

The Caymans - Islands In Recovery

Contributed by Susan Birkenshaw
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As a travel agent, I am honoured to see countries around the world. The thing that never ceases to surprise me is the resilience of both the people and the land itself of different countries.

In September 2004, the Cayman Islands were hit by a monstrous hurricane. Most of the devastation was apparent on the showpiece of the Islands ? Grand Cayman.

Grand Cayman's sister islands ? Cayman Brac and Little Cayman were spared most of the impact from this hurricane and yet the people of these islands suffered along with their fellow countrymen.

In May 2006, less than a year after this horror, we had the opportunity to visit these islands and could not have been more surprised. The smaller Islands were well on the way to recovery and continued their tradition of friendly hospitality and pride in their home.

Little Cayman is world renowned as a top-notch dive site.

Michael and I had never tried this sport. We were finally able to take lessons in snorkeling from a well-qualified dive master. The magic of the seas and the beauty of the creatures, that we never see in Canada, were awe-inspiring.

We caught "the bug" and actually purchased our own equipment. I do not believe that it is possible to be dive off "the Wall" on the west coast of Little Cayman without feeling captivated by the World of Wonder under the seas.

Little Cayman boasts of the few inhabitants and the iguana population. Somehow, the island was missed almost completely by Ivan, which meant that the iguanas were protected. They continue to flourish and "own the roads".

Very little "fancy" on this island but I found it a joy to be amongst some of the happiest people I have ever met.

Sadly, Grand Cayman was not so lucky. When we flew into that airport, we witnessed the power of wind and water when they are unleashed on low-lying lands. Much of this island is just barely above sea level. When Ivan crashed in, the water struck two sides and met in the middle. We learned that the runways of the airport stood under more than two feet of seawater for more than two weeks.

The effect of the salt water also was tragic for such special places as the Butterfly farm and the Botanical Gardens. The butterfly garden was wiped out ? and yet when we arrived there the first time, their colleagues had rallied to help recreate this beautiful environment. I have numerous photographs of iridescent butterflies and beautifully "painted" ladies. This "farm" is a perfect example of what I mean about the resilience of the people and the land. Within six months, the land had been cleared, had been replanted and many indigenous plants simply sprang up again. Finally, the people who are so committed to this project repopulated the farm with many butterflies and started their research projects again.

Grand Cayman is known for its beautiful Seven-Mile Beach with its spectacular white sand and turquoise waters. When we returned to this island in May 2007, we were on a conference cruise. Over one hundred travel agents poured into this unique harbour and went off to see some of the many attractions.

Since Michael and I had been there recently we went looking

for something new. What we found was so magical we stayed

much longer than we should have. The Queen Elizabeth II Botanic Park is a lush tropical oasis. This park bursts with the colour and blossoms that are natural to the island with a few plants that are tropical worldwide. Set amongst huge tracts of uninhabited land it in fact covers more than

65 acres.

Orchid lovers will be in heaven in this park. There are 26 orchids native to the Caymans and seven of which can be found only in these islands. The park boasts examples of many of these classic flowers.

Peace and quiet can be found during the week on Rum Point.

A small protected bay with a beautiful beach, this rest stop is a short ride from the Botanic Park. Accommodation can be found in small guest houses in the area.

The Cayman Islands ? a world of wonder waits for you ? people who are so proud of their nation and a land that seems to have bounced back to display its beauty better than before.

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