



BURT WOLF

TRAVELS & TRADITIONS

CAYMAN ISLANDS

As Christopher Columbus was sailing back to Spain at the end of his fourth and final voyage to the New World, a storm came up between Panama and Haiti and pushed him off course. It pushed him to the west, directly into the islands that are now known as Little Cayman and Cayman Brac. His ship's log for May 10th, 1503 reports the following: "We came upon two very small islands full of tortoises, as was the sea around them -- so many tortoises that



they looked like little rocks."

Columbus marked the islands on his map with the name *Las*

Tortugas -- the turtles. *Las Tortugas* has become The Cayman Islands, and now there are three of them: Grand Cayman, Cayman Brac and Little Cayman. They lie about 180 miles west of Jamaica and 480 miles south of Miami.

The total population of the three islands is about 30,000 and the people come from a mixture of African and European backgrounds. The residents of the Cayman Islands have one of the highest standards of living in the Caribbean. The average household income is almost \$70,000 U.S. dollars per year. The government is stable and the country's banks, insurance companies and mutual fund operations have made it the fifth largest financial center in the world.

The nation's banks are significant, but the nation's beaches are even more important. The Cayman Islands are actually the limestone tops of three mountains that come up from the bottom of the sea. The limestone is so porous that none of the islands have any rivers or streams, and therefore no runoff from the land to the sea. The absence of runoff gives the water around the Cayman Islands a clarity and visibility that is over one hundred and twenty feet. The islands are also surrounded by coral reefs that protect the shores. The areas between the reefs and the beaches are

perfect for snorkeling. And just on the far side of the reefs are drop-offs that go down for thousands of feet and create ideal conditions for diving.

The modern snorkel is a J-shaped tube with a mouthpiece that is attached to a face mask. It was introduced in the 1930's and it allowed swimmers to cruise the surface of the sea, face down, while they looked at what was going on below. But the idea of using some kind of breathing tube while working underwater goes back for thousands of years.

Alexander the Great had a team of underwater divers who used reeds as breathing tubes. They would swim into an area underwater and clear it of any barriers that had been put in place to damage Alexander's incoming ships. The ancient Greeks also had a team of snorkelers that became famous for sinking an enemy fleet. One night, they swam underwater to the fleet, cut the ropes that held the ships to their anchors. The ships floated away and crashed on the nearby reefs.

An ancient Roman writer described soldiers who held one end of a leather tube in their mouth while the other end floated on the surface. He compared the apparatus to an elephant lying on its back underwater with its trunk extended to the surface. Our modern word "snorkel" comes from an old German word that means "tube" or "scroll." It's a perfect description of the equipment being used.

The 1930's also saw the introduction of fins or flippers that increased a swimmer's speed and weight belts that allowed divers to dive deeper. But the breathing equipment really didn't permit the divers to stay down for very long and there wasn't any clothing that would protect them against the cold. And those two problems limited the sport.



Which brings us to the story of SCUBA, five letters that stand for "Self-Contained Underwater Breathing

Apparatus". Now, most of the technical problems of staying underwater for a long time and doing some useful work down there had already been solved by 1819 when the diving suit was introduced.

It consisted of the familiar round metal helmet with a glass window in the front, a metal shoulder plate and a waterproof leather jacket. A tube connected the helmet to an air pump on the surface. The pump supplied the diver with an unlimited amount of fresh air. Towards the end of the 1800s a vulcanized rubber suit lined with twill was substituted for the leather jacket. It kept the diver drier and warmer. Eventually modern conveniences like telephones and electronic air compressors made the system safer and more practical. These suits worked well for industrial divers and they set the standard for underwater-wear until the Second World War.



The naval technology needed during the Second World War led to the development of some new underwater gear. Basically, there were two systems. One was known as a rebreather. It consisted of a cylinder of fresh air and a canister of lime. The diver would take the fresh air in from the cylinder and exhale it into the canister. The lime in the canister would remove the carbon dioxide gas from his exhaled breath and then the clean air was recirculated. The system was wonderful because it was completely self-contained; no bubbles would rise to the surface and that made it very difficult to detect a diver working underneath. The rebreather systems were issued to crews on German U-boats in case they needed to escape. There was, however, one major disadvantage. The system didn't work very well at depths below 30 feet. So if your submarine sank in a swimming pool you were all set; otherwise you were in deep trouble.

The second underwater breathing system had an open circuit that allowed the exhaled air to escape. There were tubes for inhaling and exhaling and valves that connected the tanks. This system was good down to a hundred and thirty feet and sometimes even deeper. In 1942, a young French naval commander named Jacques Cousteau took out a patent for a piece of equipment he called an Aqua Lung. It was based on the open system and featured a series of tanks that contained compressed air. They were strapped to the back of the diver. This was

the first modern SCUBA setup.

Soon depth gauges, underwater watches, and wet suits were added. Divers were warm, comfortable and free to move about. When the war ended, SCUBA diving became a popular sport.

BOB SOTO

I was the first SCUBA diver on this island. I came here to start a SCUBA diving business because we had about a hundred and thirty rooms on the island and the people just laid around the beach or went fishing, and I thought this would be a wonderful pastime for them to spend the day SCUBA diving. Of course, everybody thought I was crazy and that these people was going to drown and I was going to drown myself. And I started with six tanks, it took an hour and twenty minutes to fill a tank, and I had six tanks, so I was up half the night filling tanks to go diving the next day. Once I introduced somebody to the water, it just blew their mind because it opened up a new world. You got people from all over the U.S. coming here, and they had such a great time because they had beautiful reefs, and caves, and shipwrecks, and turtles, and stingrays -- all sorts of marine life and it was very accessible from the beach because it's only a couple hundred yards offshore and you've got any kind of reef and marine life you would ever dream of seeing.

Water filters the color out of sunlight and by the time you get down to a depth of fifty-two feet everything is green and blue. Cousteau pioneered a system of artificial underwater lights that allowed a diver to record the extraordinary colors that are found below the sea. Underwater photography began to develop, which made the sport even more popular. And one of the most popular places in the world to practice this sport is in the waters that surround the Cayman Islands.



The most recent innovation in underwater breathing equipment for the sports diver is a combination of SCUBA and

snorkel -- called SNUBA.

Very similar to SCUBA diving, the only difference is the SCUBA tank is on raft on the surface. The raft floats and follows you on the surface, following wherever you go. You can be connected to it with twenty foot long hoses. You wear fins, a mask, a small weight belt, and a regulator right here.

FOR THE BIRDS

Charlie Ebanks is famous for his birdhouses. He builds them and his wife Elaine explains them.

ELAINE EBANKS

We make several different kinds of birdhouses. One is called Fences because it has the gardens and the hand-painted fences that go all the way around. Each one is signed and dated on the bottom.

We primarily work with the colors of the Caribbean: pink is for the conch shell, green for the sea, blue for the sky, and yellow for the sun. Our birdhouses have traditional Cayman roofs. We have no city water at all out here; we totally rely on the rainwater for our water supply. And our unique roof line makes it easier for collection. Each old-time house had a little gingerbread on the roof, a palm tree, and a hammock.



Charlie tries to do a different birdhouse every year for the people that collect

his houses from year to year. A couple years ago, he started his version of the old Rum Point Bar. We put on it everything that we felt the old bar was famous for. Charlie numbers his larger houses, everyone signs for their number, and we know where each and every house went. This year's house is the dive shop. And we've made it to mount on the wall, and the owner's name is put on top of the dive sign to personalize. Of course, that's numbered and accounted for also. All the houses are made of wood, they're all nailed, countersunk and filled, nothing is glued on them, they're all painted with exterior house paint - they are weather worthy.

In my garden grows a breadfruit tree. Breadfruit is round and green; it's very much like a potato. You can bake it, mash it, boil it -- it's a starch. We wait 'til the brown leaves fall to the ground, harvest them, wash them, and brew them for a tea. Everything in nature has a reason for being. God put everything here for us; it's up to us to find what it's for. The breadfruit leaves, they say, are very good for high blood pressure. And this is the breadfruit tea from the breadfruit tree that we spoke about. I hope you enjoy it.

FOUNDED ON THE SEAS

The motto on the national emblem of the Cayman

Islands reads: He Hath Founded It Upon The Seas, which is an excellent description of the place and its history. Three islands -- Grand Cayman,



Cayman, Cayman Brac and Little Cayman -- make up the country, which is a crown colony of Great Britain. No point on any of the islands is more than a few minutes' drive from the sea. The first people to take any interest in the area were sailors who stopped in during the 1500s for fresh water and turtle meat. Fishing and shipbuilding were the main businesses for hundreds of years, as well as sending young men off to join the navy and the Merchant Marine. Then a tourist business developed, based on people who loved water sports, particularly *underwater sports*. Finally, the off-shore banking industry developed. The Cayman Islands are definitely founded on the seas.

One of the leading authorities on the history of the Cayman Islands is Dr. Philip Pedley, who is the director of the Cayman Islands National Archive.

DR. PHILIP PEDLEY

I have a charming map from a French source that says: Iles de Cayman. This is what I call the first European picture or image of any of the Cayman Islands. It's almost certainly a picture of Cayman Brac, dated 1590. And you can see the turtles that Columbus himself saw. And you can see, eating up the turtle eggs, the caymanos after which Cayman is named. He was a large crocodile that lived, as the accounts say, both in the sea and on the land. So it was aquatic and terrestrial.

Now what we've got here is two of the images -- two of the pictures -- that go along with this picture of Cayman Brac. And Columbus, when he passed the sister islands in 1503 called this Las Tortugas, but that name gave way in the next thirty years or so to this creature. On another map you can also see confirmation that it is Cayman Brac -- the bent trees, bent over by the wind. Now, that's sort of significant in the history of Cayman Brac because shipbuilding was a strong industry over there -- a strong tradition. And the shipbuilders would simply go up onto the bluff, which is a hundred and forty feet above the sea level -- and select the exact curvature of the wood they were looking for.

I also have a very interesting little booklet, which I call the first example of tourist literature in the Cayman Islands. It's a letter written by the commissioner, Commissioner Cardinal, to

the rest of the world: Dear Sir of Madam wherever. And it's an invitation to come and enjoy an unspoiled paradise. And it's signed by the whole of Cayman.

FIVE DISTRICTS

These days, Grand Cayman is divided into five districts. George Town is the smallest. It's also the seat of the government, the center of the nation's banking and business interests, and the most populated. It's on the sheltered western side of the island with the best port. The duty free shops are here, so you can do your duty and shop in an almost guilt-free environment, justifying your expenditures on the basis of how much you saved.

ANITA EBANKS

I want to introduce you to George Town and the harbor. At one time this was called the Hog Stys -- the whole area. They kept pigs here. And supposedly all the people on the island had them penned in a certain area. And on a bad day if you were downwind from it, it was very smelly. So it was called the Hog Stys. And then sometime during the early 18th century, Governor Bodden decided it would be good to name it George Town in honor of George the Third. And I guess if it hadn't been changed, we would be sending post cards and letters from Hog Stys, Grand Cayman.

Fort George was the first of several batteries around the island -- the first line of defense against Spanish marauders from Cuba. This was Hog Sty Bay, so they'd probably steal some of their hogs and maybe some of their turtles and poultry.



You can see the outline of where the old fort was. It was about five feet high on the sea side. The land side was only about two feet high. And the walls were about three feet

thick, and they had various embarcadiers for about maybe ten cannon. Most of the cannon were about four or six-pounders. And the two that are there now are recreated out of cement. They are replicas of six-pounders.

In the early days people would go down to the beach and go beachcombing to find whatever might be washed up. We were very isolated, so it might be one could find a favorite piece of wood wash-up. And one morning back in about 1846, Mary Webster from Frank Sound supposedly was doing some beachcombing early in the morning, and she saw this strange kernel on the beach. And she planted

it and it grew into an almond tree. And supposedly that's where all the almond trees that you find on the island today are descended from. I think they're really lovely -- various shades of orange and red.

The most unusual house in George Town was built by Carroll Henderson. In 1935, he started buying conch shells. When his collection passed the 4,000 shell point, he used them to construct his dream house -- conch shells anchored in a twelve-inch thick concrete wall. He could only set thirty shells a day, so it took over two years to build the place. But when it was finished, it was so well made that during the Second World War the U.S. Navy used the house as a bomb storage depot. Today, it is the home of Mike Henderson, who is the son of the original builder. It's a private residence, but Mike doesn't mind if you come by to take a look.



Next to George Town is the northwest part of the island, which is known as West Bay. The old Bothwell residence is in West Bay and it stands as a typical example of traditional Cayman architecture, gingerbread trim and a sand garden.

The central part of Grand Cayman is called Bodden Town. Bodden Town is the home of the oldest building on the island. It was built in 1780; rock walls three feet thick, nice view up top, underground dungeons below. What else could you ask for? It's called Pedro Castle.

The Cayman Island National Trust has an extensive program for preserving historical information about the islands, and making that information available to visitors. The Trust publishes a series of booklets that outline historical walking tours of both West Bay and Bodden Town.

In one of those bursts of creativity that often overcome early settlers, the eastern end of Grand Cayman is known as East End. It's one of the least populated parts of the island and still has a very rural lifestyle.

Tourists drive over to the district to take a look at the blowholes. Waves dive into the underground caves. Holes in the top of the caves allow part of the wave to escape in a plume of spray.



If you're in the neighborhood on Friday, Saturday or Sunday and you're thirsty, you can walk across the road and get some fresh coconut water.

LINDO PARSONS

The coconut water is what you drink direct from the coconut. The milk is gathered by grating the coconut into small pieces.

Or today in modernized equipment, we put the small pieces in the blender, chop it up in smaller pieces, take it and wash it in water, and strain it through a strainer. What comes out of there is the milk. What remains is what is called "trash" locally. That is converted into candies and coconut tarts.

Just down the road from the blowholes is a stretch of beach from which you can see what's left of a group of ten British ships that foundered on the reef in 1794.

The event became known as the Wreck of the Ten Sails. The lead ship that was doing the navigation sent back a signal to the rest of the fleet that read: "stay clear." The sailor who interpreted the signal read it as: "all clear." Talk about losing something in the translation.

The next district on the island is called North Side. It was the last part of Grand Cayman to be settled and it has the smallest population. North Side also has the most fertile land and the island's best farms. For many years, the lack of roads kept it isolated from the rest of the island. These days, however, the roads have improved.

And there's a public ferry from the busiest part of the island at Seven Mile Beach to the tip of North Side. The ferry goes up and back throughout the day and will deposit you on Rum Point, which is considered by many to be the most beautiful

beach on the island.

Rum Point appears to have gotten its name as the result of a ship that wrecked on the reefs in front of it. The ship was carrying a cargo of barrels filled with rum that floated ashore. When they were discovered by the local residents, they also got wrecked. These days there are a number of bars and restaurants on Rum Point that will help you recreate the experience.

About two hundred yards to the west of Rum Point is one of the most interesting underwater attractions in the world. The area is called Stingray City, and it offers snorkelers and SCUBA divers an opportunity to hang out with a couple of hundred stingrays. I went out to the city

on a sixty-five-foot catamaran named *The Spirit of Paloo*.

DIVE INSTRUCTOR

One of the nicest places for you to touch a stingray is on the underside of his wing. You could also touch him on the top, but it's not quite so smooth, it's a little more leathery. You do not have to worry about the tail stinging you when it's touching you -- they physically have to do this. So you can touch the tail if you'd like.

VANESSA BELLAMY

Their mouth is on the bottom, their eyes are on the top and we feed them squid, that's how we get them up on the surface. You might have noticed as you've been watching me, they come close and their nose is at the front. Everybody says, "Oh, they seem to like you." No. They swim forward, that way we can hold on to them better so everybody else can get a good look at them. The only thing that's dangerous about a stingray is they do have a little bit of a barb on the end of their tail that they sting with. But the only way they do that is when they settle in the sand to rest and somebody comes along and steps on them. Then they come up and sting them. Here, the rays here, they're very, very nice.

Going out on the *Spirit of Paloo* is a very modern experience -- but if you would like to slip into a recreation of the past, you might ship out on the *Jolly Roger*. She was built back in 1986; it's a replica of a seventeenth century Spanish galleon. She's sixty-seven feet in length, she weighs sixty-two and a half tons, has fifty-seven fully working pieces of rigging, including eight sails.



TO LEARN MORE . . .

CAYMAN ISLANDS DEPARTMENT OF TOURISM
EMPIRE STATE BUILDING
350 FIFTH AVENUE, SUITE 1801
NEW YORK, NY 10118
TEL: (212) 889-9009
WWW.CAYMANISLANDS.KY

CAYMAN ISLANDS NATIONAL ARCHIVE
37 ARCHIVE LANE
GEORGE TOWN, GRAND CAYMAN
TEL : (345) 949-9809
WWW.CINA.GOV.KY