the only five-diamond resort on the island and the best choice if you're looking for a full-service resort. It offers a complete spa and several of the better restaurants on the island. Even if you don't stay at The Ritz, make plans for dinner at 7 Prime Cuts & Sunset or BLUE by Eric Ripert, which offers fantastic cuisine and a romantic atmosphere. It's important to note that the main hotel is located across the street from the beach, so if you book the garden- or resort-view rooms, you'll need to walk to the beach by way of their air bridge. I'd recommend a room in the oceanfront tower, which is right on the beach. The Ritz is the best option for honeymooners looking for luxury. Rates start at \$299 per night, with your fifth night free.

Now that I've been there—and come home thoroughly relaxed—I'd be happy to help tailor your own Grand Cayman escape. Feel free to call me at 800-843-4433. I also can recommend some private home rentals (one to five bedrooms) on the quieter North Shore or on Cayman Kai—perfect for larger groups hoping to escape the Seven Mile Beach crowds. Finally, be sure to check out my Grand Cayman restaurant recommendations at www.Hideaways.com/caymandining. **H**



WITH DECOR AND CARIBBEAN DISHES that pay homage to the author's tropical wanderings, Hemingway's restaurant at the Hyatt Regency has a creative menu, a beautiful setting on Seven Mile Beach, and enough candles and torches around its colonnaded terrace to set the perfect romantic mood.

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