

There's This Place:

Bonaire



by Deanna Chaney

A Cruising Paradise Above and Below Sea Level

I slip out of the dinghy and poke my head underwater. Below the mooring at the dive site called "Forest," I see French angelfish and black durgions flitting over a sandy terrace populated with hard and soft corals. Already I know that this is going to be a great dive!

As we descend on the reef slope, I notice something that looks like the branches on a pine tree. It's feather black coral, but it reminds me of the piney woods of East Texas where I was raised. I'm feeling right at home on this reef!

We continue swimming up current over a healthy reef with a vibrant fish population. To my surprise, I look up and see a turtle meandering clumsily over the coral. Hey fellow, don't touch the coral! Oblivious to our presence, the turtle finds something tasty to chomp on as I hover

over him in 80 feet of water. As he ascends, I swim alongside my new tortoise-shelled dive buddy. "Thank you Jacques Cousteau for inventing SCUBA!" I say to myself as I have many times since we came to Bonaire.

When we return to the shallow terrace below our dinghy, we're greeted by two curious French angelfish looking for a handout. I extend my arm and rub my fingers together as if to offer a treat. The bigger one cautiously swims forward and then... Ouch! Rough little teeth nibble my fingers. I jump back, startled, and then laugh aloud into my regulator. We play with the angelfish until our air is almost gone and then reluctantly ascend, concluding yet another memorable dive in Bonaire.

Bonaire is part of the Netherlands Antilles "ABC" island chain located in the south-central Caribbean Sea



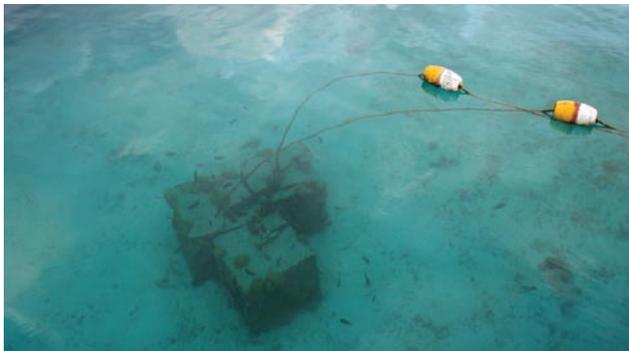
north of Venezuela. While visiting there in the summer of 2008 aboard our ketch *Caribbean Soul*, my husband Nick and I enjoyed some of the best, and certainly the easiest, diving in the Caribbean. For \$25 each, we received a marine park tag good for one year of diving privileges (or you can pay \$10 for swimming and snorkeling only). The fringing reefs surrounding Bonaire and its smaller sister Klein Bonaire are protected by the Bonaire Marine Park. No anchoring, spearfishing, or diving gloves are allowed. Water temperature is around 80 degrees, and visibility is usually over 100 feet. According to the NOAA Ocean Explorer website, Bonaire is “arguably the most pristine coral reef environment in the Caribbean.”

Bonaire is a pleasant downwind trip for sailors arriving from the east. A lure trolled behind the boat may reward you with mahi mahi or tuna for dinner. Our 100-pound test line was snapped off twice on the southern point, leaving our imaginations to ponder the big one that got away. The approach is easy since the island is steep-to without any shoals to avoid. However, care should be taken on the rocky windward coast. Rounding the southern point into the lee of the island, you'll find some of the best sailing in the Caribbean. Trade winds blow true and somewhat enhanced over the low island, while the seas flatten out nicely for a glorious sail into the Kralendijk mooring field.



describes 86 sites, including their level of difficulty, currents, accessibility from shore or boat, and suitability for snorkeling. Dive sites are typified by a shallow terrace extending from shore to a depth of 30 feet, then dropping off at a 45-degree angle to a depth of about 130 feet. Navigation is simple: just swim up current until your air is half empty and then swim back until you spot the mooring overhead. For something different, the southwest shore offers several double-reef dives and the wreck of the *Hilma Hooker*. If you're in Bonaire during a disruption of the trade winds (usually when a hurricane passes north), you can dive among the larger creatures inhabiting the windward side of the island. Larry's Wild Side Diving specializes in this area. The small island of Klein Bonaire is not to be missed, but best saved for days with light winds if you'll be taking your dinghy.

Great Adventures Dive Shop at the Harbour Village Marina is the most cruiser-friendly place to get your own tanks filled. They also let you rinse your gear in their freshwater tanks, conserving your onboard water supply. If you don't have your own gear, you can rent from them or one of the other shops. For equipment repairs and purchases, go see Bruce Bowker at the Carib Inn. He performed several miracles when our gear malfunctioned, and we found his prices to be the most reasonable.



Since anchoring is prohibited, 42 public moorings are provided off the main town of Kralendijk for \$10 per night, or you can take a slip at the Harbour Village Marina. The mooring field is located on the edge of Bonaire's fringing reef, so you can simply jump off your boat and start your descent. Independent diving is encouraged in Bonaire, but you can also choose from numerous shops offering guided boat dives. During our two-month stay, we completed 43 dives from our dinghy or sailboat and usually had the reef all to ourselves.

Most dive sites are accessible by boat or from shore. Up to three dinghies or one 45-foot boat are allowed to tie to a dive mooring. The free “Bonaire Dive Guide”





Some of the dive sites are suitable for snorkeling, but to truly appreciate Bonaire, you need to blow some bubbles. If you aren't certified and want to be, Bonaire is the place to do it. I got certified here seven years ago. The class only took four days and I never set foot in a pool. The entire class was in Bonaire's bathwater-clear water surrounded by colorful fish and sea creatures. You can't duplicate that experience in a pool stateside.

Since you have to come up for air every now and then, don't miss a land tour of the island. Above sea

level, Bonaire is an arid island of cactus and salt pans, inhabited by donkeys, goats, and iguanas. We rented a vehicle with another couple and spent the better part of a day touring Washington-Slagbaai National Park on the north side of the island. Bring along your marine park receipt and they'll waive the \$10 admission fee. The park is the best place to spot the endangered Lora parrot and flashy pink flamingos. There are several dive sites (rated advanced to intermediate) in the park, so you can bring along your dive gear if you wish. We

also spent half a day touring the south side of the island. Here you'll see Bonaire's salt pans, the infamous slave huts, and the windsurfing resort at Lac Bay. There's also a naturist resort on Lac Bay, if you're inclined to take it all off in a group setting.

For cruisers like us arriving from Venezuela, Bonaire provides a nice change of pace. Put your Spanish-English dictionary away and bring out your greenbacks. Although Dutch and Papiamentu are the local languages, most shopkeepers speak English. US dollars are exchanged at 1.75 to the local Antillean Florin, and businesses will charge your credit card in US dollars upon





request. You can also withdraw US dollars from many of the ATMs.

Easy access to your funds is important since Bonaire offers many temptations, and they aren't cheap. The captain can satisfy most any need at Budget Marine, NAPA, Caribbean Fasteners, and several hardware stores. The galley slave will find grocery store shelves stocked with many items that were either unavailable or hard to find in Venezuela, like cheddar cheese, sour cream, pickle relish, and dried pinto beans. Better yet, forget cooking and enjoy Bonaire's wide variety of restaurants serving international fare. Don't miss the yummy ice cream shop in the mall, our favorite excuse to go into town! Then, if you're feeling lucky, you can try the slots and tables at the Divi Flamingo Casino.

On the other hand, sticker shock at the gas pump greets anyone arriving in Bonaire from Venezuela or Trinidad. During our visit, gasoline was \$6.43 a gallon; diesel, \$4.54. Fortunately, Chichiriviche on the Venezuelan mainland is an easy 75-mile reach. Maria at the Islas del Sol dock in the town harbor (identified by an ornamental lighthouse) will fill your fuel jugs for the local price plus a nominal trip fee, totaling about 13 cents a gallon in our case.

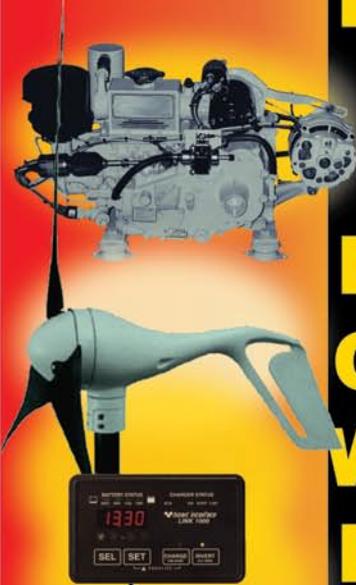
For sailors who enjoy the undersea world, Bonaire is truly paradise. The diving is excellent, accessible, and inexpensive. The island offers fabulous sailing, good shopping, and excellent dining. With so much to offer both above and below sea level, Bonaire is a definite "must stop" on any westbound Caribbean cruising itinerary. ⚓





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