Bonaire 2007

Neil and I have just returned from a 10-day scuba-diving holiday on Bonaire, one of the “ABC” islands (Aruba, Bonaire and Curacao) in the Dutch Antilles, about 50 miles north of Venezuela (feed the following co-ordinates into the “search” box of Google-Earth “12 10 14.10N,68 17 16.00W”).

We flew east with KLM out of Heathrow to Amsterdam, then had a 1-hour wait at Schipol for another KLM flight going west to Flamingo International Airport, Kralendijk, Bonaire. The bad part was realizing that we were flying directly over our house about six hours after we had left it that morning (six hours to get nowhere!). After about 9 hours we landed in Bonaire where we were met by the coach that took us to the Buddy Dive resort (www.buddydive.com). Check-in was a bit chaotic, so Collin, our intrepid leader picked up the room keys and explained to the staff that we would do the paperwork in the morning. We had two three-bedroom apartments. Neil and I, Rob and Frank and (the other) Sue had one, while Kate and Collin, Claire and Max and Sam and Ian shared the other. We did some unpacking then went down to the Lion restaurant for a meal. I think everyone opted for “burger and fries”, to compensate for the fact that the food on the plane was horrible (to put it mildly).

The next day we had breakfast then we had to register for diving. This too was a bit chaotic and took some time to complete. Then we kitted up, did our buddy checks, jumped off the jetty (or went down the steps) and were ready for our first dive. We let the air out of our BCDs and made our way to the house reef, doing the south part of the reef that time and the north part as our second dive. Apart from Frank we were all diving on Nitrox (EANx32). Collin had used his considerable bargaining skills to get us a 33% discount. I think Lourdes, the lady in the dive shop, who called all the men “me douchie”, had taken a shine to him.

The next day was Saturday and poor old Neil, who had picked up a cold on the flight over was in a bad way. There was no diving for him that day, so he stayed in bed till lunchtime and spent a couple of hours moaning around the pool area, while the rest of us went diving.

Bonaire is known as the shore-diving capital of the world. There are 60 dives on the island, with a further 26 on Klein Bonaire, accessed via boat. As part of the dive package we had a jeep and a small people carrier. In the morning we would have breakfast then go to the “fill station” to get two nitrox tanks each and analyse and record the results. Then we’d drive the jeep and van to the drive-thru fill station, load up the tanks and our dive gear and drive to the exit. Then we’d either turn right, to do a couple of dives on the south of the island, or left to go to the sites on the North of the island. We’d drive along the coast road looking for little yellow markers that had the name of the dive site written on them and if one took our fancy we would stop, kit up and dive, as simple as that! We were told to leave the car doors unlocked with the windows down while diving. I had a pouch for money and keys, which worked fine on the first dive, but after that we had to keep drying out the greenbacks after every dive.

We went north that day. After a few miles the coast road changes into a one-way road, so after your dive you then have to drive to Karpata and from there head inland to Rincon, drive a very wide loop around past the windward side of the island and make your way back to Kralendijk, although there is a slight short-cut, which means that, if you don’t miss it, you don’t have to travel all the way into, then out of Kralendijk itself. Nevertheless it is a pleasant drive through some interesting scenery, with lots of cacti. They even use the cacti as fences

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It is a strange experience to be on a Caribbean and hear the native population speaking fluent Dutch. I know that it shouldn't be a surprise, since it is the Dutch Antilles, nevertheless, talking to someone in English, who a minute later speaks to one colleague in Papiamento, a Portugese-based Creole dialect with similarities to Spanish, then to another in Dutch is rather weird. It shouldn't come as much of a surprise to hear that many of the other divers were Dutch. there were also some Germans and some Americans.

Although tropical diseases are more or less absent from the ABC islands, Neil and I saw our NHS nurse some weeks beforehand to make sure our vaccinations were up to date. The tap-water is perfectly drinkable. Neil as usual got a couple of mosquito bites and I had quite a few bites from sandflies, the little so-and-sos found my legs very tasty.

While the national currency is the Netherlands Antilles Florin (NAFl), everywhere accepts $US and prices are usually quoted in both currencies. There are a few banks, one within walking distance of the Buddy Dive Resort, that have ATMs and give you a choice of NAFls or Dollars. Electrical sockets are of the US (2 flat prong) type and the supply is 120v 50Hz. My cell phone worked fine.



There is a partially pedestrianized shopping area in Kralendijk and a nice passeo-like walkway that extends from just south of the Buddy Dive Resort (turn right just before the Bistro de Paris restaurant) that runs all the way to Kralendijk. If you walk into Kralendijk, as Frank did on several occasions, I would suggest going this way, rather than using the main road that runs parallel to it about 50 metres inland - it's much more picturesque.

On many dive entries you have to step onto a (usually) short stretch of dead coral. If you are snorkelling don't forget to pack booties, to avoid cutting your feet. I had quite a bit of trouble with my back, but found that by using a 10-litre tank instead of an 11-litre one and putting my BCD and tank on in the water, it was much easier.



Note that dive gloves are strictly prohibited, in fact their use is against the law. If found a diver can have his/her gear and their diving permit confiscated. The Bonaire authorities take the conservation of their reef and national park exceedingly seriously, so don't be tempted to wear gloves, even if like Neil you are prone to having senior moments where you decide to head-butt the dead coral on your exit and end up with a gashed hand. He's been feeding everyone the story that it was the result of a shark attack, but no-one has taken the bait so far.

We had a couple of instances of people leaving at least one item of kit at the hotel and having to improvise. Collin was usually very good at reminding folk not to forget any of their kit, since once you're on the one-way stretch up north, it's a long way back. Claire had to borrow MAX's wetsuit on the trip where she left hers behind. On the only day that one group of us went to the most northern dive sites, past the one-way stretch, into Rincon, then about another hour and a half bouncing over hardly discernible tracks through the Washingtom Slagbaai National Park, Collin found that he had left his kit behind and couldn't dive. By the way, to get into the national park, you need the receipt for your dive permit AND a form of personal photo ID. Also, you must leave the park by 5pm.



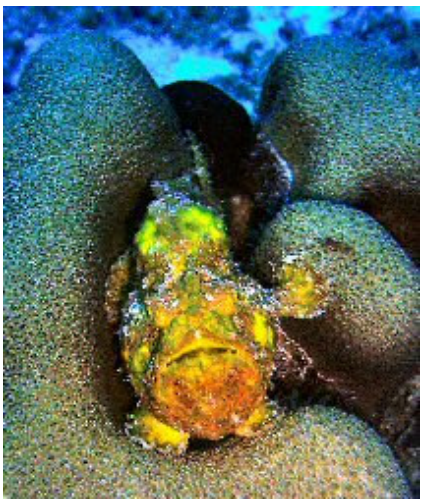
The island is one of two halves as regards scenery. To the north you have the scrub with lots and lots of cacti, while the south is made up of salt pans, owned by the Cargill Salt company. Seawater is fed into huge shallow lakes and allowed to evaporate under the heat of the sun. These lakes are pink in color, due to the algae they contain, and are home to thousands of flamingos - the largest colony in the western hemisphere. The salt is piled into large salt mountains that are gleaming white and look like snow covered Alps, though somewhat smaller. They made me hearken back to my skiing days, carving those turns down the black runs into Zermatt - such a vivid imagination.

Cargill Salt have their own pier, which they often allow divers to use, under supervision. they also own a large proportion of the beaches in the south, but again they allow people to use the beaches, of which Pink Beach is probably the best (sandiest) for snorkelling, as well as diving.



The Hilmer Hooker is the name of the wreck dive on Bonaire. A 70-metre 1000-tonne Korean freighter, it put into the Town pier for urgent repairs in 1984. Customs officers found tons of marijuana on board and confiscated the ship. It was later sunk deliberately to form an artificial reef, but someone forgot to remove the anti-fouling paint from its keel, so corals have taken a long time to colonize that part of the wreck. The ship lies on its side at depths of between 18 and 30 metres. It is well worth a visit.

Several of our number did a dive called the 1000 steps. There are actually a lot less than 100, but after the dive, it seems like a thousand, carrying your kit back to the road. As I said earlier, shore diving is a rather relaxed affair compared to boat diving, where of necessity everything has to be regimented, because of the usual lack of space on a dive boat. We did do one boat dive, which went from the Buddy Dive resort pier, across the short stretch of water (about 2 kilometres) to the Leonora I dive site just off Klein Bonaire. We saw a cute little seahorse for the first time on this dive.



For our last dive of the holiday we opted for a night dive at the town pier. This was absolutely amazing. It isn't deep and you have to book well in advance, because they only allow guided dives on days when the pier is not being used by the cruise ships that come to Bonaire several times a week.

The pier stanchions are covered in coral of all shapes, sizes and colours and lots of small creatures make their homes in the tyres scattered on the seabed. We saw eels and seahorses on the night we dived. You just have to see the colours to believe them.

On the last day but one, when we couldn't dive because we were flying the following day, we attended a wedding. Sam and Ian, who were part of the group had arranged with the authorities to get married at the Buddy Dive Resort. The night before, we had a hen and a stag party, both groups meeting up at the end in a small bar on the seafront near the pier, we didn't get back till about 3am. They needed six witnesses, of which Neil and I were two. The wedding was quite a simple affair and it went very well. The happy couple had a guard of honour at the end of it, consisting of the rest of us holding our fins in an arch for them to pass under.



On the last day, Saturday, we packed our cases and checked out, then a small bus took us to the airport. There is only one small duty-free shop there, but the cost of spirits was so good that I bought several bottles. It was only about half an hour later that a problem arose. Collin pointed out that since we would be catching a connecting flight to Heathrow from Schipol the liquor needed to be in sealed bags. The people at the duty-free couldn't do this, so I had to get a refund instead!

We left Bonaire on a sunny day. It was over 32 degrees Celsius (the water was about 29 degrees). We got back to a wet Heathrow with the temperature hovering just above freezing. I wanted to turn around and get right back on the return flight. This really had been a fantastic holiday, with a great bunch of dive buddies, some spectacular dives in a great place. I would certainly recommend shore diving in general, and Bonaire in particular, where everything is geared up for it. Many of our group have already signed up to go on next year's expedition with the Divecrew (www.divecrew.co.uk) to the Seychelles. We can't wait.



Sue - November 2007





Depth (m)	Time (min)	EANx	Dive
20.4	58	32	Buddy Reef (S)
16.2	56	32	Buddy Reef (N)
28.7	52	32	Witches Hut - Beautiful coral, lots of fish
16.5	54	32	Tula (Ol' Blue) - Easy entry, fish & corals galore
28.0	51	32	Hilmer Hooker - Wreck dive
19.5	64	32	The Invisibles - Easy entry, interesting sponges
14.9	46	32	Buddy Reef (N) - Night dive - lovely
24.4	53	32	Oil Slick Leap - Quite an entry - an adventure!
16.8	62	32	Andrea I - Good entry, a photographer's dream
24.4	56	32	Jeff Davis Memorial - Tough entry
20.4	59	32	Karpata - Lots of steps - my 100th dive - lovely!
26.5	49	32	Angel City - Entry OK, superb dive
19.8	59	32	Pink Beach - Good entry, good dive, saw a ray
14.6	63	32	Buddy Reef (S) - BCD problems, kept inflating
26.5	56	32	Leonora's Reef - Boat dive off Klein Bonaire
20.7	60	32	Tula (Ol' Blue) - Another great dive
7.9	59	32	Town Pier - FANTASTIC night dive, seahorses



