

Out of this world

Laura French finds out what the Cayman Islands have to offer those in search of nature, adventure and all-out seclusion

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It's pitch-black, and all I can see are stars – above me, below me, next to me. Beneath our kayak, tiny specks of iridescent green and bright, luminous white swirl around, sparking here and there like the embers of a fire from within the depths of the inky, rippling water.

I'm kayaking through bioluminescence, and it's extraordinary.

We paddle further into the bay and the colours get even more vivid, with every swish of our oar producing clouds of pale, whitish green, getting brighter and brighter until they're like full-on flames burning a glaring, phosphorescent blue.

Ten minutes later I'm swimming in it, my whole body lighting up like a lamp in the heart of the ocean, leaving a glitter trail behind as if someone's just swished a giant sparkler through the water. Then a nurse shark glides past, its tail elegantly

swaying, its outline illuminated in a hazy silver glow.

You'd be forgiven for thinking I'm in some sort of weird hallucinatory dream. I'm actually on a night-time tour around Grand Cayman's Bioluminescent Bay – a patch of calm, still water that's filled with millions of light-emitting organisms which glow like fireflies with every movement you make.

It's one of a series of surreal experiences I find myself having on a trip exploring Grand Cayman and its smaller sibling, Little Cayman. And after a week staring out over the bright teal waters that characterise both, I'm left wondering why more Brits don't make the hop over here – especially given direct British Airways flights from Heathrow, and a plethora of resorts and attractions that make these among the most-developed and accessible islands in the Caribbean.



Funway Holidays offers seven nights at Grand Cayman Marriott Beach Resort from £1,350 per person based on a family of four, flying with American Airlines on October 21. funwayagents.co.uk

Southern Cross Club offers five nights' full-board from \$1,681 per person based on two sharing in summer, including accommodation in an oceanfront bungalow, airport pickup, use of kayaks and paddleboards, sunset catamaran cruises and some drinks. A two-tank dive starts at \$110 (clients need to be Padi-certified). southernclub.com



bioluminescence, for it was just as surreal, and even more serene. Words don't quite do justice to these two very different islands. And if you've got clients interested in seeing extraordinary phenomena on a well-developed, British-owned territory, the Caymans should be on your radar. [TW](http://tw)

ABOVE: Beach horse riding

LEFT: Queen Elizabeth II Botanic Park

BELOW: Southern Cross Club

GRAND CAYMAN

The main base for most tourists coming to Grand Cayman is Seven Mile Beach, which flanks the Caribbean Sea on the western side of the island and is dotted with big-name resorts – including a Marriott, Westin, Ritz-Carlton and Kimpton – framing turquoise waters. Capital George Town and manicured, candy-coloured development Camana Bay are both on this side of the island, but it's the wealth of natural attractions that give this place its main appeal.

Among the crowning glories is Stingray City, a shallow sandbar in the North Sound where stingrays flock in abundance. Catamarans take visitors to wade and snorkel with these graceful, surprisingly tame, creatures

in waist-deep water, with the chance to hold and stroke them.

Despite my fears I found myself happily embracing one within seconds of plopping in. Its belly felt smooth and slippery as its tail swished behind, its face glaring up at me with what I can only assume was affection (from \$85 for adults and \$43 for children for a half-day tour with Red Sail Sports, including an extra snorkel stop).

It's not just the stingrays for which Grand Cayman is known, of course. The island is an underwater treasure trove, with historic shipwrecks and the dramatic North Wall drop-off among its diving highlights.

For those wanting to glimpse it all without getting wet, there's an alternative – a submarine tour. Taking

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you up to 100 feet deep, Atlantis Submarines shows passengers everything you'd see with a scuba tank but from the safety of a 48-passenger, family-friendly boat: colourful coral, razor-like barracudas and huge fish gliding around an abyss of deep, violet-blue, with a guide on board to talk you through it all (\$114 adults, \$59 children).

LAND ACTIVITIES

For those less keen on the water, there's plenty more to see. Among the highlights is Crystal Caves, a cluster of 105 limestone formations hidden beneath tropical forest, dating back several million years and once used as a hideout for pirates.

Today, guides take visitors to explore these crystal-covered marvels, where stalactites jut out like glittering upside-down castles, mirror lakes shine out from damp, murky corners, and fruit-bats hang overhead, swooping elegantly through the darkness (\$40 adults, \$30 under-12s).

Just as worthy of a visit is the Queen Elizabeth II Botanic Park, where blue iguanas, unique to Grand Cayman, have been bred since 2001 as part of a recovery programme. I was lucky enough to spot one skulking freely around the grounds in all its bluish glory, swerving its way through the exotic display of waxy-looking flowers, fanned-out palms and other colourful flora that make up this 60-acre park (entry is \$12 adults, \$6 children).

But most memorable was a horse-riding trip along the beach. A small-group tour with Spirit of the West had me serenely trotting along – vast sea to my left, wild forest to my right – in silence, bar the sound of hooves kicking up the dusty sand (from \$75).



LITTLE CAYMAN

If Grand Cayman is all about the attractions, Little Cayman – reachable via a 35-minute flight on a tiny, inter-island aircraft – is all about serenity: pure, open sea; peaceful, empty beaches; and a population of just 160.

Diving and fishing are the main lures here, with just three resorts spread across its 11 square miles. I stayed at Southern Cross Club, a remote, chilled-out spot for divers and fishing fans made up of 14 brightly coloured bungalows scattered across an empty stretch of sand.

It's about as conducive to switching off and tuning out as you can get, with barely anyone around to interrupt the views of calming blue, but it was the diving that truly blew me away. Little Cayman's coral reef is high-on pristine, and at Bloody Bay Wall you'll find one of the most-renowned and spectacular drop-offs in the Caribbean.

A huge coral reef covered with tiny green fronds, mustard-yellow sponges and burgundy clumps of brain-like coral, the 'wall' suddenly drops off into a void plunging more than 1,000 feet. Swimming over it feels like stepping off a cliff or floating through the sky like a parachutist, stomach plunging with vertigo as you look down to see nothing but deep, dark blue.

Exploring the reef and its universe of creatures – elegant turtles, iridescent rainbow fish and schools of tiny glittering fish – took me back to the

Tried & Tested

Grand Cayman Marriott Beach Resort

Set right on Seven Mile Beach, this large, family-friendly five-star is in the heart of the action. Rooms are comfortable and spacious, and the food options are excellent. Locals flock for the sushi, brunch and crêpes, and there's a stylish outdoor restaurant dishing up freshly caught seafood against an idyllic sunset come evening. It's especially popular with families and larger groups from the US, which means it can get a little loud, but the beachfront location and fun, upbeat vibe, with DJs, kids' activities, barbecue nights and more, make it an excellent option for those after a livelier stay. marriott.co.uk

Kimpton Seafire Resort & Spa, Grand Cayman

The newest addition to Grand Cayman's roster of luxury resorts, the Kimpton goes all out with an ultra-stylish design across its 266 rooms, suites and bungalows. Its pièce de résistance, though, has to be the spa, a mosaic-bedecked masterpiece with a hammam and several treatment rooms. The full-body massage was divine – as were the tacos and cocktails I followed it up with at the beach bar afterwards. seafireresortandspa.com

