

Bonaire's Diving Freedom

by Mark Webster

Underwater photographers are quite a fussy species and we need very particular conditions and opportunities to bring out the best in us. The most crucial elements in the equation is where and how we dive as the correct combination produces relaxation and productivity, whilst the wrong mix will lead to stress and disappointment. Deciding where to go is perhaps easier than the how, but I know many photographers who have made the mistake joining a group of 'normal' divers or who have selected a dive centre or boat who are not sympathetic to their needs. If you can join or form a group of like minded photographers then you are in a better position to dictate your needs to a dive operator, but if you are in a smaller group or travelling on your own then you need to seek out a location which has a relaxed attitude to diving procedures. I am of course referring to that taboo technique that many of us enjoy most, that of solo diving!

I recently made a return trip to Bonaire with a group of photographers, a location which we switched to at short notice following the terrorist problems in the Far East and the resulting Foreign Office travel advice. Coming back reminded me just how well this location suits our needs and I thought readers might be interested in a reminder or an introduction if you have not tried diving here.

Bonaire is one of the three islands that make up the Dutch Leeward group of Aruba, Bonaire and Curacao, often



The Toucan dive centre (at the Plaza Resort) is perhaps the biggest on the island. It ran extremely efficiently and even had an outpost at our bungalow resort to enable you to collect tanks for beach diving without going to the main resort. Nikon F90X, 20-200 zoom, Elitechrome EBX, f11 @ 1/125th.



Green turtle - Turtles are seen frequently at the northern end of the island particularly in the early morning when they are starting the day with breakfast. They show no fear of divers and are very patient with photographers struggling to keep pace and arrange their camera equipment for a shot. Nikon F90X, Subal housing, 18-35mm zoom, two Inon Z-220's, Elitechrome EBX, f11 @ 1/60th.

called the ABC islands. They lie right at the southern end of the Caribbean between 50-70 miles from the coast of Venezuela

which places them outside the seasonal hurricane belt which can plague the islands further north. Bonaire itself is a



Yellow long snout seahorse - These yellow seahorses are surprisingly well camouflaged and do not look as bright as this in natural light. Nikon F90X, Subal housing, 105mm micro, Inon Quad flash, Velvia, f11 @ 1/125th.



Sponges Salt Pier - The supporting legs of the Salt Pier complex are encrusted with sponges and invertebrate life and we found we could dive here with a different lens each time and still find new subjects. Nikon F90X, Subal housing, 16mm fish eye, two Inon Z-220's, Elitechrome EBX, f11 @ 1/60th.

boomerang shaped island lying roughly north to south and only 24 miles long and 5 miles across at its widest point. This orientation puts the island directly across the path of the trade winds from the east and so provides a year round lee shore on the western side. Mid way down the island nestled only a mile or so from this lee shore is the tiny uninhabited island of Klien Bonaire. The coral reefs on the western edge of the main island are never more than 15-30m from the shore and Klien Bonaire is only a short run by boat. The entire coast and neighbouring island is a protected marine park and you can choose to dive easily from the beach or from a variety of purpose designed boats operated by a wide range of diving centres.

From a photographers viewpoint perhaps the most important feature is that most of the diving centres operate a policy called 'diving freedom'.

This means that for beach diving you can literally collect a tank at any time of day or night and, using your hire car, go diving all by yourself at any one of the numerous beach dive sites along the coast. Each dive centre requires you to attend a Marine Park briefing before you start, where they may recommend buddy diving, but the choice is most definitely yours and you will not be hassled by horrified dive guides. Boat diving presents few problems either. If you are part of a mixed group then the dive master will lead the 'normal' divers on a tour of the site and leave you to operate the 'same ocean' buddy system with your fellow photographers - in short they seem to understand us! This approach was pioneered by Captain Don's Habitat but now seems to have been adopted by almost all the dive centres.

The marine park was established before the expansion of diver traffic and therefore has managed to preserve the reefs from some of the damaging practices which have plagued other parts of the Caribbean. The hard and soft corals are lush and healthy and fish life profuse. A ban on fishing means that most fish are inquisitive rather than wary which is very encouraging if you are a photographer. Beach diving is particularly attractive as you can often have the site to yourself and also have the freedom to dive a site repetitively to pursue a particular subject. All the dive sites have a mooring buoy for the dive boats and all the operators observe a one boat per site policy, which means that sites are never crowded and you will not see the long strings of dive boats which some Red Sea locations are now famed for.

In addition to the reef dives there is a intentionally sunk wreck (the Hilma Hooker), which is slowly being colonised by the reef species, and two pier dives, one at the Town Pier in the centre of the capital Kralendijk and the other at the salt loading pier in the south of the island. Boat traffic rarely precludes diving at the piers and they are both stuffed full of macro life and Salt Pier in particular attracts large schools of fish. Bonaire is often advertised as the macro capital of the Caribbean and, whilst many may dispute that claim, the reefs certainly do have numerous subjects to keep you busy with exotics like sea horses and frog fish to keep you looking hard.

Although the majority of the island's tourist industry is dedicated to the visiting diver, there are other attractions by day



1000 Steps dive site - Bonaire boasts it has the best beach diving in the Caribbean and it is certainly some of the nicest I have seen. This site is unusual in that the access road is not at sea level but the trek down these steps (only 77 in reality) is worth it. Nikon F90X, 20-200 zoom, Elitechrome EBX, f11 @ 1/125th.



Slender file fish - These tiny fish are only 2-3cm long and hide amongst the branching gorgonians at the top of the reef. They are very camera shy and constantly change colour as they move from branch to branch with a very fast move every few minutes when they effectively disappear and your search begins again. Nikon F90X, Subal housing, 105mm micro, Inon Quad flash, Velvia, f11 @ 1/125th.

and night if the diving becomes too much for you. However, don't expect a cosmopolitan night life here, although there is a night club and casino in the capital entertainment is largely relaxed and low key. There are a

wide variety of restaurants to choose from - fast food to sea food - but some are expensive and you can all too easily run up a nasty shock on your credit card bill! The capital of Kralendijk is the size of a small seaside town



Hilma Hooker propeller - The Hilma Hooker is a former drug running coaster sunk for the benefit of visiting divers. It is still very intact and is slowly being populated by sponges and reef species. Nikon F90X, Subal housing, 16mm fish eye, two Inon Z-220's, Elitechrome EBX, f11 @ 1/60th.



Hilma Hooker amidships - The shape of the wreck superstructure and colour of the sponges make ideal frames for diver photography. Nikon F90X, Subal housing, 16mm fish eye, two Inon Z-220's, Elitechrome EBX, f8 @ 1/30th.

in the UK, but definitely has the imprint of Dutch colonialism on it particularly in its brightly coloured architecture. There is a range of shops from supermarkets to high chic boutiques, but most of the shops are geared to the tourist souvenir market aimed towards American tastes.

If the pace of the diving becomes wearing or you are staying for two weeks then take the opportunity to investigate a little of Bonaire's other attractions. There are two other nature sanctuaries to explore on Bonaire, the Washington-Slagbaai National Park at the northern end and the flamingo

reserve at the southern end. In fact the bird population is very varied and prodigious and, surprisingly to divers, some tourists visit only with bird watching in mind! The northern end of the island is surprisingly rugged and hilly with lush vegetation and hides a number of secluded beaches and coves ideal for a lazy picnic watching the island's flamingos and crash diving pelicans grabbing their lunch. At the southern end of the island you will find the salt pans, which is what attracts the flamingos to the breeding sanctuary, and evidence of the history of the island's use of slave labour to harvest the salt. Tiny slave workers huts, which dot the coastline, are a harsh reminder of the common use of slaves throughout the Caribbean.

The choice of accommodation includes traditional hotel rooms, studios, apartments and small villas and cottages and you can easily purchase a diving package from one of the centres if your accommodation is not linked. Many divers opt for self catering as this increases your diving flexibility and allows you to economise on catering if needed.

There are a variety of ways to travel to Bonaire, all of which require at least one change of aircraft en-route from Europe. KLM fly direct from Amsterdam on a daily basis now or you can fly with a number of carriers through Miami and onward with the local ALM airline. There are alternative routes via Lisbon in Portugal, Caracas in Venezuela or several other 'gateway' cities in the USA. The good news is that most transatlantic flights offer generous baggage allowances, although buying a



Vase sponge and diver - The reefs are largely undamaged by diver traffic and you will find all the typical Caribbean species of sponge and corals here. Nikon F90X, Subal housing, 18-35mm zoom, two Inon Z-220's,



Chain moray eel - The fissures of the reef are full of interesting subjects for a macro lens such as this brightly coloured chain moray eel. Nikon F90X, Subal housing, 105mm micro, Inon Quad flash, Velvia, f11 @ 1/60th.

package through a UK travel agent may restrict this through the ticket price. If you travel via Miami it is best to collect your luggage and re-check it for the onward flight as bags often go astray here, although it is a good policy always to check that you bags have been loaded when transferring flights.

Bonaire will measure up to most photographers requirements and, although you won't see much big fish action here, there are a host of other species here to keep you more than busy for a week or two. Successful photographic trips are all down to the planning, flexibility on

location and the opportunity to dive when you wish and Bonaire will easily accommodate most of this.

Information:

Currency:

Local currency is the NAF - Netherlands Antilles Guilder - but US dollars are accepted everywhere as are all major credit cards. You can also draw cash from a number of ATM's and banks.

Language:

The official language is Dutch but most locals speak

Papiamentu, a mixture of several colonial languages. Most locals also speak English well.

Voltage:

110-120v 50hz is standard, but can surge. Bring a transformer to boost and smooth the current to 240v or charge batteries at the dive centre.

Water:

All tap water on the island is produced by a desalination plant just north of Kralendijk. The quality is excellent and can be drunk from the tap without a worry.

Medical:



Yellow head jaw fish - These fish hover above their burrows to feed and disappear when they feel threatened. A slow approach helps, but using a ring flash with these fish for the first time enabled me to get much closer than previously. Nikon F90X, Subal housing, 105mm micro, Inon Quad flash, Velvia, f11 @ 1/125th.



Saucer eye snappers - Salt Pier attracts some of the biggest schools of fish you will find around the island. They are very tolerant of persistent photographers and will gladly pose for you until the shot is right. Nikon F90X, Subal housing, 18-35mm zoom, two Inon Z-220's, Elitechrome EBX, f11 @ 1/60th.

The main well equipped hospital is St. Francis Hospital. There are also local doctors and medical centres.

Recompression:

A recompression chamber is situated at St. Francis Hospital.

Climate:

Truly tropical. Temperature a steady 80-85° with a constant trade wind from the east which get somewhat stronger during July and August. Rainfall is 10-15" per year in short showers generally in the winter months.

Water Temperature:

Between 78-84°, warm enough for a shorty or dive skin if you swim about during your dives. For photographers I recommend a 3-5mm wet suit. Visibility is normally around 30m.

Tourism Corporation of Bonaire - www.infobonaire.com
 Oonadivers - Tel. 01323 648924 www.oonasdivers.com
 Plaza Resort - www.plazaresortbonaire.com
 Lagoen Hill Bungalows - www.lagoenhill.com

Toucan Diving - www.toucandiving.com
 Captain Don's Habitat - www.habitatresorts.com

Mark Webster

Mark is the author of 'The Art and Technique of Underwater Photography' (published by Fountain Press) and Diving and Snorkelling Belize (Lonely Planet) and hosts regular workshops both overseas and in the UK. For further details visit Mark's website at www.photec.co.uk

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