ISLAND IN THE STREAM

ONCE A KEYSTONE FOR CARIBBEAN PIRACY AND THE SLAVE TRADE BUT BEST KNOWN TODAY AS A TAX HAVEN, THE CAYMAN ISLANDS LIE SOUTH OF CUBA AND NORTHWEST OF JAMAICA. AS KATY DARTFORD FOUND OUT, THERE ARE STILL HIDDEN TREASURES FOR THE MODERN ADVENTURER ON THE MOST EASTERLY AND UNSPOILT OF THE THREE ISLANDS - CAYMAN BRAC

PHOTOGRAPHY KIRK DONALDSON



When Christopher Columbus' ship was blown off course between Hispaniola and Panama on his last trip to the New World in 1503, he discovered three islands full of sea turtles, naming them Las Tortugas. Around 80 years later, the first English visitor, Sir Francis Drake, sighted Las Tortugas and renamed them the Cayman Islands, after the Caribbean crocodiles he saw. Like many, I first visited Cayman Brac, the second largest of the islands, to dive with the turtles. But a year later I was back for something quite different. As I stood on the iron-coloured shore, gazing out across the bay, I wondered if I was one of the first English visitor to climb on Cayman Brac's Bluff. This limestone wedge runs along the spine of the 12 mile long island, reaching 40 metres in height at the northeast point. For a long time, pirates like Blackbeard and Morgan used the Bluff's caves to hide their treasures, but now I'd found treasure of my own: exotic rock climbing on technicolour flowstone cliffs, rising above the aquamarine sea.

When I first heard there was climbing on the Bluff I asked around for more information, but being August and the hurricane season, there were no climbers about, and local Bracians knew little about it. Google brought up a few basic websites and the name Jon Byrnes, who had a house by the Bluff and had bolted some of the first routes. Climbing on the island began in 1994, when two of Jon's Colorado friends spotted its potential and bolted two routes. A second siege on the island took place in 1995, which Jon was involved with. I dropped him an email, expecting never to hear of it again. But a few weeks later a reply landed in my inbox. Jon explained that he usually headed to the Brac from about February to April, opening his house up to anyone interested in climbing- a sort of 'climbers retreat.' This year he had organised a rebolting trip to replace some of the steel bolts with more reliable titanium ones, and was invited to come along.

After months of debate, I decided the opportunity to climb on undiscovered limestone and snorkel on the same day was too tempting to miss. So six months later, I was again strapped into a tiny Twin Otter plane, looking down through heavy eyes as the island appeared like a grain of sand in the expanse of cobalt sea. Cayman Brac is not your typical tropical setting of white sand, crescent beaches, and swaying palm trees. You can find these on the southwest side of the island, but the northeast 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.

Jon picked me up from the airport: he's not quite what I expected, a little reserved for an American, and lacking a Caribbean suntan. Jetlagged, I muster up the strength to ask him about the climbing. 'It's not promoted at all,' he tells me, 'the authorities only want to show weddings, glamour and luxury. But that's not the Bracians picture of life here,' he explains. 'It's a laid back place, everything moves slowly on 'island time', 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. 'Well, Bracians are getting

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FACING PAGE: Katy Dartford in the big dihedral of *Walkin' the Plank* (5.10c/6b) on the North East Point of Cayman Brac.
ABOVE RIGHT: Local Bracian and one of the island's key activists Jon Byrnes on the crux move to a mono pocket on *Out of Africa* (5.11d/7a) at Dixon's Wall.

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 which are really good. 'It's gourmet limestone' he says.

We arrive at the sky-blue Bluff View House, but sleep deprivation was not a good enough excuse to not go climbing. So I dump my bags, down a frozen margarita that Jon had whipped up for me, and we take a short walk to Love Shack Wall. At the crag, Jon hands me a spongy matt to sit on as the rock is extremely sharp; 'whipped up like the devil's meringue.' There I met Vance from Wyoming and Darek, a frothy-haired Pole now living in Colorado, who were rebolting some lines. Hanging from 5 meters up Vance asks if I can hear a high pitch chirp. 'It's the bats in the cave.'

Unsure I believe him, I look nervously at the overhanging rock, and decide I truly am too tired to climb, so Jon, relaxed as he was now in his element, 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 good 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 returned to Bluff View house that evening, where Darek prepares a dinner of freshly caught Mahi Mahi fish. As we eat, I learn that 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 7 climbing areas on the island: 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 broke balmy and still, so we decided to go snorkelling off the north shore near a dive site called Radar Reef until shade hit the Orange Cave. At around 2pm we picked our way across a the beach, where I narrowly avoided being sprayed by a blast of water forced through a blowhole. The 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 warm up on *Lord Slime* (4) nervously, 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 edge. Once I realised this, I calm down and hunt around, finishing easily. I then jump onto *L'Orangerie*, a 4+ 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 moved quickly to the anchors. A few meters east of Orange Cave are some more recently bolted lines. Teetering off a stack of rocks piled as high as I could balance them, I pulled on a 6a with an awkward bouldery start and a small roof at the top. But I got my comeuppance, as after moving easily to a cave, I tried to haul up on jugs to the top, but my grip began to fade: 'Smarm!' I made a few more attempts before admitting defeat.

We decide to move on to Wave Wall to see if conditions were better there. About twenty 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 was exciting, but worth the effort once Wave Wall came into view. Here, the 30 metre routes are streaked red and black, peppered with the Caymans' 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 ▶

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FACING PAGE: Elizabeth Rappaport leans out to check the next move on *No Problem Mon* (5.10a/6a) at the North East Point.
ABOVE LEFT: Jim Dideo reaches for a bolt well up on *Hang 10* (5.10d/6b+) on Wave Wall.
ABOVE RIGHT: Katy Dartford isn't taking in the spectacular view as she makes a clip on *Shooting the Curl* (5.10a) Wave Wall..

certainly the case. *Old School* was a good warm up for *New Wave* at 6a. After a stiff, bouldery start, I hauled up on buckets into a small cave, where I rested, before doing the splits to get out of the cave, then reaching wide to the final bolt. Threading my rope, I glanced back to see the sun beginning to set over the Bluff, leaving the sky a myriad of colours. Regretting resting on the route, I returned a few days later to finish it off, more familiar with the rock and its strangely camouflaged pockets.

The next morning we decided to climb on the north side at Dixon's Wall, rather than the usual routine of snorkelling first. 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 emerged through the bush, looming overhead was a fingery, pocketed vertical wall, leading to overhanging flowstone and stalactites. Despite this, I felt relaxed, knowing that as there was nothing easier than 6c here, I probably wouldn't have to lead anything. I tried the 'warm up' *Dixons Delight*, climbing through small pockets and crimps to the 5th bolt where the flowstone set in and I backed off. But I was then persuaded to lead the beginning of *Out of Africa* (7a) which started on friendly tufas. I climbed easily through them until I reached the crux dyno: I didn't have the reach to make the move, but was beginning to feel more comfortable with the rock.

There was 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 meters into the sea. Parking at the lighthouse, we crossed the jagged shore to reach the first big dihedral, marked by a palm tree. Jon set up a complicated- looking abseil, which I tied into and shuffled out over the edge, being watched by bemused birds. I slid down the rope, with waves booming in caves below my heels, to a small ledge. My first route was to be *Shiver Me Timbers*. (6a+) Starting on buckets to a beautiful orange arête, the climbing turned out easier than I expected, until I reached the grey coloured rock crux. Failing to find the hidden finger pocket, I decided to head out right onto an edge, pulling up to 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 had gleefully told me that 'the only way out, was up,' so I was glad I had kept going. But reaching the belay stance wasn't as relaxing as I had 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 headed home where Darek slashed some fresh coconut to drink from, then we headed to the public beach to swim and soak up the sun.

We returned to Orange Cave a few days later, after a morning of snorkelling off the north shore near the wrecked Russian Frigate, the MV Captain Keith Tibbetts. We decide to try the islands first bolted route, *Chumb Buckets* (6a) - it's named after chopped fish for good reason, because your hands end up looking just like that.

That night a badly needed storm set in, rattling the windows of Bluff View house. 'Let's see how it affects the rock today,' said Jon ritualistically grinding his morning coffee. There's no debate, as we're all keen to go back to the Point and *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-handle pocket, and then clip. I could instantly feel that the storm overnight had cleaned the rock, leaving it 'smarm free'. I moved 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 was to be my last climb on the Brac, but I was finally feeling more confident and comfortable with the rock. I'd spent over 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 visit to Cayman Brac is different to your average climbing trip: the tropical setting, the snorkelling, the laid-back islanders, and the feeling of being far from civilization all combine with the unusual climbing to form a unique and memorable experience. ■











TOP: Patrick Cusack heads for afternoon shade on Wave Wall (seen in the distance). **TOP CENTRE:** Barry's Golden Jerk chicken is a must while on the Brac. These guys take their jerk chicken and competative dominoes games seriously. **CENTRE:** Bluff View House (aka the Climbers' House) is owned by climbing guide author and Bracian information-source, John Byrnes. **LOWER CENTRE:** Bright green Cayman Parrots are indigenous and endemic to the island. **LOWER:** A hermit crab emerges from its shell on the shore of Cayman Brac.

TRAVEL

Fly to Grand Cayman's Owen Roberts International Airport then take an inter-island service to Cayman Brac via Cayman Airways (who provide a daily jet service) or Cayman Express, who fly 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 in the low 80's (28C), 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 Climbers House' by the locals, and you can rent out an entire floor for £73 per night. Email: jbyrnes@frii.com
On the North East side there are B&B's at Walton's Mango Manor Bed & Breakfast (waltonsmangomanor.com) and Ocean Wave apartments at 12 Foster Road, Stake Bay.

GEAR

There are no guidebooks, but route information can be found at http://www.climbcaymanbrac.com There are now 62 routes bolted with titanium bolts, with grades ranging from 4 to 8a. No gear is sold on the island, so bring your own. The longest route requires 19 quick draws. Six to eight shoulder-length slings with karabiners and jumars 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.