



Washington Slagbaai National Park

Schooling doctorfish swim over the upper reef



This park is a cactus wonderland. Lizards and iguanas warming themselves on the road scurry from the slow approach of your vehicle. Unlike the developed part of the island, the park has rolling hills, small lakes, bays and forests of brush and cactus, thinned somewhat by wild goats and a dwindling population of wild donkeys. Birds of prey sit in twisted trees, while elegant pink flamingoes wade through the shallows of broad saltwater estuaries foraging for food.

PARK DIVING

BNMP's (Bonaire National Marine Park's) numbered dive sites start at Number 1 – **Boka Bartol** on the northwest corner of Bonaire – and run south to the island's southern tip, with a few more park sites extending back up the east coast to the Lac.

Wild and remote, the beauty and solitude that comes from isolation is also a factor to be considered when diving in Washington Slagbaai.

The roads are scheduled to be paved in some places in the park, but for the most part they are one-way single lanes little more than dirt tracks. If you should have any sort of diving accident,

whether it be slipping and breaking a bone or a hyperbaric emergency, it is a good hour from the closest park dive site to any medical treatment. Shallower dives and favorable entry conditions are the best and safest way to approach diving here.

There are seven sites within the park and all but one (at this writing) are open to the diving community by shore. The diving here is considered to be more virgin, as dive boats and shore divers don't get up here as frequently. If you are boat diving, many dive operations will spend two dives up in the park waters as it is considered a long way to go for a dive, and will therefore maximize the experience.

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	GOOD SNORKELING	NOVICE	INTERMEDIATE	ADVANCED
1 BOKA BARTOL	•			•
2 PLAYA BENGE	•			•
3 PLAYA FUNCHI	•	•		
4 BISE MORTO	•	•		
5 WAYAKA	•	•		
6a BOKA SLAGBAAI NORTH	•	•		
6b BOKA SLAGBAAI SOUTH	•	•		

Blowholes and rugged cliffs are found in the National Park's boundaries



1 BOKA BARTOL

Location: Washington Slagbaai National Park

Depth: 15-85ft (4-27m)

Access: Shore or boat

Expertise Rating: Advanced and/or with guide



This broad and beautiful bay is a favorite dive and snorkel site for park visitors. The sandy inner reef area studded with corals and small channels is a snorkeler's delight. Since it sits at the northern tip of Bonaire it is wise to evaluate conditions before entering the water here.

As with most of the park sites, it is not as protected as those further south, and careful attention should be paid to surf

and weather conditions here. Stronger currents usually accompany a big surf, so even if you get out, you may run into current problems. Since no-one lives up here, it is necessary to drive up and check the seas. Do not be afraid to abort a dive or snorkel if conditions aren't favorable. Even though it is a long drive, better safe than sorry.

If entering by shore, park at the south end of the boka and make your way down the small beach area at the shore. If snorkeling, enjoy the many corals and sandy areas in this boka, and keep an eye out for big barracuda coasting by. The STINAPA buoy sits offshore in 27ft of water, the block base being in a sandy area that basically marks the beginning of the sloping reef. If diving, head out through one of the shallow channels and admire the shallow corals on the way out. Drop down at the buoy

and you will see there is a sandy area that again turns into slope and more corals and channels.

The best diving is about 30ft to 80ft. Since this area isn't dived or fished heavily, parrotfish, grouper and many other species can be larger here and more abundant. The sand channels hold a multitude of garden eels at around 50ft to 60ft and further down. Look also for stingrays buried in the white sand.

On the way up, check out the odd coral formations and make your deco stop, enjoying the many shallow corals. This shallow area can get quite stirred up when there is strong surf and visibility can be low on exit, which is another reason to carefully consider this dive if it isn't a nice day.

Also, when diving, look into the blue water. The park's first few dive sites have been places where eagle rays, turtles, the occasional manta and even a whale shark have been seen.

2 PLAYA BENGE

Location: Washington Slagbaai National Park

Depth: 10-140ft (3-35m)

Access: Shore or boat

Expertise Rating: Advanced and/or with guide



This is another of the trickier dives in the park. Conditions need to be evaluated here carefully for both divers and snorkelers. Wind-driven waves can cause the inner-reef area to fill quickly, and the only means for water to escape is the center channel where divers and snorkelers like to enter. Thus, it can be a rip of a ride out and a real struggle to get back in the same way. Don't dive or snorkel if the strong wind is

coming into your face as you look out onto the reef.

Although we have the wall icon listed, it is not a true wall, but rather quite a steep slope. On the right, the coral is in heavy concentration, with the south being sand and coral heads. Deep dives can be made past the buoy's base



A hawksbill sea turtle wings in from the blue

from 30ft down to 110ft. Here a deep lip starts and holds pocked areas and a small cave. One cavern is actually a swim-through.

Big fish abound here and this is also a good place to keep an eye out for pelagics. The basin-shape of the wall area sweeps currents over the corals but also protects them. Thus, they are competitive and healthy here. Star, brain and other hard corals compete for space.

This white sandy beach is also a nesting area for sea turtles, so watch your step when crossing the beach so as not to disturb the nests. Again, evaluate conditions before entering.

The beach and nearby salina make Playa Funchi a scenic site



3 PLAYA FUNCHI

Location: Washington Slagbaai National Park

Depth: 15-90ft (4-28m)

Access: Shore or boat

Expertise Rating: Novice



Funchi, or a traditional corn meal mush, is an Antillean staple. Since the beach is full of coral rubble, it isn't mushy at all. Local folks like to eat it with fish, so maybe the reef reminded someone of fish and funchi. They also eat it sliced and fried in butter and served with crisp bacon and scrambled eggs for Sunday breakfast. Maybe the beach was a good place to spend Sunday morning. No matter how it got its name, it is a nice place for snorkelers and divers. The reef has lots of nooks and crannies in the coral and marine invertebrates are in good numbers here.

The buoy here sits in 28ft of water but it is not on the drop-off. A swim of a couple minutes brings the diver out to the slope. Look for marauding jacks along the reef and also schooling jacks. Again, this area has larger fish down deep than are seen further south.

The reef slope has coral cover from about 30ft to 100ft and then becomes a sand plain. There are some nice sponge formations here and small cleaning areas with barber pole shrimp and hiding eels.

Since it is a three to four minute swim once back up at the 30ft mark, give yourself plenty of time and air to get back into the shallows.

Snorkelers feed the fish here – although they're asked not to – so angels and others may seem overly friendly. They're just looking for a handout. Fish feeding is against BNMP regulations everywhere, by the way, which is why there aren't 'pet' morays and other such creatures found at other Caribbean destinations.



4 BISE MORTO

Location: Washington Slagbaai National Park

Depth: 20-100ft (6-30m)

Access: Closed

Expertise Rating: Novice



This site is closed for a while. The park authority occasionally closes some areas on land and sea so they can be relieved of visitor and diver pressure. This can be a long time or a short time. The park puts no real deadline on opening and closing a site. They just monitor these closed sites to see how they are doing, so ask if you hear a place is closed, as it

might re-open. Also, don't be surprised to find a site closed, but normally they only close one or two of the island's many areas at a time.

Bise Morto has a small beach and a buoy in 25ft of water. It has a long sandy inner reef plain that eventually slopes and runs down to about 120ft to 130ft and turns again to sand. Hard corals abound.



A spotted moray is a commonly seen eel

Hurricane Lenny

Mid-November 1999 is a time that Bonaire residents recall with trepidation. A tropical depression started building on November 13, and in a short time Tropical Depression number 16 evolved into the eighth hurricane of the season, dubbed Lenny. Hurricanes at this time of the year are a rare occurrence. Not only was Lenny remarkably intense for a late-season hurricane, but the system also made a nearly unprecedented eastward track through the Caribbean Sea. Only four other hurricanes reached category 3 or greater on the Saffir-Simpson Scale. Lenny was a strong category 4 when it tracked past Puerto Rico and the US Virgin Islands. During this century, only three other hurricanes moved predominantly east or northeastward through the Caribbean at any time of the year; in 1905, 1939 and 1955 (all in October). Most of the late season tropical systems that form over the Caribbean move northward.

The storm did not actually hit Bonaire, but the swell from the intense storm rolled into the north and western coast and wreaked havoc on the normally tranquil coast. Bonaire was known for its coral growth that came right up to the shoreline in many places. Capt Don tells tales of having to actually hack paths through the coral just to get out to shore dive. The powerful waves wiped out a lot of coral in the shallows and down to 30ft in some places. Coastal erosion was rampant and many homes, businesses and piers were destroyed.

Bonaire buffs still reflect on the rich reefs before Lenny. However, corals are now rebounding and regrowing along the western reefs, while fish have new habitats and the change in the reef structure has opened up the coastal areas for different invertebrate species and fish to move in.

Anyone who had not been to Bonaire before would not be able to see much of the damage, unless it was pointed out. It is good to know how nature builds and then changes the ocean floor. This is evident in Bonaire and the reefs are rebounding well, making for a rewarding diving experience.



The short set of steps leads to Wayaka's entry

5 WAYAKA

Location: Washington Slagbaai National Park

Depth: 15-130ft (4-40m)

Access: Shore and boat

Expertise Rating: Novice



This is also a dive and snorkel site with the park buoy in fairly shallow water at 21ft. Snorkelers are very partial to this site. There is a small sandy beach that all but disappears at high tide, and this site also has a *saliña* nearby that flamingoes like to frequent. To get to the beach you have to go down a set of a dozen steps with a handrail. This leads to the beach

area and there are a number of entries along the shoreline. The sand is very fine and there are rocks as you get deeper.

This is a long swim out for snorkelers and divers also have to swim along the bottom to get to the drop-off if heading to the reef from the buoy line. Once out through the shallow channel and out to sea or off the boat, the reef makes a gentle decline down to a depth of 130ft. Look in the depths for the fernlike black coral. Not many Caribbean islands still have this type of coral, due to its use as jewelry and other hand-carved items.

This is a good place for midnight parrotfish, rays and turtles. Move back up the reef slowly to enjoy the variety here. Coral heads vary in size, giving this site a nice topography and a lot of places for the divers to look around.



A gray angel is a curious photo subject



Historic buildings are found at Boka Slagbaai

6a BOKA SLAGBAAI NORTH

Location: Washington Slagbaai National Park

Depth: 17-120ft (5-35m)

Access: Shore and boat

Expertise Rating: Novice



This is a popular site for both diving and snorkelling. The area is seen easily from **Wayaka**. There is a scenic old harbor and historic buildings that have been renovated and can be visited by those coming here. There is even a picnic area and a *saliña* nearby that normally has flamingoes. Kayakers also come here to explore. The original buildings date back to 1868.

The beach is rubbly with sandy pockets in many places. Entry is pretty easy in most spots but on the north, there is a sandy beach at the start of the inlet and this is a good place to get in as there is less wave action when the swell comes from the north. The bottom has very few obstacles as you fin up and head out.

There are two BNMP buoys here, and both sit in 17ft of water at each end of the bay. Swim out and descend. Take note of the current and its strength. The currents here are not usually strong but there is usually some current.

The reef starts in 30ft to 35ft and slopes down to sand at 115ft to 125ft. Hard corals are in abundance, as well as

sponge life and big fish. Big green morays are found here. Look for shoals of Creole wrasse, French and queen angel-fish and hawksbill turtles. If you're lucky, manta may appear in the blue.

6b BOKA SLAGBAAI SOUTH

Location: Washington Slagbaai National Park

Depth: 17-120ft (5-35m)

Access: Shore and boat

Expertise Rating: Novice



On the other side of the old harbor and historic buildings is another parking area and open access to the shore. The slaagbaai to the east can be seen easily here and so can the wildlife, so look for flamingoes and other water fowl. Slagbaai is a natural bay. This commonly used word for a brackish, shallow bay actually comes from the Dutch word *slachtbaai* (slaughters bay). From the 1860s, the Dutch shipped slaughtered and salted goats to Curaçao from here, and also began to transport salt. The old buildings represent the office, several stores, a slaughterhouse and a house of a superintendent from those days. The buildings can now be reserved for family or company gatherings and picnics.

Entry to this site is also easy as there is more beach area at this end of the cove. Again, take the long swim out past the buoy. Look for turtles, big parrotfish, lobsters and some blue water creatures when diving here. The tube sponges here are pink and purple and there are large barrel sponges. There are some nice translucent vase sponges as well.

Take care not to snorkel or come back too close to the bay's cliff line if there is a swell as you may get tossed around from the backwash. This is a great place to spend a day, and not all that far from the park's exit.

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