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Dive into the Cayman Islands

By JOHN BORDSEN - McClatchy Newspapers

What's it like to live in a far-off place most of us see only on a vacation? Foreign Correspondence is an interview with someone who lives in a spot you may want to visit.

Walter Puk, 49, is a rental manager at Aqua Bay Club, a condo complex on Grand Cayman in the Cayman Islands. He has been in the Caymans for 14 years and divides his time between there and suburban Chicago.

Q. There are hundreds of tourist-ready islands in the Caribbean. What makes the Caymans different?

A. Grand Cayman developed a tourist base after becoming a capital of the banking world, and banking gave the Caymans financial stability. We're part of the British Commonwealth and not independent, so there's also political stability. There's hardly any crime, unemployment is very low, and per-capita income is one of the highest in the Caribbean. So you have a different tourism base than you'd find on islands that may be more like a Third World country.

Q. How many beaches are on your island?

A. The main one is the famous Seven Mile Beach. It's the original attraction, where all the major hotels are: Ritz Carlton, Hyatt, Weston, Marriott and others. It's where our tourism industry is located and where most restaurants are.

Another part of the island, called Rum Point, has a beautiful, sandy beach that's shallow and is known for its beach bar and restaurant and its sweeping views of the northern shore. Other parts of the island are starting to develop, as well.

Q. What's Cayman's sand like?

A. It's not as powdery as on some islands: It has more shells ground into it by wave action. It's not a flour-y sand; it's more like sugar.

Q. Is there much shelling?

A. Yeah. Go for a walk in the morning and take a bag along to pick up shells. And the snorkeling is fabulous. Right by Aqua Bay condos is a place called Cemetery Reef, one of the best offshore snorkeling spots. Just take a snorkel, mask and fins, and walk in. Within 50 feet of shore is this beautiful coral reef, in maybe 10 feet of water.

The corals and sponges are different colors - bright red to black, and anything in between. Pink. Yellow.

Q. How about diving?

A. It's easy. There are diving outfits all over the place. You can go out on a boat and take a nice dive with the operator. Operators will do group or individual trips. Or just wade into the water to explore many shore-accessible dive sites.

You can rent everything for \$50 or less. To do that and dive from a boat is about \$100, and the boat trip usually lasts a couple hours.

Q. Is seafood part of the local cuisine?

A. Most restaurants offer fresh seafood, and fresh local lobster in season is my favorite. Any fish can be served Cayman style - with tomatoes, onions and other vegetables.

Other than fish, the most popular fare would probably be oxtails with rice, beans and plantains. ... It's a traditional Caribbean dish.

Q. What about rum?

A. Many tourists bring back rum cake as souvenirs. Cayman rum! Tortuga Rum is well-known throughout the Caribbean, and the company produces famous rum cakes. The island also has a brewery, Caybrew, which resembles Heineken in taste, retails for about \$12 a six-pack.

Q. Grand Cayman has a reputation for being pricey. What are the best deals?

A. The best deal is to go to the Caymans in summer, the off-season. If you go between May and November, you're pretty much guaranteed beautiful weather. The water is 82 or 83 degrees and everything costs less. Cars and lodgings are less expensive to rent. The government runs all kinds of discount promotions for families that include deals on water sports and restaurants.

Q. What's the No. 1 attraction people don't know about?

A. Probably the new Boatswain's Beach. It's the old turtle farm that was damaged during Hurricane Ivan in 2004 and rebuilt across the road as a 23-acre marine adventure park. Besides breeding turtles and iguanas-including the native blue iguana, which is endangered and only found naturally here - the park has a predator tank. It's where you can see stingrays, sharks, eels and other creatures otherwise found in deep water. An adjacent swimming pool is separated only by a glass panel. This allow snorkelers to swim virtually right next to these unique creatures.

Q. There's an oddly named limestone formation on your island with a post office that's popular with tourists. How far are you from Hell?

A. Hell rock formation is a 15-minute drive from our property. It's on the northwest part of the island.

Know someone who lives in an interesting city or country who would like to give us the inside line on visiting there? E-mail, in English, jbordsen@charlotteobserver.com.