



North Wall & North Sound



This area is home to several famous shallow and deep dives. **Stingray City** and **Sandbar** inside the North Channel in the northwest end of the vast North Sound lagoon are the best known sites by far, where huge stingrays have become accustomed to divers, snorkelers and waders, and never fail to thrill.

But the entirety of North Sound is one of the island's finest assets. It's a huge, natural incubation site for all kinds of waterfowl, marine plants, juvenile fish and invertebrates, and sites outside the main channel benefit greatly from this treasure trove.

North Wall & North Sound

	COBALT	ICE	SEA	SEA
1 STINGRAY CITY	•	•		
2 SANDBAR	•	•		
3 LESLIE'S CURL	•	•		
4 EAGLE RAY PASS	•		•	
5 PRINCESS PENNY'S PINNACLE	•		•	
6 TARPON ALLEY	•		•	
7 HOLE IN THE WALL	•		•	
8 GHOST MOUNTAIN	•		•	
9 COBALT RIDGE	•		•	
10 SEA FANS 1 THRU 3	•		•	

The wall outside the Sound area is alive with marine life of all sorts, where deep grooves and coral encrusted drop-offs provide a multitude of shelter types for huge fish, shoals of colorful tropicals and flurries of tiny reef fish.

Considered by many to be the island's premier place to explore, the dives here, when accessible, are always promising.

1 STINGRAY CITY

Location: North Sound

Depth: 6-12ft (4m)

Access: Boat

Range: Novice

1 — =

One of the world's most famous dives, Stingray City is fun, shallow and located in a beautiful setting.

The dive starts with an on-board briefing about how to settle on the bottom and interact with the stingrays. The lecture normally contains some stingray info as well, so you learn a bit about these amazing creatures.

While this is mainly a shallow dive site, people snorkel above the feeders to watch the action. The water is normally crystal clear, making it easy to see what's going on. Ray wranglers may even swim up with a ray or two following, to give snorkelers a good, close look.

Upon descending, hungry rays will probably already be near the boat. If not, it is a thrilling sight to see a group of anywhere from four to 14 stingrays winding their way toward you across the snow white sand. Rays here have been measured at over 4ft across and weighing over 125 pounds. There have been reports of 6ft rays, however this far exceeds their normal adult size. Still, there are definitely some big ones.



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A stingray comes to greet divers

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	GOOD SNORKELING	NOVICE	INTERMEDIATE	ADVANCED
1 STINGRAY CITY	•	•		
2 SANDBAR	•	•		
3 LESLIE'S CURL	•	•		
4 EAGLE RAY PASS	•		•	
5 PRINCESS PENNY'S PINNACLE	•		•	
6 TARPON ALLEY	•		•	
7 HOLE IN THE WALL	•		•	
8 GHOST MOUNTAIN	•		•	
9 COBALT RIDGE	•		•	
10 SEA FANS 1 THRU 3	•		•	

Stingray City's Stingrays



It is estimated that between 3,000 and 5,000 people visit the stingray attractions in the Grand Cayman North Sound on every day that weather permits. Many of these visitors are from cruise ships, while others are divers and snorkelers staying on the island. In any case, from mid-morning through to the early afternoon, it's a busy place.

The rays found here are called southern stingrays. As the story goes, the cut in the reef which leads to this area of the North Sound was a popular one for fishermen to enter and then sit in calm water within the Main Channel while cleaning the day's catch. As they threw the bones and guts overboard, rays learned about this spot and came to feed on the discarded fish parts. Eventually word got out to divers, and it quickly became a dive attraction.

The fishermen are all but gone nowadays, but the rays remain. In the wild, they aren't normally seen flying across the reef as they do here, preferring to usually keep buried in the sand. With their eyes set high on their body, they can rest in this camouflaged state whilst keeping an eye out for predators, such as Caribbean reef sharks or hammerheads.

Rays also have one or more serrated, venomous sheathed barbs, four to eight inches long, that can be used to ward off enemies or someone settling on top of them. These can inflict a painful wound in humans which may quickly become infected, and if the barb breaks off, it must be surgically removed.

When hungry, rays can be seen foraging through the sand, often in the company of a bar jack or a goatfish which will try to grab any morsel the ray may scare up or leave behind. Rays eat small fish, clams, crabs, lobsters and other invertebrates, and their powerful jaws can crush shellfish and crustaceans easily.

Reports of stings and accidents at the Cayman's popular sites, such as Stingray City and Sandbar are actually very rare. The rays here have become quite tame and used to humans. Still, they are wild creatures and care should be taken not to handle, grab or step on them.

Rays also have a protective mucous on their skins. Touching them can remove this coating, leaving them vulnerable to infection. Look but don't touch - leave that to the ray wranglers, who know what they're doing.

There can be some current at this site as it's close to the Main Channel, so extra weight can be helpful, plus it helps anchor you in place to watch rays feed without having to deal with buoyancy issues.

Try to find a nice sandy spot and settle down with the other divers in a circle around your ray wrangler. Divemasters usually have a canister containing squid which the rays come in to eat, although this is not their normal fare in the wild. Wranglers release bits of squid at intervals with a few waves of the canister, keeping the rays around for you to watch and interact with.

This can go on for quite a while, especially if no other boat comes around. Dives typically last over an hour, and since it is only about 15ft deep if you use a shovel, it's rare to use an entire tank here. Rays can be fickle though, and may disperse when a new group shows up, but often they or another group will return.

Rays aren't the only fish to be seen here. The ubiquitous yellowtail snappers are always present, and there are also a couple of large groupers and a large, somewhat cataract-affected green moray eel. This eel can't see well,

so if it does put in an appearance, keep your hands close to your body. There are also some great barracuda lurking about. If any of these guys show up, the wrangler may cease feeding for a while, as they can strike like lightning.

It may seem incongruous to bring a macro lens on this dive, but the site is very close to a reef channel and also an outlet for the mangroves in the inner bay. There is some very good small marine life at the many coral heads near the anchorage. About a half-hour into the dive, the divemaster may stop ray feeding to lead a short tour through the corals and coral heads. Look here for juvenile blue tang, lobsters large and small, juvenile spotted drums, red reef shrimp, flame scallops, juvenile angelfish, anemones with Pederson anemone shrimp and lots of other small creatures that may have developed in the mangroves and are now heading out for a life on the reef. Even seahorses can pop up here.

The feeding will then often continue at the end of the reef tour. Enjoy the rays and this amazing interaction, as there are few places like it in the world. Many divers come back for second and third dives here, as it's always fun and great for photos.



The beautiful stingrays at Stingray City in black and white

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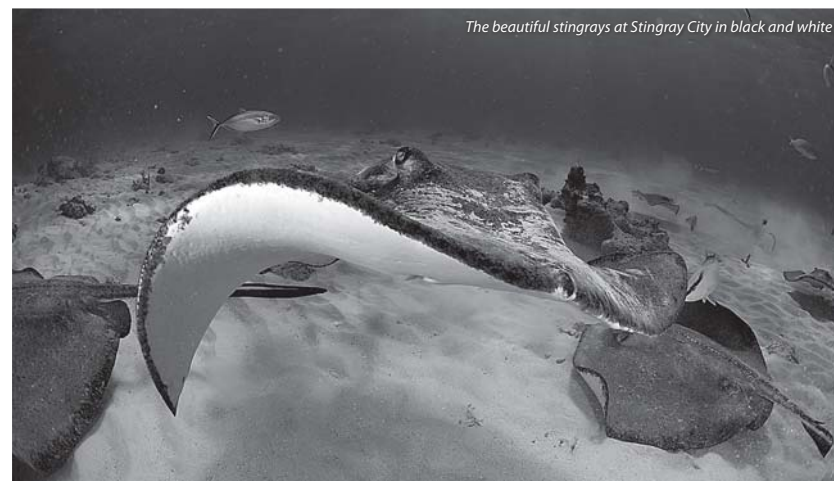
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2 SANDBAR

Location: North Sound, east of Stingray City

Depth: 0-5ft (1.5m)

Access: Boat

Range: Novice, snorkel only

1 --=

This site is more for non-divers who still want to see stingrays. A popular wading and snorkeling spot about two miles east of **Stingray City**, the procedure here is much the same as in Stingray City. A designated feeder uses a canister of squid pieces to lure rays in to be fed, while visitors get to watch as the rays zip in.

Research has found that these rays are mostly females (normally the larger ones) and that they hang around to be fed by day. Males tend to stay farther away from the site, but they must get together sometime, as many of the rays here will often be pregnant.



Tube sponges at Leslie's Curl

It was also found that the fed rays remained at the Sandbar during the day. They do leave the area a little at night, probably to find crustaceans if still hungry, but they then return the next morning and await feeding time.

These rays should not be lifted out of the water or grabbed - simply enjoy watching their graceful movements whilst taking part in one of diving's unique interactions.

3 LESLIE'S CURL

Location: North Wall

Depth: 60-100ft (18-30m)

Access: Boat

Range: Novice

1 8 --=

This site starts rather deep, which is pretty much the norm for most of the wall area northwest of the Main Channel. A deep spur and groove system, there are nice cuts with sandy bottoms and healthy corals around 75ft to 85ft. A feature known as the curl is an undercut in the main outer wall at around 75ft. Swim from the mooring eye straight out and over the wall to see it. Inside there are growths of black coral, plus tunicates and ascidian colonies.

This area is known for big fish, so keep an eye out for large groupers. Out in the blue there's a chance of seeing Caribbean reef sharks, sea turtles and eagle rays. Just remember that this is a deep dive, so bottom time will be rather short.

Purple sea fans, sea whips and lacey gorgonians thrive here, and beautiful purple-tipped sea anemones with Pederson shrimp can also be found. Shallow depths are good for turtles, as well as green morays that like the cracks along the reef top.

Keep an eye on your air during this dive as it starts rather deep, where the tendency is to burn air more quickly.



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Range: Novice, snorkel only



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Photographing Stingrays at Stingray City

When one sees stingrays in the wild, they are normally buried in the sand or creating clouds of sand while foraging for a meal. If this is the case, approach low and slow, breathing very lightly and making slow movements. Try to expose for the ambient light and just fill the image with your strobe, as the light sand can be very reflective.

If you're at Stingray City though, the rules can change as the rays will often be swimming up at camera level and even above your head. While they have gray to tan bodies, their white bellies are quite reflective, so exposing for both is tough. The site is also primarily white, fine sand, but this is a plus, as the ambient light reflected from the sand helps fill and light everyone in the scene.

Do you need strobes in such a shallow setting? In a word, yes. The color red starts to disappear as shallow as 5ft to 8ft, but the strobe restores proper color. The site is usually pretty bright, so it is best to just use strobes here as fill light to maintain color. Meter on something light gray (or even use the back of a stingray), take a few shots to see how the exposure is and adjust accordingly. The lowest power on the strobe will act as fill and also not reflect as much from sand as a higher one.

Of course, if you want to try for a ray swimming past a big sunburst, this all changes to higher settings and f-stops. But for over reef scenes and feeding photos, just meter the scene, expose for it and fill with low strobe power.

Another method involves no strobes at all. There are filters designed to be used with your digital white balance that add the red spectrum and allow for a normal exposure. If shot very close to the surface, they can leave a slight red or pinkish hue, but shot down around 12ft they are fine. Just remember to keep the sun at your back.

Stingray City is an action-packed dive site that is good for many clicks of the shutter. Have fun.

4 EAGLE RAY PASS

Location: North Wall
Depth: 42-100ft (16-30m)
Access: Boat
Range: Intermediate

18--=

The likelihood of seeing an eagle ray, or even a whole school of them, is good on this dive. Eagle rays have a tendency to be rather shy and don't like being approached, so if you see one, get down low on the reef and breathe lightly. When not intimidated, they can also be curious. If you are near the sandy shallower part of this dive, act like you're looking for something in the sand, as these rays may think you're feeding and come to join you.

Situated west of **Leslie's Curl** in the middle of the Main Channel, this site is a good place to see pelagic creatures swimming in the channel's outflow and intake. As scalloped hammerheads, blacktips and Caribbean reef sharks all like to eat stingrays, these may also be seen cruising here, looking to nab a foraging stingray or even an eagle ray.

This is a stunning site with a large sand chute and canyon-like walls on the side. At one point the sides nearly converge, forming a near arch. At about 70ft the chute spills out to the wall, and the dive can become a search for both Mr Big in the blue and Mr Small on the wall. Large barrel sponges, lacey gorgonians, healthy plate corals and a smattering of sea anemones adorn this wall, while the cracks and crannies are home to green morays, spiny lobsters and queen angelfish.

A divemaster or ray wrangler steers a ray toward nearby divers



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On the way back up, check out the canyons on either side of the chute for more good marine life. This site isn't as deep as **Leslie's Curl**, with a sandy area about 40ft deep up top, but the wall can be bottomless, so watch your air and depth here nevertheless.

5 PRINCESS PENNY'S PINNACLE

Location: *North Wall*
Depth: *45-130ft (14-30m)*
Access: *Boat*
Range: *Intermediate*

18--=

This site was named after Penny Ventura, who was a world class free diver. Princess Penny's Pinnacle is a great site with a lot going on. It has a stunning wall with lots of coral and marine life, including cleaning stations with banded coral shrimp, anemones with

commensal shrimp and crabs and huge sponges.

Distinguishing features include swim-throughs and a pinnacle off the main wall. The pinnacle can be seen from the mooring as you descend, and is decorated by large deepwater gorgonians with clouds of fish swarming over the top. Creole wrasse fill out the water column, as do black durgons. Other fish life includes yellowtail snappers, large triggerfish and shy queen angelfish. Look too for cleaning stations in and around the beautiful large barrel sponges.

The wall is also worth a good look. Swim through the narrow, chimneylike passage west of the mooring, which spits you out on the wall at 75ft. Tube, rope and finger sponges cover the wall and large plate corals hold habitat for gobies. This is also a good place to see eagle rays and perhaps a foraging hawksbill. Swim a bit to the east and there is another chimney at 90ft that leads up to reef top at 45ft.

The North Sound

While the rays garner most of the attention in the North Sound bay area, which takes up most of central and northwest Grand Cayman, birdlife, marine plants and fish all thrive in its protected and nurturing environment. Sports enthusiasts are also attracted to certain portions of this bay, for kite surfing, kayaking and some major snorkeling.

Mangroves line a good portion of the inner bay and there are even some small cayes. Mangroves are a highly important incubation area for many reef species, both fish and invertebrate, providing shelter and a food supply for juveniles, including spiny lobsters and various grunts and snappers that later move to the reefs. The mangroves' tangled root systems absorb and disperse wave energy, preventing extensive erosion or flooding problems. They also provide a buffer that protects reefs from nutrient-rich sediment loads washed into the sea.

If you look closely you'll see a very complex eco-system here. A helicopter flight over North Sound will reveal roaming reef sharks (patrolling for stingrays) on the mangrove edges, stingrays and eagle rays. Birds can also be found nesting and hunting in the area.

Many smaller creatures use the shelter provided by both the mangrove root system and the sea grasses for protection and habitat. The bay holds sea grasses, sometimes called turtle grass. Snails, juvenile fish, crabs, shrimp, juvenile lobsters and many other invertebrates live here or in the silty sand that the grass holds in place.

This is an important area for keeping Grand Cayman's reefs healthy and diverse. Enjoy these protected inland waters and if bird watching, snorkeling or kayaking here, treat the environment with great care and respect.

6 TARPON ALLEY

Location: *North Wall*
Depth: *45-130ft (14-30m)*
Access: *Boat*
Range: *Intermediate*

18--=

Divers can expect to see silvery tarpon here, where upwards of 50 are known to school, making for a very cool and fun dive site. The norm is to find a dozen or so here, but this can vary to larger numbers, with reports of up to 100 being seen.

Silvery tarpon are hard to miss and are sometimes even mistaken for sharks by new divers. Measuring 3ft to 6ft in length, they are quite accustomed to the presence of divers in 'The Alley' and can be photographed fairly closely. Since they are silvery, try to use a low flash power, otherwise the strobe will reflect too much and blast all the detail from the fish. This can be tricky but you'll usually get a few tries at it, as they



Schooling silver tarpon

aren't too spooky. To find them, head to the wall. Near the drop-off there is a long and narrow canyon with a sandy bottom. The fish will be in the ravine and under overhangs in this area, hovering almost motionless. Do not rush in or they will head out - approach slowly and steadily.

If you really want, you can also dive the wall here and look at the sponge and fish life; however, this site primarily gives you the opportunity to make a fairly shallow (for the North Sound) dive and enjoy some other fish life as well.

The large loaf-shaped coral here has some smaller coral heads on it and lots of fish, including parrotfish, snappers, whitespotted filefish and angels. There can also be rays in the surrounding sand, while sea fans, sponges and sea plumes adorn the reef top.

While some places may have tarpon off and on, this site is pretty much a sure thing.

7 HOLE IN THE WALL

Location: *North Wall*
Depth: *45-130ft (14-30m)*
Access: *Boat*
Range: *Intermediate*

18--=

This is a deep dive with some rewarding sights. Another of the deeper dives here, the bottom of the mooring sits in 60ft of water. Head out to the wall where the site is marked by some pinnacles and deep cuts and crevices.

As well as being on the deeper end of the spectrum, there can also be some current here, which at times gets rather strong. This attracts schools of chromis and active Creole wrasse, and sharks and eagle rays may also appear. These, along with the corals and sponges make for a fascinating dive, even if bottom time is somewhat limited.

On the way back up, check out the canyons on either side of the chute for more good marine life. This site isn't as deep as **Leslie's Curl**, with a sandy area about 40ft deep up top, but the wall can be bottomless, so watch your air and depth here nevertheless.

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commensal shrimp and crabs and huge sponges.

Distinguishing features include swim-throughs and a pinnacle off the main wall. The pinnacle can be seen from the mooring as you descend, and is decorated by large deepwater gorgonians with clouds of fish swarming over the top. Creole wrasse fill out the water column, as do black durgons. Other fish life includes yellowtail snappers, large triggerfish and shy queen angelfish. Look too for cleaning stations in and around the beautiful large barrel sponges.

The wall is also worth a good look. Swim through the narrow, chimneylike passage west of the mooring, which spits you out on the wall at 75ft. Tube, rope and finger sponges cover the wall and large plate corals hold habitat for gobies. This is also a good place to see eagle rays and perhaps a foraging hawksbill. Swim a bit to the east and there is another chimney at 90ft that leads up to reeftop at 45ft.

The North Sound

While the rays garner most of the attention in the North Sound bay area, which takes up most of central and northwest Grand Cayman, birdlife, marine plants and fish all thrive in its protected and nurturing environment. Sports enthusiasts are also attracted to certain portions of this bay, for kite surfing, kayaking and some major snorkeling.

Mangroves line a good portion of the inner bay and there are even some small cayes. Mangroves are a highly important incubation area for many reef species, both fish and invertebrate, providing shelter and a food supply for juveniles, including spiny lobsters and various grunts and snappers that later move to the reefs. The mangroves' tangled root systems absorb and disperse wave energy, preventing extensive erosion or flooding problems. They also provide a buffer that protects reefs from nutrient-rich sediment loads washed into the sea.

If you look closely you'll see a very complex eco-system here. A helicopter flight over North Sound will reveal roaming reef sharks (patrolling for stingrays) on the mangrove edges, stingrays and eagle rays. Birds can also be found nesting and hunting in the area.

Many smaller creatures use the shelter provided by both the mangrove root system and the sea grasses for protection and habitat. The bay holds sea grasses, sometimes called turtle grass. Snails, juvenile fish, crabs, shrimp, juvenile lobsters and many other invertebrates live here or in the silty sand that the grass holds in place.

This is an important area for keeping Grand Cayman's reefs healthy and diverse. Enjoy these protected inland waters and if bird watching, snorkeling or kayaking here, treat the environment with great care and respect.

6 TARPON ALLEY

Location: North Wall
Depth: 45-130ft (14-30m)
Access: Boat
Range: Intermediate



Divers can expect to see silvery tarpon here, where upwards of 50 are known to school, making for a very cool and fun dive site. The norm is to find a dozen or so here, but this can vary to larger numbers, with reports of up to 100 being seen.

Silvery tarpon are hard to miss and are sometimes even mistaken for sharks by new divers. Measuring 3ft to 6ft in length, they are quite accustomed to the presence of divers in 'The Alley' and can be photographed fairly closely. Since they are silvery, try to use a low flash power, otherwise the strobe will reflect too much and blast all the detail from the fish. This can be tricky but you'll usually get a few tries at it, as they



Schooling silver tarpon

aren't too spooky. To find them, head to the wall. Near the drop-off there is a long and narrow canyon with a sandy bottom. The fish will be in the ravine and under overhangs in this area, hovering almost motionless. Do not rush in or they will head out – approach slowly and steadily.

If you really want, you can also dive the wall here and look at the sponge and fish life; however, this site primarily gives you the opportunity to make a fairly shallow (for the North Sound) dive and enjoy some other fish life as well.

The large loaf-shaped coral here has some smaller coral heads on it and lots of fish, including parrotfish, snappers, whitespotted filefish and angels. There can also be rays in the surrounding sand, while sea fans, sponges and sea plumes adorn the reeftop.

While some places may have tarpon off and on, this site is pretty much a sure thing.

7 HOLE IN THE WALL

Location: North Wall
Depth: 45-130ft (14-30m)
Access: Boat
Range: Intermediate



This is a deep dive with some rewarding sights. Another of the deeper dives here, the bottom of the mooring sits in 60ft of water. Head out to the wall where the site is marked by some pinnacles and deep cuts and crevices.

As well as being on the deeper end of the spectrum, there can also be some current here, which at times gets rather strong. This attracts schools of chromis and active Creole wrasse, and sharks and eagle rays may also appear. These, along with the corals and sponges make for a fascinating dive, even if bottom time is somewhat limited.

A stoplight parrotfish



8 GHOST MOUNTAIN

Location: North Wall
Depth: 45-130ft (14-30m)
Access: Boat
Range: Intermediate

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This is an eerie dive, as the 'mountain' is not usually visible when one descends the anchor line. Legend has it that back in the pre-digital days, a photographer had been shooting the site and it was only when he got his film back that the 'mountain' was seen, looming like a ghost in the background. When they went back to the site, they found this deep pinnacle.

From the mooring, head out to the wall area. There are deep grooves with nice plate coral and yellow tube sponges on either side of a large coral-covered spur. Sea plumes and sea fingers cover the reef, and the sponge life here is diverse with tube sponges, netted barrel sponges, leathery barrel sponges and branching and brown tube clusters all to be found along the way.

Then it appears like a ghost: an active pinnacle rising up to around 80ft to 90 ft, full of marine life. Creole wrasse, jacks and blue and silver chromis all move in the current, while huge groupers hang on to the plate corals that cover the pinnacle. Big lacey sea fans quiver in the current, and there is a large star coral head atop the pinnacle itself. Brown tube sponges can also be seen to adorn

the top of one point where the pinnacle is undercut.

There is also a deep cave-like area and some deep grooves and spurs along the wall leading back up to the shallows. To fully appreciate the site and because of the depth, it is best to follow the guide around the first time here and get the lay of the place. A lot of the bigger and more colorful growth, plus a lot of the fish action, is at the deeper end of the dive, so be sure to watch your computer and air.

When you head back up to the mooring, the 'mountain' may again disappear from sight, like a ghost into the blue.



The tip of Ghost Mountain.

Hurricane Ivan Documented

Mid-October 2004 is a time that Cayman Islands residents and long-time visitors recall with trepidation. A tropical hurricane hit the low island, killing two people, flooding virtually everything and leaving a total mess for everyone.

After the storm had passed a quarter of all buildings on the three islands were reported uninhabitable, and only 20% escaped without any sort of damage, with the damage bill totaling US\$1.85 billion.

A direct hit by a big storm is an extremely rare occurrence here, and the before and after has been documented by resident photographer Courtney Platt. A contract photographer for *National Geographic*, his book brings home firsthand the damage that was caused - looking at Grand Cayman today it is hard to believe it all happened so recently.

According to Platt, 'As Hurricane Ivan approached at category 5, we all knew it was going to be a bad one, but few could have anticipated the enormity of the devastation that was left in its wake here.'

His book was made in the hope that readers will gain a better appreciation for the power of this storm and the extent of the damage it inflicted on the people and properties in Grand Cayman.

Says Platt, 'Consider that as much wreckage as you will see in the book, this still represents only a fraction of the total destruction caused by Ivan, the most grievously expensive disaster in Cayman's inhabited history.'

This book is intended to be a collector's item, as well as a reminder to all who live in harm's way to prepare properly for the next big storm. It can be purchased at island book stores and dive shops.

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