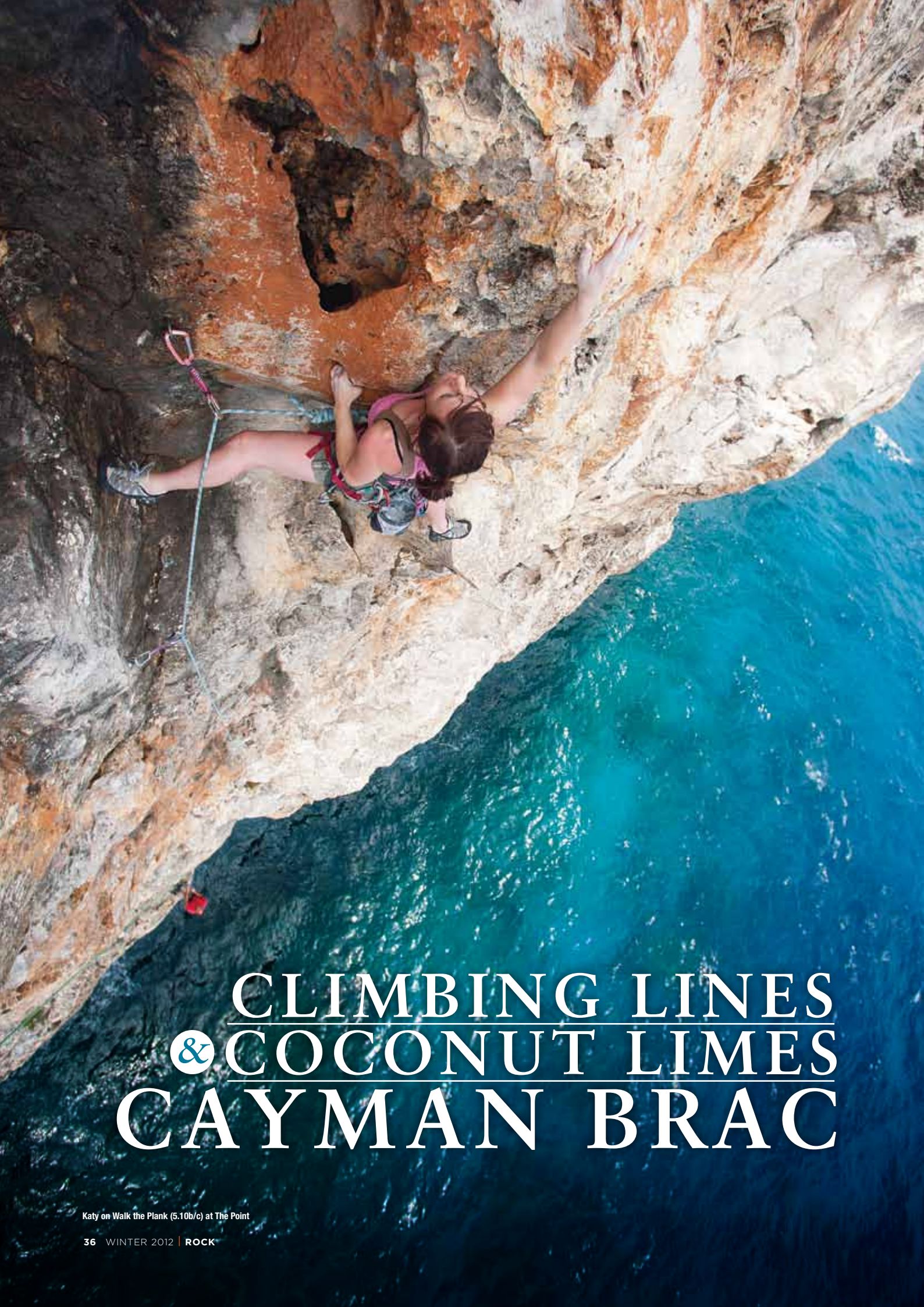


CLIMBING LINES & COCONUT LIMES
CAYMAN BRAC

Katy on Walk the Plank (5.10b/c) at The Point

MOST CLIMBING TRIPS CAN BE PRETTY FULL-ON. SPECIFIC ROUTES AND GRADES TO TICK OFF, LIVING FRUGALLY, EARLY NIGHTS AND EARLY STARTS THEN RETURNING HOME IN NEED OF ANOTHER HOLIDAY – BUT THIS ONE WAS DIFFERENT, AS *KATY DARTFORD* FOUND OUT ON THE CARIBBEAN ISLAND OF CAYMAN BRAC.

Cayman Brac, just south of Cuba and north-west of Jamaica, hasn't had much attention lately. The island is still recovering from hurricane Paloma which hit in 2008. She tore through the homes of the 1500 islanders, leaving 70 percent of them without roofs. Because of this, the Brac is one of the least developed islands in the Caribbean.

There are still signs of devastation. Uprooted trees and wind battered houses can still be seen around the island. The south side has only been developed in the last 30 years as Bracians don't believe it's safe from hurricanes. "I hope I never have to live through that again," says local tour guide David. "We had to smash our windows to ease some of the pressure caused by the winds. Next time – and pray to God there isn't a next time – we will go to a proper shelter, or a cave."

Like many, I first visited Cayman Brac, the second largest of the Cayman Islands, to dive amongst the turtles, but I soon discovered that diving is not the only attraction of Cayman Brac. David takes me to look at the caves he mentioned; legend has it that spots like Rebecca's cave, Peters Cave and the Bat Cave where also once used by pirates like Blackbeard and Morgan to hide their treasures. The caves are dotted along the 'Bluff,' (Brac in Gaelic), a large limestone wedge that runs along the spine of the 12 miles long island. The Bluff is nearly 30 million years old and starts at sea-level in the west end, reaching around 40-metres in the east - the highest point in the Cayman Islands. However, the cliff now holds a different kind of treasure – at least for me; exotic rock climbing manna from heaven on flowstone and multi-coloured cliffs, rising above dark blue and aquamarine seas.

Cayman Brac has only recently been developed as a sport climbing location and it's one of this rugged and unspoilt island's best kept secrets. Less than a year after my first dive trip there, I was back. During a short flight on a shaky otter plane from Grand Cayman, the island appears like a speck of sand in the expanse of shimmering blue sea. Cayman Brac is not your typical tropical setting of white sand crescent beaches and swaying palm trees. You can find this in the South West side of the island, but the North East side is wild and raw, vegetated with cactus, agave stinging vines and scrub. It's virtually uninhabited, except for hermit crabs, lizards and frigate birds soaring above the cliffs.

I'm met at the tiny Brac airport by Jon Byrnes. The American had a house by the Bluff and has bolted some of the first routes. I managed to track him down on email after a google search for information about climbing on the island.

It all began in 1994, when two of his friends from Colorado spotted its potential and bolted two routes. A second siege on the island took place in 1995 which Jon was involved in. He explains that he usually heads to the Brac from about February to April, opening his house up to anyone interested in climbing. I'm invited to come along. As we head off to his sky blue Bluff View House, Jon tells me more about the climbing. "It's not promoted at all. The authorities only want to show weddings, glamour and luxury. But that's not the Bracker's picture of life here," he explains. "It's a laid back place, there's no traffic and you don't often find other climbers, so there's no crowds or polished routes." "What about the people who live here?" I ask. "Bracian's are getting more interested in climbing, but they're scared as there's no-one here full time to teach them."

He tells me that in 1995 they put up about 45 routes ranging from 6a to 7c, but there are a handful of easier routes that are really good.



Katy Walking the Plank.



The quite delightful route to first cay

Despite sleep deprivation setting in, I dump my bags at Jon's house, down a frozen margarita that he whips up and we take a short walk to Love Shack Wall. Jon hands me a spongy matt to sit on as the rock is extremely sharp and 'whipped up like the devils meringue.' There I meet Vance from Wyoming and Darek a frothy haired Pole now living in Colorado who are rebolting some lines. Hanging from five metres up Vance asks if I can hear a high pitch chirp. "It's the bats in the cave." I'm not sure I believe him. Looking nervously at the overhanging rock, I decide I truly am too tired to climb, so Jon, gives me the beta: "Grey rock is bad. It's sharp because it's not overhanging and it catches the rain. You should climb on the white and orange rock. It's in good condition because it's steep and doesn't catch the rain." I'm going to have to get used to overhangs if I'm going to get anything done here, I decide.

We return to Bluff View house that evening, where Darek prepares a dinner of freshly caught Mahi Mahi fish. As we eat, I learn the intricacies of the weather are a big part of the Brac climbing experience. "It's all about picking the right time of day and the right area," says Jon.

There are seven climbing areas. Three on the North side which are in the shade in the morning, the other four, on the South side, go into the shade in the afternoon. "But you need to look out for 'smarm'," warns Darek. "The rock can get a coating of sea-spray which makes the holds feel soapy, but if there's been some rain and breeze, conditions will be crisp and the route will feel easy."

> AFTER A WELCOME NIGHT'S SLEEP, THE MORNING BREAKS BALMY AND STILL, SO WE DECIDED TO GO SNORKELLING OFF THE NORTH SHORE NEAR A DIVE SITE CALLED RADAR REEF UNTIL SHADE HITS THE ORANGE CAVE.

After a welcome night's sleep, the morning breaks balmy and still, so we decide to go snorkelling off the north shore near a dive site called Radar Reef until shade hits the Orange Cave. At around 2pm we pick our way across an iron shore beach, where I narrowly avoid being sprayed by a blast of water forced through a blowhole. The rather phallic shaped Orange Cave has six routes ranging from 4 to 6c+. All are steep, with two coming out of the cave on jugs. I approach the warm up, 'Lord Slime' a 4, nervously, not sure what to expect of the route or myself. Pulling through the first moves onto a white tower, I start to panic 'where are all the holds?' I soon discover that it's peppered with sharp hidden pockets and edges. Once I realise this, I calm down and hunt around, finishing easily. I then jump onto L'Orangerie, a 4+ and find it

quite enjoyable, with a tentative traverse left to get the first bolt, then some steep moves to get past it. Determined not to embarrass myself in front of my new American friends, I climb the steepest line out the right side of the cave to a crouching rest, and then move quickly to the anchors. A few metres east of Orange Cave are some more recently bolted lines. Teetering off a stack of rocks piled as high as I can balance them, I pull onto 'Ick theology, I'd rather study Cod.' At 6a, it looks too difficult, except for an awkward bouldery start and a small roof at the top. But I get my comeuppance, as after moving easily to a cave, I try to haul up on jugs to the top, but my grip began to fade; 'Smarm!' I make a few more attempts, before admitting defeat.

We decide to move onto Wave Wall to see if conditions are better there. About 20 minutes east from the Orange Cave, it's best approached during calm seas, unless you want a good soaking. To reach the crag you pass a pointed boulder, the First Cay, and then time your crossing between waves at three sections of sloping shingle. Traversing this in hiking boots, with wet, jagged rock and pounding seas is exciting, but worth the effort once Wave Wall comes into view. Here, the 30-metre routes are streaked red and black, peppered with the Cayman's semi-precious stone, Caymanite. Jon offers me the lead on Old School, a 4+ warm-up. The route description reads, 'If you're not on a jug, you're probably off-route,' and this was certainly the case. Old School is a good warm up for New Wave at 6a. After a stiff, bouldery start, where I panicked and took a rest, I haul up on buckets into a small cave. Looking out I see plenty of air below me. I rest back in the cave, building up the courage to commit to the move, before doing the splits to get out of the cave, then reaching wide to the final bolt. Rethreading my rope I glance back to see the sun beginning to set over the Bluff leaving the sky a myriad of colours.

The next morning we decided to climb on the North side at Dixon's Wall first thing, rather than the usual routine of snorkelling then climbing. It's named after the pleasantly rotund Mr Dixon, who's happy to let strangers ramble across his backyard to get to the crag if they pop in for a chat. When we emerge through the bush, looming overhead was a fingery, pocketed vertical wall leading to overhanging flowstone and stalactites. Despite this I feel relaxed, knowing there was nothing easier than 6c here, I probably won't have to lead anything. I try the 'warm up' 'Dixons Delight', climbing through small pockets and crimps to the 5th bolt where the flowstone sets in and I back off. But I am persuaded to lead the beginning of 'Out of Africa,' (7a) which starts on friendly tufas. I climbed easily through them, until I reach the crux, a finger pocket for the left hand, that requires a dyno, then a move up for a cauliflower-shaped hold for the right hand. I don't have the reach to make the move, but am beginning to feel more comfortable with the rock.

There's still plenty of time to head to the North East Point. I'd heard much about the adventurous climbing there, as the Bluff drops straight down 40-metres into the Sea. Parking at the lighthouse, we cross some sharp iron shore to reach the first big dihedral marked by a palm tree. Jon sets up a complicated looking abseil, which I tie into and shuffle out over the edge, being watched by bemused booby birds. I slide down the bottomless sea cliffs with waves booming in caves below my heels to a small ledge. My first route is 'Shiver me Timbers.' (6a+) Starting on buckets to a beautiful orange arête, the climbing turns out easier than I expect until I reach the grey coloured rock crux. Failing to find the hidden finger pocket, I decide to head out onto an edge, pulling up onto easier ground of brick-red rock and more obvious pockets,

There are about 18 routes at the Point with grades range from 5 to 7b+. Jon gleefully tells me "the only way out, was up," so I'm glad I kept going. But reaching the belay stance wasn't as 'relaxing' as hoped, as I had to hang from bolts below the rim to avoid running the lead rope over any sharp edges. Then the heavens opened as I began belaying Jon up. Fortunately he'd wired the moves years ago, so sailed up, finishing, just as the rain did. With the sun returning, we head home where Darek slashed some fresh coconut to drink, then we head to the Public Beach to swim and soak up the sun.

We return to Orange Cave a few days later, after a morning snorkelling off the north shore near the wrecked Russian Frigate; the MV Captain Keith Tibbetts. We decide to try the islands first bolded



That girl Katy again. Orange cave, Chum Buckets (5.10b)

route, Chum Buckets. (6a) Beginning inside the cave, the starting sequence is powerful, moving right using a pistol pinch, through orange and black stained buckets, using a painful heel hook to manoeuvre me out of the cave onto a thin shelf. I clip the first two draws and get as high as the third but can't find a way to clip it.

Slumping onto the rope, I'm quite relieved not to go much further, as the rock became dark, correlating with 'sharpness'. The route is named Chum Buckets after chopped fish for good reason – your hands end up looking just like that.

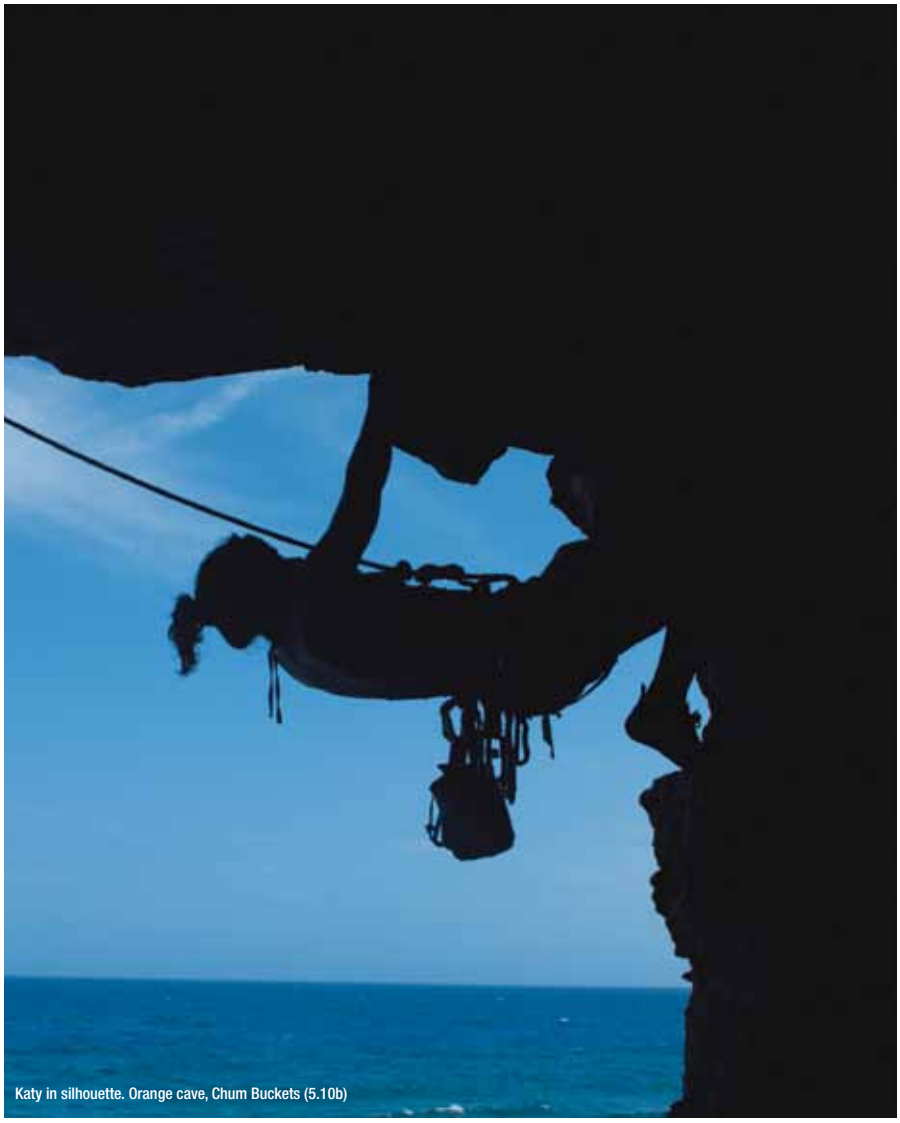
That night a badly needed storm sets in, rattling the windows of Bluff View house.

"Let's see how it affects the rock today," says Jon ritualistically grinding his morning coffee.

There's no debate, as we're all keen to go back to the Point to make me Walk the Plank.

I begin with a tentative traverse out right, making at least five attempts to reach over a bulge, almost giving up, until I throw a huge Egyptian to reach a suitcase handhold, pockets, and then a clip. I can instantly feel that the storm overnight had cleaned the rock, leaving it 'smarm' free. I move up along slabby crystals and crisp holds up to a large dihedral with dark sections of rock. Again, I'm doing the splits, shuffling up, feeling around above my head until my hand sinks into a bucket – just in time – as my left foot pops and I catch myself. Quickly I move through an airy traverse left, onto some crumbly rock, then to the belay, with huge relief.

This is my last climb on the Brac. But I was finally feeling more confident and comfortable with the rock. I've spent more than a week snorkelling and climbing while thriving on rum, beer, fresh fish and jerk chicken with unfamiliar Southern stars glowing above the iron shore every night. A trip to Cayman Brac is different to your average climbing trip; the tropical setting, the snorkeling, the people, and the feeling of being far from civilization. A deluxe climbing experience.



Katy in silhouette. Orange cave, Chum Buckets (5.10b)

TRAVEL

Fly to Grand Cayman's 'Owen Roberts International Airport' then take an inter-island service to Cayman Brac via Cayman Airways, which provides a daily jet service or Cayman Express that flies four times daily.

SEASON

The best time to climb is late-November through to April, when the temperatures are lower and there are fewer storms. Winter temperatures are usually around 28°C, so follow the shade and breeze around the island and climb on the north side in the morning and South in the afternoon.

ACCOMMODATION

To be near the climbing, stay at the East End. Bluff View House, on the South Side road, is known as 'The Climber House' by the locals, and you can rent out an entire floor for about AU$115 per night. Email: jbyrnes@frii.com On the North-East side there are B&Bs at Walton's Mango Manor Bed & Breakfast www.waltonsmangomanor.com and Ocean Wave apartments at 12 Foster Road, Stake Bay.

GEAR

There are no guidebooks so route information can be found at www.climbcaymanbrac.com There are now 62 routes bolted with titanium, with grades ranging from 4 to 8a. No gear is sold on the island so bring your own. The longest route needs 19 quick draws. Six to eight shoulder-length slings with karabiners and ascending devices are useful for routes at the Point.
A 60-metre or longer rope and an extra rope for abseiling is also recommended.

REST DAYS

Hire a car at CB Rent-A-Car at the airport: www.cbrentacar.com. There is hiking on the Bluff, leading to a variety of caves and a nature trail leading to the 180 Parrot Reserve. If you're also a diver, contact Reef Divers based at the Brac Reef Resort: www.bracreef.com or go snorkelling. The entire north coast offers great shallow underwater scenery with easy entry at places like Buccaneer's Beach.

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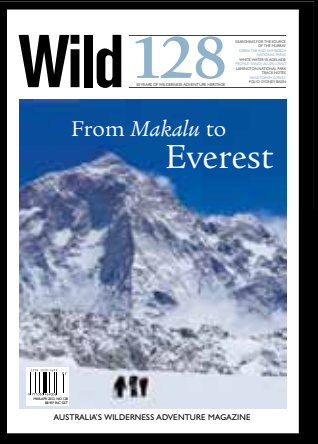
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