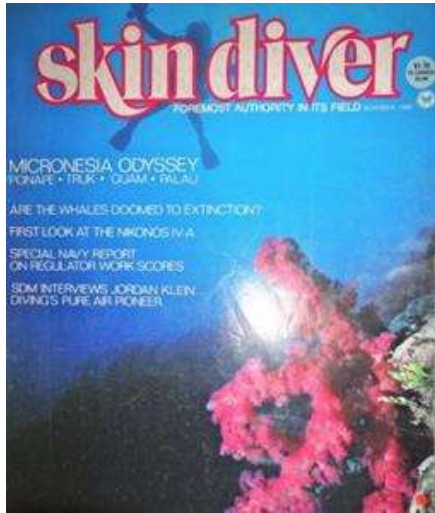




*Grand Cayman, British West Indies*  
*July, 1980*

Selecting a dive package is like going to a smorgasbord; there are numerous selections and potential risk. Area dive shops invariably offer island dive trips to Cozumel or the Bahamas and that's fine if you like to go with a large group to commercial dive resorts. But that defeated the purpose of learning a sport that can put you anywhere in the world. Or it may be that we were too much the loners to be associated with large groups.



Our selection criteria for dive locations was generally based on inaccessibility of large cruise ships - no deep sea port, limited/small dive operation, basic lodging accommodations, etc. We subscribed to a number of diving magazines all advertising destinations with pristine diving and memories of a lifetime.

We settled on Grand Cayman for our first saltwater dive adventure. The advertisements boasted of seven miles of white sand beaches, continental dining, a fresh water pool, two bars, and a dive shop on the premises.

Grand Cayman is the largest of the three Cayman Islands and the location of the territory's capital, George Town. In relation to the other two Cayman Islands, it is approximately 75 miles southwest of Little Cayman and 90 miles southwest of Cayman Brac.



### ***A bit of history...***

Christopher Columbus sighted the Cayman Islands (after the Carib word *caimán* for the marine crocodile ) on May 10, 1503 and found the two small islands (Cayman Brac and Little Cayman) and it was these two islands that he named "Las Tortugas".

The first recorded English visitor was Sir Francis Drake in 1586, who reported that the *caymanas* were edible, but it was the turtles which attracted ships in search of fresh meat for their crews. Overfishing nearly extinguished the turtles from the local waters.

Caymanian folklore explains that the island's first inhabitants were a Welshman named Walters (or Watler) and his companion named Bawden (or Bodden), who first arrived in Cayman in 1658 after serving in Oliver Cromwell's army in Jamaica. The first recorded permanent inhabitant of the Cayman Islands, Isaac Bodden, was born on Grand Cayman around 1700. He was the grandson of the original settler named Bodden.

A variety of people settled on the islands: pirates, refugees from the Spanish Inquisition, shipwrecked sailors, and slaves. The majority of Caymanians are of African and English descent, with considerable interracial mixing.

England took formal control of the Caymans, along with Jamaica, under the Treaty of Madrid in 1670 after the first settlers came from Jamaica in 1661-71 to Little Cayman and Cayman Brac. These first settlements were abandoned after attacks by Spanish privateers, but English privateers often used the Cayman Islands as a base and in the 18th century they became an increasingly popular hideout for pirates, even after the end of legitimate privateering in 1713. Following several unsuccessful attempts, permanent settlement of the islands began in the 1730s. The Cayman Islands historically have been popular as a tax haven. In November 1794, ten vessels, which were part of a convoy escorted by HMS Convert, were wrecked on the reef in Gun Bay, on the East end of Grand Cayman, but with the help of local settlers, there was no loss of life. The incident is now remembered as The Wreck of the Ten Sail. Legend has it that there was a member of the British Royal Family onboard and that in gratitude for their bravery, King George III decreed that Caymanians should never be conscripted for war service and Parliament legislated that they should never be taxed.

From 1670, the Cayman Islands were effective dependencies of Jamaica, although there was considerable self-government. In 1831, a legislative assembly was established by local consent at a meeting of principal inhabitants held at Pedro St. James Castle on December 5 of that year. Elections were held on December 10 and the fledgling legislature passed its first local legislation on December 31, 1831. Subsequently, the Jamaican governor ratified a legislature consisting of eight magistrates appointed by the Governor of Jamaica and 10 (later increased to 27) elected representatives.

In 1835, Governor Sligo arrived in Cayman from Jamaica to declare all slaves free in accordance with the Emancipation Act of 1833.

The Cayman Islands were officially declared and administered as a dependency of Jamaica from 1863, but were rather like a parish of Jamaica with the nominated justices of the peace and elected vestrymen in their Legislature. From 1750 to 1898 the Chief Magistrate was the administering official for the dependency, appointed by the Jamaican governor. In 1898 the Governor of Jamaica began appointing a Commissioner for the Islands. The first Commissioner was Frederick Sanguinetti. In 1959, upon the formation of the Federation of the West Indies the dependency status with regards to Jamaica ceased officially although the Governor of Jamaica remained the Governor of the Cayman Islands and had reserve powers over the Islands. Starting in 1959 the chief official overseeing the day-to-day affairs of the islands (for the Governor) was the Administrator. Upon Jamaica's independence in 1962, the Cayman Islands broke its administrative links with Jamaica and opted to become a direct dependency of the British Crown, with the chief official of the islands being the Administrator.

Following a two-year campaign by women to change their circumstances, in 1959 Cayman received its first written constitution which, for the first time, allowed women to vote. Cayman ceased to be a dependency of Jamaica.

In 1971 the governmental structure of the Islands was again changed with a Governor now running the Cayman Islands.

As was customary at the time with many international flights, our trip to Grand Cayman required a layover. For us, that meant a tiresome sit in a Texas airport. From Texas we flew Antillian Airways - serving complimentary rum punch before landing.

Although landing on Grand Cayman Island was more spacious than most islands we have been to, it still felt as though the pilot had put his landing gear down on the very edge of the island, went immediately to full flaps, brakes, and stopped not 15 feet from the end of the runway and the ocean.

In 1980, the Grand Cayman International Airport consisted of a Customs Office, baggage room, and a sitting room. We were checked through customs after a few preliminary questions and a quick search of our luggage. Taxis were numerous and one had been sent by our hotel to pick up any and all passengers...and any natives traveling that direction. The drive was a young black man who was very courteous and seemed willing to answer all our questions.

Our hotel was the Royal Palms, situated ideally on the seven miles of white sands advertised in the dive magazine.



It's hey day, the hotel must have been spectacular with it's white concrete entrance, avenue of mature palm trees, and its stately open appearance. And although it showed evidence of wear, it still retained an air of dignity and of conspicuous consumption.

The Royal Palms today is once again a highly rated destination.





We checked in on a Sunday afternoon and were given a brief tour of the facilities. Our room was on the second floor of one of the older wings overlooking the pool and courtyard. After settling in, we anxiously went to inquire about our diving arrangements which were included as part of the package. We were informed that the dive shop was closed, and it was too late to make arrangements to dive the following day.

We inquired if there was another dive operation that may be able to help; *"Well just down the street there's a dive shop run by Bob Soto."*



**Bob Soto**, established the Caribbean's first dive operation on Grand Cayman in 1957.

Soto's introduction into diving came during World War II when he went to work in the United States for the US Navy. He started as a diver tender on a salvage tug, progressing to assistant diver and then to hard hat diver. After the war, Soto joined the Merchant Marines, giving him the opportunity to dive in many places, such as the Red Sea, the Persian Gulf and the waters off South America. Returning home he realized that the underwater scenery in Cayman was 'second to none'.

Soto established a diving school in the Cayman Islands for the tourism market. Soto created his own equipment and promotional diving videos to assist the Cayman Islands Department of Tourism and diving clubs throughout the United States, as well as introducing the first "live-aboard" trips.

Soto, known as the "father of diving," continues his interest in marine and environmental conservation and was instrumental in marine laws being put in place in 1986. He is very knowledgeable of the development of these islands and the constant geographical movement of the land and the sea. He continues to campaign for more stringent laws to try and preserve marine life. In 1996 he was given the 'Marine Conservation Award' for his valiant efforts. Soto was made a Member of the British Empire by Queen Elizabeth II for his various life-long contributions.

So off we walked towards Georgetown which was a hike of 20 minutes or so, and one we would make frequently. The shop was easily located and we inquired within about arrangements for the following day. A double-decked pontoon would pull up on the beach in front of our hotel the next afternoon on their way to a dive spot with other Soto divers on board.

We slept very little in anticipation of our first saltwater dive, but we were raring to go in the morning.

We were scheduled that afternoon to dive Fish Pot Reef, just off Georgetown. The air temp was a marvelous 95 with clear skies. This was the first time I ever swam in saltwater. My heart was a flutter. This is what it was all about!

The Dive Master gave an explanation of the reef saying that we would be diving through tunnels of coral. We entered the water at 2:55 PM. Visibility ran anywhere from 90 to 100 feet with massive outcroppings of live coral bordered by shoots of white sand. No words can adequately describe the beauty.

There were brain coral six feet in radius. Stag horn and elk horn reefs. And everywhere there were fish too numerous to name and too many to catch in one glance. Then fate stepped in to create another first.

On my first dive trip, on my first dive, within the first ten minutes, I cut myself. We had been going through several tunnels and I had just turned around to check on Dad when I hit the palm of my hand on a piece of shelf coral. The cut was a clean and deep "V" on my right hand.

It immediately began to bleed blue blood. Perhaps I should explain. At different depths, colors are lost to filtrating light. Red is one of the first colors to go, so I was bleeding blue. I closed the wound with my left hand and, showing it to Dad, I indicated that I did not want to stop the dive. We surfaced 40 minutes later after an otherwise tremendous dive. It was everything I had hoped for.

After surfacing, it was impossible to climb into the boat and remove my gear without releasing the pressure on the wound. And being wet, the cut bled profusely. The Dive Master cut a towel to make a wrapping and by elevating my hand it bled very little. The only pain was my pride. The return boat trip seemed much longer with the numerous inquiries from the other divers.

Upon return to our hotel room and with closer examination of the cut, Dad thought it should be stitched and I agreed. We inquired in the lobby how to get to the hospital and called for a cab. Still wrapped in the bloody yellow beach towel, we headed for the "Casualty Room" - the islands equivalent to an emergency room.

The concrete block building appeared inside and out to be more like a bath house than a hospital. The benches in the "Waiting Room" were also concrete built into the walls and without padding. There was an "Admittance" window at which we related for the umpteenth time how I had cut my hand and were told to take a seat and wait.

There were fewer than half a dozen patients in the room waiting for shots and prescriptions. It was just after 5 PM when we were asked by the nurse to step into the "Examination Room". She and several other, what appeared to be nurse aids, examined the exposed flap of skin and deliberated on whether or not the flap should be cut away and allowed to heal on its own or stitched. Thank goodness, it was decided that the nurse should contact the doctor who had just gone to dinner and wouldn't be back for another hour. So, we waited in the "Operating Room".

The room was unbelievable. In it were chests with instruction sheets posted for the treatment of numerous injuries. There was one gurney about five feet long with two tanks at its head. The sheets were bloody and the swabs and wrappings from the previous operation were still on the floor. There was one air conditioner in the only window running at full speed but making little headway. To top it all off, we spent the the time waiting watching a colony of ants drag dead butterflies across the floor.

The doctor arrived promptly one hour later. he was in his late twenties or early thirties with a reddish beard and curly hair and very English. We learned that he was educated in England and interned on the island.

After examining the cut, he concluded that it would require stitching. The hand needed to be placed on a flat surface and the only way to do that was to sit in a chair next to the gurney, rotate my arm backwards and lay it on the table behind my back. The shot of novacane as given locally using a glass hypodermic with a LONG needle. The doctor's hands shook slightly but the area was already somewhat void of feeling. He then asked the nurse for 2-O silk. "*We don't have any.*" Then 3-0. "*We don't have any.*" They settled for black 4-0 that I swore you could string a tennis racket with.

Finishing with six stitches, he wrapped the hand and said that he knew we were divers and it wouldn't do any good to tell me not to get the stitches wet, but to dry the hand off as quickly as I could after the

dive. He wrote a prescription for pain which we could get filled at the local drug store. We thanked him and returned to the office to pay our bill.

The island, being under British rule, had socialized medicine. We asked the office clerk how much the surgery cost. The girl said she didn't know but they would send us a bill. We explained that we were from the United States, but that didn't seem to make any difference. A bill did arrive several weeks after our return. For the stitches, removal of the stitches, the first prescription, and medication, the cost was \$17 if we paid by cash and \$13 if we paid by check.

The night was very restless when the injection wore off and all the nerve endings came to life. Come morning, there was no pain whatsoever. However, we didn't think it would be wise to dive that day. Our plan was to go into town and purchase a latex glove and surgical tape to seal the water out. We purchased the only box of large Playtex gloves the store had along with some tape and spent the remainder of our time in Georgetown shopping. We bought a couple of sharks carved from black coral and I bought an antique Spanish piece of two (Spanish Reales were minted in 1/2s, 2s, 4s, and 8s - the legendary pieces of 8).

The remainder of the day we spent touring the island. The hotel recommended a driver/guide named Ruby. Ruby knew everyone on the island, or at least she stopped and talked to everyone along the way. As a source of information, Ruby was a gem. We stopped and sampled native fruits from people's gardens; she was well versed in native vegetation and the history of the island. Ruby literally drove us to Hell and back.



Hell, at least in the islands, has a make-shift post office complete with an official stamp (Hell, BWI). It is not a town. It is an outcropping of strange volcanic formations; like stalagmites of upward projecting jagged spears of lava. If ever there were in nature a depiction of Hell, Dante must surely agree that this is it. We sent Mother a postcard from Hell just to say we had been there and back.



*Hell Post Office with Dad in the foreground and Ruby in the background*

In 2012, my brother and his wife went to Hell. The Post office had changed considerably.



Included in our tour of the island was a visit to the Grand Cayman Turtle Farms. Cayman Turtle Farm was established in 1968 as Mariculture Ltd. by a group of investors from the United States and Great Britain as a facility to raise the green sea turtle for commercial purposes. The intention was to supply the market with a source of product that did not deplete the wild populations further. By releasing turtles and facilitating research, any harm created by removing turtles and eggs from the wild would be mitigated.

When we were there, the farm consisted of a collection of holding tanks and nurseries operating much like a fish hatchery. The Mexican government had an ongoing study of an endangered species of sea turtle at the farm although the guide didn't seem interested in talking about it.

The gift shop had a number of attractive and attractively priced gifts from turtle shell glasses, coasters, table tops, and polished shells to mummified/dried baby sea turtles. We purchased some hand lotion for Mother made from sea turtle oil. As it turned out, it was wise that we didn't buy any other products since there was a ban on articles made from sea turtles and they would have been confiscated at US Customs; I have a polished sea turtle shell undoubtedly adorning the wall of a customs storeroom to attest to the fact.

Today, the Turtle Farm is a major tourist attract with pools, wildlife encounter areas, water park, shows, etc.

Having recovered from my coral encounter and have had a day to rest, we began to plan for the morning dive. We opened the box of rubber gloves only to find that it contained two left-hand gloves and my cut was on the right hand. Years of expensive education didn't go to waste, the obvious solution was to turn the glove inside out.

The scheduled morning dive was to "Shark's Hide" off Georgetown noted for the basket and barrel sponges that are large enough to stand in. The weather was clear and warm with water visibility up to 100 feet. I slipped on the glove and taped it into place. We donned our tanks and in we went - and in



came the water into the glove. Oh well. The dive consisted of a coral wall leading to the open sea. Our average dept was 80 feet for a total dive time of 20 minutes. All-in-all it was a great dive.

Sometime during the week - I don't remember which day - we visited the ruins of the salt pans. African slaves were imported to work the pans because the indigenous Indians were too small to handle the burdensome loads. The slaves were housed in huts shaped in a cube 6 feet by 6 feet with a height of 4 feet. The huts were too small to stand in or sleep comfortably. Several roofless huts still remained as do the pans which were originally filled with sea water and allowed to evaporate. The remaining salt was harvested and shipped around the world.

Today, sea salt is still harvested from pans and exported.



This being our first trip to the Islands, it was also our first exposure to "island time." Being regimented to time schedules and accustomed to looking at a watch or clock every few minutes, we found ourselves waiting - a lot. Other than the scheduled departure of the dive boat, there is no sense of time and the natives move at an almost sloth pace. Time is, "whenever" - whenever they feel like it. Mangers have learned that giving a list of chores to workers is useless. it is better to give them one task to do and when completed they give them another. My advise to divers is to take a dive watch and leave it with your gear at the end of the dive.

We made a number of dives to reefs with exotic names - Eden Rock, Drop Off, Island Shoot, and Surfside Reef - before diving our first wreck; the Oro Verde.



The 184' Oro Verde (meaning green gold) was a liberty tanker sunk in May 31, 1980 to serve as a dive site and as a base for a reef. The ship lays on its starboard side in about 50 feet of water, easily accessible from a dive boat. The hull was left open for fish and divers to explore. Not the Spanish galleon one would hope to dive, but interesting nonetheless.



The boat was just beginning to attract colonies of fish including one large angel fish with a hole through its body - the result of a spear gun. It obviously didn't hold a grudge since it was first to the breadline; bread being taken down in plastic bags by the Dive Master to feed the fish.

A quick explanation of the operations on a dive boat might be in order for the uninitiated. Dive boats range from pontoons to strafed-hulled open cockpit boats, to wooden launches, to cabin cruisers. Anything that floats and has a motor to transport divers in some relative safety and comfort to a dive site will fulfill the dive boat requirement. The FLAG Diving operation that we used from the hotel operated two double-decked pontoons with a walk-on bow and a platform at the stern to enter and exit the water. Each boat normally had two operators; one piloted the boat and may or may not also dive with the group, the second was the Dive Master who oversaw the dives.

Our Dive Master was a young man named Derrick whose father was in the fishing industry in Texas. The duties of the dive boat personnel were many - skipper, mechanic, dock hand, pilot, social worker, and instructor. The boats were usually equipped with tanks so we carried only our personal gear on board - mask, fins, snorkel, regulators, and buoyancy control device (BC).

For the most part, the dive sites were marked with permanent moorings. Where there were no moorings, the crew were VERY careful to make certain that we anchored in a sand shoot to not damage the coral.



Trinity Caves was a unique dive. It was like diving a cave except that the coral formed the stalactites and stalagmites. I kept my hands to my side this time.

We made one last trip to George Town to pick up a few souvenirs and to stop by the hospital to have my stitches removed. This trip began a long tradition of collective dive T-shirts. The collection of shirts from various islands inevitably sparked conversations.

The last dive of any trip is the most difficult; you want it to last as long as possible. Our last dive was at Flamingo Tongue; a large coral reef in 30 feet of water. The reef is named after the snail that inhabits the waters.

At 10:47 AM we climbed out of the water from our last dive of the year and our first saltwater dive adventure. We packed our bags and taxied to the airport that afternoon for the flight home.

The final note in the dive log says it all;

"Last Dive - Great Week - Fantastic Diving!!!"

