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A traditional Grand Cayman home is very different from the high design of some of the island's resorts.

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By Colin and Justin **Ef** Recommend

Oh yes, Grand Cayman. The undoubted jewel in the Cayman Islands crown, a wonderfully temperate land mass that basks in the sun, almost all year round, in the Caribbean Sea. You've heard us rhapsodize in previous columns about our beloved Mauritius; now we feel like guilty partners who've succumbed to temptation and taken a secret, furtive lover. The Indian Ocean sanctuary, you see, has long since been our rock, both literally and metaphorically; a

remote, tropical island and a place unto which we ran whenever we needed to recharge our

both centres of retail heaven when it comes to style setting. Inspiration can come, too, from

the packaging we might see in a Chinese supermarket or perhaps from the colours we'll espy

Grand Cayman, however, is just 3 ½ hours from Toronto and with direct flights and a shared time zone, not to mention airfares from \$500 (\$900 from Vancouver and 6 ½ hours flying time), it's not the exorbitantly priced destination you might imagine it to be. At the end of last year we visited for 12 glorious days, and, leaving the biting chill of Toronto behind us, enjoyed temperatures of around 25C. And joyous it certainly was!Two weeks before Christmas the skies were dazzling blue and the rain was noticeable only by its absence.

impeccable service of Florence and it all makes sense. Little wonder, then, that The Cayman Cookout (a weekend celebration of food and wine) attracts global interest. Featuring an incomparable roster of famous chefs, wine experts and spirits blenders, the event boasts tastings, tours and dinners, all of which celebrate the barefoot elegance that the Cayman Islands deliver in abundance. Damn it! If only we were free from the 12th to the 15th of January we'd be back there in a flash.

With many wonderful hotels to choose from, we opted for the Ritz-Carlton, in part, we suppose, because the brand has been at the forefront of our thinking since launching in Toronto. And, take it from us, we made the correct decision. From the moment we approached the enormous glass portal and entered the cavernous reception, we couldn't have felt more at home. Our

favourite hotel trick (a massive round table with clustered vases of white flowers arranged at

different heights) set the scene in a remarkable world where high design is telegraphed at every opportunity. Our suite, decorated in the English country house style, alluded to the islands' British history and its balcony, with its sweeping views across the azure sea, was station to rattan steamer chairs attired in fluffy white monogrammed towels. Not for this hotel the spartan, overly fashioned "boutique" esthetic; the Ritz-Carlton is more about a return to bygone elegance with silver service meals and unabashed indulgence at every turn. Corridor walls strain with local

But anyway, back to restaurant business. The first we visited was Luca, located on Seven Mile Beach, a remarkable sandy stretch that's home to some of the islands most beautiful homes and eateries. Arranged at ground level at The Caribbean Club (a chic condominium development), Luca flickers with candlelight as competent staff deliver a menu that, while predominantly seafood, has lots for the committed carnivore. We both opted for rack of lamb and swore blind it was amongst the best we've ever tasted.

be described as languid. Lodging in The Club at Little Cayman, a select rental development, we sucked up the rural idyll wandering deserted beaches, watched at every turn, it seemed, by surprisingly tame iguanas that lumber the bijoux island in all their spiny majesty. Having

enjoyed the glamour of Grand Cayman, we reckoned — initially — that it might have been

difficult to settle into the simpler world of its smaller sibling, but this wasn't the case. The

experience, in fact, was magical and our memories will endure forever.

typical holiday pursuits. One particularly sunny morning we boarded a twin prop puddle jumper

and enjoyed a 35 minute flight to Little Cayman, a diving Mecca, where the pace of life can best

Back on Grand Cayman, we indulged in a helicopter ride to experience a whole new island perspective. Our captain, Jerome, who also works as a stunt pilot in the L.A. film industry, steered our breathtaking journey across fields, out across the rippling water and over sandbanks where we witnessed sharks, the wreck of a battleship (now a major dive attraction) and a bird's-eye view of several cruise liners berthed at George Town, the island's quaint clapboard capital. Rested, after our skyward thrill ride, we slipped on our design hats once again, this time to visit Osetra Bay, a venue that, in a clutch of Cayman fine dining, would prove to be our favourite.

culinary catwalk. Food "architecture" is crucial to this restaurant's chef - nothing is simply placed on the table, rather arranged to dramatic effect. Five amuse bouche items (yes, five per person) arrived, simultaneously, in various glasses, each at a different height and each

If you make it to GC, as we hope you do, you'll discover beautiful design at every turn. As

Entered through a wide corridor dressed with opaque white floor lanterns, we discovered a

captivating environment that overhangs the ocean. A beautiful thatched ceiling sets the tone

while dark timbers underfoot lend an opulent air. Tables are dressed in white napery, silver

chargers and opaque "egg" lights with further design cues signalled courtesy of shiny silver

cutlery and crisp white crockery, all of which play like fashion accessories on a veritable

coloured and textured to tempt the palate and the eye.

we might transport a little Cayman magic to our project.

decorators, we were impressed by simple native architecture. As much as the island has a wonderfully glossy side, it retains beautiful original homes, often tin roofed and painted softest baby blue, yellow, or even delicate pink. Fences everywhere are adorned with conch shells and treasures that wash up on the beach. The island is a haven which imbues the traditional feel of days past, yet one which ensures contemporary travellers are enriched, courtesy of modern trappings. One such modern trapping is Camana Bay; spread across 500 acres near Seven Mile Beach, the destination boasts up-market boutiques, cafés, office buildings and sports facilities, as well as a host of

behold. A vintage Rolls-Royce, once owned by Elton John? Tick. A 1970 Mercedes 280SL? Tick. And if that wasn't enough, the museum also houses the original Batmobile, a priceless piece of TV history which Andreas secured after intense negotiation. And so it came to pass, our final day was upon us. Yup, after nearly two weeks it was time to fly home. Whether our accountant defrays the trip against our tax bill remains to be seen (this was, after all, an inspirational visit to conjure up visions for our forthcoming project) but one thing's for sure; soon we'll be serving up a little Cayman magic in Britain's Capital. Yacht-like

luxury, azure tones, sandy shades, Ferrari red colour ways and minimalist tablescapes. Who

knew such global inspiration could be derived from one perfect wee island?

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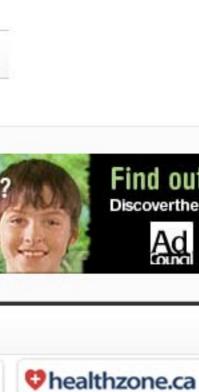
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We'll take inspiration wherever we can find it; while leafing through wallpaper samples at London's Chelsea Harbour Design Centre, or meandering through Designers Walk in Toronto

while visiting Muskoka. Or it might be birthed in walloping great truckloads on vacation. As it was recently in Grand Cayman.

batteries. But there are distinct drawbacks to Mauritius; the exhaustive travel time, for example, not to mention expensive air fares and jet lag.

Our big ambition as we descended upon the island was to visit as many restaurants as possible, being that we're currently appraising an opportunity to redesign a 78-seater eatery in London's South Kensington. As much as we know how we'll direct that project, it's always useful to see what's happening on a global platform. And besides, we'd heard the island's restaurant scene is world class. Take a smattering of downtown New York and roll together with the friendly buzz of South Beach and season with a little Caribbean magic. Add in the

The Firm some 19 years past, we'd always dreamed of marking our passports with the Cayman stamp. And then, having enjoyed the Tom Cruise movie — and having observed how beautiful the island actually is - we couldn't resist any longer.

But what attracted us to Grand Cayman in the first place? Well, since reading John Grisham's

art while dark timber finishes set a moody tone throughout the hostelry. For those who enjoy

the sense of relaxation that only a deep tissue massage can impart, we'd recommend a trip to

the hotel's spa where we enjoyed a soporific La Prarie treatment with essence of caviar. We

can still feel the benefit.

Asserting balance between food, service and design can be tricky for even the most proficient operation, but the Luca team excels. Sur terrace, and cooled by a soft blowing breeze, we enjoyed a wonderful evening as we soaked up decor inspiration by the bucket load. As much as research was the driving factor for our Cayman odyssey, we still made time for

immaculately groomed gardens and courtyards. And yes, in typical Grand Cayman style, the restaurant landscape is buoyant. Wandering, our minds flipped to South Kensington and to how

Cayman's spectacular assets, the Grand Cayman Motor Museum. Owned and curated by Natalie and Andreas Ugland, the recently constructed visitor centre is fascinating and home to the family's personal classic car collection. A 1961 Alfa Romeo Giulietta? Tick, it's there to

With just a couple of days before jetting back to Toronto, we found time to visit another of

Colin McAllister and Justin Ryan are the hosts of HGTV's Colin & Justin's Home Heist and the

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The Club at Little Cayman: www.theclubatlittlecayman.com

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