

Introduction



The island of Bonaire is one of those places that claims to be a diver's paradise. It even says so on the license plates. This may seem to be too broad of a claim, but divers are seen at just about every venue on the island at any time of the day.

One of the true environmental success stories – not only in the diving world but internationally, the entire reef system around the island and satellite island Klein Bonaire is a national park. Everything on the reef is protected and every effort is made to keep the reefs healthy. The people of Bonaire have been stewarding the reefs for decades and they have become a source of national pride.

Part of the ABC islands of Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao, this island has tried to keep an individual identity in

the southern Caribbean. Inhabited by residents who have a rough history first as slaves and then as farmers in an arid land, they are an independent lot, happy to be on their own and away from the political squabbles in the more populous Curaçao. Voting to remain part of the Netherlands while its neighbors break away, the people of Bonaire maintain an unhurried pace, courting tourism but not becoming enraptured to the trappings that come with unbridled growth.

In the cultural stronghold of Rincon, fiestas celebrate the local pride and traditions. Coastal accommodations are built to favor the aesthetic, with few buildings over three storeys. The national park and flamingo nesting grounds cover perhaps a quarter of the island, giving the natural world



Dutch architecture dominates the island buildings



on land its due. The only concession to mass tourism may be the weekly visit of a cruise ship. But it will leave the same day, blasting its horn as the sun sets and leaving Bonaire to keep to itself.

This book will introduce you to the island's most revered resources – the coral reefs. It takes a look at remote northern shore dives in the Washington Slagbaai National Park, then makes a run down the coast looking at the combination of shore and boat dives that bring the diver into the lush world of dense corals and odd creatures like frogfish and seahorses. The turtle-nesting sanctuary at the offshore island of Klein Bonaire has stunning steep slopes and coral gardens with dive sites circling the island. The book also looks at the famous Bonaire pier dives, its famous *Hilma Hooker* shipwreck and the many shore dives opposite the island's saltpans in

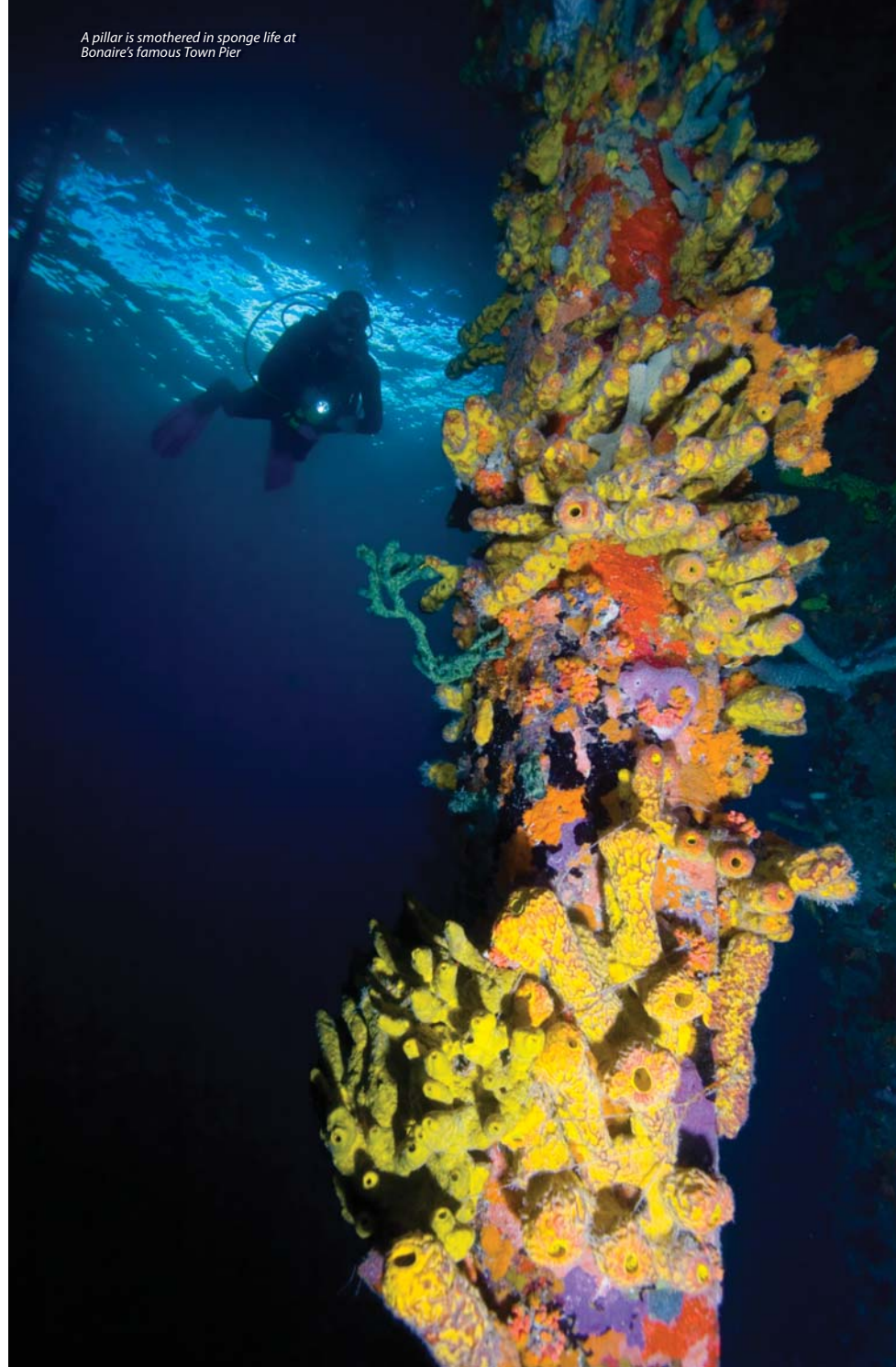
the south. The guide also has a sampling of the 'wildside' – the windswept east coast that offers an opportunity to see a whole undersea world where few dare to go.

Bonaire probably has even more sites than are listed in this book. Plus, the unique wildlife, like its flamingoes and wild donkeys, make it a special place to spend some time. You will see why many divers come back year after year, enjoying the old familiar sites and discovering some new ones. It is truly a diver's paradise.

BONAIRE DIVE HIGHLIGHTS

- 1 **Boca Slagbaai** – a favorite of snorkelers and divers with some history and flamingoes thrown in.
- 2 **Karpata** – great undersea terrain with a good chance of seeing sea turtles and lots of other stuff.
- 3 **1000 Steps** – beautiful retreat for snorkelers and divers alike with a nice variety of marine life in a serene setting.
- 4 **Reef Scientifico** – this house reef in front of Captain Don's has a small shipwreck, big sponges and a resident barracuda.
- 5 **Town Pier** – colorful sponges and great macro make this a superb day and night dive.
- 6 **Jerry's Reef** – great place to see big sponges, black coral and other offerings of Klein Bonaire.
- 7 **Hilma Hooker** – signature dive for Bonaire wreckies, this ship is fun to explore and has good marine growth.
- 8 **Angel City** – explore the double reef here and see big eels and, yes, angelfish.
- 9 **Salt Pier** – a must-dive, this shallow maze is great for a long relaxed dive through shoals of fish.
- 10 **White Hole** – the best dive on the 'wildside' with schooling tarpon and pretty sea fans.

A pillar is smothered in sponge life at Bonaire's famous Town Pier



Facts about Bonaire

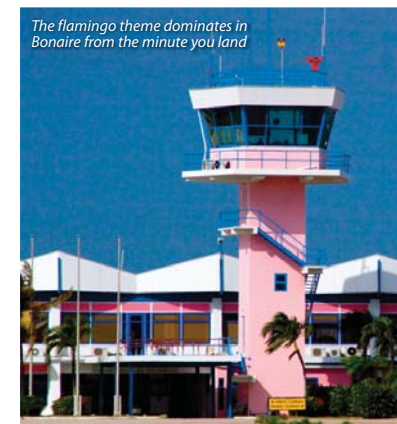
OVERVIEW

Many destinations claim to be a diver's paradise. In Bonaire, it says so right on the license plate. Bonaire has made a commitment to preserve its reefs, which are its livelihood, but at the same time to forego true mass tourism in favor of a more controlled development of its economy.

If one looks at Bonaire's past, there has always been an air of independence and isolation. In the years after slavery was abolished, islanders were content to farm and ranch and pretty much keep to themselves.

It kind of slid into the world tourism scene and, rather reluctantly, it now embraces it. But it does this on its own terms, ensuring the health of its environment and natural resources take precedence over the temptation to sell out for the short term.

Bonaire, with 12,000 inhabitants, is part of the Netherlands Antilles. Together with Aruba and Curaçao it forms a group referred to as the ABC islands. But make no mistake, Bonaire, with a capital 'B', is its own entity and is happy to stay that way.



The flamingo theme dominates in Bonaire from the minute you land

HISTORY

Bonaire's history dates back at least 1000 years to the first inhabitants, the Caiquetios Indians, a part of the Arawak nation. There are indications the island may have had inhabitants as far back as 3000 years ago. Cave paintings from the Caiquetio habitation can be seen by following a turnoff on the road close to Rincon – it is marked by a sign. The Caiquetios came from coastal Venezuela and lived peacefully for five centuries until Europeans came to Bonaire in 1499. Alonso de Ojeda and Amerigo Vespucci claimed it for Spain. Unfortunately for the Caiquetios, the Spanish ruthlessly enslaved them and moved them off to work in plantations on the Island of Hispaniola, leaving the island unpopulated.

Bonaire's name is believed to be derived from these people. It comes from the Caiquetio word '*bonay*', meaning 'low country'. The early Spanish and Dutch modified its spelling to Bojnaj and also Bonaire.

The island was sparsely settled until 1526. Cattle were brought to Bonaire by the governor and Caiquetios were returned to become agricultural workers. The island became a center for raising sheep, goats, pigs, horses and donkeys. They were raised for their skins, not their meat, and roamed wild. Soon, large herds of animals greatly outnumbered the people. Wild donkeys and goats still inhabit the *kunuku* (outback). However, due to a number of car accidents most donkeys are found at the Donkey Sanctuary. The goats still roam.

Bonaire's early inhabitants were mostly convicts from Spanish colonies in South America. The only permanent settlement was the village of Rincon. Situated in a valley far from a safe harbor, it was thought to be safe from



Divers leave for Klein Bonaire as a snorkeler watches

marauding pirates. In 1633, the Dutch took possession of Curaçao, Bonaire and Aruba. Curaçao, the largest island, became a slave trade center, while Bonaire became a plantation island of the Dutch West Indies Company. At that time the first African slaves were forced to work by cutting dyewood and cultivating maize and harvesting solar salt. The remnants of those sad days can be seen on the island's south coast, where there are small slave huts. The handmade salt-pans are still used today.

Until 1816, ownership of Bonaire changed hands a number of times, finally being returned that year to the Dutch as a result of the Treaty of Paris. By 1837, it was a thriving center of salt production. The abolition of slavery in 1863 brought an end to the human exploitation. The salt industry died and wasn't reborn again until the 1960s. Today it is a division of Cargill Incorporated, one of the world's largest salt producers.

Tourism was born when the government constructed the first pier for ships in the harbor. This allowed cruise ships to tie up and discharge passengers. It also made it easier to bring in goods and supplies for the island's residents. Hotels were built to house the early visitors. In 1943, the construction of a modern airport south of Kralendijk made it even easier for tourists to reach the island.

The island embraced scuba diving and nature over the past few decades, and has become one of the true international environmental success stories found in eco-travel. Bonaireans have learnt to balance their growth with the environment. Politically, they have chosen to remain aligned with the Netherlands as Aruba and Curaçao take another tack. The future holds some exciting new challenges for the island for growth and to cement its place in the region.

DIVING HISTORY

Total diving freedom is the mantra. In Bonaire, divers like to do what they want to do, any time and any place. They've been an independent lot since divers first came to the island and that attitude remains today. In the early days, divers went all over Bonaire by boat and by shore looking for dive sites. Pioneers include Bruce Bowker, Bas Marin, Nel Nicholas, Ebo Domacasse and Capt Don Stewart. Back then in the 1960s, one of the main scuba diving activities was spearfishing; harvesting from the sea was the norm. There were even international spearfishing competitions in Bonaire.

Capt Don (as he's known to the locals) recalls scuba divers weren't looked on fondly by others in the fledgling tourism industry in the 1960s. Divers wore their swimming suits everywhere and hauled gear around. But, rather than leave, they stayed and established their own hotels, bars and dive shops so they'd have places to hang out. This slowly but surely put Bonaire on the map as the diving destination of choice by divers all over the world.

Capt Don says he had an epiphany of sorts and felt spearfishing just wasn't a good thing. He vowed to be a shepherd of the sea and its resources. Others followed suit and through a friend named Carel Steensma (see the dive site **Carel's Vision**), Capt Don was able to approach Prince Bernhard of the Netherlands. He proposed the island be a marine preserve and the prince concurred. Since then, the Bonaire Marine Park has been a reality and Bonaire is regarded as one of the world's leaders in pioneering multiple use reef conservation.

A film documenting the captain's efforts, *Island Adrift* (also the name of his book) was filmed by Hendrik Wuyts and is available around Bonaire on DVD. Capt Don is also credited with finding and naming more than 50 dive sites,

personally placing mooring buoys at many of them. He is hailed by many as the founder of the dive industry on Bonaire, and an ardent conservationist. 'He helped give the island an identity. He helped give it a vision,' says George Buckley, professor of marine biology at Harvard.

Tourism has grown rapidly in the past two decades and is the island's main activity for visitors.

Today the management of the park is in the hands of Stichting Nationale Parken Bonaire, or STINAPA Bonaire. It manages the Bonaire National Marine Park, the Washington Slagbaai National Park, the caves at Barcadera, Klein Bonaire and three RAMSAR sites. RAMSAR sites are internationally recognized wetlands. It continues to fulfill the vision of the early pioneers and is recognized internationally as a model in marine park management.



The charismatic Capt Don is considered the diving pioneer of Bonaire

GEOGRAPHY

Bonaire is a small place and mostly volcanic. The island is 24 miles (38km) long and 3 to 7 miles (11km) at the widest point. It has 116 sq miles (300 sq km) of land, most of which is no good for agriculture, so the island is covered mainly in cactus and brush. It sits near Venezuela and has one small offshore island called Klein Bonaire, nestled in its western arch. Prevailing winds blow from the east all but about two months of the year (September and October) and the west side of Bonaire is protected by a central ridgeback. This leaves the water calm, making it the natural side to dive.

The north of Bonaire is mainly *kunukus* (big ranches) and a national park. In and near the park are numerous hills, the highest being Mount Brandaris at 723ft (241m). The south end is flat and almost at sea level, and made up of salt fields and a flamingo sanctuary.

The Netherlands Antilles has a tropical climate, with warm weather all year.

CLIMATE

Bonaire's tropical but pleasant climate is legendary. The average air temperature is 82° Fahrenheit (30°C) and 75% relative humidity. For divers and snorkelers, the average water temperature is 80°F (29°C). Rainfall averages 22in (52.8cm) per year, mostly during the rainy season. There is a constant east trade wind that generally makes the evenings cool and comfortable. Average wind speed is 15mph (25kph).

The tourism high season is winter/spring: December 15 to April 14. The low season is summer/fall: April 15 to December 14. The stronger winds are May through August, with strong to moderate winds January through April. Calm season, when divers try to dive the east side, is September and October. Things green up for a few months in rainy season from November through

January, although the rain usually comes at night or in bursts. It is rarely constant or torrential.

This lack of rainfall is good for divers as the water is normally clear with visibility averaging 100ft up to 150ft on a good day (30m to 45m).

POPULATION, PEOPLE & CULTURE

Bonaire's permanent residents are a friendly bunch with a rich history, steeped in the settling and commerce of the Caribbean. There are about 12,000 people on Bonaire. Many are Dutch citizens who have decided to give life in the tropics a try. The rest were born and raised here or on nearby islands.

Bonairean culture goes back many generations. This cultural history is evident in songs and dances traditionally seen during holidays and festivals. Nowadays, Catholicism is strong in the community and this has enforced strong family ties and respect for nature and an understanding of an environment.

The first settlers in this inhospitable, arid land were slaves and salt miners. Early days of slavery conditioned the people to be strong in the face of adversity. People began to develop songs, invent dances, and sing in the old African tradition. These songs and dances have now evolved into festivals that are an important part of Bonaire life and culture.

The dances of the Simidan and the Bari are the best known. The traditional waltz, mazurka and the polka and the local 'Baile di Sinta' (ribbon dance) are performed as well as the rumba, the carioca, and merengue that came from other islands. American jazz also influenced local traditions of song and dance. Using an eclectic assortment of homemade musical instruments, early performers set the stage for rich, local traditions.



The Samur is a unique vessel for a sunset sail



The harbor holds some colorful boats and yachts

Thus, quite a few festivals occur throughout the year. The *Bonaire Reporter* or *Nights Magazine* alerts visitors to those taking place during their particular vacation period. The period from January 1 to 6 is Maskarada, which is worth seeing for the creative and colorful masks made in honor of this event. The Spring Harvest Festival occurs from the end of February until the end of April. Summer sees Dia di San Juan and Dia di San Pedro celebrations. Bari runs from the end of October to the end of December.

Many of the festivals are regional, even on small Bonaire. For instance, the main village of Rincon is more apt to celebrate all the holidays in grand style, while the village of North Salina devotes a lot of energy to Maskarada. The best

example of strong cultural ties is during Dia Di Rincon (Rincon Day) when there are thousands of participants from the Antilles and Aruba that come to celebrate.

LANGUAGES

English is spoken almost everywhere, but there are many other major languages to hear. The official language of Bonaire is Dutch. But the native language is Papiamentu, spoken exclusively in the ABC Islands of Aruba, Bonaire, and Curaçao. Papiamentu is a mixture of many languages including Spanish, Dutch, Portuguese, French, English, Caribbean Indian and various African languages. An official spelling for Papiamentu words was established

several years ago, and dictionaries and language training materials can be found in the book stores.

All Antillean children are required to be fluent in Dutch as part of their schooling, so if you can speak Dutch, you'll be able to get around very well. There are a number of Dutch-language newspapers available on Bonaire and the pop music Mega FM radio station (FM101) features hourly news in Dutch during the workday.

English is also widely spoken and most of the fish guidebooks and other marine material are in English. There are local Dutch and Papiamentu language newspapers but no English language equivalent. The *Bonaire Reporter* is in English and has a touristy verve for those visiting and wanting to find out

what's happening. Trans World Radio, an international Christian radio station with a big presence on Bonaire, also offers hourly English news (AM800).

Also, almost everyone here speaks Spanish. So if all else fails, one can usually converse in Spanish. Papiamentu language has strong Spanish roots and is close enough that one can make oneself understood when speaking Spanish.

GATEWAY CITY

Kralendijk

Divers have a Mecca – it is called Kralendijk. This colorful little city next to the Bonaire Flamingo Airport is the hub of the island, flanked on both sides by the island's major dive hotels. In town there are many fine restaurants, bars, gift shops, a visitor center, supermarkets and other support businesses that mainly revolve around tourist divers. The town square is a historic setting of an old Dutch fort and some older buildings still holding their own as part of a waterfront walkway and shopping district. Sailboats anchor in this protected setting and Klein Bonaire sits just across a channel where the sun sets with a warm afterglow most evenings. Many come to this area to shop and eat after a big day of diving and some also come to dive, as this is also the home of the famous **Town Pier**, one of the Caribbean's finest night dives.

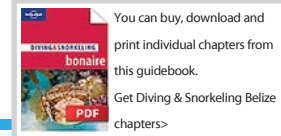


Catholicism is the main religion here



A big school of snapper congregate at reef top on Bonaire's Wildside

Author



TIM ROCK

Tim Rock attended the journalism program at the University of Nebraska at Omaha and has been a broadcast and print photojournalist for 30 years. The majority of those years has been spent in the Western and Indo Pacific reporting on environmental and conservation issues.

His television series, *Aquaquest Micronesia*, was an Ace Award finalist. He has also produced six documentaries on the history and undersea fauna of the region. Rock won the prestigious Excellence in the Use of Photography from the Society of Publishers in Asia. He also has many other awards for photography and writing, publishes a magazine and is a correspondent for numerous Pacific Rim magazines. He is the author of six other Lonely Planet series guides, including *Chuuk Lagoon, Pohnpei & Kosrae, Bali & Lombok, Guam & Yap, Palau, South Africa and Papua New Guinea*, and is a major contributor to *Philippines*. Lonely Planet Images (www.lonelyplanetimages.com) and other agents worldwide represent Rock's photographic work.

FROM THE AUTHOR

Thank you to my wife Larie for her continued support and for holding down the fort while I travel. Olga Spoelstra provided her many talents and unselfish help and friendship in making images and words for this book. Anne Louise Tuke shared some great insights about her beloved Bonaire. Also, Capt Don Stewart, Janet Thibault, Larry Bailie, Janice Huckaby, Martin Heinrich, Jackson Winkler, Martijn Eichhorn and Monique Reichert, Simone Wackenhut, Jack and Karen Chalk, Harley Chalk, Chris Chalk, George Buckley, Dee Scarr, Ernesto 'Netto' Bernabella, Jenny Marchena, Christina Wooten, Karen Pearson, Max Margarita, Rozaida Rosaria, Bous Scholtz, Ronella Croes, George Thode, Fernando Simal, Rolando Marin, Ramon de Leon, Elsmarie Beukenboom, BNMP and STINAPA staff and the people of Bonaire for their hospitality and dedication to the preservation of the marine world that surrounds their beautiful island.

FROM THE PUBLISHER

Bonaire is one of diving's special places. The island and its people have dedicated themselves to the conservation of its reefs and resources. We are happy to present this new guide to the snorkel and dive sites of the island and hope you enjoy its bountiful natural resources.

PHOTO NOTES

Tim Rock uses Aquatica housings and Canon 20D cameras with Canon and Sigma lenses. Ikelite makes his DS125 strobes. TLC strobe arms are used to angle the strobes. Land cameras are also Canon, with Canon, Sigma and Tamron lenses. All photos are by the author unless otherwise noted.

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