

GRAND CAYMAN, CAYMAN ISLANDS - A young American tourist has just heard a snippet of a conversation at the new home of the Cayman Turtle Farm inside the Boatswain's Beach marine park that has left her a bit confused. "Do people eat them?"

she asks staff member Marsha Ebanks who is guiding journalists through the park on a tour of the new \$52-million (U.S.) facility.

"Uh-huh," says Ebanks.

"What part?"

"Fins, belly, steak ... everything but the shell, pretty much."

"Where?" the woman asks horrified.

"Here," says Ebanks without batting a lash.

She means that literally. Caymanians in general are fond of turtle meat and just a few feet away from the breeding tank and turtle petting area (home to more than 11,000 turtles ranging in size from 179 grams to 272 kilograms), both the Turtle Crawl Deli and Schooner's Bar and Grille have turtle on the menu. It's a fact that many tourists seem to have a hard time swallowing.

"You've got some that run in there and can't wait to eat the turtle and then others who can't believe it," says Ebanks.

Caymanians may love their turtle soup, fritters and steaks, but they also have a deep admiration and respect for the animal that has long been a part of their history. When Christopher Columbus arrived at the islands he called them Las Tortugas (which means "the turtles" in Spanish) because of the large population of green sea turtles that were once the sole inhabitants of Grand Cayman. According to Cayman literature, when permanent settlements developed in the 17th century, turtles were both a means of income and a convenient food source. That's why you will find turtles on the country's flag, seal and currency.

But by the early 1800s, the turtle stock had become seriously depleted and by the 1960s, they were on the verge of extinction. It was then that the original Cayman Turtle farm stepped in. The small beachside facility raised the turtles, both to provide food for locals and also to replenish the declining turtle population. And though 60 per cent of the animals raised at the farm still end up at the local market, more than 31,000 have been released to the wild since 1980. And now Caymanians have created a backdrop for their hard-shelled friends that is sure to provide even more awareness about their achievements.

Boatswain's Beach is a far cry from the small stand on the beach that housed the farm only a few short years ago. The 9.3-hectare adventure marine park set in West Bay (about 13 kilometres from Georgetown) is set to become Grand Cayman's largest tourist attraction. The turtle farm is joined by an aviary, iguana exhibits - featuring the protected blue iguana - and gardens that highlight some of the flora and fauna of the region. The Barrow family, visiting from England, were clearly impressed.

"We're having an excellent time," said Ian, while his wife, Caroline Mann, and children, Jack and Lily took turns holding the slippery creatures at the display tank and snapping photos. "We're already looking at coming back next year."

They should. The park is only about 60 per cent complete and there is much more to come.

The highlight of the park will no doubt be the predator tank - filled with sharks, eels and other marine life - which will divide the island's largest freshwater wading pool from a 4.2-million-litre salt-water snorkelling lagoon. The result will be the ability for snorkellers to go nose-to-nose with a shark. The same opportunity will be available from a viewing platform outside the tank for those who'd rather do the experience with their feet on terra firma. Other planned attractions within the park include a streetscape depicting a historical Caymanian street filled with porchside artisans.

There, visitors will find everything from portrait artists to hair-braiding shops to unique jewellery. The 3,500-square-foot retail centre selling souvenirs from the park and the island is already open and a fine dining restaurant is slated to open this summer. And as for the turtle-eating thing? It's not so strange when you think about it. I mean, how many times have you left the petting zoo and then ordered up a bacon cheeseburger?