

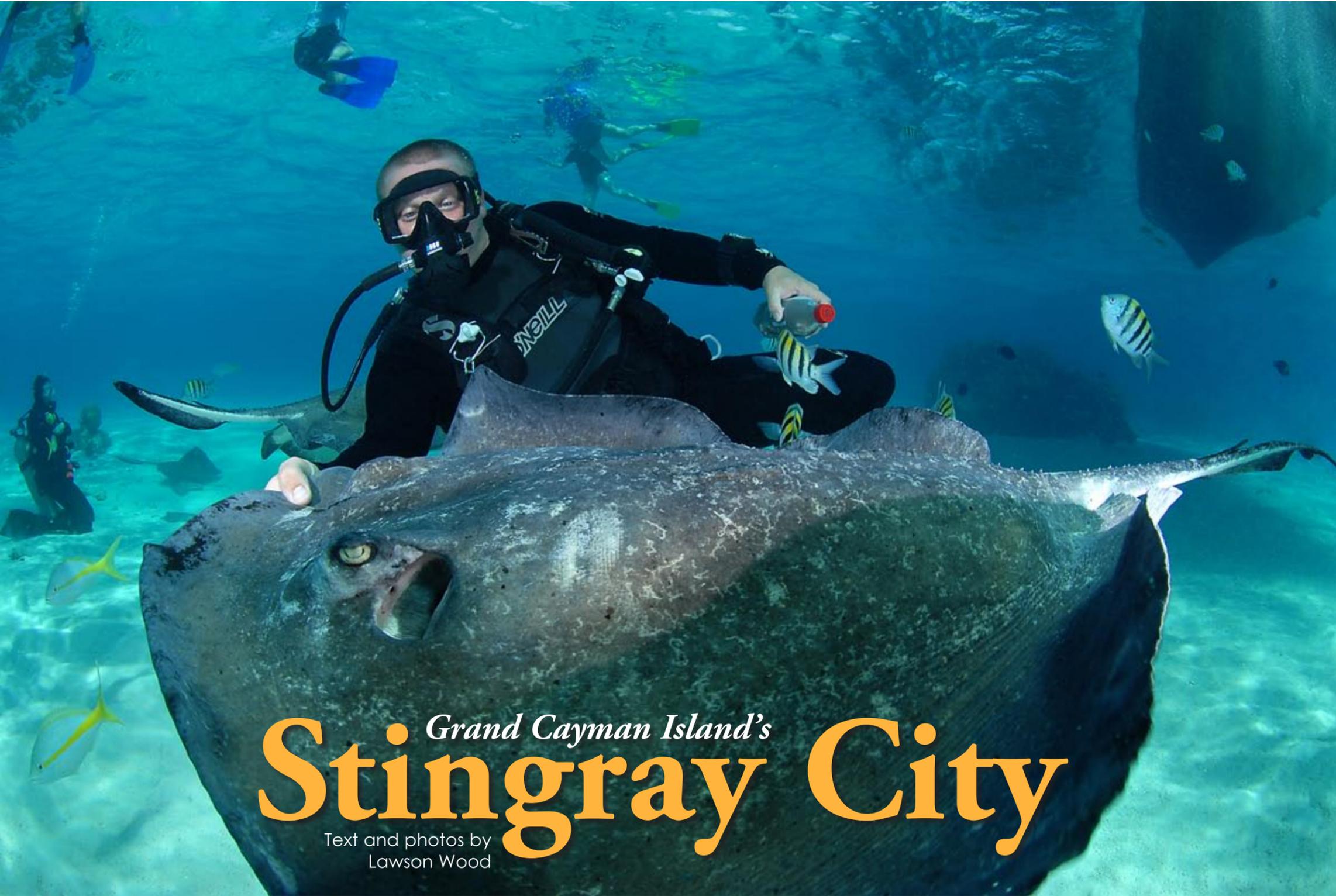


—*Caribbean Playground*

Cayman Islands

Text and photos by Lawson Wood

Lawson Wood is a resident of the Cayman Islands. For indepth information, he's an expert source and has published several dive guides and books. What follows is an insider's tour of the Caymans complimented by stunning images taken at the best dive sites on each island—Grand Cayman, Little Cayman and Cayman Brac. Indulge yourself in the color and grandeur of Wood's underwater photographs, which reveal the splendor of the magical realm under Caribbean waves.



Grand Cayman Island's Stingray City

Text and photos by
Lawson Wood

Guaranteed interaction with huge stingrays on every dive

Caymans

PREVIOUS PAGE: Brilliant, beautiful and frilly, this nudibranch is called the Lettuce Sea Slug, *Elysia crispata*

Like it or hate it, Grand Cayman Island is still home to one of the most legendary animal encounters on the planet. Dubbed as the world's *greatest 12-foot dive*, the region is located inside the northern barrier reef, which protects North Sound from the vagaries of wind and rough seas. Here, the waters are almost always calm and sheltered, and the curious behaviour of the stingrays was first recorded by local fishermen many years ago. The fishermen used to clean their fish catches at the end of each day in the shallows near the edge of the drop-off and noticed that many stingrays would come into the shallows to take advantage of this free meal. (Incidentally, you also often get moray eels and nurse sharks too). Once the cleaning was over, the rays soon got bored and went about their day to day foraging business. These fishermen were apparently overheard by a local dive master as they were chatting about this in one of the local bars—well, the rest is history!

The stingray most commonly found in the Cayman Islands is the Southern Stingray (*Dasyatis americana*) and the two locations where the stingrays congregate in the largest numbers are Stingray City, which is around 3-5 metres deep (10-17ft) and the Sandbar, a natural sandy plateau around only one metre deep (3.25ft). Over 250 of the rays inhabit the North Sound, and these have now

trained the humans to bring them plenty of free meals (usually frozen squid).

The deeper dive site at Stingray City tends to be used by the local dive shops as their second (shallower) dive of the day, or perhaps as an afternoon dive, as there are less tourists in the area. However, the shallow sandbar region is still inundated by large numbers of tourist boats who disgorge their cargo of tourists

looking for that thrill of the encounter with a wild animal. Once in position, the boat staff will introduce some food into the water to attract the rays nearby their particular boat. Even after all these years and many visits to the site, the surge of excitement is still palpable as the rays swoop in and envelop you in their wings in the search for a free meal. The dive guides keep the bait in sealed containers

and will feed the rays individually. If you do get the chance to feed them, hold the squid in the palm of your hand. The sensation is similar to feeding a horse—underwater. The mouth parts of the stingray are located underneath the body; they do not have teeth as such, but have a series of rasping plates with which they crush and grind the molluscs and crustaceans, which are their normal

food source. It is advised to wear some sort of body protection, such as a thin wetsuit or skin, as the stingrays have been known to give you a rather nasty suction bite, similar to a *hicky* or *love-bite*, which may be difficult to explain to your partner!

The dive or snorkel interaction becomes very much like a *feeding frenzy*, as the visibility of the water will





THIS PAGE: The Sandbar is the shallowest of two stingray sites where tourists and non-divers are able to experience the thrill of the wild animal encounter first hand

drop due to the sand being constantly stirred up by both the tourists and the rays. Interestingly, as soon as the free meal is over, the stingrays immediately revert to their normal foraging behaviour

can remove the protective mucus on the stingray's leathery skin. When handling the stingrays, do not try and ride them or grab them by the tail. Remember, these are wild animals, and if they feel

of searching the sand flats for small crabs, snails and burrowing sea urchins.

There are a couple of *must nots* when amongst the stingrays: Gloves should *not* be worn, as the fabric

threatened in any way, their defensive mechanism is designed to sting, as their name implies.

When Pliny first described the habits of the Stingray in the Mediterranean, he wrote in his famous *Historia Naturalis*: "So venomous it is, that if it be struchen into the root of a tree, it killeth it; it is able to pierce a good cuirace or jacke of buffe, or such like, as if it were an arrow shot or a dart launched; but besides the force and power that it hath that may be answerable to iron and steele, the wound that it maketh, it is therewith poisoned."

Even after all the years of hype and generally adverse reactions to stingrays after the untimely death of the Australian TV presenter, Steve Irwin, who was killed by a stingray during filming on the Great Barrier Reef in Australia, the Cayman Islands have more than weathered that

storm.

Stingray City and the Sandbar on Grand Cayman Island are amazing, and simply nothing can prepare you for that first rush of adrenalin. This balance of nature and enterprise is a curious mix, and it is not certain which has trained what! Suffice to say that several hundred thousand tourists have enjoyed the delights of the interaction in one of nature's amazing phenomena and will continue to do so for many years to come.

Just a small footnote: there are plans by a (well-connected) local person to install a floating bar in the middle of this protected area, which many regard as utter madness. There are hundreds of people against this

rash plan, and hopefully the Cayman Islands government will take note of the following saying by Mohandas Gandhi: "The greatness of a nation can be judged by the way its animals are treated."

The Cayman government clearly did not take this into account when they installed Dolphinarium—a dolphin interactive program—which was totally against the entire local population's feelings. Perhaps they may take these feelings into account now and save one of the true wild animal experiences from undue and unnecessary exploitation.

Cayman Brac

Caves, Wrecks & Walls

Text and photos by Lawson Wood

Caymans

—Open For Business!

Following a crushing hurricane in November 2008, Cayman Brac has spent the time re-inventing itself. The island is now incredibly lush and green, the existing Brac Reef Beach Resort has had a total (much needed) make-over and there is also a fine new hotel called the Alexander Hotel, also situated at the west end of the island. New condominium resorts and bed and breakfast establishments are also open for business and the top dive centre Reef Divers is looking after its diving guests with the same aplomb, friendliness and attention to detail.

Cayman Brac, Grand Cayman's farthest sister island used to be known affectionately as "the island that time forgot"—now they add the word "almost" to the phrase. The island is 20km long (12 miles) by just over 1.6km wide (1 mile). It is roughly split into two, being the flat area to the west of the island where the airport is located and the steep bluff with its remarkable ancient coral limestone cliff and caves to the east. The word *brac* is Gaelic for *bluff*. The locals are known as *Brackers*!

Situated 145km (90 miles) northeast from Grand Cayman Island, Cayman Brac now has a resident population of around 1,400. There are 15 churches, a hospital—Faith Hospital—and over the past 30 years, the old one room

Brilliant sponges
decorate the reefs





Caymans

CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: The fabulous walls are encrusted with colourful sponges with crystal clear water as a backdrop; A pair of grey angelfish; Turtles are commonly seen on most dives as are the stunning vistas filled with tropical fish

school house has expanded to the needs of the rising local population. There is now a secondary school, three primary schools and a community college. The Cayman Brac Museum is the oldest in the Cayman Islands and hosts a wealth of history, as the island has slowly changed with more modern trends.

Cayman Brac is the smallest island in the Caribbean that has a full jet service. The Gerald Owen International Airport has eight jet flights weekly and a further ten flights or so daily operated by Cayman Express, which services both Cayman Brac and Little Cayman Island, linking them to Grand Cayman, almost like an aerial taxi service. The flight from Grand Cayman is well worth the time if only to view the colours of the sea and reefs from the air.

There are two small resorts and several villages dotted around the island, and the two main roads run each side of the island but are unable to go all the way round because of the height of the bluff at North East

Point, which rises to 42 metres (140 feet).

The numerous caves are still used as hurricane shelters, and these are well worth exploring. The road to the north stops at Spot Bay, and the road to the south—more dramatic because of the size of the overgrown vertical cliff to the island side—terminates at Pollard's Bay. This drive, in particular, is splendid due to the contrasting colours of the sea as you drive along.

From Pollard's Bay you can walk to the edge of the bluff, where the ironstone shore terminates. This is incredibly dramatic, and

there are several blowholes that send sea spray way overhead (or over your head!).

You can rent a small car or scooter to explore the island (which cost about the same). The caves were reputed to have been used by Edward Teech (Blackbeard) to hide his ill-gotten gains





The newly refurbished Brac Reef Beach Resort (above); Colourful sponges are found on all of the reef structures (below); Divers can find huge, majestic barrel sponges protruding from the reefs (left)

I would recommend that you buy the local (very rare) Caymanite Rock jewellery, the island craftsmen are excellent. The local residents are some of the friendliest I have come across.

If you are not diving, then you are thinking about it, or getting your cameras ready or travelling to or from a dive site. Cayman Brac diving is similar to Grand Cayman, without the numbers of divers, and for that reason, it has become a great favourite with the world's diving fraternity.

The isolation of the island has served it well. The corals are in good condition, and there is a vast variety of marine life recorded in the registered 49 dive locations including seven wrecks. Also located along the north wall are many very fine reefs, quite similar in shape, structure and depth to the north wall on Grand Cayman, but here there is the added attraction of being able to dive under the huge limestone bluff, which rises steeply to the east of the island.

The underwater terrain in this area comprises of huge limestone blocks, which create interesting swim-throughs and gullies where sleeping nurse sharks are generally found. There are splendid pillar corals, magnificent sea urchins, scorpion fish and spotted drum—an excellent dive

which should not be missed.

The southern sites on Cayman Brac also resemble those on Grand Cayman, with a classic spur and groove reef system, but here it is more pronounced, and the wall starts around 20 metres (66 ft). The wall is more gently sloping in this area and starts much further out from the shore. This means that there are large

areas of sand flats with small but very good quality coral growths on the lower slopes. Lots of elk horn coral as well as numerous large sponges. However, the area is still not as popular as crossing the short distance to Little Cayman Island—this results in the reefs being relatively under dived.



plundered from the ships of the Spanish Main.

The two hotels are just a short drive from the airport and the Brac Reef hotel has its own in house dive centre, Reef Divers. There are also a number of condominiums, B&B's and holiday rentals, which will suit all tastes and purses of diving visitors to the island. There is, in fact, very little else to do on the island,

other than birding, rock climbing, snorkelling, kayaking, windsurfing, fishing, rockpooling or having fun getting drenched at the blowholes, or generally laying back and enjoying the superb beaches along the south shore.

Each of the major local families has a provisions store of some sort and all will sell homemade jams and chutneys (in season) as well as the usual goods.



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Flamingo tongue shells are a common find on seafans; Diamond-backed blennies are the Caribbean equivalent of clownfish—living amidst the anemone's tentacles; The anchor that gives the Anchor Wall dive site its name, opposite the Brac Reef Beach Resort; A juvenile yellow-tail damselfish has iridescent spots all over its body

be found amongst the coral rubble as well as jawfish and yellow sting rays. The dive is very similar to the Meadows on Little Cayman Island.

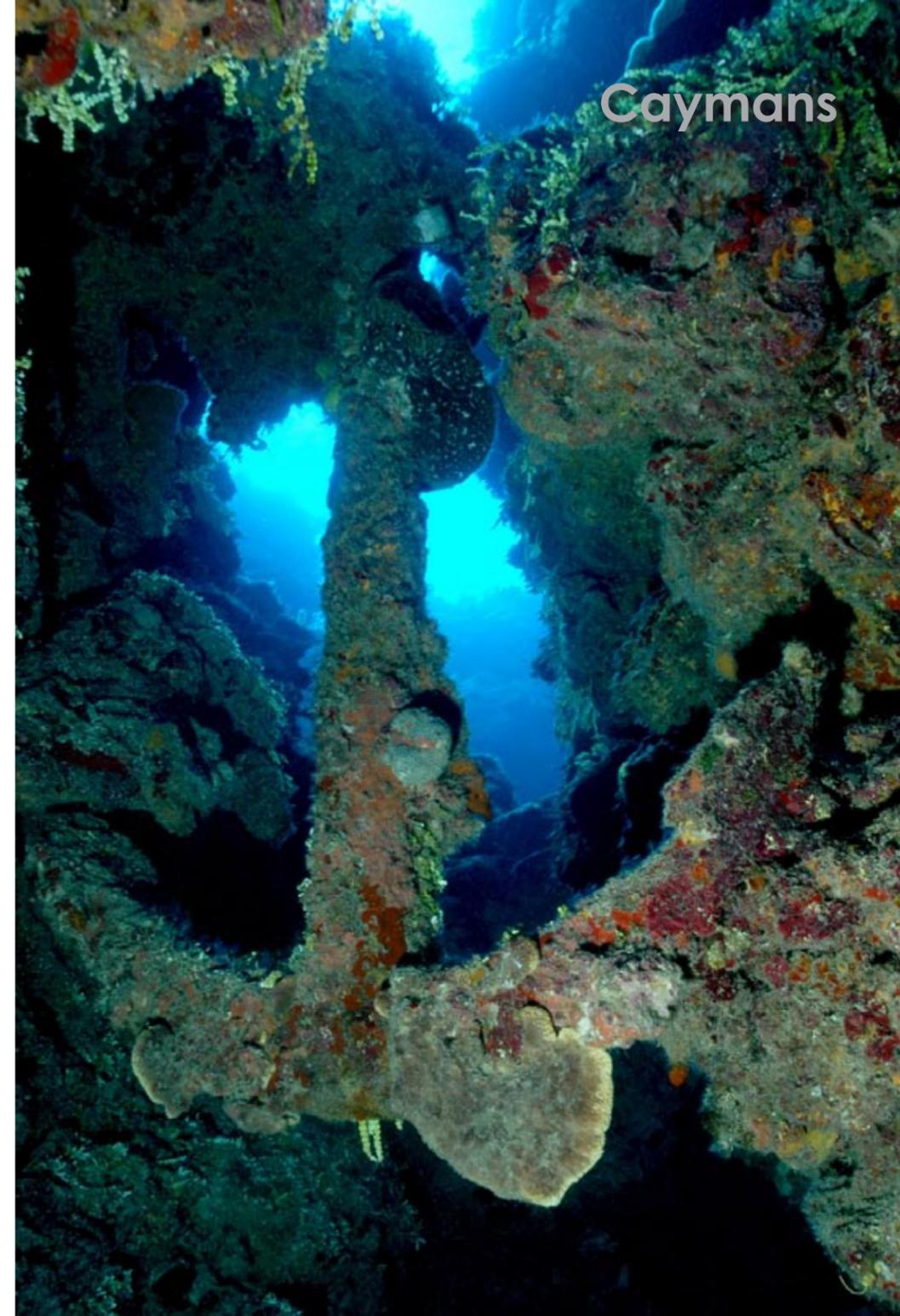
Anchor Wall

Three other dives along the south shore really stand out. The first is Anchor Wall. This is a deep dive to the outer reef wall, very close to Reef Divers home base. The spur and groove reef are cut here

by massive fissures, and you can locate a huge anchor jammed in one of them at around 27m (90ft). Hammerhead sharks are seen here in the spring as well as at the second noteworthy dive. This is known as Wilderness Wall.

Wilderness Wall

Here, the reef wall starts at only 9m (30ft) and drops dramatically down through some huge coral canyons. On the tips of the reef spurs can be found giant



Frey Cave

One of the best dives is Fry Cave, located off Salt Water Point. Weather dependent and with a moderate swell, the cave is on the same type of rugged spur and groove reef and mini wall cut by many different gullies and canyons. Lots of elk horn and pillar corals in good structure and form make this a delightful dive. Snapper and sergeant majors make a nuisance of themselves. The fry of the Fry Cave name

are silverside minnows comprising of four different species of juvenile fish, which congregate together to make one huge mass of moving fish, found in the summer months. This is a very interesting area for invertebrates including file clams, nudibranchs, arrow crabs and good quality sponges and sea fans. Pistol shrimp can



anemones with their symbiotic host fish—no, not clownfish, but Diamond-backed blennies that have a very similar existence to their Indo/Pacific counterparts. The great thing about this dive is the fact that the wall starts in shallow water and is suitable for all levels of divers.

Prince Frederick

The third dive worthy mentioning here is the wreck of the *Prince Frederick*. Located just offshore, this is a superb shore dive amidst the tumble and jumble of this ancient sailing vessel, which ran aground in 1888. (Apparently, the captain said that he did not know that the island was there!)



Caymans

that there would be no accidents, were meticulous—what did cause a moment of anxiety was when the aluminium superstructure cracked open in two places, splitting the living quarters with a resounding crack.”

Fourteen years on, underwater, the ship is simply massive, now pulled apart with her gas turbine engines exposed. The main part of the hull listing only slightly to port and perfectly placed in a sand-chute, which plunges over the wall. On either side of her are healthy sections of coral reef carpeted with huge barrel sponges, rope sponges and good quality corals and under the bow at 25 metres (83 ft) is a field of Garden Eels.

A large section of the superstructure has collapsed and the bow has now almost sheered off, lying at a much more acute angle over to port, but now the ship looks much more like a real shipwreck, rather than an old ship that was sunk as a tourist attraction. Now known more simply as the 356, the wreck is at the top of the list to divers visiting the Sister Islands.

Russian Republic took over the operational control of the old Soviet base on Cuba. Unfortunately, due to the economic upheaval in Russia, the base could not be supported financially from

was finally sunk in September 1996, Jean-Michel Cousteau took the very brave move of staying on board the ship as she sank. We watched as Jean-Michel Cousteau, wearing full SCUBA gear clung onto the guard rail as the ship vanished. Later that night, after we had completed filming for the day he said, “...fear did not come into it. This is something that I have always wanted to do, and the preparations beforehand, to ensure

Kissimmee Wreck

Nearby is the Kissimmee Wreck, located just north west of Scott's Pier, nearby the airport, it sits in 12m (40ft) of water and is almost upside down. This retired tug boat was deliberately sunk in 1982 as an addition to the reef system and provide an interesting start to



THIS PAGE: The Russian Frigate 356, renamed the *Captain Keith Tibbetts* was sunk in September 1996; The famous Brac Bluff is over 42m (140ft) high (left)

Wrecks

The majority of all dives are undertaken along the north shore of Cayman Brac. Virtually all of the wreck sites are here, as well as some absolutely cracking reef dives, both down the wall and in the shallows for your second dive each morning.

MV Captain Keith Tibbetts

Undoubtedly the top dive is the renamed and christened the MV

Captain Keith Tibbetts. This former Russian destroyer, Patrol Vessel #356, is a Brigadier Type II Class Frigate, built in 1984 at Nadhodka in the U.S.S.R. at a cost of US\$30 million. The ship is 95 metres long (330 ft) with a beam of 12.8 metres (42.6 ft) weighing 1590 metric tons.

Originally part of the old Soviet fleet stationed in Cuba as part of the Cold War, the vessel was never actually involved in any conflict. When the U.S.S.R. dissolved in 1992, the newly created

Russia and in 1993 the base and all of the ships stationed in the Caribbean were removed from active duty. The ship's complement of 11 officers and 99 enlisted personnel were all repatriated to Russia.

When the ship



Four-eye butterflyfish are common on every dive

Caymans

a huge sun dial and other artefacts. These are now all covered in sponge growth and make for an interesting photographic backdrop.

Under the Bluff

Under the ancient Bluff is always the feather in a diver's cap, as it is very rare that the sea conditions are so perfect to allow this diving in an otherwise pristine diving location. Scoured by storms, there are very few robust seafans or sponges, as everything is low lying. However there are kazillions of featherduster worms, small nudibranchs, blennies and gobies and an otherwise undived terrain of huge boulders with interesting swim-throughs, various shipwrecks parts and simply staggering visibility, as there are no sandy areas to get kicked up by rough waters.

Best kept secrets

Great emphasis has always been placed on the diving on Grand Cayman and the North Wall is outstanding, plus everyone raves about Bloody Bay Wall

diving locations than both Little Cayman Island and Grand Cayman combined.

Stake Bay is where the island's government administration buildings and museum are located, and there is a huge ramp and stepped slipway to make access nice and easy. This region of the north coast is quite protected and there are some simply massive barrel sponges and ginormous seafans and soft corals.

This site also has two sculpture structures, the first is of dolphins and rays, and the second is a local artist known as Foots and his rendition of his idea of Atlantis. There are statues, columns,



Friendly Hawksbill Turtles are encountered on most dives (above); The local shipwrecks are now heavily encrusted in marine growth (right)

a shore dive that can take you at to the edge of the reef wall, as this is the closest point on the island to undertake this type of dive. The wreck is a favourite site for photographers, and during the summer months, large numbers of rays can be seen.

This location is also superb for night dives, as there is easy access, and the rock pier has overhead lights, which makes things easier for navigation. Here, we always find octopus, squid, juvenile spotted drum fish and many species of shrimp.

Wall dives

The wall dives are many and varied, but most start around the 18m (60ft) range, making all of those first wall dives going to depths over 30m (100ft).

East Chute

One of the more popular sites is East Chute, which also has a small wreck called the *Cayman Mariner*, which sits in 18m (60ft) nearby a huge sand chute that rolls over the north wall and into the depths. Eagle rays are common here as well as large schools of pelagic fish

such as Horse-eye jacks and oceanic triggerfish.

The wreckage of the *Cayman Mariner* is a superb as it has become its own little eco-system and is stuffed full of incredibly colourful sponges, sea fans, and tons of invertebrates and small fish species such as pufferfish, wrasse and various blennies and gobies.

Stake Bay

Further east along the coast at Stake Bay are more superb shore diving sites. In fact, Cayman Brac has more shore

The shallow walls are renowned for their sponge growth and dramatic scenery

Caymans

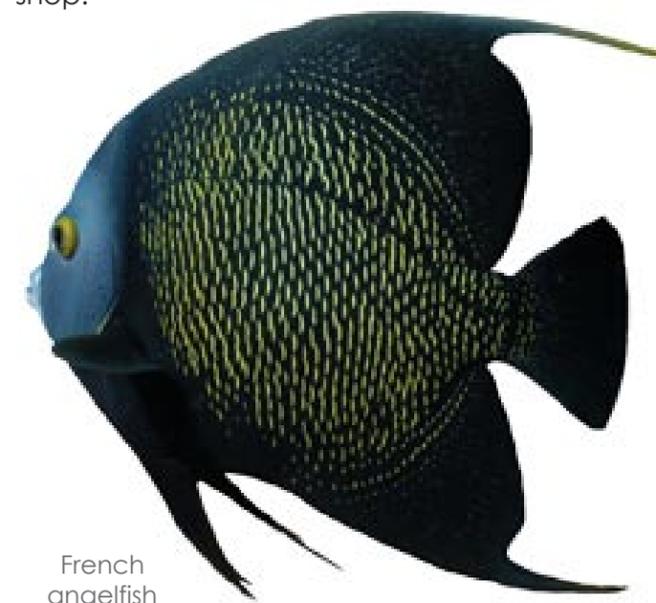
edge to catch those spectacular sunsets.

Brac Reef Beach Resort www.bracreef.com

A newly refurbished hotel with comfortable rooms, complete with Wi-Fi throughout the complex, a swimming pool with a raised deck area and a great bar. About 100 metres (300 ft) from the beach. Its own dive centre is situated next to the jetty. Reef Divers has a well-stocked shop and the local Photo Pro, Ed Beaty, is on hand to guide you through the many and varied steps of digital underwater photography and videography. Barbecues are common on the grounds, and at night, downwards facing flood lights attract tarpon, squid and stingrays into the shallows, a perfect end to the day's diving.

The Alexander Hotel www.alexanderbrac.com

This is a new hotel located near the beach at the west end of the island. Rooms are modern with Wi-Fi access and bar looks to the east over a large brackish pond popular with wild fowl. The diving concession is organised through Reef Divers at the Brac Reef Hotel and transport is available from the Alexander Hotel to the Reef Divers jetty and dive shop.



French angelfish

on Little Cayman Island, but many fail to appreciate the facts that Cayman Brac has much smaller diver numbers; more shore diving sites making for unlimited shore and night diving; plus, four major wreck sites as shore dives and diving conditions and reefs, which more than match the other islands.

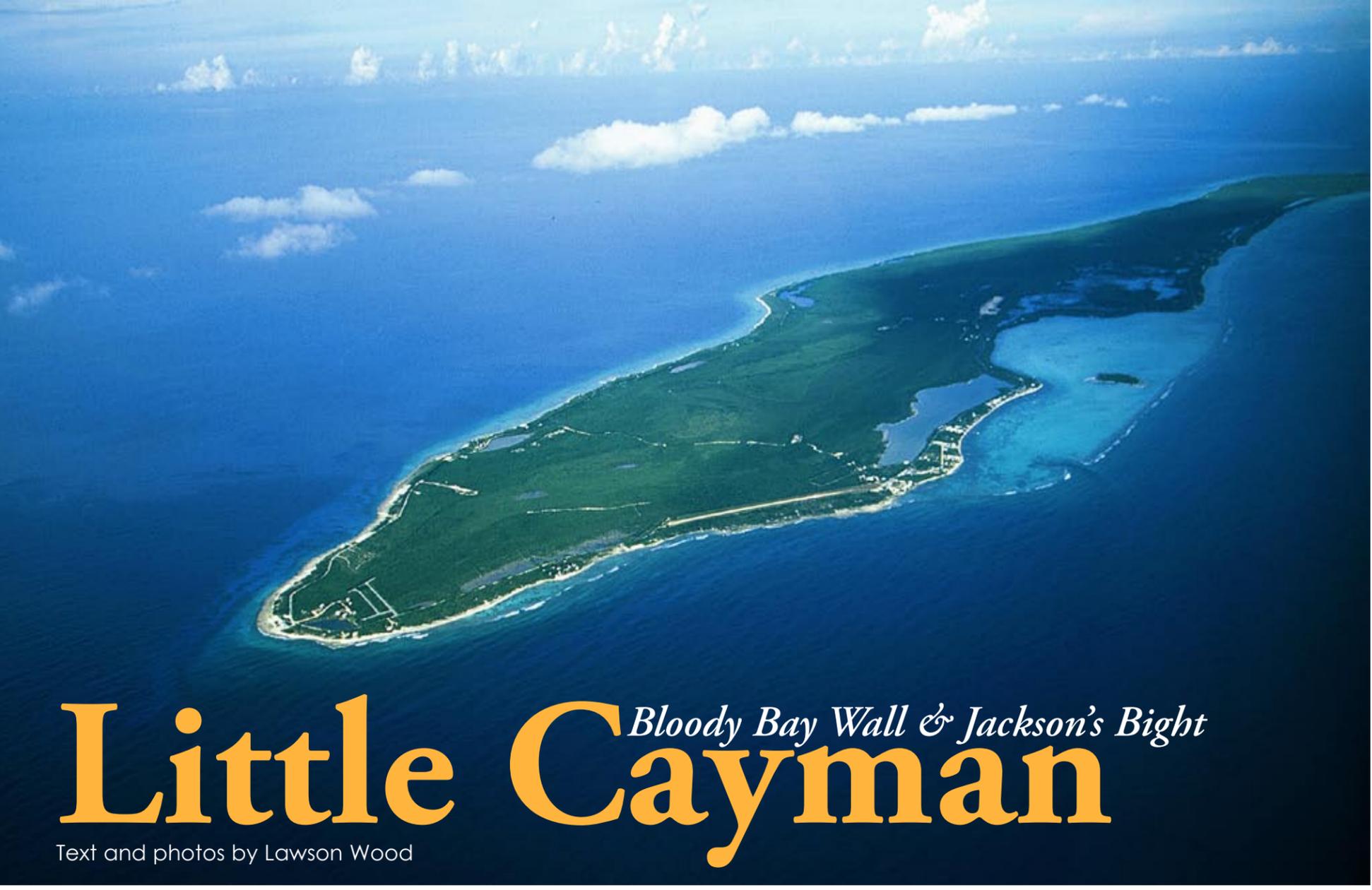
Where to stay

All of the accommodation is similarly priced and styled. Apart from the individual self-catering apartments and villas, the hotels have good restaurants attached, particularly the Brac Reef Hotel, which is superb. Meals are generally buffet style, and there is plenty

of it, more than enough for the active diver. Lunches tend to be a local spicy dish of fish or chicken, soup, salad and a sweet of some kind as well as fruit and soft drinks.

All of the hotels and dive centres have the same rule. No alcohol until the day's diving is finished and no diving on your

last day before flying off island. Many visiting divers keep the last afternoon free to off-gas and explore the caves and caverns and obviously the local gift shops for a piece of Caymanite jewellery, or perhaps go exploring along the shore to perhaps find your own piece of Caymanite rock or up on the outer Bluff



Little Cayman *Bloody Bay Wall & Jackson's Bight*

Text and photos by Lawson Wood

Little Cayman Island—a jewel in the clear Caribbean Sea (above); Banded butterflyfish (right inset)

Jacques Yves Cousteau described Bloody Bay Wall off the northwest shore of Little Cayman Island as one of his top ten dives in the world.

Little Cayman Island is the smallest of the three Cayman Islands at only 14.4km (9 miles) long by 1.6km (1 mile) wide. It is located 120km (75 miles) north east of Grand Cayman and only 11.2km (7 miles) across the narrow channel west of Cayman Brac. Predominantly scrubland and flat in nature, there are a few brackish ponds in the south west of the island with virtually all of the resorts found in

this location as the shoreline is protected by a large shallow lagoon with an outer fringing reef. For those with time on their hands, there are only a few vehicles for hire, other than getting around by bicycles, which are available at the resorts. The National Trust has a large visitor centre overlooking Booby Pond where booby birds, frigates, egrets and various storks, herons and waterfowl can be observed. Owen Island can be found just offshore in the South Sound, and many visitors enjoy the leisurely snorkel out to this remote location. Bonefishing is also popular within this sheltered stretch of water, where pirate vessels once anchored. Midway along the north



shore, Cayman Islands Marine Research Centre is located. This facility opened by HRH Prince Edward conducts on-going research into the coral reefs and its inhabitants around the Cayman Islands, including important research on the alien invasion of lionfish



Bloody Bay Wall is world renowned and is one of the most colourful in the Caribbean

(*Pterois volitans*) which have swept through the Caribbean and western Atlantic.

Discovered by Christopher Columbus back in 1503, the island was used as a revictualling base where passing ships

would harvest the abundant local turtles and teeming fish stocks. Subsequently, there are a number of historic shipwrecks around the island, but very little of their remains can now be found except for the occasional anchors and other heavy



THIS PAGE: The walls of Little Cayman's north shore are stunning and packed with marine life from the largest turtle to the smallest banded coral shrimp or goby

With this in mind, visiting divers must take notice that every dive can be a potential deep dive as the vertical wall is either the main feature of the dive, or just within a short swim from any location. The unlimited depths along this coast are indeed a temptation, and dives should not be taken lightly or unsupervised. Shore diving within the marine park is discouraged, but is still available for those who wish to go it alone. Any night divers must leave notice at their resort of their intention, their location and when they will return.

The entire zone is a protected marine park,



metal parts. Whilst these sites are still incredibly interesting, virtually the entire emphasis of diving is concentrated around Bloody Bay Wall and Jackson Bight found at the north west of the island and stretches over 4.8km (3miles).

These two reef structures are co-joined, but separate in structure and shape by an ancient fault line and fresh water source. The Bloody Bay Wall is as described in the name: a vertical wall, often undercut that starts around 5m (17ft) and drops way into the depths well beyond any sports recreation or technical divers limits. Jackson Bight, however, consists of an inner mini wall directly out from the shore with a wide sand plane and then a further outer buttress reef cut with many swim-throughs, caves, caverns and sand chutes.

and this is particularly obvious with the large numbers of friendly Nassua grouper (*Epinephelus striatus*) and sightings of hawksbill turtles (*Eretmochelys imbricota*) on every dive. Bloody Bay Wall has around 13 dive sites and Jackson Bight a further 15 sites all marked with mooring buoys for dive boats to tie up to without damaging any of the corals with unprotected anchor drops. As you travel from





Diamond-backed bellies (top left) and Peacock flounders (left) are seen on most dives and love them or hate them; Lionfish are now regularly seen on dives, as they are on most Caribbean islands (above)

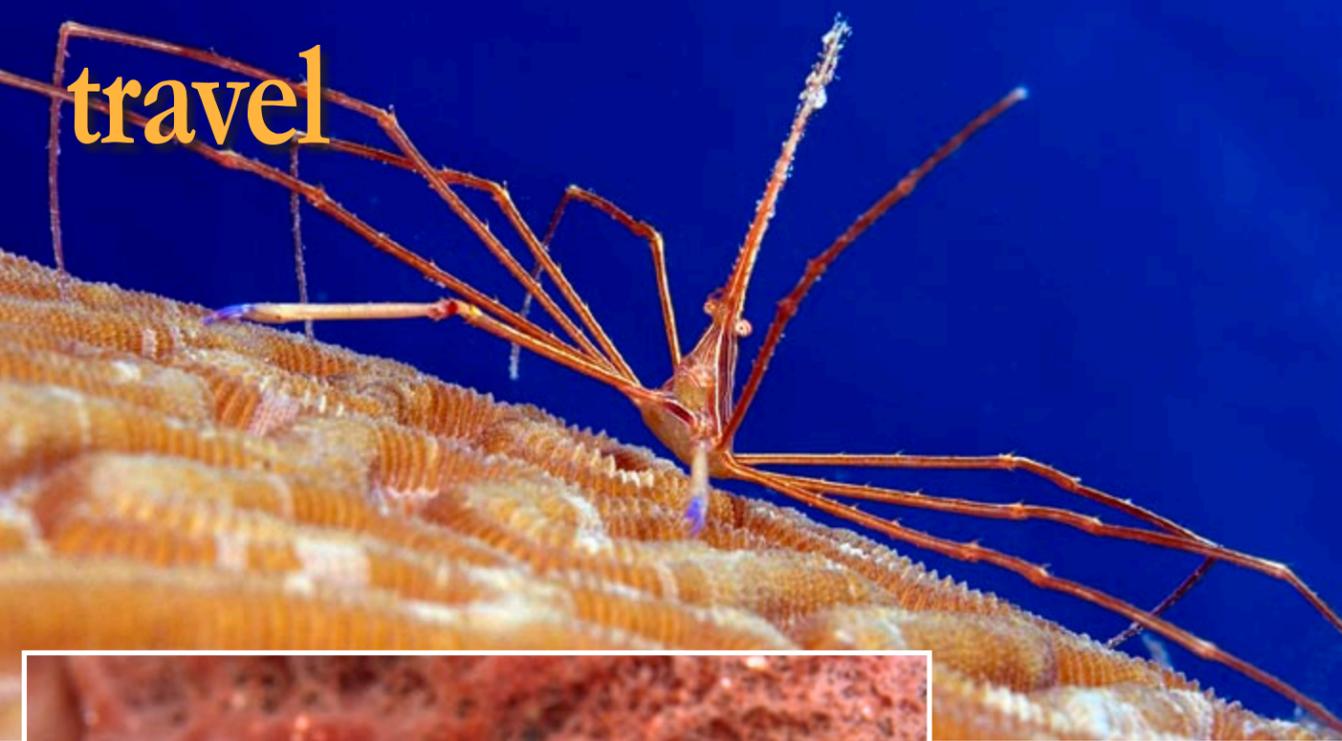
west to east along the wall of Bloody Bay, the reef is fairly uniform in structure, rather barren on top except for small knobby corals and seafans, until you get to the edge of the wall where larger sponges predominate amidst more delicate corals such as wire corals, lace corals and black corals. Finger sponges, strawberry sponges, vase sponges and a variety of tube sponges are found all along the wall in all varieties of colour and size. Couple this backdrop

with an amazing variety of colourful reef fish and you can instantly see why this wall is so popular with divers and underwater photographers.

At the confluence of the two zones of Bloody Bay and Jackson's Bight is a dive site known as Mixing Bowl. This site gives the divers the best of both types of reef structures with a vertical wall to the west and a more sculpted and convoluted wall to the east cut with numerous fissures and canyons. On the corner

of the wall is a large black coral tree where arrow blennies and fairly basslets are found. Typically, you can also find French angelfish, Queen angelfish and various wrasse, parrotfish and groupers. The top of the wall usually has large numbers of flamingo tongue shells (*Cyphoma gibbosum*) on the seafans and lettuce-leaf nudibranchs (*Tridachia crispata*) which graze of the algae covered dead corals.

Towards the eastern end of Jackson



Bight, the mini wall is very interesting with large sea fans and plumes, and the area is patrolled by eagle rays and stingrays. The sand plane has garden eels, conch shells, sand divers and razor fish. At sites such as Cumbers caves, huge sand chutes and canyons cut under the outer buttress reef and disappear into the depths. At a site known as Paul's Anchors, there are at least 15 different anchors to be found stuck hard into the reef and overgrown with coral, there is even an ancient canon in the shallows.

on the reef tops, you can find many large anemones with their host fish species the diamond-backed blenny (*Malacoctenus boehlkei*). This fish appears to have a similar lifestyle to that of the clownfish found in Indo-Pacific waters.

For those avid divers who wish to sample some of the best diving in the Caribbean in an idyllic very quiet setting, you can find out all about where to stay, how to get there from the Cayman Islands Department of Tourism.

Sadly, the coral reef structure here has taken a battering over the years and is nowhere near as good as it once was. El Niño struck rather harshly over two winter seasons as well as several crushing hurricanes, resulting in large areas of dead corals overgrown with algae. It is slowly recovering, but the reef fish here are mainly algae eaters such as wrasse. However,



THIS PAGE: The Cayman islands are also renowned for their 'little critters'. Here, you can find (clockwise from top left) Arrow crabs; Pygmy filefish; Yellow-head jawfish; All the representatives of butterflyfishes, blennies and gobies; Sharpnose pufferfish; Frogfish

USS Kittiwake

—*New Artificial Reef off Grand Cayman Island*

Text and photos by Lawson Wood





With a touch of déjà vu, I sat on the dive boat supplied by Red Sail Sports to witness and document the creation of a new dive site off Seven Mile Beach on Grand Cayman Island. I was on a similar boat in September 1996 for the sinking of the former Russian frigate #356 off the north shore of Cayman Brac. That sinking took over seven hours; I guess Russian frigates are not designed to sink easily! Now seven years in the conception, planning and culmination of this new project spearheaded by Nancy Easterbrook of Divetech, the *USS Kitiwake* (ASR 13) was slowly filling with water for a (very) controlled sinking by the crew of the United States Tugboat America.

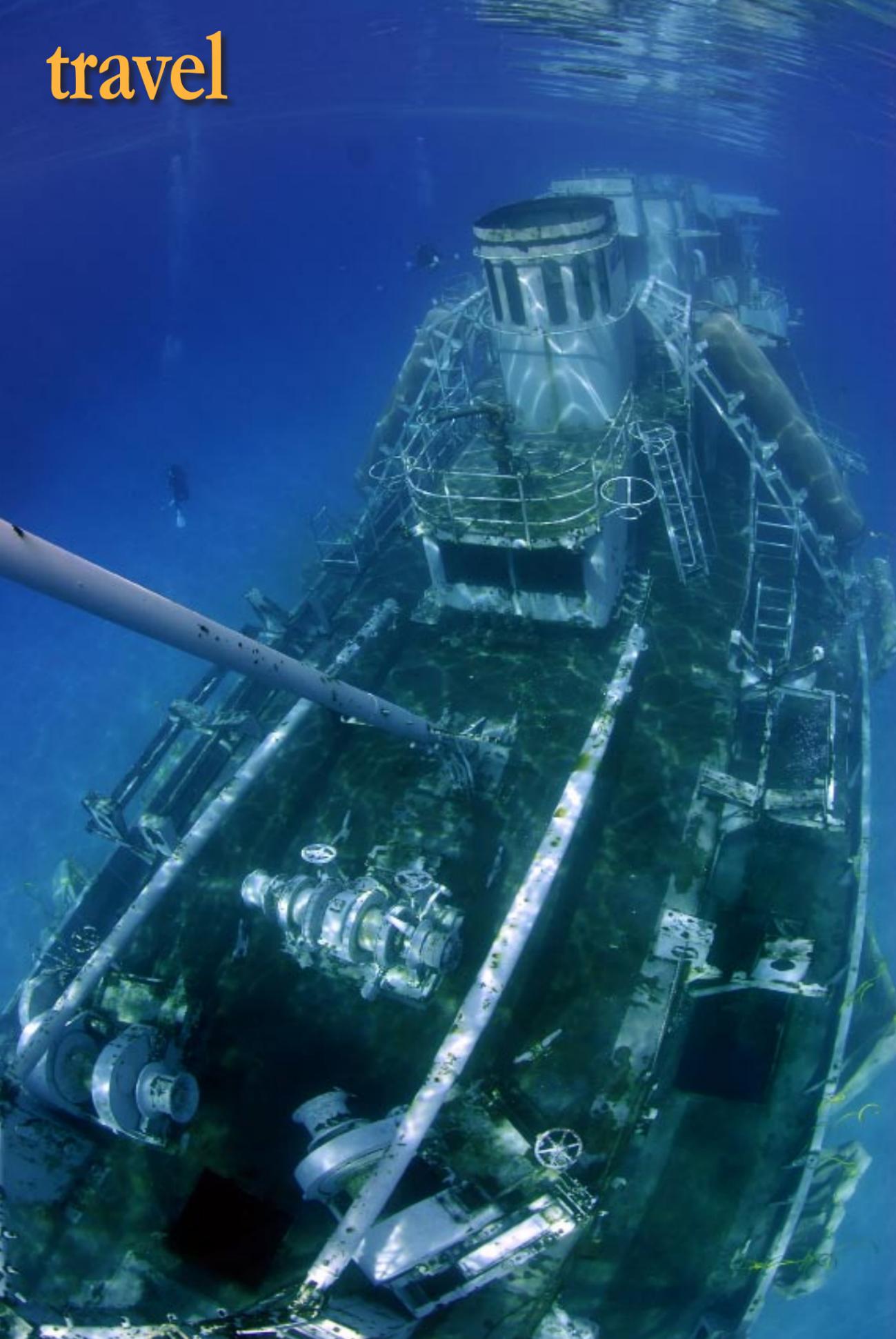


Reputedly one of the cleanest boats ever to be sunk as a dive attraction, due to the constantly evolving laws and regulations regarding artificial reefs, the Cayman Islands Tourism Association said that they had ensured that all the precautions were strictly followed to ensure hazardous materials, paint, lubricants, oils and fuels were removed prior to sinking so there would be no harm to Cayman marine life or waters. This included a final scrub down of the outside of her hull just three weeks before her final journey to prevent any foreign marine species, which may have attached to her hull, from entering Cayman waters.

Additional safety measures included the removal of all loose wiring and hatch covers as well as any features that would deteriorate quickly in salt water such as carpets, ceiling tiles, wooden fixtures and all light fittings. Many safety cut-outs were installed throughout the ship for the safety of divers and to allow natural light to reach virtually



THIS PAGE: Going, going, gone! The *USS Kitiwake* sinks to its new life underwater off Seven Mile Beach on Grand Cayman Island



THIS PAGE: Intact and upright and as diver friendly as can be, the shallowest parts of the ship are only one metre below the surface

all areas of the ship. Undoubtedly these same measures will also contribute to the colonisation of marine life on the ship and provide safe refuge for many different species of fish, corals, algae and invertebrates.

Finally, sinking began at precisely 2:34pm—six minutes ahead of target. All of the local boats, dive charters, attending tugs, barges and marine authorities signalled her final sinking with blasts from their ships' whistles.

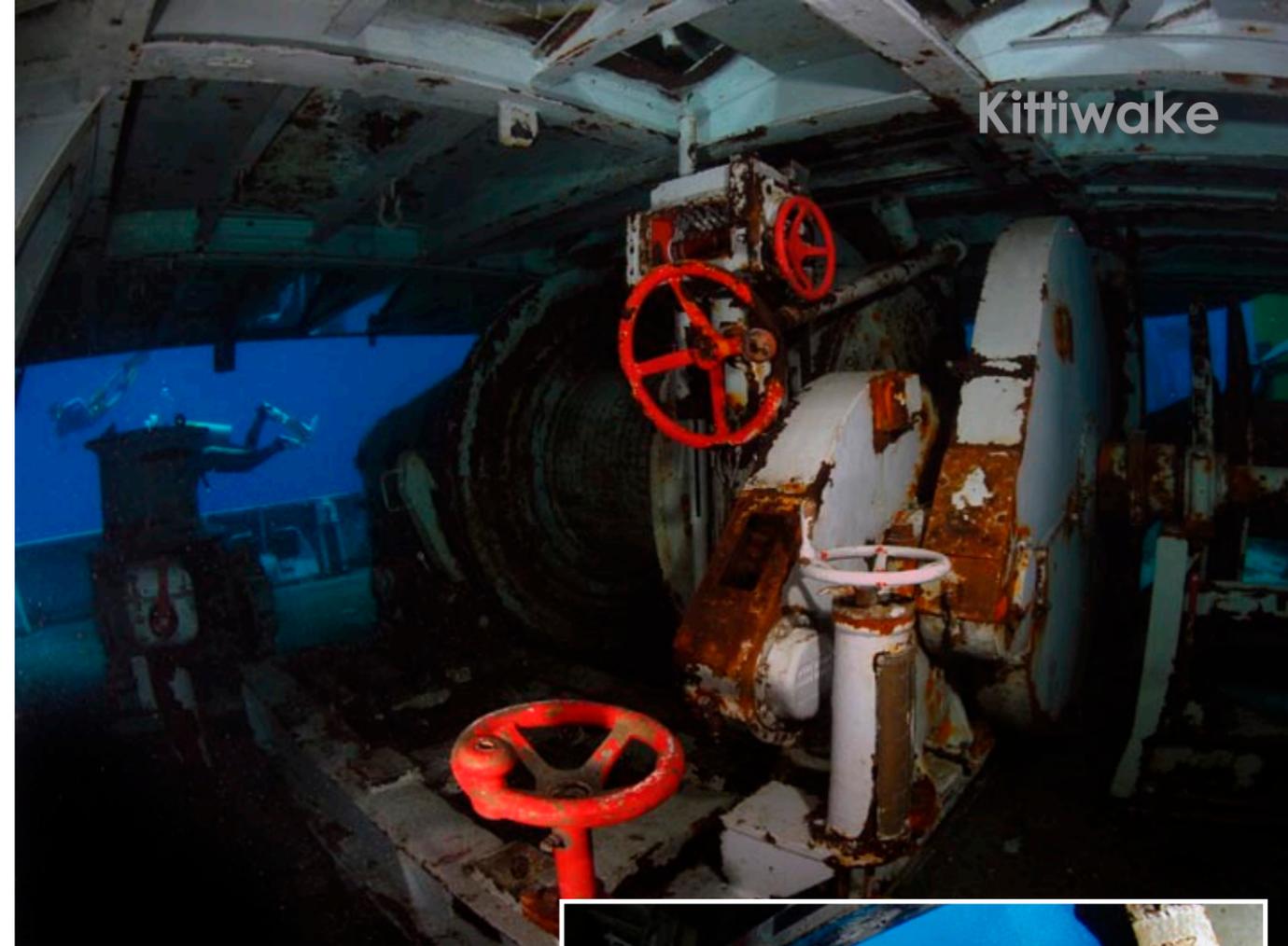
Now sitting with a slight list to port,

the overall height of the ship for divers is 52ft (15.5m) from the seabed to the top parts of her superstructure, and since she is lying in only 55ft (16.5metres), the rear section of her superstructure is only one metre below the surface. This makes the *Kittiwake* perfect for snorkelling and indeed for all levels of divers, as she is just a short swim from the edge of the wall on the northwestern shore of Seven Mile Beach.

Entering the water immediately after her sinking, we witnessed the

total transformation of this ship. She appeared almost serene surrounded by her initial cloud of exhausting air bubbles, tiny bits of floating detritus and eager divers. Local stingrays cruised in to see what the fuss was all about, and an eagle ray passed over the ship as if it had always been there. Very quickly some of the local reef fish swam over to investigate the rather rude appearance of this somewhat angular addition to their coral reef.

Snorkelers from the surrounding craft



THIS PAGE: The Honorable Cline Glidden, project leader of the sinking of the *USS Kittiwake* Nancy Easterbrook, and her husband Jay, enjoy a moment in the wheelhouse (left) and take a peek into the interior (right)



soon discovered the immediate attractions of such a shallow shipwreck and enthused over her fine lines and accessibility for everyone.

Every level of the ship is accessible and you can even enter at the top of the smoke stack and descend directly down through the entire ship into the engine room. I swam past two open recompression chambers, banks of disused air tanks, winches, cranes,

derricks, submarine escape pods, the machine shop, kitchens, crew galley, wheelhouse (complete with wheel and compass binnacle) and all manner of really interesting bits, just ready for marine colonisation and diver interest.

The second day's diving was spectacular, with over 30m visibility, and the sea was that exceptional clear blue colour so synonymous with the

Cayman Islands. Being so shallow in parts, you could see the entire ship from the surface, what a sight the arriving visitors will get when they fly into the island as the *Kittiwake* is directly under the flight path.

Traversing through the ship at every level, we were asked by Nancy Easterbrook to take note of any marine life already on the ship. We listed many juvenile butterflyfish and

angelfish, small blennies, barracuda, small schools of jacks, hogfish, creole wrasse and several stingrays rooting about on the sand next to the hull.

Just a short swim away is the massive buttress reef and the wall, making this site a perfect dive for everyone. I have to say that I loved the dive and look forward to the transformation and colonisation in years to come.

This former Chanticleer-class submarine rescue ship is the first U.S. military vessel to be acquired by a foreign country. Joining the former Russian frigate sunk on Cayman Brac, the *USS Kittiwake* is undoubtedly the new star attraction of diving in the Cayman Islands and is destined to be one of the top artificial reefs in the Caribbean.



THIS PAGE: The ship is accessible to all levels of diver and now—marine life!



Lawson Wood was raised in the Scottish east coast fishing town of Eyemouth and spent his youth exploring the rock pools and shallow seas before learning to scuba dive at the tender age of 11. Now over 44 years later, Lawson has been fortunate to make his passion his career and has authored and co-authored over 45 books mainly on our underwater world. Lawson is a founding member of the Marine Conservation Society, founder of the first Marine Reserve at St. Abbs in Scotland, and made photographic history by becoming the first person to be a Fellow of the Royal Photographic Society and Fellow of the British Institute of Professional Photographers solely for underwater photography. ■