

MAGIC IN THE MANGROVES

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The yellow sea anemones caught our eye as they swayed to the rhythm of the water. We also took a peek at little green plants that look like underwater ferns and mini palm trees.

In a secret place amongst Cayman's mangroves there lives a peculiar species of upside-down jellyfish called *Cassiopeia*.

These fish are the ocean's equivalent of snowflakes: you can watch them glitter and throb in a rainbow of colors gently sprinkled across the ocean floor.

We encountered them on a mangrove kayaking trip, which is one of the Ambassadors of the Environment adventures offered by The Ritz-Carlton, Grand Cayman, with the jellyfish being a highlight of the tour.

Marine biologist and mangrove expert Lune Vermeire was our guide on this educational, amusing and extraordinary adventure.

We jumped into glass-bottom kayaks, with the world beneath our feet, and gently set off into the water's calm embrace, gliding into a fairy-like world where small exotic fish, sparkling sea slugs, waving sea anemones and tiny seahorses all came out to play.

As we started paddling, our guide invited us to sail into the heart of the mangroves.

Moving through the hidden jungle-gym, we used the outstretched branches to guide our kayaks slowly through the water.

Serenity washed over us as we brushed our hands against the warm tree limbs while our guide told us the story behind the biology of the mangroves.

This neat mini-ecosystem provides a safe home, or nursery, for an array of small aquatic life forms which use the roots as safe passage away from deep sea predators.

As we stared at the red and green canopy, we saw an abundance of seed pods dangling from the branches. We asked what these pods were and Lune informed us that they were “intelligent” little plants that drop into the ocean when they mature, float to a safe hiding place, and sprout up from the sea floor when they are ready to bloom.

We emerged from the majestic cover of the canopy and our guide took us around the outside of the mangroves where iguanas were hanging from trees, tropical birds were resting comfortably and a beautiful tri-colored heron was chirping.

As we sat back and took in all of the natural beauty, our guide reached into the water and showed us a shimmering sea slug, or *Aplysia dactylomela*, a strange creature that is only found in Cayman during four months of the year.

It looks just like cool Jello and we noticed its golden skin sparkle in the sunlight. Lune laughs and says this is her favorite creature that lives in the mangroves, reminding her of a moose.

We continued paddling and although we weren't lucky on this occasion, it's frequently possible to meet another aquatic creature, the lined seahorse. Lune informed us these little guys are hard to come by as they are so small.

These horses come in a myriad of colors, from shades of gray and black to red, green, and orange. The lined seahorse is monogamous, just like penguins, and the male performs ritual dances every morning to reestablish the bond with his mate.

As we watched our guide swimming around in the water searching for more creatures, we feel a desire to jump in too but she cautions us not to because there are jellyfish which can pack a sting in.

Lune is very knowledgeable and tells us she studied marine biology, knows three languages, and has completed scientific training about mangroves. We see the passion on her face as she talks about the vital role that mangroves play during a hurricane and how they should be re-grown and protected.

As we continued to paddle we glanced down below where there were lots of miniature fishes swimming in and around an array of different species of plants.


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By this time, an hour and a half had passed but it really felt like 20 minutes; time seemed to slow down out there in Cayman’s aquatic wonderland.


Lune led us to her favorite spot inside a large group of mangroves and gave us water and snacks. As we hung out with the birds in the trees, the beauty of the quiet took away all worries about life and we were at peace.

After we finished rehydrating and eating, Lune took us back into the sunlight and to our surprise we were right back where we started.


Key to Cayman enjoyed this adventure courtesy of The Ritz-Carlton, Grand Cayman. The resort’s Ambassadors of the Environment program offers adventures suitable for both adults and children which introduce visitors to the natural wonders and cultural traditions of the Cayman Islands.




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