

Fathoms

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Bonaire

Soul food for divers

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A school of French grunts, a blueheaded wrasse, and assorted other reef fish claim this elkhorn coral as their home in Lac Bay. Bonaire is world famous for the pristine condition of its stony corals.



BONAIRE: SOUL FOOD FOR DIVERS

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY **ETHAN GORDON**

Once our pick-up truck's engine ground to a halt, the only noise remaining was the sound of surf crashing on the limestone shore. Hagen Wegerer and I sat silently, each taking in the serenity of the scene before us—blue skies, blue water, moderate surf and not another person in sight. At the time Hagen was the watersports coordinator for the Buddy Dive Resort. He must have drawn the short straw at the dive shop that morning, as he was assigned to guide me on a shore dive. Not just any shore dive. We planned to dive the eastern side of Bonaire.



Purple stove-pipe sponges, or tube sponges, are another hallmark of the reefs in Bonaire. These sponges can grow as long as eight feet.

Buffeted constantly by the trade winds, Bonaire's eastern shore typically presents visitors with a seemingly impenetrable wall of white water and dangerously sharp coral. For a destination made famous by its easy shore diving, this side of the island stands in stark contrast to the protected western shore where divers generally experience a duck pond. Over a dozen years and an equal number of visits, I had already dived just about every traditional site on the island and was looking for something new. I had an insatiable urge to see the almost mythical eastern sites. Stories of schooling tarpon, plentiful eagle rays, sharks, and dazzling reefs had tempted me each time I had come to Bonaire, but never had the surf been as seemingly tame as it now appeared.

"How does it look?" I asked Hagen who studied the surf zone intently, searching for the path that would take us to deeper, calmer water.

"Not bad," he replied in his crisp British accent.

I had been hoping for a response like, "Great," but "not bad," would have to do. A two-to-three-foot surf was rolling in. It didn't look so daunting from our perspective in the car. "Tell me, how many times have you dove the eastern shore?" I asked.

Hagen began calculating in his head. Based on monthly averages... three years on the island... add in his sense of adventure... subtract out the fact that he was the father of three... "Twice," he responded. I felt a slight sinking feeling in my stomach. Nonetheless, we geared up, I grabbed my camera, and like manly men we headed into the surf. All we had to do was

traverse about 50 yards of white water and we would be home free. If not for our third dive buddy, Mr. Murphy, our plan may have actually worked.

The moment I put my face in the water and tried to swim, I couldn't see through my mask. A never-ending froth from the waves obscured my vision. Suddenly I felt my camera assembly, which I had been clutching like a security blanket, go limp. Essentially blind, I felt around to discover one of my camera's two strobes had become detached. I clutched the strobe under my arm and tried to signal a retreat. The only problem was, I couldn't see Hagen. I did, however, manage to get my footing in the chest-high water and stood up for a look around.

No sooner had I climbed to my feet than a shadow blocked out the sun. I turned just in time to take a big wave right in the face, tearing off my mask and sending me ass over teakettle. I tumbled around for a long time, bouncing off of one coral head after another like a pinball. Don't worry—the coral in the surf zone is not living coral, but the remnants of an ancient reef. For those of you more worried about the condition of my camera and dome port—you also needn't worry. Rather than protect my head, I clutched the camera with both arms to protect the expensive dome as I did my best impersonation of an underwater tumbleweed.

After several long minutes, I flopped ashore like a stranded fish. When I came to my senses, I sat up and looked around for Hagen who was sprawled out several yards away, looking much the way I felt. Between the two of us we were missing one strobe arm, one fin, one snorkel, one mask, and two egos. At first we didn't speak, we simply sat there catching our breath and staring back out to sea. Finally, Hagen imparted his words of wisdom on me.

He stated simply, "East side: 1. Divers: 0."

Soul Food

Soul food for divers—that's what Bonaire is. No matter how discerning someone's palette may become, there is always something comforting and deeply enjoyable about soul food. While connoisseurs bask in avant-garde cuisine, I'm sure they still love those simple pleasures—possibly more so. I'm not referring to soul food in the form of cornbread or macaroni and cheese, but about the staple of any diver's diet, Bonaire. It doesn't matter how many exotic Pacific/Asian destinations or exciting expeditions I experience, I keep finding myself on a plane headed to the aptly named, Flamingo Airport. I can't help it. I am a diver, and Bonaire is my soul food.

I first visited Bonaire 12 years ago and have returned almost every year since. On my first visit I led a group of eight divers organized by the dive shop I was working for. The shop owner gave me fabulous advice on how best to dive Bonaire: "Pick up your rental cars and dive your brains out. If anyone wants to go in the water, you go with them." What I didn't know was how truly easy it would be to follow orders. You see, Bonaire is the "Shore Diving Capital of the World"—self-proclaimed, but rightfully so.

“East side: 1. Divers: 0.”

Even their license plate proclaims in English, “Diver’s Paradise.” As far as visitors to the island, they pretty much come with one of two purposes in mind: diving or windsurfing... and, oh yes, there is a naturist resort on the island—luckily for our eyes, it is secluded behind a high fence. The people that stay there, of course, are the last people on the planet you’d like to see naked.

On that first trip I stayed at a small inn with only ten rooms (clothing was required). It had the key component for success in Bonaire—direct access to the water. From their little dock we could simply suit up and giant stride right into some of the best diving the Caribbean has to offer—and any time of the day no less. As you can imagine, for nine diving addicts, this meant an infinite assortment of dive variations: let’s do a dawn dive, or a post-breakfast before-the-boat-gets-here quickie, or a pre-dawn night dive, or a post-lunch-before-the-road-trip dive, or a... you get the picture. Some divers chose quantity, continuously ferrying themselves in and out of the water in an attempt to out-dive their trip-mates, while others chose quality, staying down for as much as an hour and a half on each of several daily dives. Either way, they were all happy as clams. Besides the unlimited access to the reef from the dock, our rental cars gave us access to a shoreline dotted with yellow stones.

On Bonaire, STINAPA (the non-profit organization that oversees Bonaire’s marine park) marks dive sites with yellow stones placed by the side of the road. All you have to do is drive along, pull off the road at the first sight of a yellow marker, park only a few feet from the water’s edge, gear up and get in. Within moments, you’re diving. To the seasoned diver who has been there and done that, shore diving may sound like a bit of a task, but if you haven’t tried Bonaire yet, you have to believe me—it is *simplicity* and *ease* at its best. In other words, it is complete diving freedom.

Regardless of where on the western shore you enter the water, there is a shallow sandy plain with gorgonians, isolated hard corals, and a splendid assortment of colorful reef fish. This sandy plain, called the reef terrace, is a veritable playground for divers and snorkelers alike. It extends between 10 to 100 yards from shore at a depth of between zero to 30 feet. In the north this shelf is very narrow, in the south it is much wider. Where the terrace ends, the wall begins—it’s never more than a several-minute swim from water’s edge to the drop-off.

While some other destinations may offer unlimited shore diving, it typically doesn’t measure up the quality of dive available right off of Bonaire’s shores. Besides geographical luck, the reason Bonaire’s coral reefs are in such pristine condition can largely be credited to the Bonaire National Marine Park (part of STINAPA). However, the marine park itself can largely be credited to the man quoted as saying, “Bonaire is to conservation as Greenwich is to time.” His name is Captain Don Stewart.

Before “marine conservation” was even a phrase in the tropical tourist’s vocabulary, Captain Don was a marine conservationist. In fact, his contributions to the conservation of our world’s reefs may be greatly under recognized. In 1961, he began the movement to protect Bonaire’s reefs and its creatures by promoting the adoption of laws protecting turtles. Ten years later, Captain Don effectively banned spear guns from the island’s waters by refusing to fill tanks for anyone who intended to go spear fishing. Enforcement of this rule was easier than you

Left to Right Murphy, one of Buddy Dive Resort’s best known dive masters, stands at the bow as we approach the resort. Yellow stones mark the dive sites from shore—just pull over, suit-up, and get in. An iguana watches the commotion of dive boats loading and unloading at Buddy Dive.



might think—he owned the only compressor on the island.

With no formal training himself, Captain Don relied on his conservationist instincts as well as the advice of marine biologist, and Boston Sea Rover, George Buckley, to develop a set of rules that would preserve the underwater world they loved so much. As a result, the government of Bonaire established one of

the world's largest protected marine parks with the goal of preserving as best as possible this underwater jewel. The year was 1979. Some of the ground-breaking park rules

Left This sign states in Dutch "DRUFZAND." It's one of the only signs on the island that doesn't have an English translation, but allow me: "QUICKSAND!"

Below Elvis Martinus, a well-known Bonairian windsurfer shows off his stuff in Lac Bay.



included: the use of a mooring system that preserved the coral from damage caused by boat anchors being dropped on the reef; banning the removal of anything from the water; and actively discouraging divers from coming in contact with the reef. Bonaire's marine park would serve as the model from which governments and resorts from around the world would formulate themselves.

Sixteen years after its creation, my group of nine dived their brains out for one week during which we reaped the benefits of Captain Don's foresight in the form of underwater memories and photos taken on pristine reefs with the largest swaths of healthy coral any of us had ever seen. By the end of the trip we were all converts. Bonaire was in our blood for good. Like the flamingos that return time and time again to Bonaire's salt pans to gorge on krill, all of us would return again and again to the Flamingo Airport to get our fill... of soul food.

A Little History

Bonaire sits 50 miles north of Venezuela and is shaped somewhat like a boomerang that points northeast—into the trade winds. This creates a nice, sheltered concave side of the island that protects an even smaller swath of land called Klein Bonaire. You need a boat to dive Klein Bonaire. As mentioned before, all of the other sites are accessible from the shore. In the north of the island, Brandaris Hill marks the highest point of elevation at a modest 780 feet. Most of this hilly terrain is contained within the Washington Slagbaai National Park. South of that, the island flattens out considerably. On the eastern, windward shore, the most notable feature is Lac Bay, the large natural protected bay that covers over three square miles and serves as a windsurfing Mecca. From the middle of the island and south, the terrain is flat and not very high above sea level. This low-lying geography is what provided Bonaire its primary means of economic stability for a couple of centuries.

Originally settled by tribes over a thousand years ago, Bonaire was first discovered by Europeans in 1499. The Spanish enslaved most of the native population, the vast majority of which would never return to Bonaire. It wasn't until 1530 that the Spanish used Bonaire as a place to raise livestock. Many of the goats and donkeys that still roam the island today are descended from this original stock. However, it wasn't animal husbandry for which Bonaire was best suited. It was its dry, desert terrain—perfectly suited to the needs of a penal colony. In the following several centuries, very few inhabitants were brought to her shores willingly.

The Dutch gained control in 1633, but it wasn't until the 1800's that they discovered the perfect use for the island's especially low terrain. Considered more valuable than gold at the time, salt was produced by flooding shallow "pans" with seawater and allowing the intense sun and wind to do their work. Once the water had evaporated the backbreaking labor of harvesting the salt was undertaken by an army of slaves and in-

This longlure frogfish (*Antennarius multiocellatus*) has its lure out, ready to attract prey. Bonaire is a haven for frogfish. Although they are difficult to find on your own, ask any dive master to guide you to one—they're everywhere.





An aerial view of Bonaire from the south looking north shows many of the notable landmarks. Most prominent are the pink salt pans. They get their color from the krill that proliferate as the seawater evaporates. Other notable landmarks on the left-hand page: The cruise ship near the top is docked at the capital city of Kralendijk; Cargill's salt pier and mountains of salt are clearly visible; Pink Beach is located south of the salt pier—it is notable for being one of the few white-sand beaches on Bonaire. Most prominent on the right-hand page are the white slave huts. You can clearly see the shallow, sandy reef terrace which gives way to the wall and drop-off rather quickly.





mates who would rake the evaporated salt pans. A tribute to the men and women who toiled at this backbreaking work can still be seen on the southern end of the island. Two sets of slave huts still stand—Red Slave and White Slave, named for the color of the buildings, not their former inhabitants. Today, Cargill owns and operates the modern salt pans. Instead of inmates and slaves, an army of bulldozers harvests the salt into giant, white mountains that can be seen from a great distance on the southern end of the island.

Up north, a couple of industrial landmarks are also notable. The BOPEC oil storage facility is located just south of the National Park where more than a dozen storage tanks hold Venezuelan oil on its way to Curaçao for processing. South of BOPEC visitors can't miss the Radio Nederlands shortwave radio antenna array. From this location and two others, in Madagascar and Holland, Radio Netherlands is broadcast around the world.

Conveniently, most of the aforementioned terrestrial landmarks serve as landmarks from which several dive sites derive their names. Divers can dive the Salt Pier, Lighthouse, Red Slave, White Slave, or any number of sites. There are some exceptions of course: Oil Slick Leap is a site that's not really all that close to BOPEC, where no diving is allowed; the *Hilma Hooker* has nothing to do with a hooker; and 1,000 Steps doesn't actually have 1,000 steps, but hey, who's counting.

Divers' Smorgasbord

Asking someone to select a favorite dive site on Bonaire is like asking them to choose their favorite dessert. Often one might pop out quickly, but then there's... or there's... or... well, you get the picture. To be honest, I think you could simply dive from your resort all week and be perfectly content, but it's the adventure of driving around and choosing your next dive site that adds to the experience.

As I mentioned before, the general underwater configuration is similar from site to site, however, there are enough differences to require some explanation. I'll begin in the north and work my way south.

To the far north are the dive sites within the Washington Slagbaai National Park. While I highly recommend taking a day off from diving to visit the park, I don't think the dive sites are all that different or more spectacular that they warrant hauling dive gear all that way. Bring your mask, fins, snorkel, a lunch, your camera, plenty of water and have fun.

One of my favorite northern sites south of the park is Ol' Blue, located south of the BOPEC oil storage facility and north of the very recognizable Radio Nederlands shortwave radio antenna array. While many of the northern dive sites require a lot of steps or a climb down a steep limestone wall to access the water, Ol' Blue has an easy beach entry. The reef terrace (as the

Left A tiny peppermint goby (*Coryphopterus lipernes*) makes each coral polyp look like a giant.

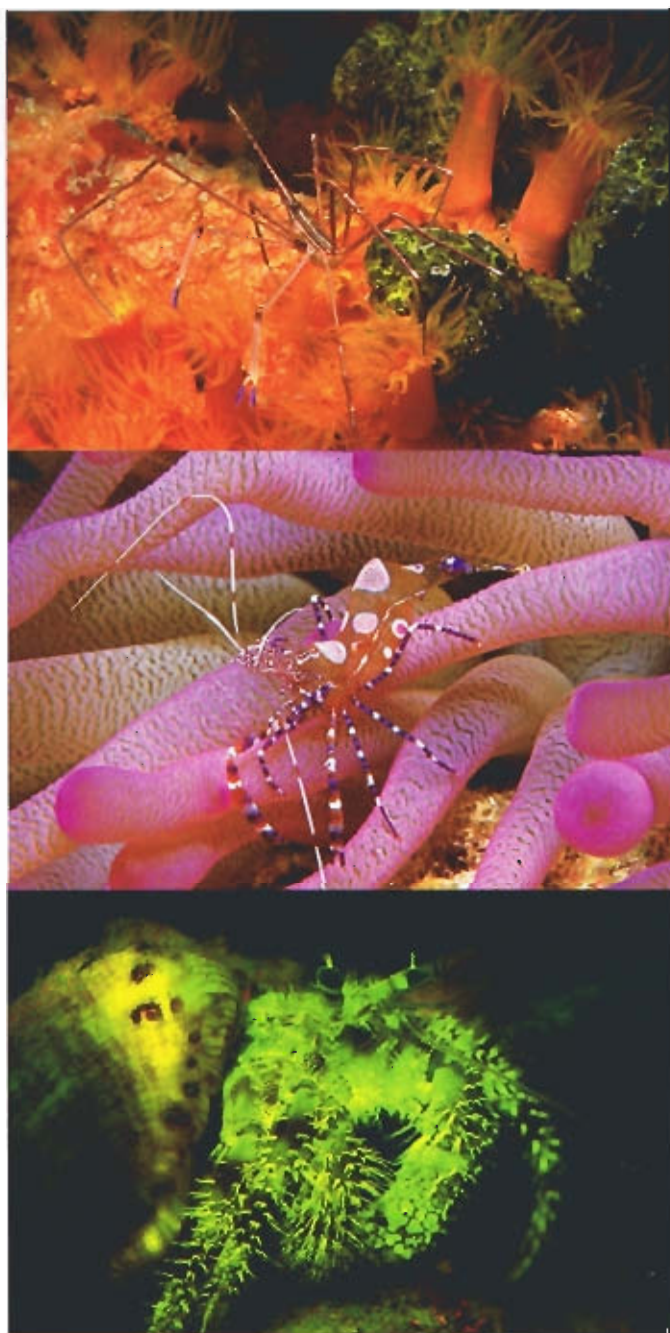
shallows are called) is narrow yet accented with elkhorn coral and gorgonians. Unlike the southern sites, there is very little white sand in the terrace. Instead, it is made up of limestone and broken up coral rubble—the perfect place to go critter hunting. Lettuce sea slugs can be found pretty easily here. The shallows are also busy with parrotfish and an assortment of other tropical fish. The wall, only about 20 yards from shore at this point, drops down to a couple of hundred feet. If really pressed to select a favorite site on Bonaire, I would have to choose Ol' Blue.

Moving south towards the middle of the western shore is where you will find the bulk of the resorts. Here the terrace has bright white sandy plains with isolated coral heads and gorgonians, yet it is still only a short distance (about 30–40 yards) from the water's edge to the wall. At this central part of the island, the wall drops to only about 100 feet. These central dive sites are perfectly suited to everyone from novice to expert.

In the heart of the capital city of Kralendijk is the Town Pier. In years past it was a sleepy little place where the occasional tugboat would pull in or out, but today it hosts a bevy of cruise ships. This is unfortunate, as the night dive beneath the Town Pier is legendary, and diving isn't allowed when a cruise ship is docked there. The critter hunting under the pier is reminiscent of Indonesia. Seahorses, frogfish, crabs, shrimp, multicolored sponges, nudibranchs—it has it all, and in a very compact area. In short the Town Pier is a macro photographer's dream, you just need to plan it with a registered guide at the beginning of your week, so you don't miss your chance.

As you head further south, the terrace expands to as much as 100 yards from shore. The twist on these sites is that, at many of them, a second reef system exists. Alice In Wonderland is a site where divers can descend the wall to the sand at about 90 feet, swim a short distance to another reef which rises to as shallow as 60 feet, but then gradually slopes down to a couple of hundred feet on the outside. Divers just need to be a little more conservative with their air consumption here. It's advisable to do a short surface swim out to the first drop off, then descend to 60 feet and swim to the second reef at that depth.

Also in the south is probably Bonaire's single most dived site, the wreck of the *Hilma Hooker*. Of course, there is a plethora of raunchy t-shirts available in souvenir shops proudly sporting such sayings as: "I went down on the Hooker," and a bunch of variations based on that concept. Despite these shirts that even a sailor might be embarrassed to wear, the *Hilma Hooker* is a great dive. Like the other southern sites, there is a lengthy terrace before the wall drops down to 90 feet where the 236 foot long cargo vessel rests on her side. Similar to her name, she has a somewhat shady past. Having had some mechanical problems in 1984, she came into port in Bonaire. The customs authority discovered she had no papers and upon closer inspection, found 25,000 pounds of marijuana hidden behind a false wall. While they decided her final fate, she was moored conveniently in the perfect place (to sink that is). One morning she began taking on water and sank,



Top to Bottom An arrow crab forages in the orange cup coral under the Town Pier. A spotted cleaner shrimp awaits its next customer from the safety of its host anemone. This fluorescing decorator hermit crab was photographed at night using the NightSea.com filter kit.

landing in the sandy area at the base of the coral drop off. It is one of the most popular sites on the island, so getting there at a good time is helpful.

At the farthest southern point on Bonaire is the somewhat



A longsnout seahorse is just one of many special creatures that a dive guide could help you locate at the pier.

challenging site named Willemstoren Lighthouse after the aforementioned landmark. Currents and surf can make this dive a little more challenging. But, underwater a forest of gorgonians will reward those hardy (or lucky) enough to get in here. Besides divers, turtles are also frequent visitors to this reef. Continuing around the bottom of the island and back up the eastern side, divers encounter the impenetrable wall of white water that I described earlier on the windward side of the island. For most of the year, the trade winds blow a consistent 20 knots, whipping up surf that, well... can kick a diver's rear end. Enter Larry Baillie, someone else who can kick a diver's rear end.

Wild Man, Wild Side

Hagen and I managed to even the score with the east side by successfully completing one dive. We loaded our dive equipment on top of kayaks and paddled out through the cut in the reef that

protects Lac Bay and dove the wall just outside. Not long after that trip, however, one former Army combat diver would set up shop taking thrill seekers through the white-knuckle surf at that very spot to dive the elusive eastern dive sites. It wasn't until my most recent trip to Bonaire with our publisher, David Fishman, that I was able to experience Larry's Wild Side Diving first hand.

We left our hotel with plenty of time to meet up with Larry at his customary 8 a.m. meet time. Unfortunately, we showed up right on time... at the wrong place. Our race to meet up with Larry before he pushed off from the dock resulted in the near death of a donkey that didn't see the blur of navy blue steel approaching at break-neck speeds. I doubted Larry would wait for us, as we were warned to be punctual for the retired Army combat diver. To our surprise, Larry, the boat, its passengers, and his crew were still there when we finally arrived at the Sorobon fishing docks on Lac Bay. Larry stood next to his truck with his arms crossed and dark glasses leveled in our direction. His silver-haired buzz cut shone in the sun, similar to the angular aluminum hull of his custom Zodiac.

As we got out of our truck he gave us a look as if to say, "What kind of A-holes are you?" I tried out our true, albeit feeble, excuse, "Someone told us the wrong meeting place." "What kind of an A-hole would do that?!" he asked. It was a rhetorical question. "All right, Eddy here will load your gear into the boat," Larry continued, "You guys just need to sign these forms." The form was one of those standard, "you're about to be killed and you're aware of it," legal docs, but with more "you're about to be killed(s)" in it. No sooner had we finished signing than the tanned fit South African, Eddy, finished loading our gear. We were quickly introduced to the other passengers and pushed off from the dock.

Larry's custom-built Zodiac looks like a cross between a high-tech rollercoaster car, and an amphibious assault craft. The oversized gray metal hand-holds on the sides of the bench seats scream, "Hold on for dear life!" Eddy gave the dive briefing as we crossed the quiet Lac Bay. He explained which hand-hold to grab and where to best place our feet to brace ourselves. He explained how not to get ejected from the boat as we passed through the heavy surf and how to avoid getting chewed out by Larry for stepping on the wrong part of the inflatable tube or climbing up the ladder the wrong way. Once he was finished, we suited up and prepared ourselves for the onslaught... which never came. Before we knew it, we were outside of the bay and there wasn't a ripple on the ocean. If it were even possible, it may have been calmer outside of the bay.

"Larry, was that the big thrill ride?" No sooner had I chided him, than I decided that that was probably a bad idea for my well being. He shot me a sideways glance and gunned the engines. We took off like a rocket ship and held on for dear life. "Well, if there's no surf today, we'll make our own." Larry was now smiling as he turned a tight circle and our knuckles whitened. He aimed for his own wake in an attempt to bounce us around.



However, the big heavy well-built Zodiac didn't even acknowledge its own wake—we cruised right through it without the slightest hint of a bump. Larry just looked back at us, smiled and shrugged. "You'll have to come back on a regular day," he replied. Despite my painting him to be a hard-ass ex-military-type, Larry was a personable, entertaining guy who catered to his audience. Everyone aboard was well taken care of, and I could see why so many of his customers are repeat visitors. The diving is great, but a day on the water with Larry is true entertainment.

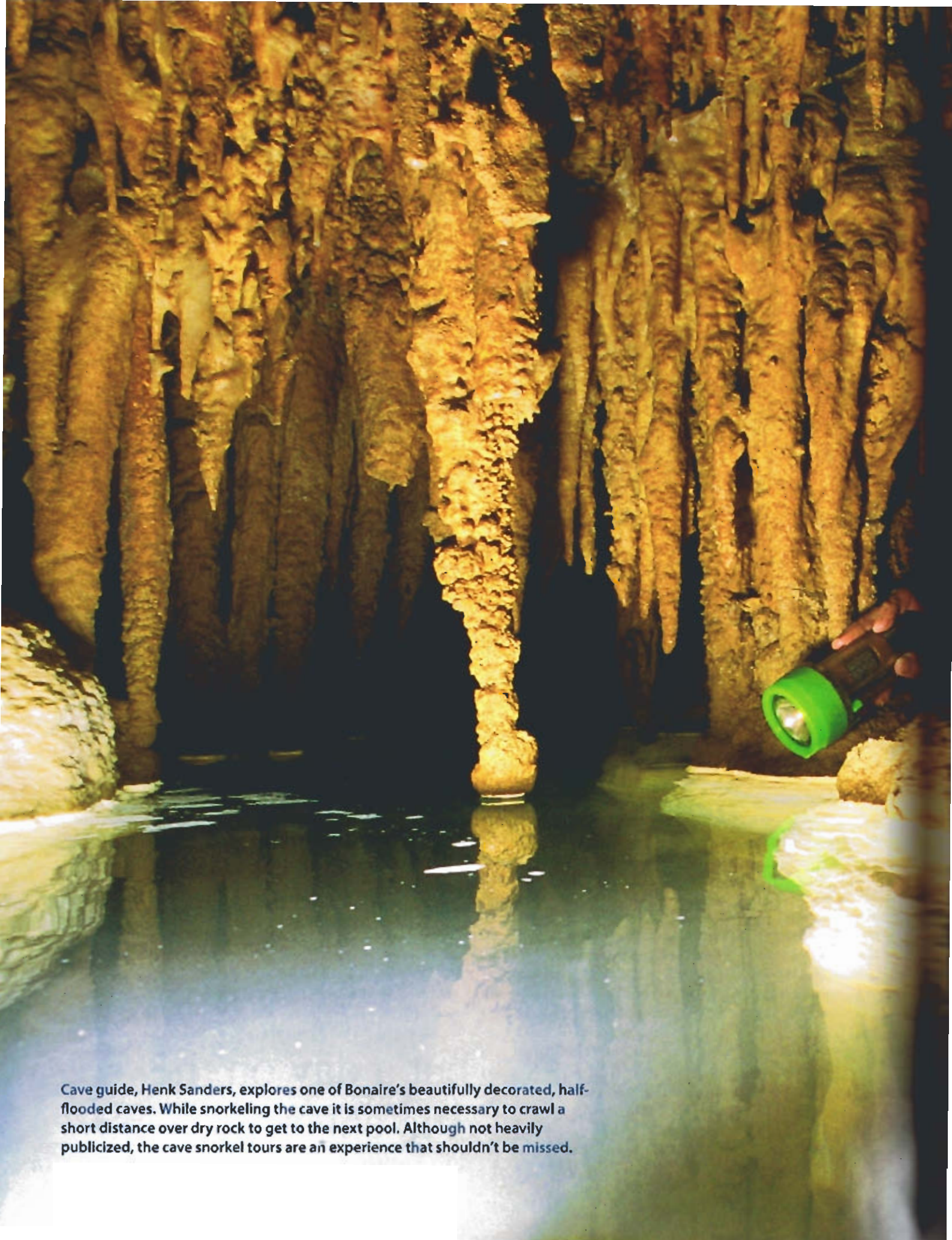
For our first dive we drifted along the wall outside of Lac Bay. While there were some highlights on the reef, like gorgonians the size of small trees, the stony corals were similar, if not slightly less spectacular, than the corals on the protected western side. The big difference, however, was our chance of seeing pelagics that don't normally frequent the western side of the island. Eagle rays, for example, are seen by Larry's customers on almost every dive... but not on our first attempt. Maybe it was a bit too

Larry's Wild Side Diving will take you out to dive Bonaire's difficult-to-reach windward sites. (inset) Larry Baillie—retired Army combat diver turned dive operator.

calm for them.

On our second dive, we did spot a pair of eagle rays at a site called the Blue Hole, or White Hole, or Tarpon Hole depending on whom you ask. It gets its name from its appearance from above. On a reef that is only about 10 feet deep, and mostly covered in green algae, a hole drops down to about 30 feet of depth. This football shaped depression in the reef is about 400 feet long and about 80 feet wide with a white sandy bottom, hence its first two names. As you can imagine, it is often filled with tarpon, hence its other name. Based on my experience alone, I think I'd have to call it Tarpon Hole, as there were more tarpon than I could count. Their silver, Airstream-trailer appearance was otherworldly, but maybe not as much so as Bonaire's world of the troglodytes.

"The diving is great, but a day on the water with Larry is true entertainment."



Cave guide, Henk Sanders, explores one of Bonaire's beautifully decorated, half-flooded caves. While snorkeling the cave it is sometimes necessary to crawl a short distance over dry rock to get to the next pool. Although not heavily publicized, the cave snorkel tours are an experience that shouldn't be missed.



Cave Dwellers

One of my assignments to Bonaire had me writing an article on the extreme diving that this otherwise extremely tranquil place has to offer—as you can imagine, diving the wild side with Hagen was one example. In between diving the extremes, Corinna, the manager of Buddy Dive's dive shop at the time, suggested I try the cave snorkeling. I did my best to resist her suggestion. "Um, I have to pick cactus spines out of my Tevas this afternoon." It was the best excuse I could come up with on the fly. However, Corinna was persistent, and so, later that day a man by the name of Henk Sanders arrived to pick me up. I have to admit, I was less than excited. Not once in my previous travels to the "Divers' Paradise" had I ever heard of "cave snorkeling." I had visions of sloshing around in a dark, slimy mud puddle under some overhang they call a "cave." Despite my skepticism, Henk was a pleasant guy with gray hair and a long beard—kind of like a skinny Santa—whose disarming personality put me at ease right away. At the very least, we would have a good ride and a nice chat, at best—pay dirt.

It didn't take us long to get to our first stop, a dry cave located about a ten minute drive north of the resort. Henk hefted a coil of heavy rope over his shoulder and we began walking into the desert scrub. Not far from the road Henk stopped next to a hole in the ground not much bigger than a manhole cover. "This is it," he said. I peered down the dark opening, at what looked to be about a 15-foot drop to the bottom. My suspicions were confirmed—or so I thought—it looked dark, and well... like a hole in the rock.

Henk tied off the rope to a nearby tree stump and we scaled down the wall to the cave floor. I took out my camera and immediately the lens completely fogged over. Humidity in the cave was near 100 percent. Unusable camera in hand, I followed Henk into the cave where he began to explain the geography behind

what I was seeing. He explained the meaning of the different color strata, but while that was interesting, what he showed me next was truly fascinating. "Look at the ceiling and you'll see that we are standing in the negative space of what used to be an ancient coral reef," he said with eyes transfixed upward.

As if a giant of long ago had made an impression of a coral reef with a gargantuan blob of Silly Putty, the ceiling was a highly detailed mold of an ancient coral reef. Perfect brain coral and boulder coral impressions made for beautifully adorned domes. Henk explained that the limestone of the ancient reef was softer than the sediment that compressed on top of it. Over time, the softer limestone dissolved from acids in the water runoff, removing the reef and leaving behind its imprint. By the time we finished our tour, my camera had adjusted to the surroundings, allowing me to fire off a few shots.

Although I was now officially impressed, I still doubted that snorkeling in a half-submerged cave would be of much interest beyond what we had just seen. Again, I was proven wrong. The moment we dipped our heads in the cool water within the next cave, I could see that the visibility was far from the mud puddle I had imagined. Crystal-clear water allowed our lights to penetrate as deep as they could through the maze of beautifully formed stalactites and stalagmites that adorned the cave ceiling and floor. The water line was approximately in the middle of the cave's height. If not for the water in the cave allowing visitors to float through the maze of rock formations, it would have been very difficult to navigate these intricate obstacles.

The surface of the water appeared as a perfect mirror from below, joining the stalagmites with a perfect mirror of themselves—false stalactites so to speak. As I looked back at Henk, he looked as though he were towing around his identical, conjoined twin. It was a bit disturbing, as they were joined at the head, but it to the otherworldly experience.

As we drove back to Buddy Dive along the familiar roads I had traveled innumerable times before, I looked off into the surroundings with a newfound sense of wonder at the hidden jewels a familiar place can still unearth. While these caves had

In the shallow reef terrace, parrotfish busily gnaw at the coral rubble. They harvest the algae that grow on the dead corals' surfaces.





been hidden from me in plain sight, the perfection of Bonaire as a dive destination had never been lost on me.

Gusto's Favorite Spot

During my most recent visit, Buddy Dive's new dive shop manager, Augusto Montbrun, offered to take David and me on a dive at his favorite spot. We gladly accepted. "He lives here," we thought, "he must know the very best of the best." I expected another eye-opening experience like I had had with Henk. So, we piled our gear in the back of our pick-up truck and headed out.

I have to take a moment to describe how the loading of gear happens at Buddy Dive, as it is absolutely unique and something divers will love. In the parking lot there stands a structure that looks similar to a gas station with two lanes for cars (or trucks) to enter. However, it is not a place to gas up your vehicle, rather to replenish the gas in your tanks. A continuously replenished stack of tanks lines the sides of the station. Simply pull in, load or unload tanks, and drive off. Instead of buckets of windshield washing fluid, there are camera rinse tanks. To describe how I feel about this feature, I needn't look further than the license plate in front of me when I'm parked there—"Divers' Paradise."

Gusto (as he's called), David and I headed north from the resort and past the area where the caves are located. We continued north along the coastal road past Radio Nederlands and Ol' Blue, but not quite as far as BOPEC. He was looking for a landmark, a big tire. After a couple of false alarms, Gusto spotted the discarded tractor tire he was looking for. In typical Bonaire fashion, we pulled over, geared up and got in the water.

We followed Gusto as he leisurely finned out toward the wall. Among the usual assortment of abundant reef fish we encountered a hawksbill turtle. The parrotfish seemed especially busy in the narrow reef terrace covered in coral rubble which

Gusto Montbrun, Buddy Dive's dive shop manager, goes for a plunge at his secret site, known as "The Tire," for obvious reasons. His enthusiasm for diving is contagious. What makes this site better than any other on Bonaire? It's like asking, "Which is better? Filet Mignon or lobster?"

they gnawed on continuously. When we reached the wall, Gusto turned and headed south. Typical of Bonaire, there was zero current in the 80°F water. The excitement built. At any moment I expected an unknown shipwreck to come into view, or perhaps a hidden underwater grotto. After all, this was Gusto's favorite site... Thirty minutes into the dive Gusto turned around and began to guide us back in the direction of our entry point. That is when it finally dawned on me. We hadn't come here to see anything in particular. We slowly swam back to where we had entered and stood in chest-high water while we took off our fins. All of this was done at a leisurely pace.

Looking as if he had just enjoyed a serving of his favorite dish, Gusto was relaxed and content. It was starting to get on in the afternoon, but with nowhere in particular to be, we took our time and chatted about the dive. Before we exited the water, Gusto turned to look once more at the beautiful ocean before him. Although he worked every day in paradise, it didn't seem lost on him. He looked at us with a smile and stated simply in the golden afternoon sun, "Wasn't that beautiful?" To me, this site was no more spectacular than any other reef in Bonaire, and I don't mean that in a disparaging way—all the dive sites are good. For whatever reason—the slope of the reef, the abundance of parrotfish, the fact that there was no one else in sight, the tire—this is the spot that Gusto likes best. As Bonaire is to us transient divers, the site with the tire on the beach is *his* soul food. **FM**