



Grand Cayman or Tortuga

Each spring, Georgia-based novelist Michael Aye and his wife Pat embark for a new destination in the Caribbean. Aye, the author of the Fighting Anthonys series, reports back this month on his most recent visit to the tropics.

The calendar said it was spring and the flowers were blooming and the pollen counts were rising, but it was very nippy in South Georgia. Not cold like Jim Nelson’s Maine, but there was still a chill in the morning air. It was time for our annual trek to the Caribbean. This year’s destination was Grand Cayman or, as it was once called, Tortuga.

Columbus spotted the islands on his last journey to the new world on 10 May 1503. He was en route from Panama to Hispaniola, which is now the Dominican Republic and Haiti. Columbus named the island Tortuga (Las Tortugas) for the many sea turtles that thrived there. Years later the name became Caymanas which comes from the Carib Indian word Cayman for marine crocodile.

For many years various pirates, including Henry Morgan and Blackbeard, used the islands for an interim port. They were drawn by the same things that attract tourists today. Long beaches with sunny shores, clear waters and an abundance of food and drink. The cuisine has significantly improved from turtles and large lizards (iguanas).

The island boasts hearty rum even today. Tortuga rum was created on the island by a former airline employee. The name also graces not only several flavors of rum, but also cakes. Both are sold internationally.

During the American Revolution, Yankee privateers aided by France, Spain, and Holland used the island as a stopover to replenish supplies. David McCullough in the privateer *Rattlesnake* was one of these. On March 20, 1778, the *Rattlesnake* arrived at Grand Cayman with two prizes in company. This created a stir on the island.

James Neill, captain of the sloop *Aurora*, was in the harbor loading mahogany, cotton and other trade goods.

He and another captain boarded the *Rattlesnake* to inquire who and why the ships had sailed into their port. McCullough quickly made the men his prisoners, confiscated Neill’s ship and cargo. The privateer then had the audacity to ransom the ship back to Neill and provided a “Certificate of Protection” from capture by a privateer for forty-two days. A surviving note states that neither captain was “ill used.” McCullough also sent a letter ashore saying his men would do no harm to island inhabitants and that they would pay for supplies they needed.

By the early 1780s, the American Revolution was over and the time of pirates and privateers came to a close, bringing peace to the Cayman Islands. By the 1830’s, the people of the Caymans had begun self rule. They met in St. James Castle, which is now the oldest building on the island. It has a long and storied past and is remembered by the islanders as the “birthplace of democracy.” Pat and I visited St. James and were amazed at the structure and its panoramic view.

By 1835, slavery had been outlawed. The islanders – whites and former slaves – led a quiet, peaceful existence. Many of the inhabitants worked as turtle fishermen or built boats. The sea provided a livelihood for the islanders, who used their catches to trade for agricultural items that the island couldn’t support.

On a cloudy, rainy morning, Pat and I decided to drive the coast road around the island to Rum Point on Cayman Kai, where the road ended. At Starfish Point, we saw two very large, live starfish. We also saw an iguana as big as a small alligator hanging from a tree limb.

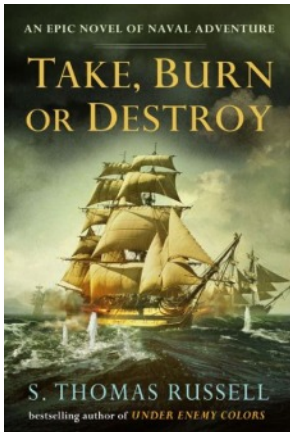
Taking the coast road we came upon a small stretch of beach. A lone tree stood next to the road with a sign that read “Flip Flop Tree.” There were hundreds of brightly colored flip flops tacked to the tree. We also came upon a blow hole and though it was not the megagusher we had seen in Hawaii, it gushed great plumes of water.

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Bookshelf

Take, Burn or Destroy

by S. Thomas Russell



(Putnam, \$27.95 / \$14.99, Kindle and NOOK) 1794, the height of the French Revolution – Charles Hayden sets off aboard the ill-fated HMS Themis with orders to destroy a French frigate sailing from Le Havre and to gather intelligence from a royalist spy. On discovering French plans for an imminent invasion of England, Hayden must return to Portsmouth to give warning before it's too late. But the enemy has been lying in wait

for him, and so begins a dangerous chase out into the Atlantic and into the clutches of a powerful French squadron. After a thwarted attempt to masquerade as French sailors, Hayden and his officers are taken prisoner. A shipwreck following a storm and a case of mistaken identity befall Hayden and his men, as they try in desperation to escape in order to warn the Lords of the Admiralty. Failure will mean the invasion of England – and the guillotine for Hayden.

Hell Around the Horn

by Rick Spilman



(Old Salt Press, \$10.99 / \$2.99, Kindle) *Hell Around the Horn* is a nautical thriller set in the last days of the great age of sail. In 1905, a young ship's captain and his family set sail on the windjammer, Lady Rebecca, from Cardiff, Wales with a cargo of coal bound for Chile, by way of Cape Horn. Before they reach the Southern Ocean, the cargo catches fire, the mate threatens mutiny and one of the crew may be going mad, yet the greatest challenge will prove to

be surviving the vicious westerly winds and mountainous seas of the worst Cape Horn winter in memory. Based on an actual voyage, *Hell Around the Horn* is a story of survival and the human spirit against overwhelming odds. "Rick Spilman brings alive the rough and tumble world of the windjammer with authentic and well-chosen detail, in a voice that is at once historically authentic, yet fresh as a salty gale," said Linda Collison, author of the Patricia MacPherson Nautical Adventures.

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Our next stop was Queen Elizabeth's Wreck of the Ten Sails Memorial at Gun Bay. In November 1794, a convoy of merchant ships led by HMS *Convert* foundered on the reef. Gun Bay is at the east end of Grand Cayman. This is a very rocky area. As the wind was blowing, white caps were breaking over the reef and it was clearly visible about a half mile offshore. Ten small pillars and the plaque are all there is to see, but watching the waves crash over the reef caused a lump in my throat and a chill ran through me. The good thing is that everyone was saved by the Cayman people. Legend has it that one of those rescued was a royal prince. Because of their bravery, King George III declared that the Caymanans should forever be free from taxation and war conscription. There must be something to the legend. Grand Cayman is now considered one of the financial centers of the world, with over 500 banks on

the island. I would like to mention that William White has a new novel called *Gun Bay* that will be released in July. Having read the manuscript, I can say it's highly recommended.

The remainder of our visit was limited to the beach. We sunned and I read several books, including the latest by Alaric Bond and Dewey Lambin. I also read James Nelson's new novel about Vikings – *Fin Gall*. All were great. Pat and I have traveled all over the Caribbean and the beaches on Grand Cayman are tops. We stayed at a small, beautiful condo called London House. It was no more than twenty steps to the tiki hut and shade, and another twenty to thirty to the crystal clear Caribbean.

Well, shipmates, that's it until next year.

Michael Aye