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Viking

adventure, pages 58-59

Hotel Inspector, page 59

TERRIFIC FOR TURTLES!

The Cayman Islands offer wild encounters above and below water

THE Queen's portrait is on display at the airport — but it feels like arriving in Florida, with joggers pounding pavements, jeeps on the roads and dollars in the shops.

Then there is the Cayman Islands' reputation as a haven for hot money — not the most obvious incentive for tourists — and its eagerness to hold huge corporate conventions.

But when I ask my Surrey-born diving instructor if he misses Britain, I realise it's a daft question. After all, it is December and we have just surfaced from a superb dive in coral-rich waters. Now the sun is beating down as we bounce back in the boat towards a perfect tropical beach.

Darrin simply smiles: 'What do you think?' 'It's not cheap,' the former IT worker adds. 'But it is beautiful and you can walk down the street at night without looking over your shoulder.'

Tell people you're going on holiday to the Cayman Islands, and invariably the joke about stashing ill-gotten gains — since this trio of islands, 150 miles south of Cuba, is better known as a tax haven than tourist trap.

When my wife and I land on Grand Cayman, the biggest island, one of the first things we notice is the business buzz. Our hotel — one of those huge places with ceaseless activities and bar-stools in the pool — is packed with boisterous Americans attending a giant insurance convention.

But looks can be deceptive. For the Westin has some of the best hotel food I have tasted in the Caribbean. And the islands turn out to be a terrific holiday location.

Diving is the main attraction, with several fine wrecks dotted around the waters. There are scores of rock tunnels to swim through, and underwater walls close to the shore which — draped in coral — ensure a constantly changing kaleidoscope of marine life.

I glide through clouds of silvery jacks, stroke a giant grouper who



Sweeping sands: The Cayman

by Ian Birrell

follows me around — and eyeball fear-some big barracuda with menacing looks on their fang-laden faces.

Then there is Stingray City, where creatures the size of small tables congregate on shallow sandbars at the sound of boat engines.

In the past, these hungry creatures swarmed to scavenge when fishermen were cleaning their nets. Now they are deliberately lured with squid so that snorkellers can caress them.

'You hold them like a pizza box, with two hands underneath,' says one guide. 'It feels like stroking a wet portobello mushroom.'

My favourites, however, are the geeky-looking Hawksbill turtles — which, although endangered, seem to be plentiful in these waters.

I encounter five on one dive alone. They seem unconcerned as I swim alongside, admiring their striking shells and sharp beaks.

These elegant reptiles were also walked by Christopher Columbus,

Islands boast perfect beaches, excellent diving and the chance to swim with wonders such as Hawksbill turtles (below)

who was the first European visitor here on his final voyage, five centuries ago.

He even named the islands Las Tortugas in their honour, claiming that there were so many he could use them as stepping stones to the shore. Later, the archipelago was re-named after its crocodiles.

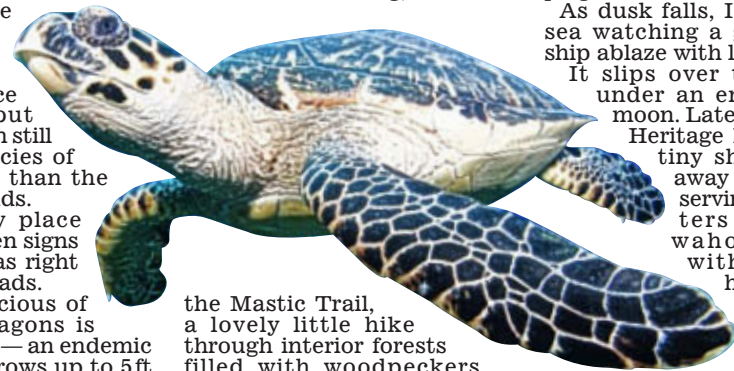
These have since disappeared, but the Caymans can still claim more species of flora and fauna than the Galapagos Islands.

It is the only place where I have seen signs that give iguanas right of way on the roads.

The most precious of these quasi-dragons is the Blue Iguana — an endemic species which grows up to 5ft long. A decade ago, there were only a dozen left, but an intensive breeding programme has boosted numbers back to more than 1,000. Although not

the most beautiful of beasts, they are mostly quite friendly. 'I love these guys,' says Alberto, the enthusiastic guide who shows us around their pens at the Queen Elizabeth II Botanic Park.

Another morning, we walk



the Mastic Trail, a lovely little hike through interior forests filled with woodpeckers, parrots and tree frogs hiding in holes of the creeper-clad trees.

Then, after plates of jerk chicken at a cafe hanging over

the water's edge, it is back to an afternoon of lazing — on Seven Mile Beach. Despite the name, this decadent crescent of sand is 'only' 5.5 miles long — and also the island's main drag, lined with smart hotels, small shopping malls and restaurants.

As dusk falls, I float in the sea watching a giant cruise ship ablaze with lights.

It slips over the horizon under an emerging full moon. Later, we drive to Heritage Kitchen — a tiny shack hidden away on the front serving conch fritters and fried wahoo, served with coconut, hot spice, rice and peas.

A meal that is simple and sublime.

Next day, we hop on a tiny plane over to Little Cayman — a slip of a place, home to about 170 people. A local provides a

lift to our pastel-painted hotel, joking that it is rush hour when we pass another vehicle.

We take to the road ourselves, hiring mopeds to chug around this ten-mile island, carefully avoiding the iguana sprawled on the Tarmac. At Point of Sand, at the north tip, we swim and soak up the last of the sun.

Then it is time for the chickens to be cleared from the island's runway and our return to reality.

TRAVEL FACTS

BRITISH Airways (0844 493 0787, ba.com) flies to Grand Cayman from £695 return.

ITC Luxury Travel (01244 355510, itcluxurytravel.co.uk) offers seven nights at the Westin Grand Cayman from £1,765 per person based on two adults sharing on a room-only basis, including return flights and private transfers.

More information at caymanislands.co.uk

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