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The Cayman Islands Marathon

Sun, sand, snorkelling – oh, and some marathon running, too

Despite its pre-dawn start time, the Cayman Islands Marathon is a hot race, but runners can expect enthusiastic aid-station volunteers, cold beer at the finish and a tourist utopia to enjoy after they cross the finish line.

BEACHES AND OFFSHORE BANKING – that's what most Canadians think about when they hear mention of the Cayman Islands. But there's more to this nation of three islands south of Cuba than resorts and hedge funds. Organizers of the Cayman Islands Marathon are counting on attracting more foreigners to visit the main island of Grand Cayman for some offshore running, and to stick around for a while after the race to explore the Caribbean paradise.

Entering its sixth year (the 2004 event was cancelled due to hurricane Ivan), the Cayman Islands Marathon is beginning to attract more foreign visitors, which race director Rhonda Kelly says is key to the run's survival as she feels they've already maximized the local participation rate. Last year, about 550 runners competed in the marathon, half-marathon the team relay, 135 of them from abroad.

To avoid the heat of the sun, the race starts at 5 a.m., so a good portion of it is run under the light of the moon. The course starts in the island's main port city of George Town and winds through wealthy neighbourhoods in the island's South Sound. The full marathon does a double loop of the half, mainly along a gorgeous coastal road flanked by palm trees.

As the race is a small event, organizers go out of their way to make runners feel welcome, such as picking foreign runners up at the airport. They also offer a shuttle service to the start from the official race hotel, the Marriott Beach Resort, swanky air-conditioned porta-potties and a nice spread of post-race food, including stacks of fresh tropical fruit. –MK

► Things to do

Grand Cayman has some great options for active tourists fleeing the chills of a Canadian winter. The December marathon is after hurricane season, but before the main deluge of tourists in January. Here are some of the top destinations:

Seven Mile Beach: Considered one of the best stretches of beach in the world, Grand Cayman's Seven Mile Beach is – you guessed it – seven postcard-perfect miles (about 12K) of fine white coral sand, skirted by aquamarine water. Locals and tourists enjoy runs along the water's edge. The Marriott race hotel is conveniently located on the edge of the south end of the beach.

Stingray City: Take a guided catamaran from Red Sail Sports out to an azure sandbar, where several dozen friendly stingrays converge for snacks of small fish and squid ink. You can swim alongside, and pet, the rays as you snorkel in the shallow water.

Snorkelling or SCUBA diving: Combine the Stingray City excursion with some of the world's best reef snorkelling or SCUBA diving. Multi-coloured coral reefs teem with marine life. The water is warm, visibility is superb and the variety of fish is astounding.

Queen Elizabeth II Botanical Park: At the botanical park in the island's interior, there's a blue iguana conservation program that gives visitors a chance to see a species that was declared technically extinct in 2001, when only 20 of the animals were found. The breeding program has brought that number up to about 250, and you can see most of them in this one small park, some of which roam freely on the park path.

The Mastic Trail: Near the botanical park, the Mastic Trail is a 3K leg of forest path that slices through the heart of the interior. You could go for a jog along the route, but then you'd miss out on spotting all the exotic plants and animals.

Boatswain Beach Turtle Farm: Devastated by hurricane Ivan in 2004, this famous hatchery for green sea turtles has moved across the street and away from the water's edge. See hundreds of the rare turtles ranging in age from eggs to 75-year-old geriatrics. The Boatswain facility also includes a restaurant, aviary and a snorkelling pond, complete with tropical fish.

► Places to eat

The Lighthouse restaurant overlooks the ocean on the pristine eastern side of Grand Cayman. It has a top-notch wine list, and a nice combination of charm and fine local cuisine at reasonable prices.

Breezes by the Bay serves up casual Caymanian fare on the main tourist drag in George Town.

For authentic Caribbean food, head to **Champion House**, just off Seven Mile Beach.

► Places to stay

Hotels abound in this tourist town, but most out-of-towners running the marathon stay at the **Marriott Beach Resort** on Seven Mile Beach, as it has a discount rate of **TKTK** for the marathoners.

► Flights

Air Canada flies direct to Grand Cayman from Toronto and American Airlines has several connecting flights through Miami. **13**

» Female Full
Marathon Winner
Beth Schreder at
the 2008 Cayman
Marathon



DESTINATION:
THE CAYMAN ISLANDS
MARATHON, GRAND CAYMAN



Race Stats

Location: George Town, Grand Cayman, Cayman Islands
Date: December 6, 2009, 5 am
Races: Marathon, Half-Marathon, Kids Run,
Wheelchair Division
For more info visit: www.caymanislandsmarathon.com

» Entertainers
on the course



» The start of
the 2008 Cayman
Marathon

