

YO HO HO!

(and a bottle of duty free rum)
- The Cayman Islands visited

Mention the top ten windsurfing areas in the world and the chances of Grand Cayman springing to your lips is small. Which is a shame as it has a great deal to offer particularly for someone looking for

something that bit different. As Mark Kasprovicz discovered when he visited the island last summer, it's a mixture of very safe sailing, some wild waves and a host of other marine based things to do.



Look, I'm just an ordinary Joe who's wild about windsurfing but likes to take a family holiday with my wife and kids. In the past they've put up with a fair amount - they've been sand blasted in just about every half decent sailing location in Europe, stranded at quay-sides and abandoned on the beach while I go windsurfing. Inevitably the only company around are Germans who either go windsurfing as well or who don't speak English. As my lot don't speak German, communication is virtually non-existent.

So when the invitation came for me to go Grand Cayman to try out the windsurfing there and slob it in some luxurious surroundings, I thought 'that's it! That's where I'll take the horde this year. It's English speaking, set right on the beach and as well as windsurfing there is Hobie Cat sailing, a couple of jet bikes, some sea canoe's, a swimming pool with a bar where you sit in the water and sip your deadly poison and some of the best marine life for a bit of the old scuba diving'. When I put the idea to them they agreed, immediately!

Part of that I'm sure was the opportunity to cross the Atlantic in one of them there 747's, plus the fact that British Airways show TWO in flight

movies between London and Miami also swayed them.

A few weeks later we were flying West of Cuba in one of the Cayman Airways 737's having had a trauma free transfer in Miami. At Grand Cayman we were met by Chris Narborough who runs Cayman Windsurfing and then made the thirty minute drive to the East of the island to Morrits Tortuga Club.

Before I go very much further let me tell you about the Cayman islands. There are three of them of which Grand Cayman is the largest. Cayman Brac and Little Cayman lie further North, halfway to Cuba in fact, about eighty five miles away. Grand Cayman is probably best known as a financial centre and tax haven. In spite of the fact that it is only twenty seven miles long and about twelve wide it is the fifth largest banking centre in the world - bigger than Switzerland. The film 'The Firm' was set there and from that you can gauge some of the beauty of the island.

Morrits Tortuga Club is situated away from the main centres of population at a place called Colliers. It's a time share resort which also has vacant apartments most of the time. Set right on the beach, all you have to do is roll out of bed, make yourself some breakfast and walk twenty yards to Cayman Windsurfing chose your board

and rig and walk to the waterside. They'll even carry your kit to the waterside!

Anyway we were shown to our apartment - struck lucky there - the penthouse suite, ocean view. The inside was air conditioned, there was a comprehensive kitchen with an ice maker, colour TV, and the biggest balcony I'd ever seen. We slept like the dead until about three in the morning when the mother of all tropical storms had us outside on the balcony enjoying the view of flashing lightning and turbulent ocean as well as the warm rain. By the morning everywhere was dry, the sun was out and it was 30°C degrees again!

CAYMAN WINDSURFING.

The reason why Cayman Windsurfing is based here and not at the other end of the island where all the hotels and condominiums are is that the east end of the island gets the best wind. On top of that a reef encircles virtually the whole island and at this point it's up to half a mile from the shore in places which together with onshore winds gives you a four and a half mile long blasting area in smooth waters between three and twelve feet deep. If you want to get out onto the ocean for the waves you simply sail out through

the reef break just to the left of the hotel and you're there. The rest is totally protected, and safe. The water temperature, like the air, is 30°C degrees for most of the year.

So come the morning I strolled down the beach to meet Bruno the man who looks after the day to day running of the place and Conrad his assistant, Conrad is a local while Bruno comes from Zimbabwe, Conrad drives a Cadillac while Bruno drives a truck. Bruno's first words were you're here too early in the season, it doesn't get really windy here until November and then it stays that way until April. Well I knew that but that was the price of avoiding matrimonial revolt.

The anemometer on the beach was reading just ten knots but the temptation to get wet overruled a lack of planing winds and the choice was a BIC Lambada and a seven metre sail for a coastal cruise. The first shock was the water temperature just by the beach. Although the sea temperature generally is about 30°C the area round the beach has patches of turtle grass which, being dark, absorb the sun's rays that much more. So the actual starting temperature is closer to 35°C! Then came the cruise down the coast and just as I rounded the point, the air speed increased and the Lambada was flying. It's not unusual for the wind to be better at a headland because of the accelerating effect that it gives to the airflow. A quick gybe and a change of boards to a Rock was a good decision and very soon I was ripping along the coastline, two hundred yards from the shore and starting to beat upwind for the second gap in the reef four miles away. The gap is very easy to find as there's a shipwreck by it - the old story, a stormy night, the captain of a coaster trying to find shelter, misjudged it and came to a sticky end. There wasn't enough wind for an exit into the ocean so it was a case of a smooth water gybe and back to base for a really quick run.

The water colour is an incredible turquoise - the white sandy bottom reflects the sun and makes the whole sailing area look like the sunlight has been turned up by a factor of three.

The next few days gave a mixture of weather strong enough for short boards and five metres sails as well as lighter wind conditions.

SAILING CONDITIONS.

Sailing on the outside can vary according to the state of the water - waves days are frequent as the shoreline rises from the Ocean floor to the reef in a few hundred yards and the water gets well stacked up on the outside. It's not as regular a wave as in the Pacific, nor is it as fast moving but it's powerful. The entry and exit points for the ocean are small and infrequent and as the reef surrounding Grand Cayman is just above the waterline you really do have to find the gaps before sailing out or in. The one by Morritts is marked with two posts and if you're returning from the south, which is the normal approach route, you sail past them parallel to the reef until you line up with the windsurfing centre and the tip of the pier, gybe and head straight for the beach. One warning, at most states of the tide the reef gaps are the main exit points for the water coming in over the reef, so currents here are very strong. You shouldn't try to gybe near the gap because if you have to ditch you'll find yourself being sucked out into the ocean very quickly! The common wind direction for this side of the island is a north easterly, but a bit more north or east adds a bit of cross shore into the equation.

On the inside you have a four and a half mile stretch of water to play in and, as you head away from Morritts towards East End you sail on an ever broadening reach. Coming back, the easiest way is to head for the reef and then sail along it and though you'll start on a beat, the way that the wind



bends around the headlands you end up creaming into the beach on a broad reach again! An added bonus is that this end of the island never gets crowded, either on the water or on the shore. The sailing area is so huge, the numbers of windsurfers small (at the moment) and there's very little coastal development so it's a great place for anyone wanting to get away from it all but still hold onto civilisation by the finger tips.

On stormy days when there's a lot of west in the wind the best wave conditions are found on Seven Mile Beach, right next to the condo's and hotels. But it's a viciously powerful set of waves which stack up high and come in quick. Equipment breakage is frequent! The feint hearted can sail instead in North South where the winds are almost as strong. As the island is so flat there's nothing much in the way to act as a break

WHEN TO GO.

As I said August is not the best month for wind in the Caribbean and in the end I reckon that I had about the average amount of wind for the month - five days in a fortnight of short board



If you want to get out onto the ocean for the waves you simply sail out through the reef break just to the left of the hotel and you're there.

planing conditions. The best months are November through to April or May when the chances of plus force four winds are over seventy per cent. Water and air temperatures don't vary by

more than a couple of degrees. Outside that time your chances lessen until the low wind season which is July and August. Average winds during the winter are 15-25 knots and 10-20 knots in the summer.

But not everyone wants planing conditions all the time or at all and in the summer months Cayman Windsurfing runs courses from beginner level up to anything you want. They're especially good at getting young people afloat. The equipment ranges from Mini BIC's with 1.9 sqm sails up to 3.5 sqm Nautix sails.

For Adults a full range of '94 BIC boards and UP sails is already in place while the '93 gear has been moved to the North Sound site at the other end of the island.

SAFE SAILING.

It's the mixture of a wide sailing area, warm clean waters, total security that appealed to me and more to the point, to my two youngsters. On lighter wind days and using a long board, both sailed with me up the coast - it was the first time that they had ever had conditions that really suited them. In addition Cayman Windsurfing has a couple of Nautix monofilm junior rigs. As an interested parent I have tried to get my children windsurfing and there's a number of redundant mini rigs lying unused in the garage. The Nautix rigs did the trick and in the end the youngsters decided that they would only use those and nothing else on offer. It wasn't an official test in any sense of the phrase, they tried all the more conventional mini rigs that were available and came to the conclusion that the Nautix designs were easy to uphaul, light to control and worked well in pushing the board forward. But most importantly a 320 board could be gybed and tacked easily, a failing of other mini rigs. I reckon that if you can get hold of a carbon mast that has broken at the base then coupled with the Nautix sail you end up with the best youth orientated rig available.

If you're at all nervous about sailing in the open sea or just like flat water windsurfing then this is the place for you. On the inside it's like sailing a lake - only this one is much larger, warmer and cleaner.

The lighter summer winds give the youngsters a chance to get out there and do it! Warm water and an enclosed sailing area are real bonus points....



...but even in the summer there's a good chance of planing conditions. If all you want to do is blast back and forth on five meter sails, then the best months are November through to April. Morritts Tortuga Club apartments, in the background, are the ideal place to stay as they're only twenty five meters away from Cayman Windsurfing's hire centre. The octagonal building in the middle distance is end the end of the dive centre's pier. It's all so convenient!

the dive equipment

OTHER THINGS TO DO.

The waters round the Cayman islands have some of the best diving in the world and on a windless day you'd be crazy not to take advantage of at least one dive. Those with PADI or other certificates will find hire rates very similar to other dive centres around the world.

If you haven't yet discovered the undersea world, the dive centre at Morritts Tortuga club will arrange a lesson. But there are plenty of dive centres all around the island and over thirty diving areas to choose from including six wrecks. You should also take a snorkel, mask and flippers as apart from the areas just by the beach at Morritts there are organised boat trips specifically for snorkellers. If you don't want to get wet try the submarine dives one of which, the Atlantis Research Submersible, goes down 800 feet into the Cayman wall- about seven times deeper than a scuba diver can manage. This is only a two man sub but there is a larger one which takes 45 people and dives no lower than 100 feet.

Apart from that Cayman Windsurfing have a couple of jetbikes, a Hobie Cat and surf canoes available for hire for lighter wind days.

Grand Cayman wasn't really inhabited properly until the eighteenth century so their history scale is quite short. Piracy and Grand Cayman though have a longer history and Sir Henry

Morgan and Edward Teach used to hang around these islands.

Go and see the blow holes on the other side of East End. Hell from where you can send a postcard with 'This is Hell, wish you were here!' written on it. Everybody else does it though Hell itself is nothing spectacular. But it's on the tourist trail on the way to the turtle farm so I suppose it has to be done if only to meet the guy who runs the post office. He walks around with a pair of horns, a trident and a red cloak with a tail just to make you feel at home!

EATING.

Cayman is no more expensive compared to the rest of the Caribbean, says the tourist board. Nevertheless you will find prices higher than in the UK for many items. Morritts Tortuga Club apartments all have fitted kitchens if you want to go self catering. There is also a restaurant and the pool side bar serves snacks throughout the day. What you cannot get is breakfast, the closest place is Algy's about two miles away in East End. You also won't find a shop selling food or drink at the Club. Again it's a trip to East End, Bodden Town or Old Man's Bay. And here is where the solitary location of Morritts becomes a disadvantage because you'll find life almost impossible without wheels. Scooters are the

WHAT TO WEAR.

The Caymans are very close to the Equator and the sun is very strong at all times of the year. The temperature only varies by a couple of degrees at most, so it's quite easy to get seriously burned. Take lots of high factor waterproof sun block and if you're susceptible to sunburn either wear a vest or a t-shirt. I saw a couple of people returning after just an hour or two on the water and you could have fried eggs on their backs!

RUM POINT.

Grand Cayman is supposed to have the most beautiful beach in the world. It might well have had in the past but, being so close to America, the property developers have their say over aesthetics and basically my feeling is that the Caymaners have sold their birthright to the condo, hotel and time share builders and Seven Mile Beach has been destroyed through sheer over-development.

Rum Point on the other hand has escaped virtually unscathed. Imagine a grove of tropical trees which cover the majority of a white sand beach. The sand slopes gently into the water and the water is about 90F. Add to that a bar and a restaurant housed in shanty style buildings and you've got Rum Point - possibly the mellowest



place in the World. The music is mellow, the tropical birds swoop down and eat from your hand and you can wade out a hundred yards from the beach and still only be waist deep in warm water. This place is paradise. It's on the east side of North Sound which it gets the second best winds on the island and although you can launch from Rum point, Cayman Windsurfing other hire facility is on the other side of the Sound, seven miles away.

In between is something totally exclusive to Grand Cayman and that's Stingray City.

STINGRAY CITY.

This is a must even on a windy day. In fact there are two Stingray Cities within a few hundred yards of each other. One is suitable for scuba diving being about four metres deep while the other is on a sand bar with waist deep water. The story goes that a few years ago a local fisherman started to feed an injured stingray which was unable to feed itself. Other rays started coming along and very soon there were loads of them all popping conch, squid or fish or whatever

happened to be on the menu that day. Then someone realised that maybe the tourists would like to feed them too and now there are daily trips both to the sand-bar and the coral gardens. Did I mention that you actually get in the water with the stingrays and let them feed from your hand? Standing on the sand-bar for the first time as about twenty, two meter rays swim around you, between your legs, up your side etc. is a bit daunting but you soon get used to it especially when the guide picks one of the smaller ones up in his arms and shows you how they feed. A snorkel is a must, flippers are banned unless you're going for the deep dive.

Old Man Sea Sports run a 90 minute "taxi" tour to the sand bar and Coral Gardens from Rum Point and the cost is twelve Cayman dollars per person. If you want to go on the scuba dive the cost is higher, around forty dollars, but includes



Stingray City from the air. The pink things are the humans, the black ones are the rays. Stingray City from the water. Evil looking devils aren't they. So long as you don't tread on one they'll keep those barbed tails to themselves!



cheapest mode of transport (Soto's or Caribbean Motors) or, at the other end of the scale, hire a jeep from Just Jeeps for a proper American model or Conumac at Morritts for a Suzuki. In between there are a whole host of car hire company's offering just about any economy

model. A warning here about insurance - there are two options third party or comprehensive. Third party may be cheaper but the hire company may insist that they 'reserve' a sum of money from your credit card. The money doesn't actually leave your account but the reserve prevents you from using that sum of money. It can be as high as \$2000 which will make a large hole or even exceed your credit limit. Morritts does exactly the same against a credit

As for traditional Caribbean food, there's a whole host of places that serve it and welcome nights at Morritts guarantee loads of things like spicy Jerk chicken.

account at the bar and restaurant and the electricity that you use operating the air conditions - these are time share apartments and not hotel rooms! These reserves can make your credit card feel very ill indeed. If you have a charge card like American Express or Diners then you're much better off.

Food is about ten per cent more expensive than in the UK, beer and spirits, which you buy from the liquor store and not the supermarket, surprisingly high considering that the Cayman's are supposed to be a tax haven! Compared with Canary Island prices, you'll find Grand Cayman booze expensive. Buy beer in packs of 24 and Tortuga rum is the cheapest of the spirits. Mixed with canned cocktail mix and a

shed load of ice from your ice maker (psst it is in the fridge in the apartment) it's the cheapest way of getting wrecked.

Restaurants we'd recommend include the Lighthouse at Breakers (lobster is great here!), Bayview in Georgetown does perfect seafood, the

Ten Sails pub serves English beer (Guinness about four quid a pint!), English food and also has a curry night! Mexican food is good and cheap at Santiago's in Georgetown in West Bay Road (especially on 'eat as much as you can' nights!) while Benjamin's Roof restaurant just down the road serves everything from fresh Oysters to Spaghetti Carbonara and boasts that it's the only place that you can eat alligator tail!

As for traditional Caribbean food, there's a whole host of places that serve it and welcome nights at Morritts guarantee loads of things like spicy Jerk chicken. Well worth going to in spite of the fact that they'll try to sell you some time share. But even that is very low key compared to what happens in the Canaries.

SHOPPING.

Tax free shopping, my eye! There are lot of shops that beckon but Chris Narborough, head of Cayman Windsurfing has been on the island for quite a few years and reckons that there is only one thing that can be regarded as a bargain - a litre of Tortuga Rum bought from the duty free at the airport on your way out! The reason is that though there isn't any income tax on the island there is a scathing import duty as well as shipping costs because everything has to come in from either the States or a neighbouring island.

GETTING THERE.

We flew scheduled to Miami and then onto Grand Cayman. It is not the cheapest way of getting there. A charter run by Airtours is due to start in the new year and that will fly direct to the island. At the moment the package price will still include the Miami transfer. Prices depend on how many you can get into an apartment, the standard of the apartment and whether you have an ocean or pool view. The average price for two for a weeks stay at Morritts is £1022 per person rising by just over five hundred pounds for the extra week. This includes board hire and what's known as an economy apartment but not electricity, food, car hire or airport taxes. All apartments have a convertible couch which makes into a very comfortable double bed and this means that two extra people can stay at Morritts for the price of the air tickets as you pay for the apartment and not for the number of people staying in it. The only extras they'll have is board hire and the other things like food and so on. The biggest apartments at the club can take six people. The price varies slightly according to the time of year.

Sportif are the agents in this country on 0293 567396 or you can contact Cayman Windsurfing direct for further information on 0101-809 947

Reaching back from the gap in the reef after a spell out in the open ocean. There's just the one gap - miss it and you have to go out to sea and start all over again. But it's easy to spot and if you sail far enough west you can rip right back to the beach in one hit.

7492 or fax on 0101-809 949 8492.

WHAT WE THINK.

The appeal during the summer will be for a family where the younger members are as keen to go windsurfing as mum or dad but unable to cope with heavy conditions. In the winter, with the stronger and more consistent winds, better sailors will find the combination of ocean side sailing and the calmer inshore water a great combination for flat water blasting and wave sailing at the same venue on the same day, even in the same hour! Comparing prices with other Caribbean winter get-away-from-it-alls its about the same price as Jamaica or Barbados but more expensive than the Dominican Republic. Unspoilt waters and beaches away from the tourist trail will appeal to crowd shunners.

But it is different - staying on the same beach as your windsurfing equipment is ideal and coupled with American style creature comforts like the standard of the apartments, a blood temperature pool side bar where you can sit and mellow out with an ice cold can of Bud or Coors beats the butt off many other similar resorts.

For those who are unsure about venturing out into the ocean or for those off-its-face days the huge and beautiful windsurfing area within the reef, Grand Cayman is perfect.

You don't have to windsurf all the time - Cayman Windsurfing have a Hobie Cat, jet bikes and ocean canoes for those light wind days.

