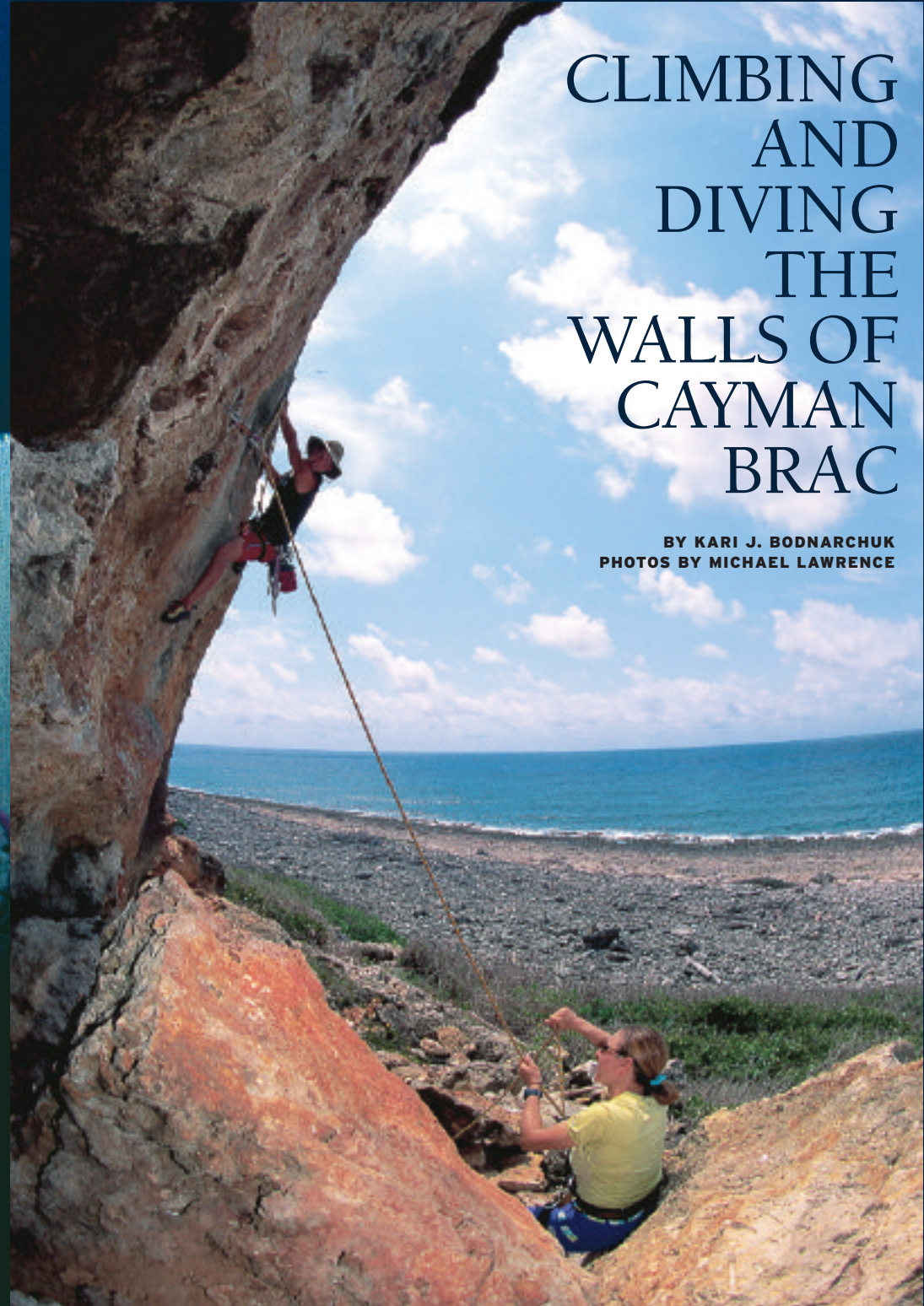


VERTICAL VACATION



CLIMBING AND DIVING THE WALLS OF CAYMAN BRAC

BY KARI J. BODNARCHUK
PHOTOS BY MICHAEL LAWRENCE



A wave surges along the shore, shooting a blast of spray through a small blowhole and across a beach blanketed in fossilized corals. I am dangling from a sheer cliff several stories above ground with my fingers wedged into little slivers of space in the wall.

Above me, a brown booby catches air currents as it scans the swells for a lunchtime snack of needlefish and sardines. Below me ... well, there's nothing but 40 feet of air and Jim Gates, my rock-climbing guide, who's belaying me from a rocky ledge and calling out instructions.

"Don't forget to breathe," he says.

Good advice. Breathing is key, whether you're diving an underwater wall or clinging to a rock face and trying to figure out your next move.

"Put your left foot on that little ledge and stand up," Jim says. "Then lose that death grip! You want to climb with your feet and just use your hands for balance."

I'll admit it right now: I'm afraid of heights. True, I've tried skydiving and bungee jumping, but I don't do spiral staircases, I won't hang out on high balconies, and even tall bridges make me nervous. Yet I've always wanted to try rock climbing, and Cayman Brac's southeast coast seemed the perfect place to give it a shot. The views here are dramatic: white coral beach, jagged rock formations and a 140-foot cliff that overlooks the seemingly endless ocean and colorful underwater reefs.

CLIMBING THE WALLS Left: Author Kari Bodnarchuk belays Jim Gates on this uniquely positioned wall abutting the crystalline Caribbean. Opposite: At least a dozen species of coral shroud this boulder in a scattershot of kaleidoscopic color.

There's nothing like the fear of falling to help focus you. I quickly tune in to the "features," as Jim calls them, of the porous limestone wall in front of me: a nook here, a notch there, a quarter-inch nub underfoot that's supposed to support my 130-pound frame (even though I've been doing double desserts every meal since I arrived — how can you decide between rum raisin cake and peanut butter chocolate pie?).

The solid gear, Jim's laid-back nature and the gentle rhythms of the sea calm my nerves. After a few slips, a scraped knee, a lot of sweating and some arm-shaking rest stops (attempts to recirculate blood to my extremities), I finally get my feet underneath me, stand up and touch the anchor at the top of the climb. From here, I have a clear view of the ironshore rock formations at the end of the beach and the imposing coral headwall. Exhausted and with arms like jelly, I rappel down the cliff, feeling like a "rock star."

What distinguishes the Brac from its sister islands, Grand Cayman and Little Cayman, is its topography. A limestone bluff running east-west across the middle of the island serves as the island's backbone ("brac" is Gaelic for "bluff"). This 30-million-year-old hunk of craggy reef is a habitat for iguanas, Jamaican fruit bats, brown boobies, barn owls and nearly 200 other species of birds. It also has impressive sinkholes and more than 100

sands of feet. The Cayman Trench, just south of the island, slices 21,000 feet into the earth — the second deepest trench in the world and the deepest point in the Caribbean.

Although I'd been certified for 11 years and had once spent a month diving in Australia and Thailand, I was feeling somewhat apprehensive about taking the plunge my first day out. "Don't forget to breathe," I reminded myself, as Jason Belpot, a captain and dive

like I'd entered a pottery factory: four-foot-high barrel sponges dotted the reef, looking like giant fluted bowls and vases on display.

Two Caribbean reef squid fanned out



LIVING ON THE EDGE Clockwise from top left: Brac Reef Resort's gazebo is a perfect perch for catching the sunset. A lettuce sea slug searches for food on an orange elephant ear sponge. A branching tube sponge is a common sight on Brac's reefs. The reclusive spotted moray has a much narrower head and larger eyes than its cousin, the green moray.

MUST DO

Brac Parrot Reserve

A 600-foot boardwalk winds through part of the 100-acre protected reserve within an ancient forest that's home to 350 endangered parrots. You may also spot banana quits (a small yellow bird), loggerhead kingbirds and doves.

MUST DIVE

1. The MV *Captain Keith Tibbetts*
2. Bloody Bay Wall
3. Lost City of Atlantis
4. Snapper Reef
5. Piper's Wall

caves, where pirates like Blackbeard once stashed their plunder (buried treasures still abound, according to local lore) and where island visitors like me have spent many a day exploring and escaping the heat.

DISCOVERY DAY IN THE TRENCH

The drama of this landscape is echoed underwater. What draws divers to the Brac are the walls, which plunge hundreds if not thou-

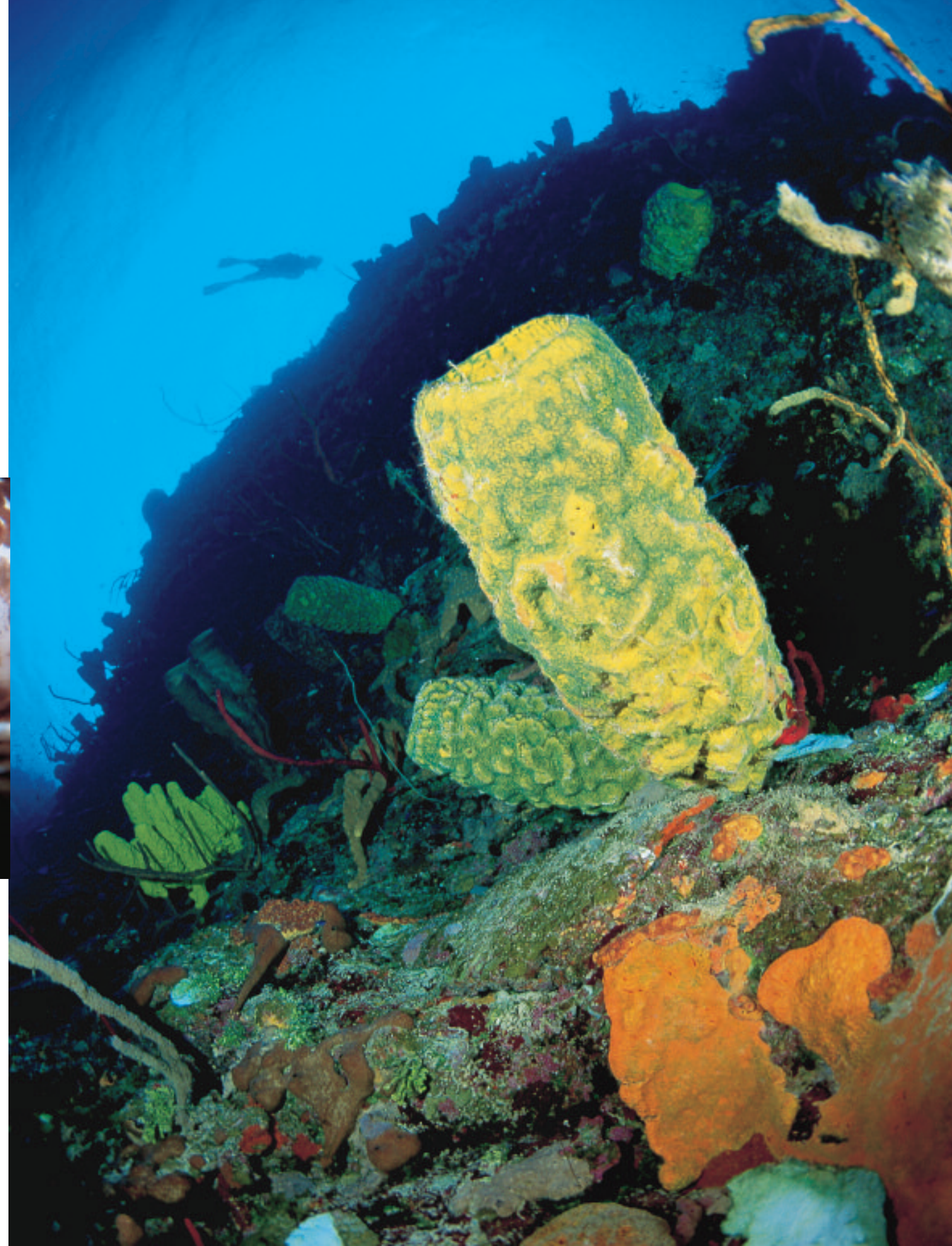
guide for Reef Divers at the Brac Reef Resort, carried my tank to the back of the boat.

"This is valet diving at its finest," he said. "Just grab your mask, snorkel and fins and we'll take care of the rest."

As I drifted down to Snapper Reef, I instantly remembered the delicious sensation of floating among rainbow-colored fish and a universe of underwater sea creatures. I wound around a series of finger corals, keeping an eye out for morays and nurse sharks, and felt

their tentacles, pretending they were part of the soft coral, while parrotfish, yellowhead jawfish and a group of fairy basslets (dubbed "Lakers" for their purple and yellow colors) darted beneath me.

Hanging on the bluff had reminded me that there is plenty to see in a small space if I just hover over a coral head and tune in to the marine life around me. That afternoon, I covered less ground and saw a lot more, from little red-lipped blennies, spotted



drums and Caribbean spotted spiny lobsters to hawksbill turtles that drifted slowly over the reef right next to me.

Later that afternoon a swim-through at Piper's Wall took me through a garden of yellow tube sponges, purple sea fans and anemones and deposited me on the wall at 100 feet. Here, I had close to 150 feet of visibility into the vast blue.

I had forgotten the wild sensation of diving over the edge of a wall — like soaring into space. I must have looked momentarily spooked — maybe it was the spread-eagle,

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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 a smile sweep across my face. A nurse shark glided past while we floated in liquid space.

HUSTLE & BUSTLE & AUNT SHA'S

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 two resorts, Brac Reef (which has a PADI dive center, Reef Divers, and the Brac's only spa) and Divi Tiara (which also has a PADI dive center with a Nikon school of photography) and one of the local watering holes, Aunt Sha's Kitchen.

I stopped into Aunt Sha's one night, and within a half an hour one couple had bought me two drinks and a woman had run home to collect mangos from her yard so I could taste the difference between the varieties — such is island hospitality. But I was anxious. After all, the next day I was headed for mecca.

THE WALL

Bloody Bay Marine Park is reached as a day trip off neighboring Little Cayman and



MONUMENTS ALL Left: Cayman's "brac" (Scottish for "bluff"), soars to 142 feet above sea level. Above: The stern cannons are among the *MV Captain Keith Tibbetts'* main attractions. Opposite: Cayman underwater expert Lawson Wood inspects a sculpture of himself as the first of 11 "elders" who will eventually line the road to Atlantis, a sprawling underwater sculpture dive site conceived by artist Foots.

promises a profusion of colorful hard and soft coral, plenty of turtles, groupers, stingrays and reef sharks, and more sand chutes than lanes on an L.A. freeway. One thing's for sure, though: which way is down. When you fin over the edge of the wall, it's like jumping out of a plane. At Bus Stop, one

of the more than 25 sites that comprise Bloody Bay, the wall doesn't slip off into the abyss; it plummets as if it's in a great rush to reach the seafloor thousands of feet below. I imagined dropping a penny over the edge and wondered exactly how long it would take to hit bottom.

All along the wall, vivid yellow tube sponges, barrel sponges and rope sponges clung to the vertical face, openly defying gravity. A massive lobster had taken up residence in an equally robust barrel sponge. As soon as we descended, a Caribbean reef shark appeared from the twilight edge of our viz (which exceeded 150 feet) and slowly worked its way along the wall, swimming past us without so much as a jitter or glance.

For our second dive off Little Cayman, we dropped in on Mixing Bowl, a row of knuckles and coral heads in the shallows. This is as close as it comes to diving an aquarium in the wild and was one of my favorite dives of the week. True to its name, hawksbill turtles meandered through the shallow canyons, stingrays sifted the sand patches for a meal, and the bright corals reminded me of the 20,000 Leagues Under the Sea ride at Disneyland. When I slowed down, all the tiny critters whose long lives depend on stealth peeked out from the shadows: Petersen shrimp, juvenile spotted drums and about a thousand cleaning station attendants working through the line-ups of eager Nassau grouper. At the end of the dive I hovered on my safety stop, trading spaces with a barracuda that lived in the shadow of the boat.



BACK TO THE BRAC

With a couple of hours to spare one afternoon, I decided to go explore the island by car.

"Just remember, the road system forms an 'H' with two crossbars," one woman told me. That makes it impossible to get lost here; a road runs up each side of the island and



Deco Stops Cayman Brac

A great way to begin your topside adventures is with a free, customized island tour, offered by the Department of Tourism; you'll explore the island's best caves (**Great Cave, Bat Cave, Halfway Ground Cave, Peter's Cave** and **Rebecca's Cave**), look for an endangered parrot and learn where the iguanas live. Both **Divi Tiara Beach Resort** and **Brac Reef Resort** have kayaks and bikes for use. Fourteen marked **rock-climbing routes** stretch from the water's edge to the top of the bluff on the southeastern section of the Brac, taking climbers high above the reefs and waterline — just bring your own gear. Sandy beaches are hard to come by, but you'll find plenty of places to sink your feet into the sand on the western side of the island. Don't forget to visit the **Cayman Brac Museum** in Stake Bay; it houses antiques, historical documents and artifacts recovered from shipwrecks.

DESTINATION PRIMER

AVERAGE WATER TEMP: 77-82°F **WHAT TO WEAR:** Dive skin or shorty to 3 mm in summer/fall; fullsuit in winter **AVERAGE VIZ:** 100-200 feet, occasionally as high as 300 feet **DIVE PROFILE:** Boat and shore diving. Wrecks, walls and reefs are plentiful, all within a 15- to 20-minute boat ride (one exception: Bloody Bay Marine Park, Little Cayman, is a 45-minute crossing from the Brac). Artificial reef (Lost City of Atlantis) offers a unique dive experience **WHEN TO GO:** Year-round

dead-ends on either side of the bluff. Besides those two crossroads, virtually all other roads lead to the ocean.

My only plan was to drive and explore, and as I drove, I passed streets with fanciful names — Moray Drive, Sandpiper Drive, Songbird Road, Fantasy Lane and Man O' War Drive — plus 14 churches, a small museum, a peach-colored hurricane-proof house (called the "egg house" or "bubble house" by locals due to its shape) and many caves, a handful of which are open to visitors.

In fact, the Brac is home to more than 100 marked and unmarked caves with incredible limestone formations, different size chambers and tunnels and nice, cool temperatures that offer a perfect respite from the afternoon sun.

In one cave along the South Shore Road I spotted two eyes in a dark hole. I stood

nearby, trying to identify it when, all of a sudden, a barn owl — showing its white belly and big round eyes — swooped out and flew right over my head. I've never been that close to an owl; it was a majestic sight.

On the way home, I stopped at Tibbetts Enterprises — the Wal-Mart of the island — because one of the locals had told me "they haven't done inventory there in 45 years." I was intrigued and wanted to see what they had in stock. Everything, it turned out, from mountain bikes, luggage and firewood to compact flash cards, waffle makers and habañera peppers. I even came across a copy of a book about the sinking of the *Tibbetts*, a fitting introduction to the next morning's dive.

The Brac has four wrecks, but the crown-glorious glory is the *MV Captain Keith Tibbetts*, a 330-foot Russian frigate that was sunk in

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1996 and has since attracted a diverse group of tenants: garden eels, groupers, stingrays, pufferfish and Atlantic thorny lobsters.

Nothing really prepares you for seeing a ship that large on the ocean floor. I was so awed by the *Tibbetts*’ size and its thick coat of coral and sponges that I forgot to look for the lobsters around the anti-aircraft guns and the grouper that hangs out around the stern.

My more daring (and properly PADI-trained) dive buddies explored the ship’s engine room, missile-loading room and bridge while I floated around the stern guns,

which are coated with encrusted fire coral, and swept down the port side.
“The *Tibbetts* wreck is ever-changing,” Lawson Wood, a local underwater photographer, later said to me. He would know. He was the official photographer for the sinking of the *Tibbetts*, when Jean-Michel Cousteau hung onto the guardrail of the ship as it disappeared underwater, a daring stunt.
ATLANTIS FOUND
I met a man at a local dock on the north shore who simply goes by the name Foots. Some say Foots is a visionary; others claim he

is quite eccentric. Either way, he’s building a massive artificial reef that’s modeled after his vision of the fabled Lost City of Atlantis. The site includes more than 60 rough-hewn sculptures that are made to look ancient, as if they’ve been sitting on the ocean floor, undiscovered, for centuries, collecting algae, barnacles, coral and colonies of fish.
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, which sits in the heart of the city 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, explaining the legend as he’s recreated it. “The elders stand with their eyes closed and hands clasped, waiting patiently for their great city to rise again above the sea.”
What’s mind-blowing about these sculptures, which are made from a mixture of crushed rock, sand and cement, is their enormity: the pyramid — which is 20 feet tall, measures 20 square feet, and has eight swim-throughs — weighs 40,000 pounds.
Lawson took me to see Atlantis, which is on a large sandy area off the north coast of Cayman Brac, at a dive site called Radar Reef. We snorkeled several hundred feet offshore from Stake Bay and then dove to about 50 feet.
Swimming around the site, I felt like an explorer who’d stumbled upon an ancient civilization that had been swallowed by the sea, frozen in time and engulfed by sea critters. Yellow algae was growing on one of the elder’s statues and cleaner shrimp poked in and out of little nooks in the columns.
A school of blue tangs cruised past as we made our way along a row of columns, and a four-foot barracuda ducked behind a reef near the city’s archway. The “ancient city” covers more than 100,000 square feet, and it will continue to grow outward, like ripples on the ocean’s surface.
“I’ll take it to the drop-off,” Foots 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.”
A JAGGED FOOTPATH
On my last afternoon I met with T.J. Sevik, a nature guide who offers free, customized island tours for visitors.



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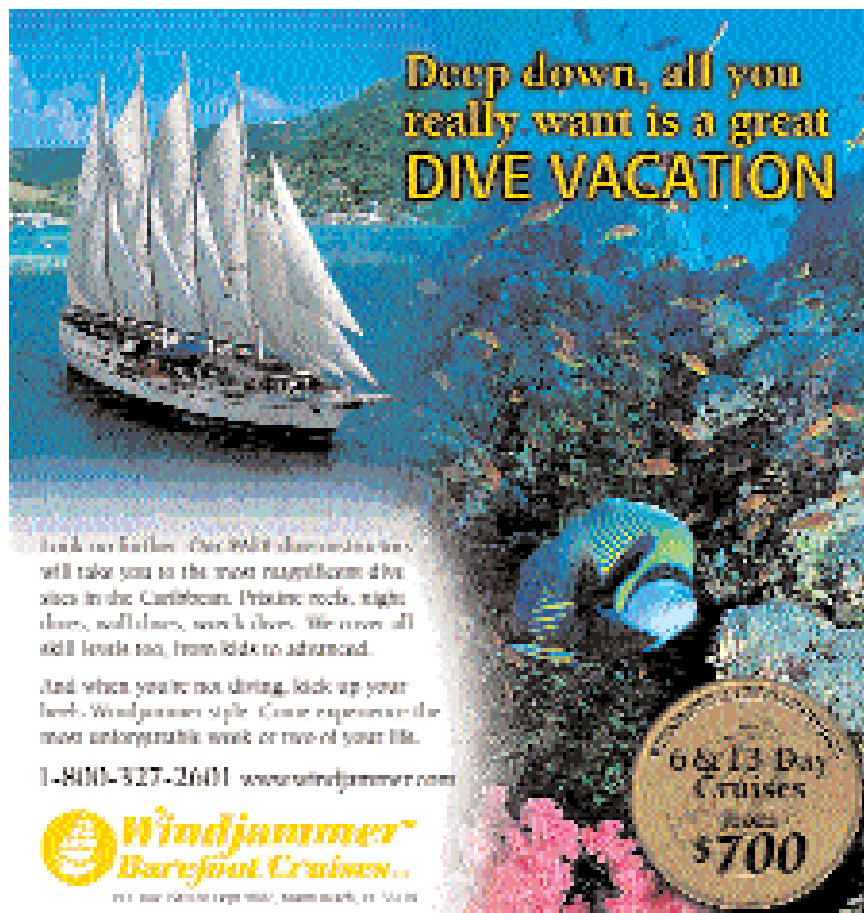


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We drove down a rolling, partially dirt road to the Brac's easternmost point. Here we saw the lighthouse — affectionately called the “light bulb” or “light stick” by locals — which is nothing more than a short metal tower with a light bulb on top that's powered by a car battery.

The Lighthouse Footpath winds along the top of the bluff, with fields of jagged, spiky ironshore on either side of it. We found a brown booby standing on the edge of the bluff and inched up until we were about eight feet away — close enough to clearly see the markings on its face. Then the bird flew out over the bluff, like a diver gracefully floating out over a wall, and slipped out of sight.

For me, the week on Cayman Brac became a time of discovery and rediscovery: I learned how to go rock-climbing, explored ancient caves, dove my first Russian wreck, spotted underwater critters I'd never seen before and remembered what hot sun feels like on bare skin (we New Englanders redefined the term “a long winter” this year). I also rediscovered the remarkable, inspiring beauty of the underwater world and fell in love, once again, with the Caribbean's mellow pace.

Special thanks to Brac Reef Beach Resort and Reef Divers (www.bracreef.com) and T.J. Sevik from www.naturecayman.com.

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