

Bragg Bonaire Trip: April 2014

The island of Bonaire is part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands. Together with the neighboring islands of Aruba and Curacao, it forms a group of islands called the “ABC Islands.” They are all located off the north coast of South America, about 50 miles off the coast of Venezuela. Previously, Steve and I had been to both Aruba and Curacao on dive trips with the girls.



Bonaire is governed as a special municipality of the Netherlands. It has the somewhat unique situation of having the U.S. dollar as its official currency so no worries about currency conversion!



After an early morning flight from Denver to Houston followed by an afternoon flight from Houston to Bonaire, we arrived at Bonaire’s “Flamingo International Airport” – painted a bright pink of course! We were joined on this trip by friends Sharon and Jeff Moulton; our second dive trip with them ... we dove together last fall on a live-aboard boat trip to St. Maarten, Saba, and St. Kitts.

Why dive Bonaire? A couple of key reasons:

- World Class Diving: Since 1979, the entire coastline of the island has been a declared marine sanctuary, the “Bonaire National Marine Park.” Due to the protection afforded by the marine park, the underwater environment is extremely healthy and robust with large fish populations and intact coral reefs. Bonaire license plates carry the logo “Diver’s Paradise.”
- Accessible Shore-based Diving: There are over 60 dive sites along Bonaire’s western shores with the vast majority of them accessible via the shore – no boat ride needed. The geological development of the island resulted in a situation where the coral reefs start right at the shoreline (especially on the leeward, western side of the island). This combined with small tide variations make for ideal diving conditions.

After settling into our accommodations at the *Buddy Dive Resort* (motto = Eat, Sleep *Buddy Dive*), we enjoyed a fine dinner at the resort’s *Ingredients* restaurant overlooking the clear Caribbean waters. After breakfast the next morning we attended the mandatory orientation and did the mandatory check-out dive at the resort’s “house” reef (i.e., the dive site right off the resort’s dock). Throughout our time on Bonaire, we wore “tags” on our gear which indicated we had successfully completed these requirements and paid a marine park fee of \$25/person. The rules of NO diving gloves and NO reef sticks were strictly enforced – both related to the park’s “See but don’t touch”



Buddy Dive Resort



policy.

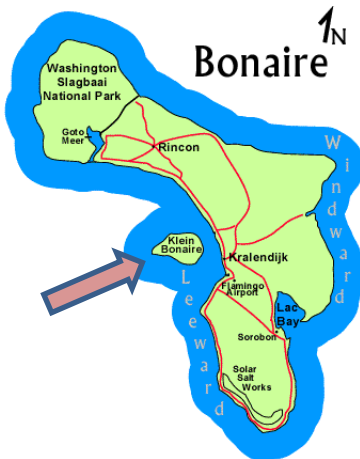
We ended up diving on the house reef several times as it was an easy and quite pleasant dive – just suit up right from the equipment storage rooms, grab some tanks from the tank storage room, and walk down metal stairs (or giant stride off the dock). The long-standing protected nature of the marine environment meant that the fish were unusually nonchalant about our presence in their world. We seemed to be able to

get much closer to them before they slowly moved away. One of the island's coral "nurseries" is located at the Buddy Dive house reef. The purpose of these nurseries is to restore and cultivate elkhorn and staghorn corals. Once cultivated on man-made racks, it will then be transplanted to the nature reef.

It certainly wasn't hard to settle into the rhythms of life for the next week or so ... diving interspersed with eating, sleeping, and a little sightseeing!



Staghorn Coral Nursery



The resort is just a short half-mile boat ride from *Klein Bonaire* (means "small" Bonaire in Dutch), a small, flat uninhabited "islet" which is ringed with 26 named dive sites. We ended up doing 7 of those dive sites during our stay -- all done via a boat trip right from the resort's dock. There is also a water taxi to/from Klein Bonaire but with no shade and no facilities it never appealed though it looked to have some of the nicest beach area.

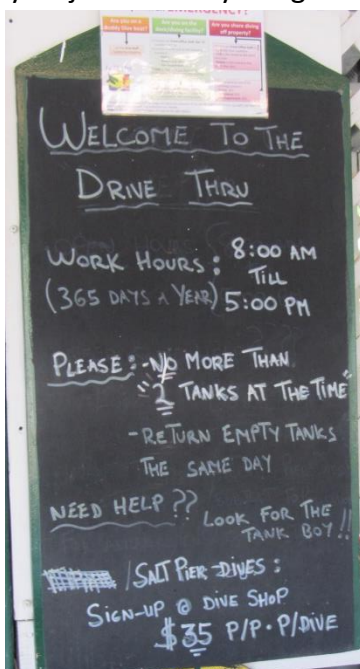


Klein Bonaire

As part of our package with *Buddy Dive Resort*, each couple had a rental 4-on-the-floor pick-up truck (none of us had driven stick shift for quite a while but it came back pretty quickly) . These vehicles had several key purposes:

- Access Shore-based Dive Sites
- Check Out Other Parts of the Island
- Take Us to Dinner in Town

Bonaire has unique "drive-thru" tank facilities which support its shore-based diving. If you want to do a shore-based dive you just throw your gear into the pick-up and then "drive-



thru" the tank facilities to pick-up filled tanks which you place in the tankrack in the bed of the pick-up (think wooden pallet upon which tanks are laid to prevent them from rolling around the truck's bed). You then drive to the dive site of your choice. After suiting up at the truck, you walk to the water's edge and then enter the water for your dive. After enjoying 60 minutes or so of a dive, you return to the shore, walk back to the truck, un-suit, and then either enjoy your between dive *surface interval* (required to safely de-gas any built up nitrogen levels) or head back to the drive-thru to drop off used tanks, rinse equipment, and/or pick-up new tanks.



Steve and Jeff were much keener on the shore diving than Sharon and I were though we all did some. Several days Steve and Jeff headed out by 8am for a couple of morning dives (they are both morning folks) while Sharon and I took a more leisurely approach to the morning (i.e., slept late and got breakfast before the buffet closed at 10am and then perhaps meet up with the guys for their 2nd dive of the morning).



All of the dive spots are marked with yellow-painted rocks. Some have easier access than others. Sharon & I chose NOT to join them when they did the site called "1000 Steps" which didn't involve walking up & down 1000 steps fully geared up but did involve well over 100 steps and a bit of a gnarly

entry into the water. One of the main island dive sites we did was "Rappel" but we had to do it via boat since it has no shore-access (unless you want to rappel down the overhanging rock into the water, hence the name).



1000 Steps Dive Site Access

Something "new" (well, new to me) that I discovered this dive trip is what is called a *short tank*. The standard tank holds 80 cubic ft while a short tank holds 63 cubic feet or about 79% of the standard size. The key (for me) is that a short tank weighs about 5lbs LESS and is also about 4 inches shorter than the standard tank so I found it is much easier to carry around on my back (important for shore-based diving when you aren't just stepping off a boat but instead hiking down to the water's edge). Since I don't "suck air" while diving (i.e., always return to boat with plenty still in my tank), having less volume to begin in a short tank wasn't an issue at all for me.

A few times while Steve and Jeff were off shore diving, Sharon and I were gathering lunch and snack supplies at the local supermarket. Being a Dutch island, the supermarket carried lots of Dutch and European items. We especially enjoyed checking out all the varieties of cheese available (the sight of large *wheels* of cheese was not one we see in our supermarket). On Bonaire, when you see the word "cheese" on a menu it is synonymous with Gouda cheese. Goat cheese is also a popular cheese in Bonaire – there is an on island goat farm which makes its own goat cheese (you also see goats just wandering around the island). We, of course, purchased several cheese varieties to sample and enjoyed them all. One lunch we all ate in the supermarket's parking lot, sitting on the open truck bed gates!

In addition to diving, we took the opportunity to explore Bonaire's non-diving aspects as well ...



Salt Mounds Awaiting Export

Geographically Bonaire is a mixed volcanic and coral island. It is not a lush, green island but is instead arid and relatively flat (highest point less than 800 ft). The island only gets about 22 inches of rain a year. The southern half of the island is almost totally given over to salt production. Utilizing the naturally low-lying geography and traditional Dutch dyke design, a giant system of ponds and pools take seawater and allow incremental evaporation of the water until the only remaining product is sea salt. As the seawater begins to evaporate, the changing salinity levels cause the water to change color from Blue to Green to Brown to Bright Pink before it completely dries and crystalizes – making for a very colorful landscape. The

salt is then washed and put into giant piles before it is loaded onto ships for export to North American, European and Western Pacific markets where it is used mostly for industrial & road salt.



Slave Hut

Historically, production of salt on Bonaire involved slave labor; there are preserved slave huts located right along the shore. Today's salt production uses primarily solar and wind power.

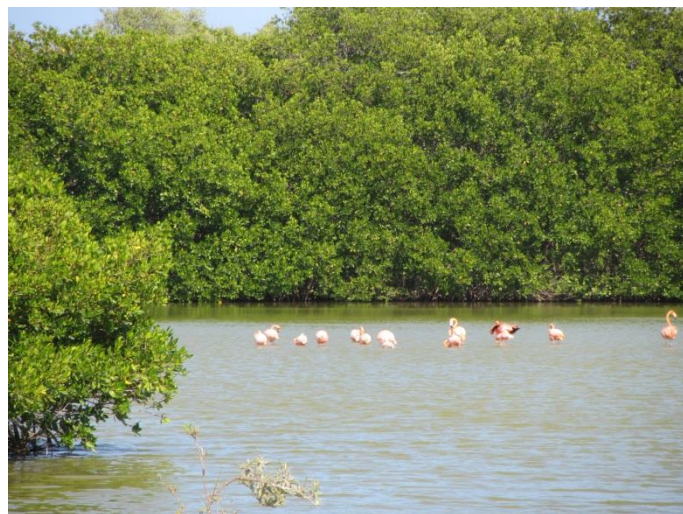
At the south-west tip of Bonaire, right alongside the salt mounds sits the popular kite-boarding/kite-surfing area known as Atlantis Beach. The area's steady winds, easy access, and warm waters all draw kiet-boarders of all skill levels (there are a couple of kite-boarding schools on Bonaire). We certainly enjoyed watching them but didn't feel compelled to give it a try ourselves. We had similar feelings while visiting the wind-surfing

mecca of Lac Bay on Bonaire's eastern shore. One day we took a picnic lunch over and enjoyed watching the wind surfers scream across the bay's shallow waters. We walked through large sheds storing the colorful wind surfing boards and sails.

Near Lac Bay is an area of mangroves and one of two flamingo sanctuary areas on the island. Here, flocks of the pink Carribean flamingo nest, breed, and feed (one of 4 places in the world).



Lac Bay



Caribbean Flamingos

The flamingo is a favorite logo for Bonaire-related items (hence, the airport being named/painted in their honor).



Building in Kralendijk



While the island's donkey sanctuary wasn't on our to-do list, we did see donkeys loose throughout the island; descendents from those originally brought to the island in the early 1500's by the Spanish.

Bonaire was originally settled in about 1000 AD by the Caiquetios, a branch of the Arawak Indians who sailed across from what is now Venezuela. The Spanish arrived in the late 1400's (and ended up enslaving the native population and shipping most of them to Hispaniola). The Dutch

captured the island in 1633. Fort Oranje was built in 1639 to defend Bonaire's main harbor. The English settlement of "Playa" was established adjacent to the fort in 1810. The town was renamed "Kralendijk" by the Dutch colonial rulers in about 1840; Kralendijk serves as Bonaire's capital. In Dutch, Kralendijk means "coral reef" or "coral dike".

Iguanas are another common sight on the island. Several hung out in the resort's seaside lounging area. One afternoon my chaise lounge was surrounded by 5 of these prehistoric looking creatures!

If a night dive wasn't planned (we all did a boat night dive on Bonaire Klein and Steve & Jeff did a couple on the house reef), we'd usually hop in one of the pick up trucks and head into Kralendijk for dinner. We enjoyed several delicious dinners at such places as *It Rains Fishes*, *4 Seasons*, and *At Sea ...* Bonaire has some great chefs; turns out that they have a program that has been sending talented culinary students to Italy for training for the past several years. Dinner was often followed by a stop at one of the local gelato shops for a final "palette cleanser" course!

Our time on Bonaire was a lot more laid back than on our usual live-aboard dive trip: fewer dives, more leisurely meals, and more non-dive related activities. Hanging with Sharon and Jeff is always fun. We certainly enjoyed all aspects of the trip except one: Steve's underwater camera flooded on day 3 of the trip which meant he was done with photography for the rest of the trip. The photos he did take the first couple of days were just terrific. He's looking forward to having his underwater photography gear back in order for our next dive trip in August to the Bahamas.



Bonaire Sunset at Buddy Dive Resort

