

Grand Caymen Trip, December 1999

We spent our December, 1999 dive vacation at the Cayman Diving Lodge on the East End of Grand Cayman. The East End is relatively unpopulated and there are only a few dive operations there. The famous "Seven Mile Beach" is located in Georgetown on the West End of the island where the tourist resorts, shopping, dining and watersports are located. Because the East End is remote, it offers more pristine dive sites with many fewer divers.

We really enjoyed our stay at the Cayman Diving Lodge. It had only about a dozen guest rooms so we got to know our fellow divers fairly well as we not only dove together, but also took all our meals together in the open-air dining area. The typical daily schedule was breakfast at 7:30, boat departing at 9:00 for two morning dives, returning to the lodge for lunch, departing again around 2:00-2:30 for an afternoon dive, then returning to rest/shower/etc. and enjoy dinner at 6:30.

The accommodations were fair – the rooms were clean and bright but without television, radio or phone, which was nice. The shower (dubbed the Cayman Mist" by Darren) was probably the poorest feature. The food was quite good – every day we had a continental breakfast, then a hot lunch with salad and fresh-baked cookies, and excellent dinners (baby back ribs, salmon, lasagna, etc.), always with delicious fresh salad and homemade dessert.

East End diving was great. A reef wall extends around the island, with only one major cut in the reef on the Southeast side of the island – the boat went through the cut to the dive sites on the ocean side of the reef. Each morning, we did a wall dive to about 100 feet, followed by a 50 to 60-foot reef dive.

On virtually every wall dive, there were stunning canyons, often only several feet wide in places but hundreds of feet deep – they were spectacular, especially looking up to the surface through the openings. The walls and pinnacles were covered with huge corals, some 8 to 10 feet in width or diameter.

The reef dives typically included a number of tunnels and swim-throughs, which were always fun. We would spend about half of the dive going through these formations, and then come up on top of the reef for the remainder of the dive, where we always saw lots of interesting marine life.

Afternoon dives were conducted inside the reef on particularly rough days and outside the reef on calmer days. The outside sites were again 50 to 60-foot reef dives, while the inside dives were shallow (20 to 25-foot) dives.

CDL had two very nice dive boats, each of which could comfortably accommodate up to about 12 divers. On days when there were more divers, we split into 2 groups and used both boats. We always had plenty of divemasters, and dive groups usually consisted of about six people.

The weather was not great for the majority of the trip – overcast skies and high winds made the water very rough the first two days of our visit. We had to deal with a lot of surge at some sites, especially near the surface. Many in our party ended up with bruised shins received while trying to re-board the boat, and the re-boarding process was often physically exhausting.

The CDL staff was great. Mark was the lodge manager and also a divemaster who took us out several times. Other divemasters included Todd & Carol (a married couple), Travis, Mickey, Jane and Scott. They were all great – very helpful and attentive to the guests' needs. They all did a super job guiding us on the dives. Felicia was our chef, with Scott filling in on her days off.

Kim took the PADI underwater photo course with Todd on the second day of the trip, which included instruction in using the special lenses with two one-on-one dives using the wide angle and macro lenses. We got the photos developed in Georgetown and had them back on the last day of the dive – the macro photos turned out especially well, so Kim rented the macro lens for the last day of diving. On the very last dive, only 3 divers went out, so Kim got to buddy-up with Mickey, and he did a great job of finding interesting critters to photograph.

The atmosphere at the CDL was very similar to that of a live-aboard, as we spent a lot of time with our fellow divers. There was another group of 6 people from South Carolina for about 3 days – Gail and Rick, Marilyn and Mike, Mike and Lawrence – all from the Isle of Palms. We also met two couples from the Seattle area – Paul and Kathy and Henry and Camille. We ate with them frequently and were often in dive groups with them. Then there were Doug and Bill from Maine (there by themselves because neither of their wives dove) – we also ate with them often. Finally, there were and Chris and Tim from West Virginia. One couple that we didn't get to know was the man with the Russian wife who spoke almost no English.

We found that most of the people at the Lodge had been diving only a few years and some (like Kathy and Camille) had only recently been certified. We asked lots of questions about favorite dive sites and found unanimous votes for the diving in Cozumel, though with some strong reservations (lots of tourists, widely varying quality of dive operations, careful about food, etc.) Doug raved about Saba Island, and the Isle of Palms group really enjoyed Walker's Cay. Chris and Tim had done one of the Nekton live-aboards and gave very positive reviews on all aspects of their experience.

It was great getting to know all these folks – we had a wonderful time.

FRIDAY, 12-3-99

RIVER OF SAND

10:00 a.m. 75°F 37 min. 100 ft. 32% O₂

Overcast sky, strong surge near surface, poor visibility – very rough dive. Various tropical fish and corals.

IRON SHORE GARDEN

11:30 a.m. 76°F 49 min. 54 ft. 32% O₂

Rough water with surge still strong. Many tunnels, including “Devil’s Throat” near the end. Lots of fairy basslets spotted.

SUNSET EAST

3:30 p.m. 80°F 67 min. 25 ft. 32% O₂

Unguided dive in much calmer water than morning dives. One huge lobster and another group of 3 lobsters; many beautiful anemones.

SATURDAY, 12-4-99

THE MAZE

9:45 a.m. 80°F 36 min. 101 ft. 32% O₂

Rough water but super dive through narrow, deep canyon walls.

LITTLE HOUSE

11:15 a.m. 78°F 58 min. 62 ft. 32% O₂

Strong surge near surface. Barracuda, queen angelfish, pufferfish.

SUNSET WEST

2:45 p.m. 80°F 58 min. 22 ft. 32% O₂

Very nice unguided dive. Sunny skies and lots of colorful marine life.

SUNSET EAST

6:30 p.m. 77°F 50 min. 27 ft. 32% O₂

Sleeping fish, banded coral shrimp, banded clinging crabs, sharptail eel.

SUNDAY, 12-5-99

LOST WALLY

11:30 a.m. 81°F 33 min. 100 ft. 32% O₂

Very deep wall with several major pinnacles. Numerous extremely large corals.

MAGGIE'S MAZE

1:00 p.m. 81°F 45 min. 58 ft. 32% O₂

Numerous short to medium swim-throughs. Lots of life on reef – lobsters, juvenile spotted drum. (No photos – film exposed)

GILLIGAN'S REEF

4:00 p.m. 80°F 52 min. 25 ft. 32% O₂

Unguided dive – lots of sand in the water – poor visibility. Sharptail eel, yellow stingray, huge angelfish, lobsters.

MONDAY, 12-6-99

CRUSHER'S WALL

10:00 a.m. 79°F 34 min. 105ft. 32% O₂

Canyon walls with extremely deep bottom; pinnacles with large corals; not a lot of fish.

FANTASY LAND

11:30 a.m. 81°F 44 min. 56 ft. 32% O₂

Numerous swim-throughs and a fair amount of marine life -- large encrusting coral formations, barracuda.

PLAYING FIELD

3:00 p.m. 80°F 44 min. 55 ft. 32% O₂

Reef dive with a few swim-throughs; sunny but with some surge near the surface; lots of fish, including two huge pufferfish.

TUESDAY, 12-7-99

JACK MCKENNEDY'S CANYON

9:30 a.m. 81°F 35 min. 97ft. 32% O₂

Overcast sky but neat wall dive with deep bottom. White reef shark spotted about 30 to 40 yards away.

HIGH ROCKS

11:30 a.m. 76°F 49 min. 54 ft. 32% O₂

Many swim-throughs and tunnels. Lots of tarpon everywhere on the reef; one yellow sting-ray with surgeonfish.

GROUPEL GROTTO

3:30 p.m. 80°F 67 min. 25 ft. 32% O₂

Long tunnel with opening to surface in the middle; pufferfish, barracuda; tarpon, queen angelfish.

WEDNESDAY, 12-8-99

KANGAROO GORGE

9:45 a.m. 81°F 24 min. 109 ft. 32% O₂

Deepest dive of trip (coming out of tunnel). Sunny skies and beautiful water; lots of colorful marine life.

TARPON TAPROOM

11:00 a.m. 81°F 43 min. 59 ft. 32% O₂

Sunny skies but very rough water getting out. Green moray eel, lobsters, lots of fish.

SUNSET EAST

2:30 p.m. 81°F 52 min. 26 ft. 32% O₂

Beautiful dive with sunny skies and calm water. Lizardfish, yellowline arrow crab, yellow stingray, flamingo tongue, eyed flounder, slender filefish.