

# ALL THREE IN A ROW



The Cayman Islands are a popular Caribbean destination, but usually it's a matter of choosing one or the other of the three islands and settling down in a resort. Alternatively, and provided the weather co-operates, a liveboard can give you the best of all worlds, as **DREW McARTHUR** reports



**I**N THE WEEKS LEADING UP TO a dive trip, I often find myself wondering what to expect. This usually evolves into an exciting sense of anticipation, tainted only by a nagging feeling that I'll forget to pack something important.

Prior to a recent liveboard trip around the Cayman Islands with the Aggressor Fleet, I began to ask myself if I was expecting too much. The thing is, the Cayman Islands have an exceptional reputation for world-class diving and, similarly, the Aggressor Fleet has a reputation for facilitating the experience. With the bar of expectation set so high, could it be possible for the experience to deliver?

The three Cayman Islands – Grand Cayman, Little Cayman and Cayman Brac – have been hosting divers since the 1960s, when local legend Bob Soto opened the first dive-centre in the region.

To provide some perspective, he converted a set of fire-extinguishers into scuba-tanks, which were mounted on homemade wooden frames to enable divers to wear them.

Five decades later, the Cayman Islands are among the world's more sophisticated dive-spots. The islands are famed for year-round wall-diving, wrecks, abundant marine life, 25-29°C water and the chance of seemingly endless visibility.

Grand Cayman has an international airport that supports direct flights from London, but for those who want to sample the sister-islands another flight is required, and that can require a certain amount of waiting around.

One advantage of the *Cayman Aggressor IV* is that, provided the weather co-operates, the itinerary aims to reach all three islands. I hoped to make the full tour but my concern was that the high winds between October and April might limit the chances of the liveboard making it off Grand Cayman.

My first impressions on climbing aboard at Georgetown's harbour were positive. There was already a fun, friendly

and welcoming atmosphere as the crew helped me to distribute my baggage between my room, the camera-table and the area where I would set up my dive-gear. Most of the guests were diving nitrox, which came in a standard mix of 32% in tanks that were interchangeable between A-clamp and DIN.

That evening Captain Niall requested that all crew and passengers meet in the vessel's comfy saloon area for a welcome briefing. Niall's instantly likeable demeanour made it easy for him to connect with the group.

His accent, which he describes as "Irish via Peckham" was easy listening and added charm to his wealth of knowledge and stories collected from 20 years at sea.

Once we had been through staff and guest introductions, safety features, operations and the difference between the sound of a conch shell (time for food) and the ship's bell (time to dive), Niall informed us that wind would prevent us crossing to the sister-islands for at least the next couple of days.

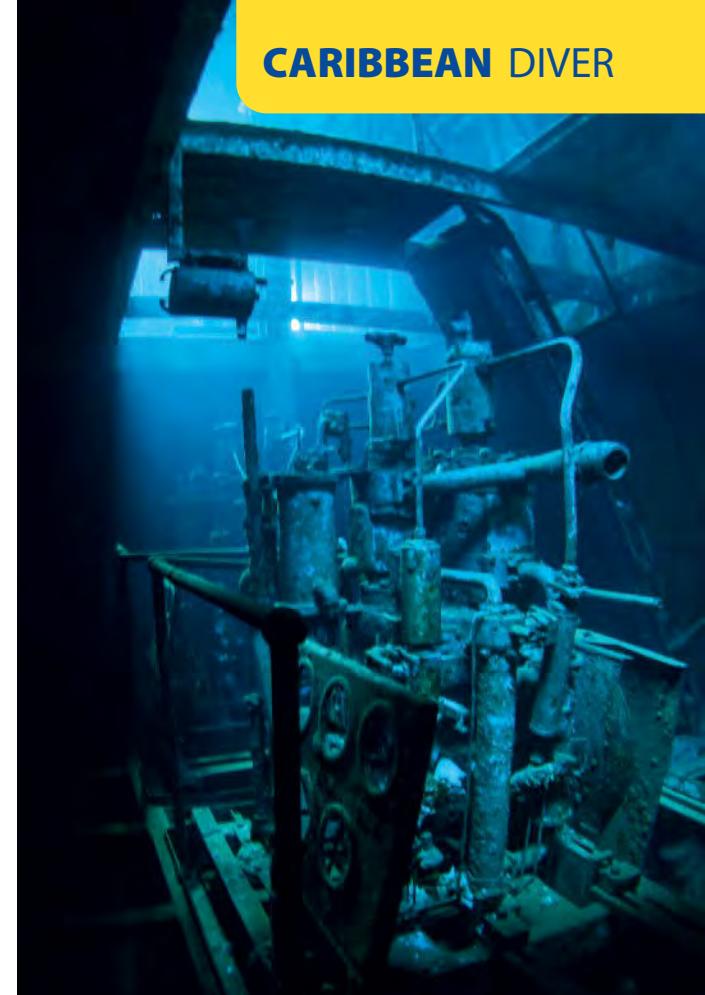
**T**HE FULL TOUR was by no means off the table, but no guarantee could be offered. With fate in the hands of Mother Nature, I decided to settle into relaxation mode, open a beer and start getting to know my fellow-passengers under the starry Caribbean sky.

Our first dive was on the wreck of the *USS Kittiwake*, the 76m submarine support ship that rests in the sand 20m deep. Aside from being rich in features and easy to penetrate, this purposely sunk vessel offers a perfect dive-profile, with the tips of the structure just 5m below the surface.

The *Kittiwake* is an impressive sight to behold, as it sits almost upright, and its six years under water have so far caused little decay.

Horse-eyed jack lazily circle the rusting frame, while the decks are packed with fish and critters such as banded coral shrimp and arrowhead crabs.

An easy penetration led us to the



**Above:** There are so many entrance and exit points to penetrate the *Kittiwake* that natural light still reaches through to the engine-room.

engine-room, recompression chambers, galley and the head, complete with mirrors that offer the perfect opportunity to get an underwater bathroom selfie.

During our dive, while daring myself to get closer to a 1.5m giant barracuda, I noticed a pair of spotted eagle rays cruising through the sand looking for tasty garden eels to munch on... jackpot!

Our next wreck was the 15m *Doc Poulson*. In the 35 years this vessel has been under water, it has attracted vibrant coral growth.

The site was named in recognition of the first diving doctor on the island who, according to local legend, used to conduct such eccentric behaviour as riding round naked on his Harley-Davidson.

No trip to Grand Cayman is complete without visiting Stingray City, a dive that provides pretty much does what it says

**Below left:** A pair of spotted eagle rays check out the snow-like sand that surrounds the *Kittiwake* in the hope of finding some lunch.

**Below right:** Turtles in the Cayman Islands are rarely bothered about divers, and generally allow them to get pretty close.



**Pictured:** The *Cayman Aggressor* provides divers with easy access to Cayman Islands dive-sites.







on the tin. We knelt in the sand 5m below the surface, essentially making an hour-long safety stop while southern sting rays cruised around us, gobbling up hand-outs of frozen squid.

Stingray City is an experience to remember, and quite unlike any other dive that I recall. It turned out that some of the guests had enjoyed an interaction somewhat closer than anticipated, resulting in sting ray "hickies" on their various limbs, though the owners of the bruises didn't seem to mind that much.

**AFTER THREE FUN-FILLED DIVES,** it was time to sample Grand Cayman's famous wall-diving. The top of the wall that surrounds the island varies from around 12m to 30m in depth.

We kicked off in style with Babylon, which includes a pinnacle protruding up from a depth of 40m.

It's the way that the black coral and gorgonian seafans cascade out of the pinnacle that led someone to liken it to the Hanging Gardens of ancient repute.

On our first wall-dive, my buddy Ray and I wasted no time. We splashed, gave a quick OK then began our descent while swimming towards the

underwater cliff edge.

Once we were over the breathtaking drop, I paused for a moment to take it all in. The island plummeted down into the abyss below, and the crystal visibility gave great effect to the sight as the terrain disappeared into the unknown.

The pinnacle was impressively adorned with an abundance of brightly coloured coral. While I floated weightlessly in such a tremendous setting, it took quite a bit of restraint not to succumb to the desire to continue dropping ever-deeper into another world.

During our three-and-a-half days around Grand Cayman, we were treated to a sample of the walls on the north, east, south and west of the island.

Each was impressive in its own right – from the cool, cave-like passages that weave through the reef at Round Rock and Trinity Caves, to the regular sightings of reef sharks at the Maze.

There was so much to see that the awe-inspiring sight of the wall itself often played second fiddle to the features existing within it.

Little Cayman is less populated than her big sister, and supports four land-based dive operations in comparison to

**Above left:** The *Doc Paulson* may be only a dinky little wreck but it does offer plenty of photo opportunities.

**Above:** A 2m reef shark cruises along the top of the Maze in Grand Cayman.

**Below left:** Stingray City is the place to get up close to southern sting rays, but try not to let your fingers look like garden eels.

**Below:** Nassau grouper are not only friendly towards divers but also like their own company.

the 20-plus found on Grand Cayman. The jewel in the crown is Bloody Bay Wall, which is where pirates are said to have massacred the crew of Royal Navy vessels hundreds of years ago.

As the sun came up on Little Cayman, I could see the top of Bloody Bay wall just 10m below the surface.

Many claim that Little Cayman has the best diving of the three islands and, as such, we were overjoyed that the winds had finally allowed us to make the journey, and eager to see if the island's waters would live up to the hype.

**OUR FIRST DIVE WAS AT** a site called Randy's Gazebo, and as soon as I dropped below the surface, I was sold. The *Aggressor* was trailing away from the shore, so we were hanging over the blue, looking towards the wall.

My first thoughts were that I could see much of the life that I'd seen in Grand Cayman – but so much more of it.

The coral was denser, the visibility clearer, and there were way more fish swimming around. I genuinely lost track of time while surrounded by such beauty.

Prior to the trip, I had read about the friendly grouper in the area. Because their

population had dipped to critically low levels in the past, efforts had been made to protect spawning aggregation sites, and had stimulated an increase in fish stocks.

During that time, divers had experimented with feeding lionfish to the grouper, in the hope of introducing the invasive species to the food-chain.

Even though this practice is now banned, the grouper still hunt for lionfish, and also point them out to divers.

In addition to the abundance of grouper, which behaved like loyal puppy dogs, there were hawksbill turtles and the occasional reef shark to be seen, against a backdrop of jack and schools of creole wrasse and blue chromis.

My experience of diving Little Cayman left me feeling that its reputation is justified. I am reluctant to say that one is better than the other, because different things appeal to different people.

Having said that, even though Little Cayman doesn't have the wrecks or diversity of Grand Cayman, it offered some of the most vibrant life in a pretty setting that I had seen in a long time.

We did make it to the third island, Cayman Brac, which lies just to the east of Little Cayman, although our only dive on "The Brac" was the wreck of the Russian frigate the *Captain Keith Tibbetts*, a name the vessel was given on being sunk in the 1990s to make an artificial reef.

The wreck is still largely intact, but twisting from storm damage has now broken its back and left the bow section on its port side.

This ageing has by no means diminished the vessel's attractions; if anything, I appreciate the added atmosphere of a wreck that has spent more time under water.

The mid-section of the 108m frigate is a tangled mess of cables and pipes, and entrance and exit points are nothing like the sterile openings on the *Kittiwake*.

The bow is the deepest part of the dive and rests in 28m. Two sets of guns are still

very visible and, among the wreckage, many varieties of coral can be found.

On my journey to the surface, I was pleasantly surprised by a little hawksbill turtle munching on some sponge coral at around 10m.

**AFTER THE FINAL DIVE** our expressions said it all – nobody wanted to go home.

Later in the afternoon, the crew prepared a cocktail party with a little award ceremony for the week's achievements. "Iron Diver" certifications were given out to those who had managed to do every dive, and spot prizes of T-shirts were ceremoniously distributed.

As I reclined on deck for the last time, I watched the sun gently settle behind the ocean. Everybody was in high spirits and making plans to go to a nearby bar for dinner and drinks.

I recalled thinking about my expectations prior to the trip, and then considered how the experience ended up comparing with them.

The food, diving, comfort and crew were all of exceptional standards, but the overall experience was more than the sum of these parts.

**Above left:** A hawksbill turtle pretends to be the lookout of the wreck of the *Captain Keith Tibbetts*.

**Above:** Divers make their way back to the boat from Randy's Gazebo on Bloody Bay Wall.

**Below:** First mate Alan provides some technical pointers to one of the guests.



**FACTFILE**

**GETTING THERE** ▶ British Airways from London Heathrow to Grand Cayman, britishairways.com

**DIVING & ACCOMMODATION** ▶ *Cayman Aggressor IV* is the only liveaboard operating in the Caymans, aggressor.com

**WHEN TO GO** ▶ Any time. Official hurricane season is from 1 June to 30 November but most years pass without any disturbance. The rainy season (May to November) usually means no more than patchy rain, but high winds between October and April may prevent visiting all three islands.

**CURRENCY** ▶ Cayman & US dollar (Cayman \$1 = US \$1.25).

**PRICES** ▶ *Cayman Aggressor* prices start at around £2230pp (two sharing) for a week-long full-board and diving package. Return flights with BA from £815.

**VISITOR INFORMATION** ▶ caymanislands.ky

