

undercurrent

The Private, Exclusive Guide for Serious Divers

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Bonaire, A Shore Diver's Mecca

the Carib Inn, deep diving private guides

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Just about every diver goes to Bonaire once. Many return repeatedly, while some swear never to return, finding the diving boring, the desert landscape unattractive, and the willy-nilly modernization uninteresting. I visited Bonaire in June -- my third trip -- to check hotels and dive operations, in a sense doing advance work for this month's reviewer who undertook serious diving, often long and deep. It's clear I missed out on the good stuff.

On my first trip in 1976, only Bonaire Beach Hotel (now the defunct Sunset Beach), where Captain Don and his guide, Bruce Bowker, held forth, offered diving. The good captain used inflated condoms to mark the reef and monitored his depth by the color changes on the red ribbon he wore. He had a dive boat, but half the time we piled into an old truck and chugged up the coast to leap off the ironshore. Beautiful coral, plenty of fish, and warm clear water is a description that still applies, though two decades of exploitation have taken a toll.

Today, divers have several easy-to-categorize lodging/diving options. There's "the gang of four," essentially next door to one another, a mile plus north of town: Sand Dollar, Lions Dive, Buddy Dive, and Captain Don's Habitat, all with restaurants fronting on the reef. The first three are condo complexes, too standardized for my liking, and the Sand Dollar doesn't seem to be aging gracefully. Buddy's and Lions are nearly twins. Only Captain Don's has real "island character," both in the little units off the beach and the villas. At each of these, divers climb down ladders or leap off the piers at waterfront dive shops to visit the same continuous reef, which remains pristine north of Don's but deteriorates south of the Sand Dollar. Each has excellent boats that travel to the same sites. Buddy's has a drive-in air station, which you can use whether or not you stay there. My preference? Captain Don's.

BONAIRE TIPS: Bonaire is rife with petty theft. Most of it involves items taken from vehicles parked for beach dives, but a rental car in front of Carib Inn was jacked up and two of its tires taken. Never leave anything in your car; leave your car unlocked and the windows rolled down.

Keep your room locked and your valuables in the hotel safe. Crime has spread to hotel premises, so exercise normal caution. We heard complaints of police failing to follow up when divers report thefts. Many people believe the government feels that forcing tourists to put up with crime is preferable to taking the risk of offending anyone by cracking down on it, but the national government has just announced an investigation into corruption.

Nonetheless, don't be afraid to drive anywhere you want to go, to talk to locals, or to enjoy the island. Visit Pink Beach in the late afternoon. Stop under the conveyor belt which transports the salt to the pier and pick up a few diamond-like chunks as a souvenir. Sorobon Beach is the finest on the island. Both it and Boca Cai Beach are at Lac Bay. There is also a small beach at Nucove as well as a stunning view. On a clear day you may see Curaçao. Don't miss the flying walking sticks (flamingos), goats, roaming donkeys, or endangered Bonaire parrots. Boca Cocolishi and Boca Slagbaal beaches are on the northeast coast. Go to the park entrance and ask for directions. Washington Slagbaal Park is a 13,500-acre wasteland; don't bother to visit it if you have anything else to do. It includes what some people call a dirt "road," but don't attempt to drive on it if it has been raining.

Each of the four has a seaside restaurant that serves similar food prepared by chefs trained in the Chart House school of cooking, which isn't at all bad, but gets routine. I tried several restaurants: everywhere broccoli and cauliflower were the veggies, mahi mahi the fresh fish, and the same white flour rolls were on every dinner table. Eventually, a hamburger and fries made a good dinner. Nearly everyone recommends Richard's seaside restaurant, where I indeed had a good meal, but Richard himself told me his food is a notch below the best restaurant on Bonaire: the Capriccio. At all these restaurants, full meals with a couple drinks and tip will run you \$50-60.

Bonaire has two upscale properties (the only two on Bonaire with any beach to speak of), the large, hotel-like Plaza and the more sequestered and pricey Harbour Village, where I stayed. It's a luxurious and pricey oasis, with lovely rooms and one- or two-bedroom suites that overlook the small but pleasant beach and are done in southwestern colors and style; less expensive rooms sit back, some fronting on the island's major marina. With three restaurants, one never has

to leave. There's a well-equipped dive shop with good boats, but most guests -- a mixture of Americans, Canadians, Dutch and Venezuelans -- were barely snorkelers.

Here, beach diving requires a 100-yard walk in full gear to the restaurant pier; then, to reach the reef, a 5-10 minute swim at 30 feet under the entrance to the harbor. Snorkel off the beach and you hover over bones of coral, but like anywhere on Bonaire there are plenty of critters; on one easy snorkel I swam among a school of small jacks, toyed with a spotted snake eel, and saw peacock flounders, a scorpionfish, hunting trumpetfish, and scores of needlefish.

I made a couple of uneventful beach dives and several boat dives here. It's a competent operation for sure (though once the boat captain spun in circles for ten minutes trying to get close enough to an errant bottle to pluck it from the ocean; good thing it wasn't a man overboard). The sites were typical (e.g., Yellow Man and A Thousand Steps), with plenty of nice coral and tropicals: uneventful, safe, easy, like all Bonaire boat diving.

But this is beach diving country and Harbour Village is no place for a serious beach diver (for a beach diver in search of luxury, the Plaza would be preferable). To get the best of Bonaire, you spend your diving hours off your hotel or rent a van and jump in anywhere (which is why many divers rent a house or a cheap apartment). A fine choice is the Bonaire Beach Bungalows, cozy little houses south of town that we've written about for two decades; you just roll in from your front porch. A couple of other options include the Cyndanna (which handles the Carib Inn's overflow).

Two other advertised hotels were both disappointing at best. The Black Durgon Inn looks like a low-rent place I might have stayed as a struggling college

feet. Here, going no deeper than 80 feet, I saw green and hawksbill turtles and large Cubera Snappers. This reef is completely different from the west side; here I enjoy drifting in the surge to the hypnotic sea fans.

At Pink Beach I went to 115 feet to find a longlure frogfish Bowker staff member Kitty Handschuh described. I watched it engulf a juvenile wrasse -- well, I saw a blur, and before you could kiss your wrasse goodbye, it was gone. An eagle ray swam within thirty feet. Heading back to the beach I watched a six-foot bluespotted cornetfish (not a trumpet fish, mind you) at a cleaning station. In four feet of water, I saw what looked like a ping-pong ball. I pulled it down; it was a ping pong ball. I stood up in the midst of a topless ping-pong game -- must have been one of those new European sports. We all got a good laugh.

Hurricane Lenny's Legacy

Seems like killer storms are brewing up later every year, and 150-mph Lenny, which wreaked havoc across the Caribbean in November, was among the latest. Lenny was odd in other ways, most notably in its freak easterly path, the reverse of the typical Atlantic hurricanes. Sounding like a minor variance, the net effect of the reversal was a storm that pounded islands where they were most vulnerable, producing what some lifelong Dominica residents called "the worst sea damage I've ever seen from a hurricane."

Lenny's range was wide, encompassing sixteen different Caribbean islands. Areas of Bonaire, Saba, St. Maarten, St. Lucia, Grenada, Martinique, and Dominica suffered extensive property damage, and deaths or missing persons were reported on Guadeloupe, Dutch St. Maarten, Puerto Rico, and Dominica. The storm also hit Antigua, Anguilla, St. Croix, the British Virgins, Montserrat, St. Kitts and Nevis, and St. Vincent and the Grenadines, although damage there was moderate.

While Bonaire received almost no rain from Lenny, which remained 150 miles offshore, wave action on the normally calm western side was an attention-grabber. Waves in some areas were reportedly in excess of 10 feet in height, spray in excess of 50'. Most dive operations secured their boats in Harbour Village Marina, and only one boat owned by Black Durgon was lost. Dive operations themselves were not as fortunate. A substantial number lost their docks, among them Captain Don's Habitat, Buddy Dive, and Bel-mar Oceanfront Apartments. Lion's Dive lost their restaurant, while Eden Beach's bottom floor was flooded and the storm left a foot of sand as a souvenir. The old seaside bar at Sunset Beach was destroyed, as was the Green Parrot. Bon Bini Divers lost their dock, and the building was severely damaged; Bon Bini is assessing whether it is repairable or must be rebuilt. A great deal of debris from damaged buildings ended up on the shallow reef, and a great deal of the reef ended up as debris on the beach, but underwater cleanups are proceeding. Many resorts also described themselves as undamaged, including Carib Inn, Divi Flamingo, Green Submarine, Dive Inn, Plaza Resort and Toucan Diving, and Caribbean Court and Photo Tours Dives. All resorts are reportedly operating either from undamaged buildings or alternate locations.

On Dominica, huge waves picked up rocks and boulders and pummeled the shoreline homes and hotels for four days, destroying seawalls, swimming pools, and steel reinforced concrete terraces & sun decks. In Roseau, the Anchorage and Evergreen hotels were severely damaged, as was the Castle Comfort Lodge. Evergreen and Castle Comfort are now open with a few rooms and spartan amenities, but Anchorage is struggling to repair and re-wire its rooms to a habitable condition, sending guests to other hotels in the meantime. Dive operations are operating at reduced capacity, but many dive sites were severely damaged. Coral Gardens near Scott's Head peninsula is not expected to be diveable for months, with sponges and corals broken as deep as 60'. Only a couple sites in the Scott's Head area survived with mild damage. However, land-based ecotourism sites including waterfalls, volcanic sites, and sulfur springs were unaffected.

Saba was battered for over 30 hours by winds gusting to 170 mph and storm surges of up to 30'. The airport terminal and tower were destroyed, although flights have resumed. The Saba Marine Park hyperbaric facility was severely damaged, but only one hotel, Scout's Place, suffered significant damage. Dive operations weren't spared, though loss was moderate with some buildings heavily damaged and some boats lost. Fortunately, Saba Marine Park reports only minimal damage to shallower areas of Tent Reef and Ladder Bay sites, while Saba's deeper reefs and pinnacle walls were reportedly unscathed.

While most dive operations appear to be operating, divers venturing to Caribbean destinations hit by Lenny should contact operators and resorts to verify the situation prior to departure.

Another splendid dive is the Mairi Bhan (the Windjammer Wreck). Carrying my deco bottle, I dropped to 204 feet, worked my way up the ship to 145 feet, and spent 44 minutes in decompression as I worked my way up the reef -- all told, 81 minutes. Swimming the interior of the hull, looking out through the ribs, I saw a hundred horse eye jacks and a school of mackerel scad. The top of the wreck is a riot of sponges, clams, and wire coral, with cherub fish and bicolor, dusky, and longfin damsels by the thousands. On the flats were beautiful sargassum triggers. A green turtle with a 3-foot-plus shell took off like a bat out of hell, perhaps catching a whiff of my wetsuit, which after three weeks could stand by itself. So large was a "hammerhead" rainbow parrot that the wash from its pectorals was like the prop wash from a freighter. Moving up through the sand chute, I came across a purple-crowed sea goddess and lettuce leaf sea slugs by the hundreds. (Water ran about 80-84°, but deep down it hit 76, while vis jumped to 150 feet.)

TRAVEL TIP — TOBAGO: Air Jamaica has announced that it will begin daily direct service to Trinidad and Tobago from Kingston, Jamaica, beginning June 24, 2000. The new service should make it easier to add on dive trips to Tobago from the western Caribbean. For information, call Air Jamaica at 800-523-5585 or check their website at <http://www.airjamaica.com>.

Red Slave Huts has a forest of soft corals, sand flats, and a steeply sloping wall. I did a 85-minute dive to 61 feet, where I watched cherub fish, a herd of blue parrots, a three-foot dog snapper, and a pair of hawksbill turtles. They made several tight circles, following each other nose to tail as if they were butt-sniffing dogs. I came across fields of garden eels weaving in the sand, four large spotfin scorpionfish, and an octopus in its den.

At Tori's Reef you'll find everything -- if you know where to look. I did a 98-minute dive to 155 feet, where vis approached 100 feet. Down deep there were sargassum triggers and a queen trigger that looked like it had been made up by Tammy Faye Baker. I searched for two lined sea horses I had seen on earlier dives, but they had either ridden off or been taken by rustlers. Along the patch reef I found some sort of shell eating a flamingo tongue (the mollusk, that is), while a foot away a large Atlantic deer cowrie sneaked away and a chain moray eel wriggled past. A large eagle ray rooted in the sand like a pig in muck.

Even if you're an experienced diver, consider hiring U.S. expat Barry Gassert, who owns the Sandwich Factory. He's an excellent guide and will take you to the east side, where, he says, California divers or those with surf-entry experience are most comfortable. (Currents come and go and are stronger on the extremes of the island.) We did two 60-minute dives to 80 feet amid stunning scenery and 100-foot vis. I saw a huge green turtle, four southern sting rays (one being cleaned), mushroom scorpionfish, harlequin pipefish, and a three-foot Nassau grouper. Half-a-dozen brown sponges were big enough to double for pianos. The entry is a 10-15 foot stride, the exit on tough ironshore.

While Bonaire is a fish photographer's dream, don't expect big fish other than what I've mentioned. I've seen mantas twice, nurse sharks, reef sharks, and an occasional blacktip shark, mostly on the east side. Unless you're sharp-eyed, when you dive without a guide you may miss the seahorses, the angler fish, the scorpion fish, the island gobies, blind shrimp, and other well-disguised or small critters, then go home saying that only commoners swim there. And one other note about the diving: there are caves inland. I can't tell you anything about them other than the fact that I met two Americans toting doubles who'd been hired by the government to explore them.

You can stay anywhere and do these dives, but staying at the Carib Inn is like staying with family. The same people show up year after year and staff turnover is low. The good-natured staff members not only do their jobs well, but they enjoy doing

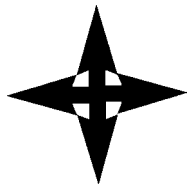
them. Kitty Handschuh has an unlimited supply of knowledge. Linda Baker is available for night dives on the town pier and has an incredible knack for finding seahorses. Valerie, Edward, and Richie are always helpful and, of course, Bruce is always around. He has a limitless interest in, knowledge of, and love for Bonaire diving. They have guided night dives and trips to the Town Pier for \$20/person, but I like Salt Pier better; permission to dive it can be gained through the office at Carib Inn.

The Inn does have limitations. There are no photo facilities, so you'll need to go to other resorts or shops for film and developing. While Bruce carries Scuba Pro, Atomic, and Sherwood regulators, should you need another brand repaired, you will need to have parts for it. They provide aluminum 80s or 63s, and you can get extra tanks. I bring a 30' deco bottle with me that I fill at Captain Don's. If you want either the typical Nitrox mixture or a higher EANx for decompression, you need proof of certification and logged dives showing your experience; the tab is \$8/fill.

Diving has changed over the years and will continue to do so. Kitty Handschuh believes the sites toward the southern end of the island have fared better than those north and center that are heavily dived. She believes spearfishing has decimated the grouper population. I saw a few small tiger groupers, fewer small black groupers and only one good-sized Nassau grouper. Barry Gassert told me that Marine Park officials allowed professional fishermen from Curaçao to come in with nets and take swarms of fish at Salt Pier. They haven't replenished themselves, and locals even fish house reefs. For this, we divers must pay \$10 for a Marine Park tag to protect the reefs? Go figure.

So, you see, Bonaire is for every budget. It's usually good anytime of year, although it can get buggy. A couple of nights I got a score of bites below the knees (sand fleas, presumably). Generally speaking, Bonaire's outside the hurricane belt, though the fringes of Hurricane Lenny in November raised hell (see sidebar). I like September because the weather is a bit warmer, as is the water, and the winds are often calm enough to dive the east side. Yes, Bonaire lacks the charm of many Caribbean islands, but for someone who's serious about diving and prefers to go off the beach on his own, there is no better venue in the Caribbean, bar none.

- S. D.



Diver's Compass: Bruce Bowker's Carib Inn, P.O. Box 68, Bonaire, Netherlands Antilles, Dutch West Indies; phone 011-599-78819; fax 011-599-7-5295; e-mail: Bruce@caribinn.com. Besides hotel rooms, they have a 3 bedroom/2 bath house for four for \$159/week. No service charge on either rooms or diving. All bedrooms have AC. Seven nights' non-refundable, non-transferable deposit of \$125 required within three weeks of booking to hold a room. One week of shore diving is \$99 (or \$12/day for 1st tank + \$5 refill -- whichever is less). All PADI courses available...Contact Barry Gassert at his shop or call 011-599-7-7369 or -7735 or -6862...Many resort guides will moonlight for extra bucks on a day off; ask your favorite... While Papiamento is the local language and Dutch the official language, most locals also speak Spanish and English. U.S. dollars are widely accepted. They generally give change in guilders. Driving: Foreign licenses accepted. Air is 82 degrees on average with highs into the 90s. Water ranges from 78 to 82 degrees. Dress is casual, but bathing suits, bare feet, and no shirts are not appreciated in town. There are several auto rental agencies, but I prefer Netty's because of the price, service, and a repeat customer's discount. A mini-van for a week runs about \$200. Netty's Car Rental: 011-599-7-5120; fax: 011-599-7-2120. While horror stories abound about ALM air, it has never lost any of our luggage. Nonetheless, carry on your essentials and realize that resorts will loan and/or rent you the items you need until your luggage shows. Round trip from Miami: \$368 plus taxes. Air Aruba and Air Jamaica also provides service to Bonaire.