



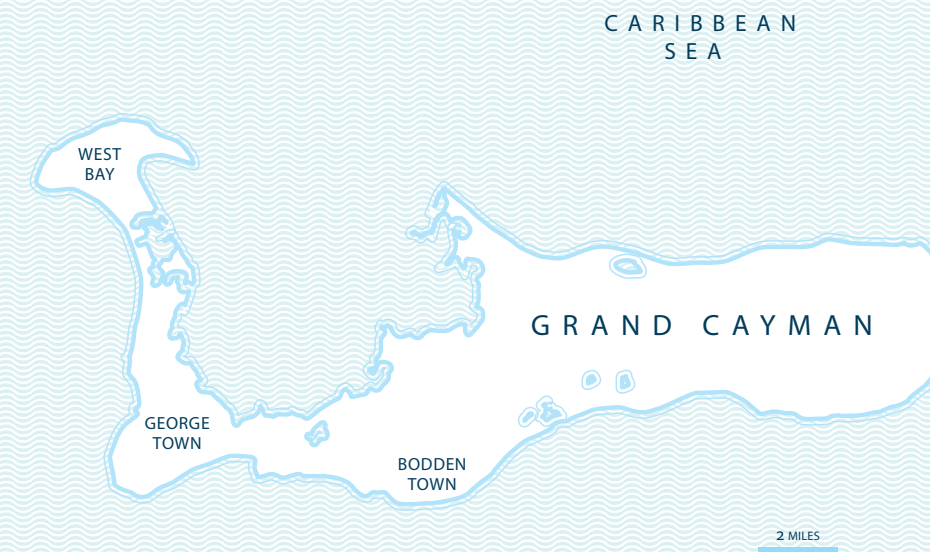
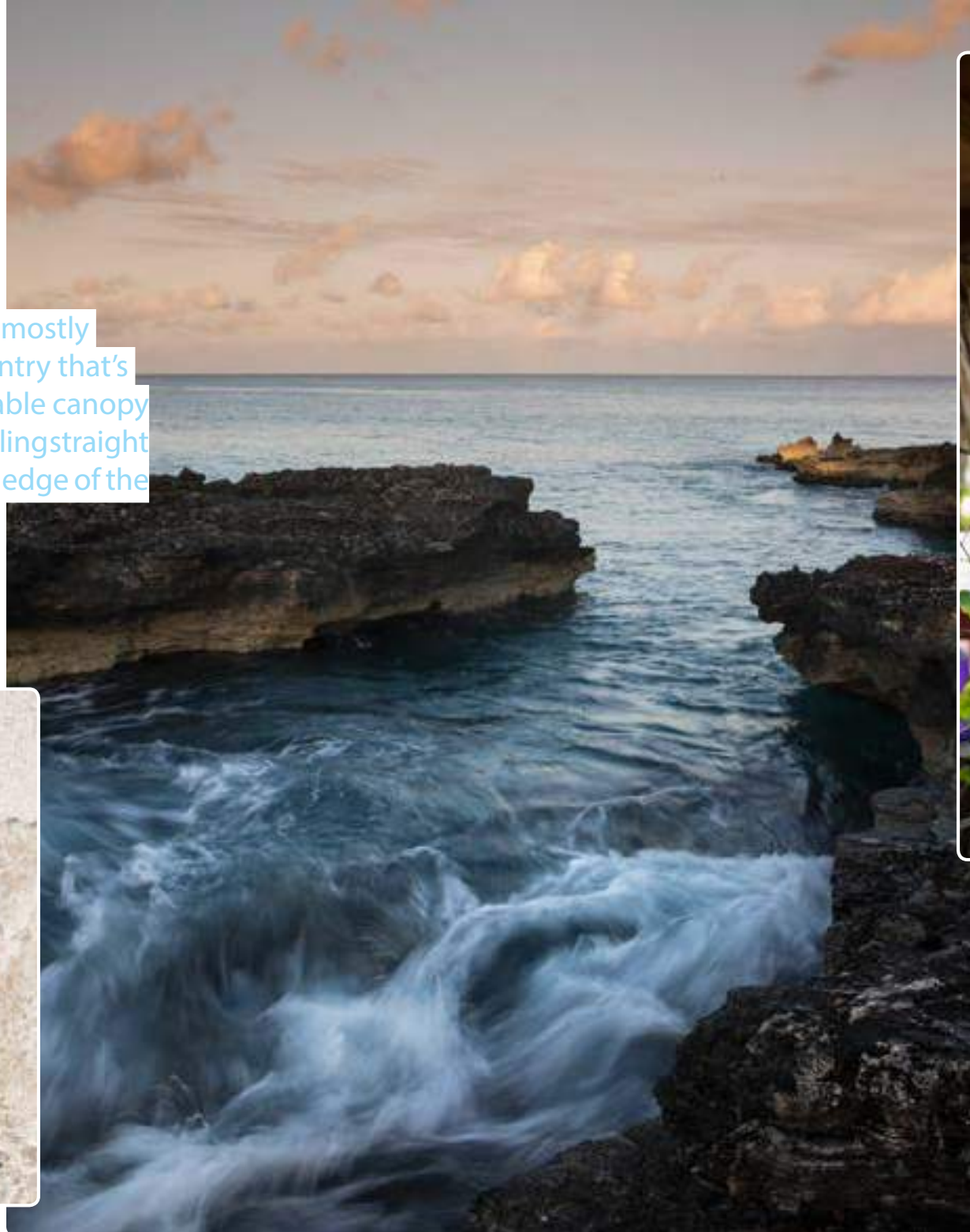
PACIFIC DREAM
The clear blue waters of the Pacific Ocean as seen from Inspirato's Serena residence near Playa Hermosa, a five-minute drive to the beach, and one of several Inspirato residences on Peninsula Papagayo and Cacique Peninsula.

AIN'T IT GRAND?

Between its wealthy financial sector, British heritage and low-key Caribbean charm, Grand Cayman offers a study of unexpected contrasts.

BY AARON GULLEY, PHOTOGRAPHY BY JEN JUDGE

“The land is mostly wild and empty hill country that’s cloaked in an impenetrable canopy of secondary forest tumbling straight down to the untouched edge of the Pacific Ocean.”



BEACH LIFE
(Above) An iguana caught sunbathing on Peninsula Papagayo.

(Above, right) The jungle meets the sea on Peninsula Papagayo.

At the George Town arrivals hall, a young Caymanian customs agent named Marlene with a spray of plaited hair like a fountain, fingers slowly through the passports. Her brow is as furrowed as a wind-chopped sea. She scowls when she looks up and demands, “You conductin’ business durin’ your stay?” Say no, and Marlene reflexively presses, “Yah certain?”

This interrogation is apparently what you get when you visit one of the world’s most powerful offshore banking tax havens. Sitting about halfway between Jamaica and the Cancun coast, just south of Cuba, this diminutive trio of islands wields inordinate power and influence for a British protectorate in the Caribbean. Grand Cayman, the business epicenter and the largest of the three, might be only as big as Boca Raton, Florida, but it has the world’s 14th highest per capita GDP. Billions of dollars pass through Cayman banks each year, and the islands’ offices, cafés, and super yachts attest to the windfall that the locals take from each transaction.

But while the island makes its money on hedge funds and banking liabilities, it sells itself with the sapphire waters and cotton-ball white beaches of travelers’ dreams. It’s difficult to reconcile the two personas—banker during business hours, lifeguard every time else—especially given that cruise ships feed much of the island’s tourism: steaming in at night, sending a landing army ashore the next day in search of “I Love Caymans” trinkets and then sailing on to the next check mark in the captain’s tick-list.

Meanwhile the country’s biggest attraction, Stingray City, where boatloads of pale North Americans pour into the island’s lagoon too fondle docile stingrays, doesn’t sound much better.

But the Caymans are said to have some of the best diving and snorkeling of anywhere in the Caribbean, as well as a refined culinary scene. And given the discriminating banking clientele—as well as the third of a million visitors to the island last year—I figure there must be more to the place. So

I’ve come to Grand Cayman to find out if its incentives stretch beyond its finances after all.

Grand Cayman is shaped like a hammer on the west end and a rhinoceros on the east, with a small isthmus (the rhino’s horn) and the flat waters of a reef-protected sound between the two. Most of the island’s infrastructure huddles in the capital of George Town, on the hammer, while the east end is a tangle of thatch palms and mahogany trees sprinkled with dozy villages, the occasional resort, and deserted beaches.

George Town is anything but deserted, especially in the morning when the cruise ships fill up Hog Sty Bay—a historical name, not mine—and the flotilla of landing rafts comes buzzing ashore. The day I arrive, six of the behemoth ships are in the harbor, the maximum that ever dock here, and I decide it’s a good moment to head downtown and see how the city fares under the onslaught. And while it’s true that

the capital is probably best avoided during these peak hours, it turns out the crowds mostly stick to a two- or three-block radius. This is where the watch shops, perfumeries, and knickknack vendors are clustered, so there’s no need for most cruise patrons to go beyond—and no need for overnight visitors to shop except during off hours.

Little more than a mile south of town center, but well away from the cruise ship maelstrom, I find Smith’s Barcadere, a pleasant little palm-shaded beach that’s blessedly empty. A pair of sandy coves is cut from the black volcanic rock, and the few visitors leap from the short ledges into the tepid, clear waters then laze in the shallows as if relaxing in a private bathtub. Onshore, a family spreads a thin blanket under a blaze red Flamboyant tree and unpacks a box lunch for a picnic.

After a while, I walk up the road to Casa Luna, the 18-residence compound where Inspirato guests will stay when it

CALM REFRESHMENTS
(Clockwise from top left) The bar at the Four Seasons Peninsula Papagayo; an order of Tico’s ahi tuna tacos at the Four Seasons; kayaking the calm bay of Peninsula Papagayo; cocktail hour at the Four Seasons.



"I can put a client in the water on a board, and I guarantee they'll be surfing by the end of the day."
 —Jonathan Zamora,
 surf instructor,
 Kelly's surf shop, Tamarindo.



TAMARINDO: SURF TOWN, COSTA RICA
 (Clockwise from top, left) Street vendor selling handcrafted bird whistles; beachside souvenirs; waxing surf boards at Kelly's surf shop; hand-carved wooden masks for sale.

CHAIRMAN OF THE BOARD

(Above) Surf instructor, Jonathan Zamora, from Kelly's surf shop in Tamarindo. (Right) Zamora heads into the mellow break with a client.

opens in early summer. Built to echo a Tuscan village, the multistory, red-tile roof homes cluster around four communal courtyards, all finished in Syrian shell stone tiles that I'm told come from the last batch out of the country before the war. At the center of it all is a sleek, tiled infinity pool that overlooks a private beach cove chipped from the rocky headlands. A pier is in the works at the periphery for private access to deep sea fishing and diving. Hugh Hart, the owner of the property and a well-known Jamaican developer who has been living and working in the Caymans for decades, walks me through the compound. "There are houses as nice as what we are doing, but to have a collection of homes with such quality and fine finishes...you won't find it elsewhere on the island," he explains. I ask about the Italian theme. "Maybe it sounds strange, a Jamaican who wants a Tuscan village in the Caymans," he says with a shrug. "But you have to remember there were no indigenous people living on the island prior to the Europeans, so it's a paradise onto which people project their desires."

There's history in Hart's words, I discover at a stop at the island's number one landmark, Pedro (long 'e') St. James. The great house is the island's oldest structure, built over 200 years ago by Englishman William Eden. Through the years it has served as a plantation home, the island's seat of government, a jail, a hotel and a museum. During its most colorful period in the '60s, American socialite and aviator Thomas Hubbell bought the building, renovated it to look like a castle and filled it with antiques and treasure to bolster fictions he circulated about the Cayman's pirate history. "It was all just stories," explains Stacy Eden Hurlston, the elderly Caymanian tour guide at Pedro St. James. Hurlston traces his lineage to the original William Eden and spent part of his childhood growing up at Pedro St. James. "But people came from all over the world to see it. We started calling it Pedro Castle, and even today we still celebrate Pirate's Week." Next stop is Seven Mile Beach, a stunning crescent of sand that arcs away to the north as far as you can see from the Easter egg-hued colonial façades of George Town. I'm told,



SHOWER FALL
Enjoy a heated natural shower at Echostermales hot springs near Arenal.

“[Tenorio] is not the best-known corner of the country, but in our opinion it is the best.”
—ex-pat Frenchman Joel Marchal, owner Celeste Mountain Lodge



however, that the beach is actually only five miles long. No one can explain the disparity except that perhaps it just sounded better. And anyway, one bartender assures me, it's long enough that if you start strolling in the morning from the southernmost end of the strand and stop for a drink at every beach shack and bar along the way, you'll likely not make it to the beach's northern end.

Even the Cayman's tax-free status is surrounded by myth, dating back to the wreck of the Ten Sails, a fleet of ships that crashed on the islands southern reefs as they were heading from Jamaica to the United States. Legend has it that the Prince William of England was onboard and that King George III was so grateful to locals for rescuing his son that he vowed to never collect taxes on the island. Historians have debunked the story, yet locals repeat it so often that it's considered fact.

At first the idea that the island constantly reinvents itself might seem frustratingly inauthentic. Yet the habit was likely born of necessity. The French diplomat Jean Baptiste Colbert is said to have described Grand Cayman as “of so little benefit that it would be more cost to take it.” Hurlston agrees. “The only thing we were known for in Cayman,” he says, giving

equal stress to each syllable as locals do, “was our seafaring abilities. Absolutely nothing else.”

Imagine if the Europeans, who thought the island was so deficient it was hardly worth colonizing, could book a reservation at New York celebrity Chef Eric Ripert's Blue, the toughest table on the island. It's all rich nautical themes inside, with star charts on the floor and heavy wood and gold accents throughout. The night I visit, every one of the plates on the seven-course tasting menu makes me pause, not just because they're delectable but also because they're as pretty as doubloons—and practically as costly. Colbert shouldn't have been so dismissive of the Caymans. And neither should I.

Fifteen minutes east from the knotted traffic and slick, Miami-style shopping complexes of George Town and the west end, the road chokes to a narrow two lanes and development gives way to coconut palms and the long, droopy needles of Causarina pines. It's almost like driving to another island.

The tabletops of black rock at the Blow Holes, where the surf slams into the crenulated coast and spews ribbons of water 50 feet in the air, feel like a world away from the flat surf of Seven

BAY BREEZE

The infinity pool and view from Inspirato's Signature Residence, Villa Vientos, on the Caciique Peninsula.



"We travel to expand our experience, to discover something new about the world and ourselves... That's the thing about adventure—you never know where it will take you."

COOL BLUE
(Above) The iridescent blue waters of the Rio Celeste waterfall at Tenorio Volcano National Park.

NATIVE CHARM
(Clockwise from top, left) Residents of the butterfly conservancy in Arenal; guide Alex Ordoñez Jarquin at Tenorio Volcano National Park; red-eyed tree frogs spotted in the national park.

Mile. The mint green palapas that laze by the spit of white sand at Collier's Beach, one of the easternmost points on the island, is deserted and devoid of the blast of reggae that fills the air on the other end of Grand Cayman, and the quiet just beckons for naps. And down the road, the menu at Captain Herman's East Side Fish Fry—thick curried stews filled with chunks of conch, dumplings and cassava and fried barracuda served with pickled onions and carrots—makes the gastronomic perfection of Blue look even fussier than the reality. Hart's right: you can fulfill almost any desire on Grand Cayman.

Top on the island's hit list has to be Stingray City. And though I'm not really dying to visit, it feels like a trip to Grand Cayman without seeing the place would be like going to Trinidad during Carnival but never leaving your hotel. I connect with Lorenzo Bebemena, an Italian who sailed his 38-foot catamaran, Doppo Sogno or "double dream," from France and has since used it to run snorkeling and sailing day trips around Grand Cayman. Dozens of boats and operators ferry hundreds of tourists a day out to the spot in North Sound

where 60 to 70 stingrays congregate, but Bebemena's ship, which operates as Sunrays Tours, is among the quietest and most exclusive ways to make the trip.

Wading in the shallows among wild animals whooshing all around and skimming your legs with their soft wings proves more engaging than I'd imagined. And it's true that when you're nestling with a four-foot beast that looks like a spaceship and feels as soft as Italian suede, you don't even notice the crowds. As much as anything, though, I enjoy the wind in the sails on the return to harbor, the light on the water like millions of diamonds, and Bebemena's perspective on Grand Cayman.

"People journey everywhere to find a place like this, with easy water and climate that lets you enjoy it every day," he says. He motions with a sweep of his arm out at the broad lagoon. "I've sailed everywhere in the Caribbean. I'm still here for a reason." Grand Cayman is insidious like that. Though there's no single compelling reason to love the place, after just a few days I'm feeling like Bebemena, as if I could stay awhile. It's almost like the breadth and ease of the place begins to seep into you.

A few mornings later, I go diving with Duncan Heard of Stingray Sports, who takes me out on his 26-foot center-console dive boat, just one of three craft he charters. He's the classic British expatriate, easygoing, tan as leather, quick with a one-liner and infectious laugh, and full of stories. He says he has a contract to train Navy Seals in a re-breather technology he developed and mentions that he was in Texas the previous day negotiating a deal on a pair of Ferraris for a friend with a dealership in England. I try hard not to think of Thomas Hubbell and Pedro Castle.

Before we take the plunge, Heard ruminates on Grand Cayman. "I've traveled around the Caribbean and stopped here because it's just so well kitted up," he says. "Sure the place is completely safe. And the people are friendly. But the financial interests ensure that there's a will and a means to make things happen."

Case in point the USS Kittiwake, the wreck dive we're about to explore. This decommissioned World War II submarine rescue vessel was purchased by the

local dive organization, with the help of the Cayman government, and sunk as a purpose-built artificial reef for divers in 2011. The project took years to accomplish and now drives thousands of divers to the island annually. It's just another tick in the something-for-everyone list of reasons to visit Grand Cayman.

We descend to the Kittiwake, where electric green algae and puffs of coral like bouquets sprout from the ship's iron seams. Schools of Blue Runners and silvery-gold Bar Jack flit through rusted-out port-holes, and we fin along the submerged decks into the wheelhouse. Fifty years from now, Caymanians may well be telling visitors tales about the stormy day that this ship veered off course and ran aground on this island's shores. I hope they do. It would be as good for the escapism of a well-earned vacation as it would be for business.

Santa Fe-based writer Aaron Gulley tried zip-lining in Costa Rica for Inspirato's spring issue.

MAKE YOURSELF AT HOME

Grand Cayman

With seven Signature Residences on the island, Inspirato members can choose from, among other homes, the 4,200-square-foot, beachfront Shutters villa with its three bedrooms and private pool; a 3,000-square-foot terrace attached to the 4-bedroom Cousteau residences in the Sea Breeze development; or four-bedroom cottages located on the golf course's lagoon within the Ritz Carlton resort on Seven Mile Beach.

TO LEARN MORE ABOUT INSPIRATO'S GRAND CAYMAN SIGNATURE RESIDENCES, PLEASE TURN TO PAGE TK.

Aleece Gregg's list
Personal Vacation Advisor

EAT: Heminway's is a cute beach cottage on Seven Mile Beach famous for its sunset views. Ortanique in Camana Bay features traditional Caribbean fare (seafood and chicken) with an upscale twist.

DIVING: There are 365 dive moorings spread around the Caymans with an array of options from coral reefs to wrecks to walls.

SHOPPING: Outside of the cruise-ship zone, George Town is where the island's wealth meets sophisticated shops that are also duty-free.

Jun. 15, 2014
JET AROUND CAYMAN This annual jet-ski race around the island turns into an all-day beach party on Seven Mile Beach.