



introduced a licensing programme for people to cull lionfish from the island's marine parks. Several dive-schools now offer lionfish hunts in which divers help the licensed cullers to spot the fish.

My dive instructor described the lionfish as "the cockroach of the sea". If it seems peculiar to compare these beautiful creatures with their decorative striped fins to that ugly insect, what's indisputable is their resilience.

Like cockroaches, they have the ability to survive in almost any conditions. Similarly to bull sharks, they can even survive in both salt and fresh water.

They're spreading like wildfire and eating everything else in sight, so their population has to be kept under control.

Being the top predator also means that they paid no attention to us as we spotted the distinctive dorsal fins and Kev swam up very close and cocked his spear.

In the blink of an eye he stabbed the fish with a quick, clean motion and disposed of it in his containment barrel.

I watched from a distance, away from the lionfish's venomous dorsal and anal

fins. The poison is similar to that in a bee sting and the affected area can swell up for around three weeks. Ouch!

After 45 minutes we returned to the boat with our catch. Although some divers have been known to feed other fish with the remains, this is frowned on as it can change the behaviour of those fish.

On the west side of the island, divers noticed an increase in the number of free-swimming moray eels; elsewhere, cullers found grouper following them like dogs begging for treats. Even sharks started to recognise the association between divers and a free feed.

So the team bring their catch back to their bar, Eagle Rays, to be made into a tasty treat for hungry divers.

I had worked up an appetite and was intrigued to learn what lionfish would taste like, so went along for a taste. Spearhead before my eyes just an hour ago, it couldn't have been much fresher.

I'd been told that the meat can be fairly bland, but pan-fried in light Cajun spices and piled into soft tacos with salad, sweet chili, mayo and a squeeze of lemon, it was delicious.

THE FINAL ACTIVITY of our Caymans trip (apart from the wedding itself), was a night-time bioluminescent kayaking tour.

Under an awesome starry sky, we made our way quietly out from Rum Point into the darkness of the bay, where our guide told us to take our paddles and stir up the sand beneath us. Puzzled, we prodded at the murk below.

As we did so, the sand began to sparkle as if we'd uncovered a layer of diamonds. These are known as "disco crabs" by the kayaking guides.

As soon as we stopped prodding at the bottom the glitter "disco" faded and we began to make our way towards the real reason for our trip – the rare and secluded Bioluminescence Bay.

We didn't notice at first that, as we moved into the bay, our paddle-strokes were becoming more obvious, as if bubbles were coming off the blade as it moved through the dark water.

As we glided further into the centre of the bay and away from the open ocean, the faint greenish "bubbles" – which were in fact plankton – slowly grew brighter.

Like fireflies, these microscopic organisms (a type of dinoflagellate called *Pyrodinium bahamense*) can create and emit their own light energy, so they can glow in total darkness if touched by or interacting with anything else in the water.

It looks like magic, but this is actually a clever form of predator avoidance. To stop fish eating them, each organism will light up the water around 100 times their normal size in the hope of attracting a larger fish to eat its attacker.

So as our paddles interacted with these tiny organisms, bright phosphorescent swirls erupted through the darkness.

We dipped our fingers into the water, and before long were reaching in with our whole arms to watch the incredible effect.

By this point the bioluminescence was practically neon against the black water. Scooping up water that sparkled like fairy dust in our palms, we scattered the glitter and watched the shimmering ripples it made against the darkness as it splashed across the bay.

Within the bay, there are up to a million of these magical organisms per gallon of



Above: Reef scene.

Top centre: Ocean Frontiers dive-boats ready to go.

water, giving an idea of the spectacle you might experience if you went on this trip on a rainy night. By all accounts it's something to behold, as the entire surface of the water glows and swirls in the rain.

Bioluminescence also occurs in the open sea, as night-divers know, but this bay's isolation protects the micro-organisms from being flushed out by wind and tides, making the phenomenon much brighter and more striking there.

It was a magical experience and stole the show, even from the colourful reefs, breathtaking coral walls and spectacular drop-offs on our dives. █

FACTFILE

GETTING THERE ▶▶ BA flies to Grand Cayman from London Heathrow.

DIVING & ACCOMMODATION ▶▶ Ocean Frontiers specialises in diving Grand Cayman's East End and offers Dive & Stay holiday packages for three, five or seven nights or customised packages to take in special requests, oceanfrontiers.com

WHEN TO GO ▶▶ The dry season from November to April is best. Hurricane season lasts from June to November.

MONEY ▶▶ Cayman Islands dollar.

PRICES ▶▶ BA return flights from £780. From 22 August until late September Ocean Frontiers is offering seven nights in a condominium at Compass Point Dive Resort, six days of two-tank dives and car hire for US \$1099 per diver. A two-tank dive normally costs \$129. Bioluminescent kayak tours with Cayman Kayaks cost \$59, www.caymankayaks.com

VISITOR INFORMATION ▶▶ www.caymanislands.co.uk