

BONAIRE

MORE THAN A DIVER'S PARADISE

Bonaire's beauty is anchored in her pristine dive spots teeming with schools of colourful fish darting amongst radiant sea fans, coral formations and sponges. Apart of the ABC islands (Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao), Bonaire is the least populated of the three and offers a laid back rural charm that brings thousands of visitors to her white sandy beaches and cobalt blue waters. — By Peter Williams

DWELLING USED BY SLAVES WHEN
HARVESTING SALT ON THE ISLAND.
BONAIRE IS KNOWN FOR ITS SALT USED
AROUND THE WORLD FOR BOTH
CULINARY AND INDUSTRIAL PURPOSES

To capture the
trills of Bonaire's
underwater adventures,
**Diving and
snorkelling**
sessions are
usually held twice daily
with morning
and afternoon
sessions

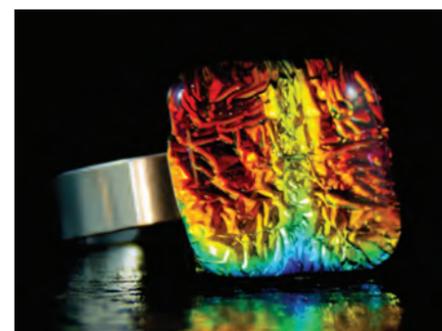




Arriving at the Flamingo Airport on an Insel Air flight, I headed to the best hotel in town – Harbour Village Beach Club with its private beach, marina, PADI five-star dive centre and well-appointed residences. That evening I settled in for dinner at the Club’s La Balandra, designed in the style of an antique Spanish ship with the dining deck extending over the sea. There I enjoyed a meal of locally-caught grilled lobster in a tranquil atmosphere with the lapping waves below. After dinner I headed next door to SPICE for a drink, and to join local Bonaireans and visitors dancing to the beat of music spun by a local DJ. The following morning, I opened the patio door of my suite to the brilliance of the Caribbean sunshine and saw a team of divers with gear and GoPro cameras in tow, to capture the thrills of their underwater adventures. Diving and snorkelling sessions are usually held twice daily with boats taking bookings for their morning and afternoon sessions.

Hitting the road

Today I decided to rent a car and hit the road to do some on land exploring, heading up the west coast passing several of Bonaire’s top dive spots, to take in the views and get a few pictures. This includes stopping at the ‘1000 steps’ diving spot. It really has 72 steps, but when lugging your dive equipment back up the steps, it certainly does feel like 1,000 steps – that’s where it got its name. For a full listing of dive sites visit www.tourismbonaire.com/bonaire-dive-sites. Near to ‘1,000 steps’ is the historic town for Rincon, the oldest village on the island. Rincon is the cultural hub of Bonaire and has many regular festivals that include the annual Simadan (a harvest dance festival) and the Bari Festival where local music is played from instruments such as drums, kitchen utensils and farming tools.



ONE OF A KIND RING FROM ELEMENTS JEWELLERS IN BONAIRE



TOP: DINING AT SEA RESTAURANT BONAIRE, A MEMBER OF JEUNES RESTAURATEURS D'EUROPE (JRE), AN ASSOCIATION OF YOUNG RESTAURATEURS. CENTRE-L: CADUSHY LIQUEUR. BELOW-L: SALT PANS. BELOW-R: BONAIRE NATIONAL DRESS



For a taste of the 'real' Bonaire, you'll love cultural park Mangazina di Rei near Rincon.

From Rincon I headed to lunch at nearby Posada Para Mira, with its local cuisine that includes salt fish cakes, conch, goat and funchi (a staple made of maize). I paired my meal with a selection of local Cadushy liquors and spirits made from cactus, aloe vera, herbs, fruits and tobacco leaves. All this food and the heat of the day called for a nap — with no hammock in sight, I headed back to the car, turned on the air conditioning and dozed off.

About half an hour later I continued up the island to the Washington Slagbaai National Park, a marvel for outdoor lovers and a bird watcher's paradise. With its rough and rustic terrain filled with dense vegetation and cactus, it's best explored by a 4-wheel drive. An open back jeep is also a good choice for transporting scuba diving equipment and bikes to ride on off-the-road tracks. The park is reminiscent of the arid South Western terrain of Arizona in the USA and is a nature lover's treat. Here you will find a range of cactus, iguanas and secluded diving spots with blow holes, a rugged coastline, and a walking trail to the highest point in Bonaire — Brandaris. At just over 700 feet it offers hikers arresting views of the island, and on clear days you can see Curaçao to the west and the mountains of Venezuela to the south. With the sun setting in this nature's paradise, I headed back to my hotel for an evening of fine dining and entertainment in the capital, Kralendijk that's smack in the centre of Bonaire.

At Sea Bonaire is one of the best restaurants in town that specializes in fresh seafood. It has received top reviews from Trip Advisor and was recommended by my hotel's concierge. The restaurant was fully booked when I arrived, so I ate at the bar patronized by a lively mix of South Americans and Europeans. My starter was a divine Ratatouille, then I had a main course of seared tuna, ending with a selection of Brie cheeses. The restaurant has served several illustrious guests over the years. In April 2015, they hosted King Willem Alexander and Queen Maxima of the Netherlands, who were on the island to participate in the festival of Día di Rincon, celebrated each year on April 30th. After dinner, I took a leisurely stroll along the quiet waterfront promenade in Kralendijk with a Heineken in hand, while checking out the boats bobbing in the surf before returning to the hotel.

Symbols of Bonaire

The next morning I drove to the south of the island to the Pekelmeer Flamingo Sanctuary — one of only four areas in the world where flamingos come to breed. This bird is the national symbol of Bonaire and much pride is taken by Bonaireans to protect it, just as they do their reefs. Make sure to carry your binoculars to watch these magnificent birds from a distance, as no one is allowed to enter the Sanctuary due to their sensitivity to disturbances. Over 10,000 flamingos will gather at a time to feed in the salt ponds. If you are lucky, you may see one of the elaborate courtship displays put on by a pair of mating birds.

Travelling along the shoreline of the south west of Bonaire, passing huge mounds of salt crystals (a product of the island's thriving salt industry), I saw a number of colourful sails, with music blaring and the smell of food being cooked. I pulled off the road to see what was happening. This was Atlantic Beach, nicknamed Kite Beach by the many young Dutch tourists that descend on the beach yearly for kite sailing competitions. Checking out the snack truck, I ordered a lionfish burger and quenched my thirst with an ice cold Amstel beer. This invasive species of fish has become a popular item on menus, due to its abundant supply and its taste which is similar to lobster. Kite Beach was one of the more active places on the Bonaire coast and a perfect spot for the young and young-at-heart to have an action packed day on the water.

Shopping

I then headed into Kralendijk for some shopping therapy and found Littman's Jewellers on Kaya Grandi. They are the agents of Rolex watches and have a range of jewellery and souvenir items. Another store, Diamonds Forever, carried an equally impressive range of watches and jewellery. I then headed to Elements, a jewellery store run by husband and wife team Charlene and Gabriele. They specialize in one of a kind Dichroic Glass handmade jewellery inspired by the elements of earth, air, fire and water. Each piece is so dazzling and unique, they literally compete with the brilliance of the Bonairean sunshine. The

TOP: THE PROMENADE OF KRALENDIJK - CAPITAL OF BONAIRE, DUTCH CARIBBEAN. CENTRE-L: VIEW FROM THE SUITE IN THE HARBOUR VILLAGE BEACH CLUB. BELOW: SCHOOLS OF FISH GREET DIVERS IN THE CLEAR WATERS AROUND BONAIRE.



Paradis Island

range of items includes pendants, rings, bracelets and earrings which promise to be a conversation piece among family and friends when you return home.

That evening I felt for Italian cuisine and headed over to Capriccio on Kaya Hellmund, with Michelin star chef Andrea Magni at the helm. With its clean lines and open architecture using ceiling to floor windows, giving sweeping views of the shoreline just feet away, the restaurant looks like a nouveau piece of art. The finest European ingredients are sourced to create gastronomic dishes. Mine featured fresh Porcino Mushrooms and Summer Black Truffles, which I enjoyed with a bottle of Borolo wine, while live music played on the terrace. It was a perfect evening of sheer indulgence.

Underwater treasures

The following day I donned my swim gear and joined a diving and snorkelling group heading for Klein Bonaire, a small uninhabited island to the west of Bonaire with marvelous dive sights and white sand beaches protected from development. It is part of the Bonaire Marine Park. After a swim in its pristine azure waters, I took the plunge and ventured off shore with my snorkelling gear on, and was surprised at the water's clarity which allowed for great picture taking in coral reefs so diverse in colour, shape and size, that they were reminiscent of gardens of orchids. Schools of fish swam by me and I was able to identify a few, in particular the parrot fish that munched away at coral reefs – an activity essential for the health of the reef and keeping beaches renewed with powdery sand. Those with dive gear were in for even more of a treat as the reef's walls carried an even more diverse array of coral and marine life, as proved by the pics taken, and shared with me on my return to the hotel. For persons seeking isolation and relaxation, Klein Bonaire is the answer. You can spend an entire day there, but make sure to carry lots of sun screen, water and food supplies as these are not available on the island.

The tourist channel

That evening I was beat from the day's sun, wind and sea, so I decided to have an early night, order room service and stay in that evening to enjoy the comforts of my suite. Flicking through the local television channels, I came across a Bonaire TV programme hosted by Franklin Dominico (Boi) Antoin. Here I learnt the island has an extensive underground cave network filled with water aquifers that can be snorkelled in, with impressive stalactites and stalagmites. Animal lovers can spend time at the Donkey Sanctuary (near Kralendijk) where some 400 animals are cared for. For a taste of the 'real' Bonaire, you'll love cultural park Mangazina di Rei (near Rincon), which keeps alive the traditions and customs of the island's dance, song and food from the time of the Amerindians,

through slavery, up to present day. Canoe in Lac Bay in the leeward side of the island, a fish nursery and mangrove filled with birds and wildlife where you may see the weird upside down jelly fish. At Boca Onima (near Rincon), discover 15th century inscriptions of red-stained designs and symbols inscribed in limestone by Amerindian Simacan — a star watcher, who was a living almanac for his people, advising them about weather systems and registering important events on rock walls. And the best place to be to view New Year's Eve's fireworks is the hill top look out point of Seru Largu with its sweeping views of Kralendijk and Klein Bonaire.

Sunday renewal

The following morning was a Sunday, and the laid back unhurried lifestyle of the island had me in spiritual renewal mode, so I decided to join a congregation in the United Protestant — Dutch Reformed Church in the heart of Kralendijk, near the government buildings all painted in yellow. The religious ceremony was held in four languages — Papiamentu, Dutch, English and Spanish, representing both the makeup of the congregation and main languages spoken on the island. Not being in Bonaire for their colourful Carnival marches or heritage festivals in Rincon, this was one of the few times I had the opportunity to spend time in the company of local Bonaireans. After the service we gathered for refreshments, and I learnt that their pastor was returning to the Netherlands and they had yet to find a replacement, but this did not dampen the spirits of this small congregation of under 100, as one amongst them would fill-in until a new pastor was identified. A lesson I took away, was how important it is for persons living on a small island to be all embracing of each other's multi ethnic cultures and to improvise.

The constant noise of throngs of fast moving persons and traffic that big city dwellers leave behind in their travels to Bonaire, is replaced by the slower paced, relaxed environment of a small community of islanders committed to preserving their environment for all to enjoy. Here you can clear your mind and renew yourself in the tranquility of this Dutch Caribbean island paradise.

How to get to Bonaire

There are lots of travel options to Bonaire by air. Delta and United are the favourite airlines flying to Bonaire from North America, with KLM Royal Dutch Airlines and Arke the popular choices from Europe. Insel Air offers a wide range of flights from North America, the Caribbean and South America. A number of cruise liners offer Bonaire in their list of destinations – Royal Caribbean Cruise Line, Holland America Line, Celebrity Cruises and Carnival Lines. | JP

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