

Cayman Brac offers drama on land, under water

By Kari J. Bodnarchuk
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

CAYMAN BRAC, British West Indies — With scuba gear strapped on, I dipped under the surface and drifted down to Snapper Reef, entering what felt like a whimsical pottery museum: 4-foot-high barrel sponges dotted the reef, looking like giant fluted bowls and vases. As I swam, two Caribbean reef squid fanned their tentacles, while parrotfish and a group of fairy basslets (dubbed “Lakers” for their purple and yellow color) darted beneath me.

At another spot called Piper’s Wall, a narrow underwater chasm took me through a garden of yellow tube sponges and purple sea fans, and deposited me on top of an underwater cliff, 100 feet below the surface. Here, I had close to 150 feet of visibility into the blue.

I must have looked spooked — maybe it was the spread-eagle,

free-fall position I was in, as I hovered over the void — because my buddy, Rob, gave me a nudge and then seemed relieved to see me smile. A nurse shark glided past while we floated in liquid space.

Cayman Brac is renowned for having some of the best diving in the world, thanks to great visibility, a relatively small local population (1,822 residents), fewer tourists and industries than on neighboring Grand Cayman, and reefs in good condition.

The island measures 12 miles long by 1½ miles wide (smaller than Manhattan), so no dive is more than a 15- to 20-minute boat ride away. And the comfortable temperatures — 82 degrees in summer and 77 in winter — mean you probably won’t get chilled before dive time is up.

What distinguishes Cayman Brac from its sister islands, Grand Cayman and Little Cayman, is its



topography. A limestone bluff runs west to east up the middle of the island (“brac” is Gaelic for “bluff”), and reaches 140 feet above sea level at its easternmost point.

This 30-million-year-old hunk of craggy reef is a habitat for brown boobies, iguanas, barn owls, Jamaican fruit bats, endan-

gered Cayman parrots, and nearly 200 other bird species. It has impressive sinkholes and more than 100 caves, where pirates like Blackbeard once stashed their plunder.

The drama of this landscape is echoed underwater. Divers are drawn to “The Brac” because of the area’s underwater walls, which plunge hundreds if not thousands of feet. The Cayman Trench, just south of the island, slices about 25,000 feet into the earth, the deepest point in the Caribbean Sea.

I spent a week on Cayman Brac in May, exploring the sights and diving the area’s reefs, walls, and underwater wrecks. The Brac has four wrecks, but the crowning glory is a 330-foot Russian missile frigate that was purchased, sunk, and renamed the M.V. Captain Keith Tibbetts by the Cayman Islands government in 1996. It has since attracted a diverse group of tenants: garden eels, groupers, stingrays, pufferfish, and Atlantic thorny lobsters.

While my more experienced dive buddies explored the ship’s engine room, missile-loading room, and bridge, I floated around the stern guns, which were encrusted with fire coral. Then I swept down the port side and poked my head in a gaping hole where the bow had broken away and twisted 90 degrees onto its side.

The next day, I met a local man known as Foots. This builder and artist, considered a visionary by some and an eccentric by others, is building an artificial reef that’s modeled after his vision of the fabled Atlantis. The site includes more than 60 rough-hewn sculptures that are made to look as if they’ve been sitting on the ocean floor for centuries.

The underwater city includes a 16-foot-tall, post-and-lintel archway at its entrance, dozens of columns (one of which contains a time capsule), 11 figures called elders, a giant pyramid, and a sundial that sits in a spot dubbed the Inner Circle of Light.

“The Inner Circle of Light is where the elders would meet to make decisions governing their city — it’s like the White House,” said Foots. The elders, he added, are modeled after people of prominence who have contributed to the marine environment and conservation efforts.

What’s mind-blowing about the sculptures, which are made from a mixture of crushed rock, sand, and cement, is their enormity: The pyramid, which is 20 feet tall and has eight swim-throughs, weighs 40,000 pounds; the archway weighs in at 65,000 pounds; and one statue’s 8-foot-long right foot, on its own, weighs 4,000 pounds.

Swimming around the site, which is on a large sandy area off



PHOTOS BY KARI J. BODNARCHUK/FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Local builder and artist Foots is creating an underwater replica of the lost city of Atlantis, complete with “elders.”

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Cayman Islands

Department of Tourism

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Sister Islands Tourism

Authority

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Nature Cayman

345-948-2222, ext. 4420

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the north coast at a dive site called Radar Reef, I felt like an explorer who had stumbled upon an ancient civilization. Yellow algae grew on one of the elders’ statues and cleaner shrimp poked in and out of nooks in the columns. A school of blue tangs cruised past as we made our way along a row of columns and a 4-foot barracuda ducked behind a reef near the archway. The underwater city covers more than 100,000 square feet and will continue to grow.

“I’ll take it to the drop-off,” Foots, 48, said later, referring to a ledge about 400 feet from the site. “I’ll keep building it as long as I’m physically able to. “It will come to an end when I come to an end,” Foots said.

When I wasn’t diving there was plenty to do topside. Cayman Brac doesn’t have any central villages or towns. The busiest spots are the island’s sole resort, Brac Reef Beach Resort (which has a scuba center and the Brac’s only spa), and Aunt Sha’s Kitchen, a local watering hole.

Much of the shoreline is blanketed in coral, conch shells, and rocks. But you’ll find plenty of places to sink your feet into the sand on the western side of the is-

land, especially around the resort.

At Pollard Bay on the southeastern tip of the island, waves surged along the shore, shooting blasts of spray through small blowholes, and brown boobies surfed the air currents as they scanned the swells for a lunchtime snack of needlefish and sardines.

I spent the afternoon exploring Bat Cave (known for its flying critters), Great Cave (with its impressive limestone stalactites and stalagmites), and Peter’s Cave (which offered a splendid bird’s-eye view of southern bluffs).

On my last afternoon, I met with T.J. Sevik, a guide for Nature Cayman who gives free island tours. Sevik took me to several unnamed caves and then to the Brac Parrot Reserve where we tried (without success) to spot an endangered Cayman Brac parrot.

After a week of exploring and falling in love, once again, with the measured pace of Caribbean life, I was ready to lie in a hammock under a sea grape tree, breathe in the salty air, and listen to the gentle waves unravel along the shore.

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