

# GOING GRAND

*On one Caribbean island,  
you'll find crystal-clear  
water, a refined dining  
scene, a worldly  
population and a  
famous stingray  
colony. That's  
Grand Cayman*

BY TERRY WARD

PHOTOGRAPHY BY WHITNEY LAWSON





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Grand Cayman's tax shelter status is no secret. But if you think staying cozy with their cash is what keeps most people on this 22-mile-long island content, think again. The largest of the three islands in the Cayman chain, just south of Cuba and west of Jamaica, offers a worldly distillation of the Caribbean and European good life. Come for some of the northern hemisphere's best snorkeling and diving, a dining scene that rivals the diversity of Miami's and the chance to experience an Old Caribbean atmosphere. "It's a sophisticated little island," says Mike Dill, an expat who calls Grand Cayman home (almost half the 50,000-plus population hails from elsewhere). Wherever you go, count on plenty of input from proud locals and transplants on the best spots to eat and play.

## All About Water

"That was epic! Can we do it again tomorrow?" This plea came not from an eight-year-old boy but from the boy's father, at one of Grand Cayman's most famous attractions, **Stingray City**. It's an expanse of chest-deep water over a sandbar a few miles out to sea, where dozens of gigantic southern stingrays congregate daily.

According to local lore, the rays were first lured to this spot in the early 1900s, when fishermen would clean their catches at sea instead of bringing the fish onto the mosquito-infested land. (Back then, mosquitoes swarmed the island in clouds thick enough to suffocate cattle, or so the story goes.) Now it's squid treats and human interaction that keep the stingrays coming.

"The rays brush their wings past your legs, much like a cat trying to get attention," says James Grainger, a captain with **Red Sail Sports**. "It feels very soft and feathery." Visitors may initially be wary, Grainger notes, but after five minutes

**UNDER THE SUN:** (clockwise from far left) A Red Sail Sports catamaran on Seven Mile Beach, along Grand Cayman's western coast; serving lattes at nearby ICOA Fine Foods; communing with a southern stingray at Stingray City, one of Grand Cayman's prime attractions; the seaside gazebo at Pedro St. James.



they're swimming off in pursuit of a stingray snuggle. Guides help you hold the rays and pose for photographs, if you're so inclined. (Red Sail Sports runs catamaran trips to Stingray City from several sites; 345-623-5965; redsailcayman.com; from \$80.)

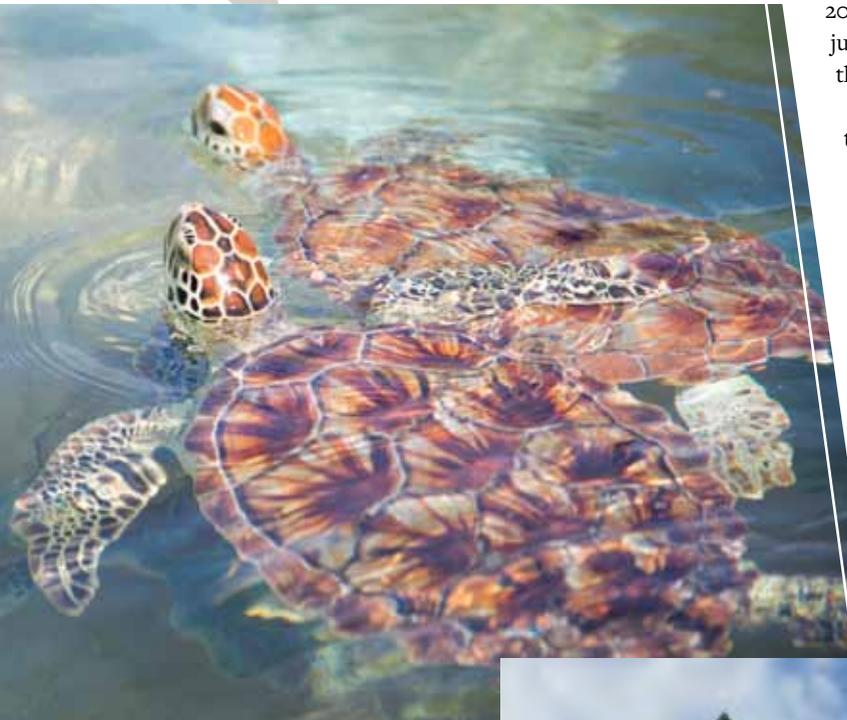
Grand Cayman's legendary walls draw scuba divers for some of the Caribbean's most impressive diving. But there are plenty of snorkeling options. The 250-foot-long **Kittiwake** (kittiwakecayman.com), a U.S. Navy ship that was sunk in 2011 to form an artificial reef, rests upright in 65 feet of water just offshore. Parts of the ship are so close to the surface that snorkelers can peer into smokestacks and cargo holds.

Get a drier look at Cayman marine life on a day- or night-time submarine trip. **Atlantis Submarines** takes you to reefs 100 feet down (30 S. Church St., George Town; 345-949-7700; caymanislandssubmarines.com; adults from \$84). Or watch fish action from above the water during the nightly tarpon feedings at **Rackam's Waterfront Bar & Grill** in George Town, the capital (93 N. Church St.; 345-945-3860; rackams.com). When the dinner bell rings at 7:30 p.m. sharp, dozens of the torpedo-like fish are already lurking below.

Grand Cayman's most popular land-based attraction is the **Cayman Turtle Farm** (786 Northwest Point Rd.; West Bay; 345-949-3894; turtle.ky). It's not for everyone: About 7,000 sea turtles, mostly green turtles, live here in cement pens and are bred in captivity. Some are released into the wild to bolster local populations; others are sold for their meat to island restaurants (sea turtle has long been a Cayman delicacy, but it's illegal to hunt them in the wild). The farm feels a bit like a theme park, but there's no denying the joy you'll see when children hold a yearling sea turtle or snorkel in a lagoon stocked with tropical fish.

### Where City and Island Mix

Caribbean style meets new urbanism at **Camana Bay** (10 Market St., Camana Bay; 345-640-4000; camanabay.com), a mixed-use development dressed in colorful plantation shutters and shrouded in native greenery. You can reach the marina and outdoor mall via a landscaped walkway from Seven Mile Beach, Grand Cayman's touristy main drag along the west coast.



**DRINK IT ALL IN:** (clockwise from top) Coming up for air at the Cayman Turtle Farm; Benny Ebanks, a guide at the turtle farm; tropical drinks at Rackam's, in George Town.



**LIKE A RAINBOW:**  
(clockwise from far left)  
Strolling down the mall at Camana Bay; tunics by Barbara Gerwit at Sand Angels; a lovingly garnished plate of wahoo carpaccio at Blue Cilantro.

## EAT

With some 200 restaurants and diverse influences (the West Indies, Europe, India, Asia), Grand Cayman is carving out a niche as the Caribbean's culinary capital. Here are a few favorite restaurants, from down-home to upmarket.

### Blue Cilantro

Island cuisine gets an Asian touch in dishes like wahoo carpaccio with *shiso* leaves and fresh snapper baked in a tandoori oven. *West Bay Rd., Seven Mile Beach; 345-945-4372; dinner for two, \$100\**

### Ristorante Pappagallo

Dine on Caribbean spiny lobster and Italian specialties, like duck ravioli, under a roof woven from the island's silver thatch palm fronds. *444B Conch Point Rd., West Bay; 345-949-1119; dinner for two, \$80*

### Over the Edge

Stop for peel-and-eat shrimp and pan-fried conch steak at this fishermen's pub on the North Side's waterfront. *Old Man Bay, North Side; 345-947-9568; lunch for two, \$35*

### ICOA Fine Foods

Don't let the strip-mall setting put you off. This popular bakery-café does delicious and healthy Asian lunches, like lamb *rendang* and coconut seafood soup. *11 Seven Mile Shops, Seven Mile Beach; 345-945-1915; lunch for two, \$40*

*\*Prices have been converted to U.S. dollars. Estimated meal prices do not include drinks, tax or tip.*

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Camana Bay shines as a community gathering spot on Friday night, when bands perform on the Paseo, a pedestrian thoroughfare. Children splash in the fountains while parents kick back with cocktails or coffee. And the Wednesday farmers market here puts the spotlight on island-grown produce and gifts. Look for Jenette Powell, a Jamaican who sells unusual tropical fruits from her island farm, such as sweetsops and June plums (the latter taste like a pineapple-mango hybrid). Nadine Brown's stall is layered with bracelets and necklaces she makes from seeds that wash ashore.

The pickings are more upscale at Camana Bay shops, like **Sand Angels** (345-945-7263; sandangels.com), which stocks stylish swimsuits by Australia's Sea Folly and Barbara Gerwit tunics encrusted with beads and turquoise. Next door, **Island Company** (345-945-7575; islandcompanygrandcayman.com) sells standard island attire: linen shirts in Easter egg colors for men and women.

Camana Bay's ever-expanding array of restaurants includes **Michael's Genuine Food & Drink** (345-640-6433; dinner for two, \$75), of Miami fame. The menu focuses on locally sourced ingredients such as lionfish, an invasive but delicious fish that's the bane of Caribbean coral reefs. **KARoo** (345-946-6633) is a tapas bar whose passion-fruit margaritas are spiced up with Scotch-bonnet-pepper-infused tequila. Afterward, you can climb the stairs or ride the elevator up Camana Bay's observation tower, past a multistory marine-life mosaic, for views that stretch from Seven Mile Beach and West Bay to the North Side.

### East End Day Trip

It's easy to find your way during a road trip to the island's less developed East End. "Keep the ocean to your right on the way there and to your left on the way back," says Richard Mottershead, a U.K. expat living and working on Grand Cayman. "You'll know what's so great about it when you get there." He's no doubt referring to the step back in time that occurs when you arrive on the island's beloved East End, where Caymanian cottages and laid-back fish restaurants share the oceanfront with millionaires' villas.

After leaving George Town, you'll pass a limestone cove called **Smith's Barcadere**, where people gather to leap from low limestone rocks into water the color of a swimming pool. Around the southwest

**SOAK IT IN:** (clockwise from top left) Admiring the view at Smith's Barcadere; stewed chicken and sides at Vivine's Kitchen; the dining room at Pedro St. James, a heritage museum on Grand Cayman's southern coast; a bridge at Queen Elizabeth II Botanic Park; a tropical bloom in the park. Opposite: Out for a stroll on Seven Mile Beach.





point and continuing east, stop at the national historic site of **Pedro St. James** (Pedro Castle Rd., Savannah; 345-947-3329; pedrostjames.ky; admission, \$10), where an 18th-century great house considered the birthplace of Caymanian democracy has been immaculately restored.

A bit farther along, if the tide is high, you'll hear the blow holes before you see them—pull over to watch the sea explode through limestone cavities on the beach. Next up, look for the small sign for **Vivine's Kitchen** (527 Austin Connolly Rd., Gun Bay; 345-947-7435; lunch for two, \$25). Vivine Walter cooks Caymanian dishes, like curried goat or chicken and dumplings; Sunday lunches draw locals for whelk, conch and turtle stew.

Spread across 65 acres on the East End, **Queen Elizabeth II Botanic Park** (Frank Sound Rd., North Side; 345-947-9462; botanic-park.ky; admission \$10) gives you the chance to stroll among native cockspur and mahogany trees, and to see Grand Cayman's endangered blue iguanas up close.

### Away From It All

"All roads lead to Rum Point," says Walter Findlay, a Scotsman who heads operations at Red Sail Sports. "People exploring the island always end up here." He's referring to the island's northernmost point, a drive of about an hour from Seven Mile Beach. It's home to a perfect sweep of powdery beach and turquoise water that barely laps above your thighs even a good hundred yards out. Families come here to relax and snack on conch fritters at colorful picnic tables under the palm trees. Rum Point's name allegedly comes from the rum barrels that washed ashore during the Caribbean's buccaneer days. Tours to Stingray City depart from the pier here.

For something different, you can head out with a guide on a Jet Ski tour to explore mangrove swamps and snorkel on the reef among sea turtles, stingrays and tropical fish. (Red Sail Sports offers these outings, too.) At Starfish Point, you can pose for a photo with enormous Caribbean starfish that tickle your fingers.

End the day back under the palm trees with a Mud Slide in hand. "No mixers or ice cream in this drink," says Findlay of the cocktail, reportedly invented here. "Strictly Irish cream, Kahlúa, vodka and ice." It's a simple recipe that's decidedly in keeping with this sophisticated corner of the Caribbean. 🍹



## STAY

**RCI AFFILIATED RESORTS ON GRAND CAYMAN ISLAND INCLUDE:**



### Morritt's Grand Resort 5930

Tranquil beaches and stunning views of the Caribbean, along with diving, windsurfing and nightly entertainment. *2289 Queen's Hwy. Colliers, East End*

**MEMBER REVIEWS:** "We had a wonderful stay. If you're big into water sports or just want to relax, this is the place." "Very quiet. The view from our balcony was beautiful." "The first day we snorkeled, we saw a dolphin next to us."



### Coral Sands Resort 4072

This small resort is close to downtown George Town and within walking distance of shopping and restaurants. *Seven Mile Beach*

**MEMBER REVIEWS:** "This intimate resort is a real find!" "The location is excellent, and the beach at the resort had good snorkeling. We had wonderful weather."



### Compass Point Dive Resort C200

Perfect for avid divers and snorkelers. Bikes and kayaks are available for free. *Austin Connolly Dr., East End*

**MEMBER REVIEWS:** "The dive boats leave from in front of the resort." "There are several beaches in the area and a small one at the resort itself."

**For complete member reviews (as member reviews have been condensed) and additional resort listings, visit [RCI.com](http://RCI.com) or call 800-338-7777 (Weeks) or 877-968-7476 (Points). Club Members, please call your specific Club or RCI telephone number.**

## NON-RCI AFFILIATED RESORTS

**Cotton Tree Grand Cayman** Four luxurious plantation-style cottages on the oceanfront in West Bay with full kitchens, plush linens and expansive private lawns. *375 Conch Point Rd., West Bay; 345-943-0700; caymancottontree.com; doubles from \$570 per night*

**Westin Grand Cayman Seven Mile Beach Resort & Spa** Most of the rooms at this modern oceanfront hotel have marble baths and balconies. The pool and beach areas are particularly appealing. *Seven Mile Beach; 800-937-8461; westingrandcayman.com; doubles from \$295 per night*