



EASY DOES IT

How many of Bonaire's 89 world-famous dives can one diver possibly hit?

We spend a week trying to find out.

By Rebecca Strauss ✦ Photos by Jennifer O'Neil



Our second dive from the dock is just as satisfying, over a sloping underwater hill covered in brain and elkhorn coral, purple tube sponges and schools of curious jacks. For our third and fourth dives of the day, we motor over to Klein Bonaire on the Newton, and hit Carl's Hill and Nearest Point — two more superlative sites. And though they're no marquee species, I spot a cadre of my favorite reef dwellers: sweet little spotted trunkfish, whose pursed lips seem perpetually to be sucking on lemons. Maybe it's the dusky sunlight hitting the reef, the flat sea, or the rainbow of orange and purple tube sponges and fairy basslets, but it's going to be tough to beat this first day. Four dives down, 85 to go.

ANOTHER DAY, ANOTHER DIVE

On the second day, we hop on Jen's Newton — complete with beanbags for surface intervals — and head south, hugging the coastline. We pass through the Kralendijk harbor, filled with sailboats sporting German, Norwegian and Venezuelan flags. Buildings on shore are painted sunny yellows and sherbet oranges, and owe their Dutch architecture to Bonaire's long history as part of the Netherlands. Though the Dutch Antilles was dissolved in 2010, the island is still a Dutch municipality, as any visitor can attest to based solely on the sheer quantity of après-dive Heinekens available.

I ARRIVED ON BONAIRE WITH A SINGULAR MISSION: TO PACK MY LOGBOOK WITH AS MANY DIVES AS POSSIBLE OVER THE COURSE OF A ONE-WEEK TRIP.

This tiny, arid, boomerang-shaped island makes it easy: Miles of coastline offer 63 dive sites, most of them accessible by shore. Nestled into the crook of the boomerang is Klein Bonaire, an even-tinier uninhabited island ringed by 26 more sites accessible by boat. As I grab my rental pickup truck, complete with a tank rack in the bed, I realize I've got my work cut out for me.

I check in at famed Buddy Dive Resort, which lives and breathes all things diving, and has one feature in particular I can't wait to experience — a drive-through tank-fill station where used tanks are exchanged for full ones, all from the comfort of the driver's seat. But first things first. In 1979, the prescient Bonaire government established both Washington Slagbaai National Park and Bonaire National Marine Park, which protect Bonaire's slice of the sea from the high-water mark to 200 feet in depth all around the island, a total of 6,672 acres of glorious water.

And before each visitor's checkout dive, he or she must attend a national-park orientation, pay a fee and get a token, which attaches to the BC like a talisman.

My orientation complete, I meet up with photographer and Alabama native Jen O'Neil and local divemaster Nolly Thode, my dive buddies for the week. O'Neil has a house on the island and a private 36-foot Newton dive boat, which she owns with her dad; the boat is perfect for whisking us to Bonaire's sites.

Like everyone I meet this week, Jen was drawn to the island because of the spectacular underwater landscape, which I'm anxious to see for myself. We jump in for our checkout on Buddy's house reef, which starts at about 20 feet. We drift lazily down to it over plentiful soft corals and sea fans, and immediately I spot trumpetfish, honeycomb cowfish and a pair of French angelfish, which seem to be eyeing us as intently as we are them.

Above, clockwise from left: sea fans at Nearest Point on Klein Bonaire; Bloodlet on the north coast is rarely dived; whip corals at Sharon's Serenity on Klein Bonaire.



MAYBE IT'S THE DUSKY SUNLIGHT HITTING THE REEF, BUT IT'S GOING TO BE TOUGH TO BEAT THIS VERY FIRST DAY.

But first, we dive. Salt City is a part of the southern double-reef system where parallel reefs are separated by a sand channel. We drop in by boat on the inner reef, and head to around 70 feet over the second reef. We fin over a sandy bottom filled with garden eels that sway like crooked index fingers, but the highlight is a free-swimming green moray eel, at least five feet long, with a chip on his shoulder — it noses Jen's camera more than once and follows us for 10 minutes, as if escorting us from his patch of real estate. Chastised, we surface and motor to our next site, Salt Pier.

Other than diving, the biggest industry in Bonaire is salt: Cargill operates huge salt pans on the island's southwest tip, tinted pink from the brine shrimp that live in the water. Ships tie up on the pier to haul salt to the East Coast of the U.S. for winter roads, but when no ships are at the pier, a dive at Salt Pier is a must. We drop



in at the southernmost pilings and fin north at about 40 feet. Every piling is patrolled by at least 20 sergeant majors, each guarding a purple egg patch the size of a dinner plate. I take wicked delight in seeing how close I can get before the little guys go on the offensive. The underwater hit parade continues as we spy a school of tarpon and a green sea turtle drifting along near shore.

After lunch, we head north again through Kralendijk to 1,000 Steps, famed as much for the entry and exit as the undersea topography. The steps from the parking lot to the beach actually number 71, but supposedly feel like 1,000 on the way back up — I'll never know, because we're cheating and diving the site by boat. It's here that Jen and Nolly last spotted one of the island's two resident manta rays, a pair that cruises up and down the west coast teasing divers. We don't see them on the dive, but we do spot plenty of the usual reef residents: triggerfish, filefish and parrotfish galore.

DIVERS DECIDE WHEN AND WHERE TO DIVE BY SIMPLY PULLING OVER AT SITES MARKED BY YELLOW PAINTED STONES.

It's midweek too soon, and I'm reviewing my checklist the next morning. Eight dives so far — this pace just won't do. I wonder if I can somehow see two sites on one dive. I spend each of the following three mornings boat diving, first with Buddy Dive, then with Toucan Diving and Wannadive Bonaire. Each of the mornings is a blur of beauty: We visit Forest on Klein, with its black coral and orange elephant ears; and La Dania's Leap in the north, where a pod of dolphins follows our boat and surfs playfully in the wake. A manta ray taunts me by gliding near shore just minutes after I've boarded the boat — only *after* I've removed my BC. We dive Joanne's Sunchi, which means "kiss" in Papiamentu, and Sampler on Klein. One of the guests on the Wannadive boat asks if I'd like to join them in his truck that afternoon, and I'm charmed once again by the simplicity of diving on Bonaire, the ultimate DIY dive experience. The road

Schooling yellow grunts cover the south piling of Salt Pier (opposite); coral embellishes the base of the mast on the Hilma Hooker.

is filled with other pickups, just like mine, each of them holding happy divers who can decide when and where to dive by simply pulling over at sites whose entry points are marked by iconic yellow painted stones.



WHAT TO DO WHEN YOU CAN'T DIVE

You've got 24 hours to kill before you fly home. Luckily, Bonaire offers plenty of topside distractions to keep you entertained.

Start your day with a guided mangrove kayak and snorkel excursion in the **Lac Bay** mangrove forest. There are one-hour tours, but if you spring for the two-hour tour, you'll paddle deeper

into the thicket of mangroves, plus get to snorkel passageways among their roots, a nursery for all sorts of reef fish. grovecenter.com

Have lunch at **The Beach Hut** on Sorobon Beach at Lac Bay, one of the world's prime spots for windsurfing due to shallow waters and steady trade winds. Afterward, try your hand at the sport, or rent a beach chair for \$5 for the day and watch as dozens of others crisscross the bay. jibecity.com

If you want to see more of Bonaire, a drive through **Washington Slagbaai National Park** can't be missed; admission is included with the park fee you paid upon orientation. There are 21 miles of dirt roads, and you can choose either the long or the short routes; set aside a few hours and don't attempt the trip in a standard car. The landscape is lunar and high desert in turn; be sure to watch for the donkeys and goats that roam free. washingtonparkbonaire.org



At Something Special, a shore dive in downtown Kralendijk, we walk into chest-deep water on the sandy bottom. A group of snorkelers nearby asks Nolly — a local who seems to know everyone — what’s so special about it. “I’m the something special today,” he says with a wicked grin. I’ve got to disagree — almost as soon as our masks hit the water, an eagle ray glides by over the sand. And again, the manta ray teases me, gliding through the harbor downtown not 10 feet from the shore where we walk after surfacing.

Over lunch on the harbor front, our little group discusses what’s realistic for my last two days underwater. Still to come today is a dive at the *Hilma Hooker*, the island’s signature wreck. Sunk in 100 feet of water in 1984, Nolly tells me it was a drug-smuggling ship with false bulkheads filled with tons of marijuana.

Though less illicit today, a visit to the ship is no less exciting. When we tie up on one of the two moorings, the parking lot on shore is filled with pickups. Those diving the wreck

from shore first have a five-minute swim over a sandy bottom, but can drop down over the first of the double reefs as they make their way to the wreck, which lies between the reefs on its starboard side. As we descend on the mooring line to the stern, the ship’s enormous hull comes into view. We make our way slowly to the crow’s nest, where Nolly hams for the camera; I’m too busy watching the bubbles drifting skyward out of the portholes and other divers exploring the wreck. Though it was towed to this spot to be sunk, only a little of the interior was made safe for penetration, so we limit our dive to the superstructure.

Even with so many amazing dives behind me, there’s one more site I must dive to consider my mission complete. Before Sept. 11, dives on the City Pier in Kralendijk were common — not so after. Divers must get the harbor master’s permission and dive the large structure with a divemaster, both of which Jen had secured prior to my arrival. We make it a dusk dive so we can watch the daytime creatures retreat

Above, from left to right: frogfish, anemones and octopuses inhabit the waters of downtown Kralendijk harbor; banded butterflyfish enjoy a light current at Something Special.

and the night creatures emerge. Scattered in the sand is debris — old tires, bottles, cans — but within each of these castoffs, fish make their homes. I see eels, juvenile spotted drums, jacks and French angelfish. And when night falls, decorator crabs and mating shovelnose lobsters appear among the pilings, which look like an eerie underwater forest in the gathering dark.

Later that evening, I pop into Paradise Moon on the Kralendijk waterfront for dinner. Amy the bartender sets me up with a piña colada and a veggie curry, and I’m soon chatting with affable Texan owners Pam and Karl Perpich about — what else? — diving. Isn’t it hard to get away from the restaurant to go diving, I ask? “That’s the thing on Bonaire,” says Pam. “You’ve got two hours off and you say, ‘Let’s go!’”

Thinking back on my week, it was just that easy. There are no long drives, no long boat rides; I picked up my tanks at the Buddy drive-through and walked right into the water. I dived when I wanted and where I wanted — everywhere and all the time. And though 18 dives in five days won’t break any underwater records, it was a beguiling introduction to an island where the most difficult choice is which site to visit next.

Special thanks to Buddy Dive Resort, Caribbean Club Bonaire, Toucan Diving and Wannadive Bonaire.

A DIVERS GUIDE TO: BONAIRE

AVERAGE WATER TEMP
low 80s in summer; high 70s in winter

WHAT TO WEAR
shorty in summer; 3 to 5 mm wetsuit in winter

AVERAGE VIZ 100 feet

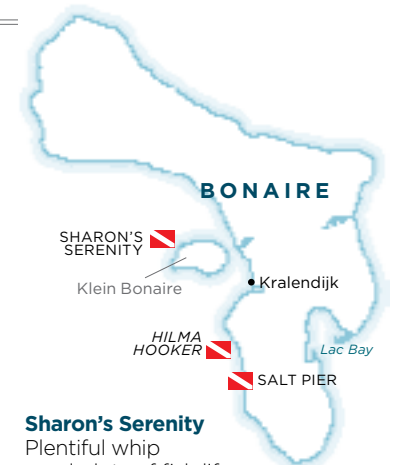
WHEN TO GO year-round

FOR MORE sportdiver.com/bonaire

MAIN ATTRACTIONS

Hilma Hooker
Bonaire’s signature wreck doesn’t disappoint. From shore, divers fin over the reef before the ship appears on its starboard side in 100 feet of water.

Salt Pier
The pilings of Salt Pier burst with life, from encrusting sponges and coral to sergeant majors and schooling tarpon.



Sharon’s Serenity
Plentiful whip corals, lots of fish life and two converging currents make this site anything but serene.

TRAINING Project AWARE Fish Identification Bonaire is home to more than 470 species of fish; learn to identify them all. Go to padi.com for more info.

LIVE IT ➔ PADI Five Star IDC Buddy Dive Resort // buddydive.com ➔ PADI Resort Buddy Dive at Caribbean Club Bonaire // caribbeanclubbonaire.com ➔ PADI Five Star Dive Resort Toucan Diving at Plaza Dive Resort // toucandiving.com ➔ PADI Resort Wannadive Bonaire // wannadive.com