

of rainbow-coloured fish and numerous rays gliding about beneath us.

The next day would give me my first taste of Caymans diving, and I had high hopes as I drove along the coastal road towards Ocean Frontiers' dive-shop.

After a short boat-ride, we began to kit up for our first dive at Turtle Pass, one of 12 sites on the three-mile stretch of reefs and walls called Queen's Highway.

The first thing that struck me about Cayman Islands diving – before I'd so much as rinsed my mask in the warm, azure water – was how confusing it is for a British diver.



Above: Checking out lunch – diver with a lionfish...

Right: ...Lunch.

The boat was packed with Americans, I and a couple of the crew being English exceptions, so the briefing was all in feet, pounds and psi. Reassured by a mini "translation" briefing to the metres, kilos and bar I'm used to, I was more confident as I made my giant stride off the boat that I'd be able to tell if I was low on air (750psi is roughly 50 bar if you're as clueless as I am on conversions).

At Turtle Pass, we were told, we had a 100% chance of either seeing, or not seeing, a turtle. What? Obviously we were hoping for the former outcome, given this was supposedly one of the top spots

in Cayman for turtle sightings.

Loggerhead, hawksbill and green turtles are all said to frequent this spot regularly, as it is directly offshore from known turtle-nesting sites. This dive-site is renowned for its steep coral wall and the underwater passageway that runs through it.

We descended and entered the narrow swim-through, winding down through the coral wall and getting steadily deeper until we reached the other side.

The tunnel requires good dive skills and, thankfully, our experienced group managed to avoid kicking up the bottom so that those at the back would still enjoy fairly decent visibility.

When we popped out on the other side, we were rewarded with an incredible drop-off and what seemed like endless blue depths below us.

In the crystal water, the exit of the swim-through felt as if it was just a few metres from the surface.

My computer showed 30m, however, and I realised how easy it would be to disregard depth in these impossibly clear waters. A stark reminder of how crucial it is to rely on your equipment rather than your senses.

ONCE OUT OF THE SWIM-THROUGH

we turned around and the light current offered us an easy drift that guided us gently back to the boat.

After recent dives in South Africa, battling strong current and huge surface swells, such mild conditions were a dream. It was easy to see why many of the divers on my boat returned each year to enjoy these easy conditions.

This would be a great destination for beginner or nervous divers to get used to the underwater world.

For the rest of the dive we swam slowly around the wall and back to the boat, admiring the bright coral, sponges and gorgonians on the reef.

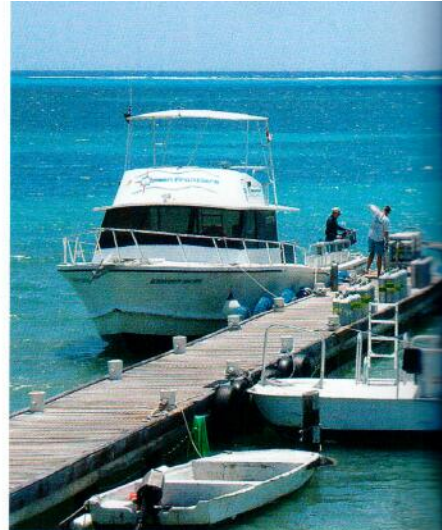
We also examined the insides of the giant barrel sponges for macro life. The sharp-eyed were rewarded with sightings of colourful flamingo tongue snails, their clearly outlined spots evoking a Roy Lichtenstein pop-art painting.

The visibility was unlike anything I'd seen before but, while Stingray City had lived up to its name, no turtle passed us at Turtle Pass. Only on our next dive at Fish Tank did an inquisitive hawksbill decide to swim alongside us for a few minutes.

The 30m vis was a blessing, as we easily spotted the inquisitive turtle from several metres away and were able to wait as it approached us curiously.

After checking us out, it decided to swim alongside us for a few minutes before darting off into the blue.

The clear water also gave our buddy-



pairs freedom to venture further from the group than might normally be possible as we explored the reef.

Despite the extensive visibility, I was slightly surprised by how few fish we saw here. I'd been expecting Caribbean diving to be full of multitudes of colourful fish as far as the eye could see.

IT WAS EASY TO SEE why it was our next dive-site Eeny, Meeny, Miny, Mo, rather than Fish Tank, that was my instructor Kev's favourite.

Here, the water was so clear it seemed you could see for miles across a seascape of rolling hills, coral walls and canyons.

This clarity made it easy to spot the most abundant form of life visible on this dive – lionfish. Just as well, because the intention was to hunt and cull them.

The Indo-Pacific red lionfish spread outside its usual territory and into the Caribbean, where it has become a pest. To protect its reef, the Caymans government

