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Grand Cayman

Take a walk on the 'Far Side'

By Joan Rattner Heilman, Special to The Sun

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Grand Cayman Island, a little more than an hour from Miami, is perfect for a quick vacation, but if you're looking for a chance to laze about and relax, take my advice and head for the "Far Side," the other end of the island from George Town, the bustling capital of this tiny British Overseas Territory.

George Town is the Western Hemisphere's largest financial center and tax haven, and it's crammed with banks and brokerages, corporate headquarters, hotels and resorts lined up one after the other along its famous Seven Mile Beach, and thousands of visitors who disembark daily from the four or five cruise ships always anchored in the harbor for the day.

George Town is an exciting city with plenty of activities, upscale eateries,



The Iguana Sanctuary. photo by Mort Heilman

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sandy beaches, and vibrant nightlife, but if peace and relaxation are what you're after, get into your rental car and drive along the scenic southern coast to the Far Side, the undiscovered peaceful part of this small island.

That's where you'll find an unspoiled and secluded retreat with hardly a car on the roads and just a few fellow layabouts stretched out on the white sandy beaches or snorkeling in the toasty turquoise water of the Caribbean.

On a recent visit, we stayed at the Reef, one of the two resorts out there. A combination of timeshares and hotel, the Reef's accommodations range from studios to two-bedroom suites, all with kitchens and patios facing the sea so when you walk out your door, you're smack on the beach.

The resort has its own restaurant, coffee shop, and a casual outdoor dining area dominated by a big bar that specializes in margaritas and rum punch. There are spa services, a few small swimming pools, and a tennis court, plus a water sports center run by two amiable young fellows from Canada who offer equipment and guidance for snorkeling, paddle boarding, wind surfing, surfing, and kayaking, just in case you feel like getting up from your beach chair and doing something that requires some effort.

I consider snorkeling the best part of a lazy Caribbean vacation because, once you've found a good location, you can float around for hours looking at wonderful sea creatures while hardly moving a muscle. The Far End is loaded with good snorkeling areas, some of them just off the beach so all you have to do is wade in and get going. Most, however, require a boat ride out to a nearby reef where the fish tend to team. Diving too is big down here and you can bring your own equipment or rent it, and again you must reach the site by boat.

Although the Far Side doesn't offer a myriad of restaurants, there are enough good ones to last through even a lengthy stay, especially if you like authentic Caymanian food. You can eat at the hotel, of course, where the food is tasty but I recommend patronizing some of the local eateries.

Ms. Vivene's Kitchen, down the road a piece, specializes in local food such as fish, fish, fish, stewed chicken, oxtail curry, fried plantains, stewed goat, and is best visited for lunch because it often runs out of the best dishes by dinnertime.

Our other favorite is Over the Edge, an open-air rustic restaurant with a busy bar and a big patio perched over the sea.



The Reef Resort's accommodations range from studios to two-bedroom suites, all with kitchens and patios facing the sea so when you walk out your door, you're right on the beach. On Page B1: Rum Point Beach, one of the most popular beaches on the East End of Grand Cayman. Photo by Nina Zapala

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It too specializes in fresh-caught fish but has a big and varied menu that usually includes turtle stew.

One place not to miss is Roland's Garden, if you can manage to get a reservation. Open only on weekend evenings and accommodating a maximum of 15 guests, this place is an adventure. Hand-hewn log tables topped by beach umbrellas are set in a clearing under tall trees, trailing vines, and bushy shrubs, lit by lanterns and decorated by piles of old wine bottles and odd bits of this and that, such as anchors and shells and fishnet.

In his big white apron, Roland, proprietor and chef (and waiter), puts on his one-man show, greeting his guests as they step through a small opening in the trees from the road, inviting them to take a tour of the property, make their own drinks (it's BYOB here), and nibble on a huge platter of unusual hors d'oeuvres.

At least once during your stay on the quiet side of the island, spend a day swimming, wading, birding, or snorkeling at nearby Rum Point, a quaint beach area surrounded by towering casuarinas trees.

Hop into a hammock or choose a couple of beach lounges, have a drink at the Wreck Bar, and sit down at a picnic table and order lunch from the snack bar.

We signed up with Red Sail Sports for an excursion on a 50-passenger catamaran that took us from the dock to the famous Stingray City, a shallow sandbar where you wade in the water and mingle with a bunch of ominous-looking but friendly velvet-skinned Atlantic stingrays who have learned that the guides always arrive with tasty snacks of squid, their favorite dish. On the way back, you pause again for a half hour of snorkeling on a shallow reef rife with fish.

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