

Virgin Gorda & Caneel Bay, 27 Nov–19 Dec 2012

Trip Report Grand Cayman March 3rd – 13th 2013

About Grand Cayman:

This island is different than most Caribbean islands. It was not inhabited when Europeans first arrived and was never a “slave island” as many of the Eastern islands were. Due to heroism after a massive shipwreck (five ships sank at the East-end reef all at once) in which the King’s nephew was rescued, the island was declared a Tax-Free zone forever. As a result, the banking industry is very active there, making Grand Cayman the 14th highest GNP in the world! There are really two islands here – the Seven Mile Beach side and the East & North End. The former is very over-built and congested with miles of concrete and fancy hotels while the other is still generally less built and much of it left undeveloped. Along the shore there are some large homes, but it is more open. Snorkeling is very good, but only accessible by boat. There are private tour guides like “Captain Dexter” (www.dexters-fantaseatours.com) who take people from the Seven Mile region and “White Sands Water Sports” (<http://whitesandwatersports.com>) from the East end. There are some excellent restaurants here both in Georgetown, the East End and in the Rum Point area. Below is a summary of this trip in which we celebrated our 16th wedding anniversary.

Where we stayed: “Retreat at Rum Point”. This condo (Unit 15) was very nice with washer & dryer, which coming so handy when doing a lot of snorkeling. The management staff is very helpful sweet. The grounds are clean and well maintained. The view to the sea is magnificent and the screened in porch is a dream. We usually slept with the sliding doors open and just let the wind blow through. The unit has AC, but was seldom used due to wonderful cool evening breezes off the water.

Fish identifications are done using three guides by Paul Humann and Ned DeLoach titled “Reef Fish”, “Reef Creatures” and “Reef Coral”. The “Fish” book is only fish, the “Creatures” book includes many genera including arthropods, cephalopods, mollusks, worms, sponges, jellyfish and more. The “Coral” book includes many types of corals, algae and sea plants. Sometimes confirmation includes searching the hypothesized fish in Google images.

An important safety tip when diving to get closer to your subject: NEVER, ever, touch a subject. Nurse sharks and eels look approachable, but can be very dangerous (deadly) if, and only if, they are touched. Also watch out for the long spin urchins. Their quills are VERY sharp and sting painfully. If stung, soaking in vinegar helps. There also is fire coral that even a small scratch can hurt intensely. Basically, take only memories and photographs and nothing else. Also, never ever stand on the coral because it can damage or even kill the coral.

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About the Photography:

Camera is the Olympus 790 SW with an underwater enclosure. Often set to “Macro” with the flash disabled. To get good pictures underwater, the key is getting close to your subject. Never use the zoom except for exceptionally shy animals like Garden Eels, Tilefish, Jawfish and Rock beauties. Try to shoot on sunny days. Only use a flash if shooting under a ledge or to stop the endless movement of a fish like a spotted drum. The flash brighten all debris in the water. When diving down, be careful of your bubbles, as many great shots get ruined by bunches of tiny bubbles between you and the subject. Most pictures are shoved through Photoshop where “Auto Levels” removes constant background colors and some (few) needed “Shadows/Highlights” adjustments if in dark shadow of a cave or coral. I never use color balance or Hue/Saturation. The pictures were then loaded into iPhoto for rotation and cropping. The iPhoto “Export/Web page” function was used to build the index sets for the webpage. The controlling “buttons” in the website are hand-written in html pointing to the iPhoto built sets.

Restaurants (In order of excellence)

“Kiabo (Upstairs)” (A++) The restaurant is at the very end of Water Cay road, which turns south just before Rum Point. It is on the top floor of the building. We chose the “Sampler” menu which consisted of a fixed price for five courses including a fish and a meat course. It was absolutely delicious and presented beautifully. This was New York good, not just island good. The only small negative was the desert was way too heavy and they did not offer a light desert like sorbet and fruit. But it didn’t matter because the meal was so outstanding. This is not an inexpensive establishment, but is worth every penny.

“Casanova’s (A+)” located at 65 N. Church Street, right in the heart of the shopping district of Georgetown. We enjoyed lunch here and it was just excellent. It felt like we were sitting at a table in Vernazza overlooking the Mediterranean. The salad, soup and entre were all served hot and perfectly prepared.

“ICOA Bakery” (A+) Is in the 7 Mile Shopping Mall (a small strip mall) and has wonderful bakery including fresh baked breads and pastries. We picked up a Tuscan bread and tow sweet rolls that were just excellent. This is like a fine French or Japanese bakery.

“Tukka” (A) This is at the East End, a few miles south of the large complex of Morritts at the East End. The food was wonderfully presented and tasted as good as it looked. It was reasonably priced and worth the stop. Seating was on a deck facing the sea. Their curried chicken is amazing for dinner.

They have a “Happy Hour” from 3 to 5 that is wonderful with many delicious offerings at very reasonable prices. We had the Lionfish Taco, Lobster & Shrimp Spring Roll, and Coconut shrimp. All were delicious.

“Kiabo (Downstairs)” (A) The restaurant is at the very end of Water Cay road, which turns south just at Rum Point. This is at beach level serving sandwiches and island specialty entrees. We had a Mahi Mahi in a curry coconut sauce and a chicken Chimichanga wrap that was deep fried. Prices were reasonable. We ate there three times and each time was as very good.

“Kurt’s Corner” (A) is small and very good. We enjoyed a fish dinner that was delicious.

“The Grapetree Cafe” (A) in Bodden Town on the shore next to the Texaco station. It is open on weekends and other random times. The fish was just delicious with local trimmings including

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roasted plantains, potatoes, onions and more. Dining is on the beach on picnic tables – very local atmosphere and wonderful.

“Lighthouse at Breakers” (B+) Located on the water in Breakers with tables on a deck over the sea. They open at noon, which is when you want to get there. It gets crowded by 1! The food is largely Italian with some island offerings too. Sharon had a simple Caesar’s Salad with fish on top and I fish & chips! Was good.

“Over the Edge” (D-) (On North Shore Road) This restaurant is always very busy, but it is hard to understand why. The food is between mediocre and awful with the service slow and surly. Not a good combination. Sharon’s meal was cold & inedible and Bob’s was tasteless and then made him quite sick once he got home. Avoid this one!

Food Shopping:

“Foster’s Food Fair” just north of the traffic circle in Savannah. It is very well stocked and surprisingly large for an island food store.

“Foster’s Food Fair” at the East end across from Morritts. It was also well stocked and about half as large as the Savannah sister store. The meats and produce were surprisingly well stocked.

“Chisholm’s Market” near Rum Point is a small store with some essentials. A bit more than a “Stop & Shop” in the US might have. Check the dates on all items.

Beaches Snorkel and Activities Sites (in order of excellence):

Cleo’s and Sunrise reefs on East End: We used **“White Sand Water Sports”** (<http://whitesandwatersports.com>, 345-916-7263) for their 2 reef snorkeling trip to these wonderful reefs on the East End. Our guide Dave got in the water with us and found all sorts of wonderful fish including a Nurse Shark. It was an excellent trip with about an hour at each reef with the history and biology given clearly and with enthusiasm. We HIGHLY recommend these guys.

Bioluminescence kayak trip (www.caymankayaks.com/biobay.htm). Once we entered the bay (about a 30 minute paddle), the paddles glowed like they were on fire! Swishing your hands or feet over the kayak’s side was an explosion of lights. With cupped hands, we watched the water produce bursts of light that flashed before our eyes. Swishing the paddles back and forth edgewise made the paddles look like laser swords. Just amazing. On the paddle back, the sky suddenly burst into BRIGHT light as the largest meteor either of us had ever seen EXPLODED across the sky directly overhead. It was so huge, you could see the size of it, not just a trail of light. It produced no sonic boom, so must have been very high indeed. The entire night was just amazing.

Stingray City: The stingray there have become so tame they swim right up to you and want an embrace. Last time here, Captain Dexter brought squid for us to feed them, but the Red Sail folks fed most to the gulls and the rest they handled, spending most of their time selling beer to other visitors at the reef. Even with that, the stingray came around and snuggled up to us and let us hold them. Their under-belly is the softest thing you have ever felt. Is well worth the trip.

Cayman reef (just West of Stingray City): This reef is absolutely amazing. We saw so many fish there in the crystal clear waters including the dramatic Black Durgon. The problem is getting

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there. We used “Red Sail” to get there with the stop only 20 minutes long and we could have easily stayed an hour or two.

Sunset Reef, East End: We took the Red Sail Sports out of Morritts to snorkel for an hour on this fabulous reef. We saw many fish and abundant anemone and corals. It is a very healthy reef. Was worth the drive for sure. We took a “2-tank” beginner’s scuba trip, but snorkeled instead. This was just \$30 each! Being a beginner’s scuba, they went to the shallow reef, so while they got their lessons, we snorkeled for about an hour. Perfect.

“Elizabeth II Botanical Park” in the center of the island. It was delightful with hundreds of tropical flowers and trees, many in full bloom. One area not in bloom this time of year was the orchid garden with hundreds of orchids hanging on the trees. In August – September it must be breathtaking. We also saw the Cayman Blue Iguana and a Cayman Parrot. The hike was a few miles long on well-groomed trails. We recommend visiting this informative and beautiful park.

Rum Point: The water stays shallow for a long time, but near the end of the pier, you can get into the deeper water and head East to the near reef. The far reef is probably more dramatic, but also quite a distance away. The nearer reef, however, does host many fish and a few turtles too. We saw the illusive bonefish and the rare Blue-Spotted Cornetfish there – a first for us ever.

There is always a strong current from the East here, so you better be a strong swimmer just to stay in one place. Getting out to the reef really needs a boat.

Bodden Town: From the boat landing near the Texaco station Eastward has some interesting rock outcroppings with many fish and an unusually large lobster population. The day we snorkeled it, the currents were seriously high and almost dangerous, with the direction to the SW, so will take you out to sea, so be careful.

Morritts Pier: Under the pier is supposed to host many animals. The setting is so uninviting, though, that we did not even try it.

Daily Log:

Sunday, March 3rd

Arrived after a bumpy flight. Left Atlanta in a little snow storm and arrived in Grand Cayman to light rain in the low 80’s. It was very windy so we took a long shore-line walk from Rum Point Easterly for a few miles and back. Was a relaxing, wonderful day.

Lunch: In Bodden next to the Texaco station, is a shack on the beach selling fish that was so delicious. It came with plantains and vegetables. All was loaded with local flavor and delicious.

Dinner: Kiabo – delicious Mahi-Mahi coconut-curry with rice and beans that was wonderful. Sharon had the Chicken Chimichanga that was also wonderful, made almost like a roti with island spices. We ate at the beach-level restaurant and highly recommend it.

Monday, Mar 4th

Today the stormy weather is breaking, but it is still quite cool. We visited the **“Elizabeth II Botanical Park”** in the center of the island. It was delightful with hundreds of tropical flowers and trees, many in full bloom. One area not in bloom this time of year was the orchid garden with hundreds of orchids hanging on the trees. In August – September it must be breathtaking. We also saw the Cayman Blue Iguana and a Cayman Parrot. The hike was a few miles long on well-groomed trails. We recommend visiting this informative and beautiful park.

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Then we caught up on our food shopping and enjoyed a wonderful Italian meal at the “Lighthouse” at Breakers on the south shore. The food market (Foster’s Food Fair) was unexpectedly well stocked and large.

Tuesday, Mar 5th

Today saw our first entry into the water as the storm has passed. We entered near Rum Point and tried to snorkel East along the reef, but the water was still too rough considering how shallow the water was. We managed only about 30 minutes, but identified 13 fish including the illusive bonefish! The afternoon included visiting two other snorkel places, but neither looked inviting, so read our books most of the afternoon.

In the evening, Sharon had arraigned for us to do a night bioluminescence kayak trip (Tom of Cayman Kayaks). OMG it was amazing. Once we entered the bay (about a 30 minute paddle), the paddles glowed like they were on fire! Swishing your hands or feet over the kayak’s side was an explosion of lights. With cupped hands, we watched the water produce bursts of light that flashed before our eyes. Swishing the paddles back and forth edgewise made the paddles look like laser swords. Just amazing. On the paddle back, the sky suddenly burst into BRIGHT light as the largest meteor either of us had ever seen EXPLODED across the sky directly overhead. It was so huge, you could see the size of it, not just a trail of light. It produced no sonic boom, so must have been very high indeed. The entire night was just amazing. What a wonderful day.

Wednesday, Mar 6th

Another amazing day. We snorkeled the Rum Point reef from the pier Easterly. The water was rather rough still but crystal clear. There was also a strong current to swim against. Still, there were a fair number of fish to see and the exercise felt good. Returning to the pier was sure easy swimming with the current.

In the afternoon we took the “Red Sail Sports” catamaran first to Stingray City where we swam with hundreds of huge Southern Stingray that are so friendly and happy to see people that they cuddle up to you. The underside of their wings are the softest thing you have ever felt. Holding them was delightful. Then we sailed just 100 yards to a portion of the Cayman reef where the fish were absolutely amazing. The 30 minutes we were allotted was definitely not enough. In all, 13 new fish were seen including the dramatically beautiful triggerfish called the “Black Durgon”. We also saw the endangered Nassau grouper, first in a cleaning station (with cleaning goby) then in the open and a very bold Graysby grouper that was apparently defending a nest since it came out to encourage me to leave. I have to say though, the stop was way too short and the main thrust of Red Sail was to sell booze to the guests (some were almost too drunk to walk by the end of the trip), not to encourage good snorkeling.

Dinner was again at Kiabo, which, again, was delicious.

Thursday, Mar 7th

This was another very windy day, so we relaxed and read in the morning. Then we drove to East end and enjoyed a very good lunch at Tukka a few miles south of the large complex of Morritts at the East End. The food was wonderfully presented and tasted as good as it looked.

Then we drove back up to Morritts, stopping first at the smaller Foster’s Market, which was well stocked but smaller than the larger Foster’s in Savannah. We found some chairs to rest and digest as we read on the beach near the pier. We had intended to snorkel near the pier, where many

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animals live, but the wind was howling and waves were severe, so instead we drove to Bodden Town where we had heard the snorkeling was good between the old cemetery and the Texaco station. Bob snorkeled from the boat landing there and found the currents very strong, but the water was clear and some fish were seen. The most amazing thing was the very large number of lobster there! At least eight huge ones were spotted, curiously all grouped together in one area.

We came back to Rum Point and had a nice leisurely swim at Rum point. Sharon prepared a delicious home cooked meal of potato latkes, tuna salad and green salad. Yum.

Friday, Mar 8th

First we took a long walk south from Rum Point along some beautiful homes on perfect sand all the way to the first canal and back. It was a very pleasant walk. When we walk, we talk constantly, so the hour walk must have included thousands of words! Was a very nice morning.

Then we took the Red Sail Sports out of the East End to snorkel for an hour on this fabulous reef. Sharon thought up the routine of booking a “2-tank” beginner’s scuba trip, but snorkeled instead (so no charge for the tank etc.). This was just \$30 each! Being a beginner’s scuba, they went to the shallow reef, so while they got their lessons, we snorkeled. It is a very healthy reef and we saw many fish and abundant anemone and corals. Was worth the drive for sure.

Dinner was at “Over the Edge” – terrible. Avoid this place with bad food and bad service.

Saturday, Mar 9th

Drove into George Town and wandered the many shops there. It is definitely a high-end tourist’s market. There were so many diamond, jewelry and other expensive stuff – and nothing to buy or that struck an interest. If a person were interested in gemology, bringing a loop along would offer some really nice viewing of fine (and some not so fine) stones. Bob did get a pair of bathing trunks at the Guy Harvey. We enjoyed lunch at “Casanova’s” which was just excellent. It felt like we were sitting at a table in Vernazza overlooking the Mediterranean.

Sunday, Mar 10th

Our 16th anniversary! We mostly relaxed today reading and a long walk from our room to the end of Rum Point, which is about a mile or more and back. The wind and sun made for a delightful walk. We also did a little snorkeling at Rum Point, but the water was very rough, but did see the rare ‘Blue-Spotted Cornetfish’. It was a nice, relaxing day with reading and relaxing being the main “activity”. Our anniversary dinner was at Kiabo upstairs where we had the five course sampler, which was absolutely delicious. What a great meal! It was a perfect day in every way.

Monday, Mar 11th

Today we took a “Two Reef Snorkel” trip with “White Sand Water Sports” (345-916-7263) to Cleo and Sunrise reefs. Both were spectacular snorkel trips with our guide (Dave) joining us in the water and staying at each reef about an hour. We logging 15 new fish photographed and identified bringing the total to 80 so far on this vacation. For an island with so few places to snorkel, this is a remarkable number. Diner was again at Kiabo lower level where we tried two more dishes that were both delicious.

Tuesday, Mar 12th

Snorkeled Rum Point from shore again. The wind is almost calm, but there is still a considerable current East to west. Also, the boats near the dock take VERY large orbits to get to the dock with

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the snorkelers scrambling to get out of the way. None the less, it was a nice little snorkel with us seeing a spotted trunkfish, which was nice.

We returned to **Tukka** for their “Happy Hour” at 3 - 5 PM where food and drinks are very reasonable. We had many small dishes including a Lionfish Taco, Lobster & Shrimp Spring Roll, and Coconut shrimp. All were delicious.

Wednesday, Mar 134th

Sunny and calm again today, but we are homeward bound. This was a fabulous trip to these beautiful, blue-green waters.

You can check out the pictures at <http://www.doppstein.com/cayman2013/>

Enjoy the water!

Bob and Sharon