

Dive Travel (part two) by Cal Kothrade

After living in airport terminals, TSA lines and cramped aluminum tubes for the better part of the last 36 hours, getting down on one's knees and kissing the sun warmed pavement of BON's tarmac seemed completely appropriate. We had made it to paradise, albeit a day late, but at least we got here. The next hour was spent standing around the intermittently moving baggage carousel. Like the spinning chamber of a revolver, this was our own version of airline roulette. Whose bags would be fired from the belly of the Boeing 737-800 into their owners' arms, and whose bags would misfire, lost in international limbo? When it was all said and done, better than half our group found themselves victims of lost baggage. We later ascertained the bags had decided Aruba was a better destination than Bonaire. My dive gear (and warm weather clothing), was sitting on a tropical island waiting to be immersed in salt water, while I, was two islands to the east, also waiting to be immersed in salt water. I unbuttoned the top few buttons of my white dress shirt, rolled up my sleeves, and bought a cold beer from the airport bar. Things were looking up. After retrieving our rental truck, my three room mates and I headed over to the resort we would be staying at for the week, *Captain Don's Habitat*, and settled into our cabana. In part one of this story, I eluded to some minor miscalculations in my manner of packing for this trip. Now was the moment many of those errors became painfully clear to me. I was wearing slip on dress shoes, and long pants. It was 88 degrees and sunny, but I couldn't even go swimming, because my trunks were carefully protecting a dive computer in a suitcase, 105 miles west of me. Lesson two of dive travel packing...flip-flops, a pair of trunks, shorts and a tee shirt go in the carry on. The bag of Munchos will not be missed upon arrival in such circumstances as these. You will at the very least, look and feel like you belong in paradise, even if you are hungry. What happened to rule number one you ask? To catch it, you needed to be paying attention in part one of this article when I mentioned the toothpaste...not a huge deal, but putting a toothbrush and travel size tube of paste in your travel bag will keep your breath up to the task of negotiating with TSA agents regarding who should re-pack your freshly inspected camera case.



Like a younger sibling, I was the walking poster boy for hand-me-downs. After donning Steve's trunks, Dirk's flip-flops, and one of Ken's Tees, I could now mosey on over to the onsite dive shop to see about rental dive gear, and how much it would eat into my culinary budget for the week. Much to my surprise, *Captain Don's* had graciously offered everyone who had been afflicted by lost luggage syndrome, free gear rental. This was huge, as I needed everything. I didn't even have a mask. Lesson number three, bring your mask with you. If you have a difficult to fit face, or normally succumb to mask leak issues, it's nice to have your own, properly fitting mask. Obviously you can't bring all of your equipment aboard as carry on, and things like regulators, B.C.s and fins are usually not so critical that you can't use the rentals. One thing I have issues with is my feet, and when one is used to wearing open heel fins with protective boots, going to a full foot fin can quickly create blisters or irritation on sensitive dogs. Lesson number four...especially when going to rocky, volcanic, or in the case of Bonaire, coral islands, pack your dive booties. It will keep the simple act of walking from the road to the water's edge from becoming a torturous trek for soft soles, when shore diving with your friends who didn't lose their luggage.



The diving I did in the the waters around Bonaire, and Klein Bonaire over the next several days was wonderful. Healthy reefs, warm waters and easy diving from an expertly staffed dive boat rarely will disappoint. I was told by locals that the visibility was less than it may be at other times of the year due to rains, but 30 to 40 feet is still more than acceptable conditions in my log book. In all honesty, if I was forced to say something less than complimentary about the diving in Bonaire, I would report that their appears to be less diversity in bottom topography here, than other Caribbean destinations I have dove. I found it difficult after several days, to keep one dive separate from another in my memory, unless it was peppered with an unusual critter sighting. Yes, I agree with you, that is a rather nit-picky complaint.

This being my first and only visit to the wonderful island nation of Bonaire, I am unable to compare our dive resort to anything else, but the staff at *Captain Don's* was ever helpful, professional and friendly. The on premise restaurant I'm told is managed by a

private entity, and is not actually owned by the Habitat, but it has a good selection of full sit down meals ranging from salads and burgers to seafood, and is convenient due to it's location. A few times though, 'island time' kicked in and made eating before a dive somewhat of a nervous experience, but hey, you're on vacation, and one shouldn't be so worried about the clock.



Despite full accommodations at the resort, I rarely am satiated staying in one place, especially when I am somewhere I've not been. For my cabana mates and me, exploring was the second order of business always, right behind diving. Three of us are also self described camera geeks, and with there being no shortage of topside subject matter here, the real problem was working out the logistics of where was the best place to photograph that evening's sunset or moonrise, and would the kite surfers still be slicing the water's surface and jumping into the setting sun if we stopped at the south light house first? There is a great diversity to this place, and if you have a vehicle at your disposal, I highly suggest making your way to the windward side. There you can experience Mother Nature's raw power, as the sea collides with an ancient coral reef that was pushed up due to tectonic forces to create the island. This jagged, volcanic looking shoreline, forces wind driven water high into the air along the southeastern shore, creating a spectacular blending of water, salt and blue sky with every pulsing, heart pounding wave.

The aforementioned southern light house is as picture postcard perfect as it gets, and if you wait until dusk, the sky behind it will morph into the most incredible blues and purples, giving your photo of this impressive landmark that little something extra.

Among other noteworthy attractions on island are the slave huts, remnants from a darker economic past, before tourism here existed. They can be found on the southwest shore. Also in the area, are the salt ponds. If you have never seen pink

water, then you must visit these vast evaporation pools where salt, a major island export is harvested. A trip across the island to the windward side will more than likely yield an encounter with pink flamingos, and maybe even a wild donkey or two. Watching the kite surfers at the appropriately named Kite Beach, is mesmerizing to say the least. It is exhilarating to watch them harness the wind with their brightly colored airfoils, and then launch themselves 20 or more feet into the salty air at the end of their run. It may even be enough to make you sign up for lessons at one of the kite schools that can be found there daily, providing instruction on the warm, sandy beach. While you're there working up an appetite watching the kite surfers, treat yourself to a burger from *Cactus Blue*, a little food truck with big taste.

That brings me to the third order of business on my Bonaire adventure, cuisine. As one who loves to eat, I can say that my travel companions and I were pleasantly surprised with our evening meals. We tried to go to a new place every night for dinner,



in an attempt to get as well rounded a culinary experience as possible. *Eddy's Restaurant* at Sand Dollar, served up a heavenly barracuda dish, that I topped off with a perfect flan, my dinner companions agreed, it was worth every penny, as well as being within walking distance of the Habitat. Next to Wilhelmina Park is *Cuba Compagnie*, where we enjoyed outdoor dining on beef and fish specialties, second to none.

In an attempt to burn off a few of those accrued calories, the final full day on Bonaire consisted of an early morning last dive, before beginning the 24 hour, no diving before flying, countdown clock. Early that afternoon, several of our group went on a prearranged cave tour, offered by *Flow Bonaire*, located adjacent to the resort. The owner of *Flow*, Leo Hoogenboom, treated us to a fascinating personal tour of two of Bonaire's many underground caves, one 'dry', and one 'wet'. On our guided tour, Leo explained how these unique ancient coral reef caves were made, why they are so special, and enthusiastically answered all our questions about Bonaire's well kept underground secrets. If you want to know more about these natural wonders, you will just have to ask Leo yourself next time you're on Bonaire.



In the end, my trip that almost never was, turned out to be a wonderful learning experience, a great story, and much more than just a 'dive, eat, sleep and repeat' type vacation. Whether it's photography, eating, spelunking, or water sports, this windswept island has much to offer above the waves, no matter what your tastes. My luggage arrived along with most of the rest of our group's bags, two days after our arrival, but trips to the airport to see if more suitcases had trickled in during the day, became a nightly ritual for some of my fellow travelers. I would be remiss if I neglected to mention that the personnel at the airport were less than helpful in the retrieval process, and the reunification of me and my dive gear, is due in no small part, to the relentless, and tireless efforts of a few individuals from our group who refused to give up on our lost luggage. The next time I embark on a dive trip during the winter season, I will pack differently. I never thought my bags would become lost, but it finally did happen to me, and though it was not the worst thing that could have happened, I could have made it easier on myself by being smarter about what came on the airplane with me. Thankfully, my journey back to reality went as planned, with no travel snafus, and even though I came back to snow, ice and sub zero windchills, at least I was wearing long pants, socks, shoes and a sport coat, much to the chagrin of my travel companions still sporting flip-flops and shorts.

