

# Cayman Islands

Three tiny islands make up the British Overseas Territory of the Cayman Islands, balanced precariously one side of the enormous Cayman Trench, the deepest part of the Caribbean. While synonymous worldwide with banking, tax havens and beach holidays, there's much more to this tiny, proud nation, even if you do need to look quite hard to find it.

What's so surprising about the Caymans at first is how un-British they are – it would be hard to design a more Americanized place than Grand Cayman, where the ubiquitous SUVs jostle for space in the parking lots of large malls and US dollars change hands as if they were the national currency. Only the occasional portrait of the Queen or a fluttering Union Jack ever begs to differ. This contradiction is just the first of many you'll discover while getting to know these islands.

The key to understanding what makes the Caymans tick is getting away from the crowded commercialism of Grand Cayman's long western coastline and exploring the rest of the island. Better still, leave Grand Cayman altogether and visit the charming 'sister islands' of Cayman Brac and Little Cayman. Here life runs at a slower pace and the natural delights that see people coming back again and again – from bird-watching and hiking to diving and snorkeling – are never far away.

The Caymans may lack the dramatic scenery and steamy nightlife of much of the rest of the Caribbean, but in their place you'll find a charming, independent and deeply warm people spread over three islands boasting many of life's quieter charms.

## FAST FACTS

- **Area** 100 sq miles
- **Capital** George Town, Grand Cayman
- **Country code** ☎ 1345
- **Departure tax** CI\$20 (usually included in the price of your air ticket)
- **Famous for** Diving, banking and iguanas
- **Language** English
- **Money** Cayman Islands dollar (CI\$); US dollars accepted everywhere; CI\$1 = US\$1.25 = €0.78 = UK£0.62
- **Official name** Cayman Islands
- **People** Caymanians
- **Population** 52,000
- **Visa** Not required for nationals of the USA, Canada, UK, EU members prior to 2004 and most Commonwealth countries; see p213.



## HIGHLIGHTS

- **Diving** (p199) Explore some of the very best diving in the Caribbean, with sites such as legendary Bloody Bay Wall on Little Cayman and the *Captain Keith Tibbets* wreck dive on Cayman Brac
- **Seven Mile Beach** (p196) Enjoy swimming, sunbathing and water sports galore on Grand Cayman's superb stretch of white sand, which is backed onto by glitzy hotels, smart restaurants and laid-back beach bars
- **Snorkeling at Stingray City** (p199) Have the amazing experience of huge, fearless stingrays eating squid directly from your hands as you snorkel in so-called Stingray City – the most famous attraction of this tiny island nation
- **Cayman Brac** (p206) Discover the Brac, the least visited of the Cayman Islands and by far the most dramatic, with great walking, bird-watching and diving
- **Little Cayman** (p208) Take life at a slower pace on the smallest of the three Cayman islands, which is packed with quiet charm, some great beaches and the best diving in the country

## ITINERARIES

- **Three Days** Join the crowds on wonderful Seven Mile Beach, shop yourself into oblivion in George Town and experience the extraordinary Stingray City.
- **One Week** After several days in and around George Town, explore some of Grand Cayman's lesser-known attractions. Try the Botanic Park and Rum Point, and get some diving in.
- **Two Weeks** Add on Cayman Brac and Little Cayman for some nature hikes, superb diving, secluded beaches and a wonderful taste of the traditional Caribbean.

## CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

The best time to visit is from December to April, when the temperature averages a pleasant 75°F (23.9°C) and humidity is at its lowest. During the off-season, temperatures average 83°F (28.3°C) with July and August usually being uncomfortably hot. During these times crowds dissipate, particularly on Cayman Brac and Little Cayman, bringing lodging rates down by as much as 40%. Rainfall is

### HOW MUCH?

- **Taxi from Owen Roberts International Airport to George Town** US\$15
- **Guided snorkeling trip** US\$35
- **Stingray City dive/snorkel trip** US\$50/30
- **Meal of fresh fish in a touristy restaurant** US\$30
- **Meal of fresh fish in a local restaurant** US\$15

highest from mid-May through to October, with frequent afternoon showers that clear as quickly as they arrive.

## HISTORY

For the first century after Christopher Columbus happened upon the Caymans in 1503, the islands remained uninhabited by people – which may explain why multitudes of sea turtles were happy to call the place home, giving the islands their original Spanish name, Las Tortugas. The sun-bleached landscape languished in a near-pristine state, undisturbed but for the occasional intrusion of sailors stopping in to swipe some turtles and fill up on fresh water.

No permanent settlers set up house until well after the 1670 acquisition of the islands – and its turtles – by the British Crown, which has held dominion over the three islands ever since. Once settlers started trickling in from Jamaica in the early 18th century, Caymanians quickly established their reputation as world-class seafarers. From the 1780s the Caymanian shipbuilding industry produced schooners and other seacraft used for interisland trade and turtling.

By 1800 the population numbered less than 1000 – of whom half were slaves. After the Slavery Abolition Act was read at Pedro St James (near Bodden Town on Grand Cayman) in 1835, most freed slaves remained, and by 1900 the Caymans' population had quintupled.

Until the mid-20th century, the economy remained tied to the sea with fishing, turtling and shipbuilding as the main industries. Divers put the Cayman Islands on the international tourist map as early as the 1950s; islanders were understandably protective of