

The House Reef Dive Sites



An iguana near the dive boats at Captain Don's

<i>The House Reefs</i>		Skill Level			
		GOOD SNORKELING	NOVICE	INTERMEDIATE	ADVANCED
24	PETRIES PILLAR	•	•		
25	SMALL WALL	•	•		
26	CLIFF	•		•	
27	LA MACHACA	•	•		
28	REEF SCIENTIFICO	•	•		
29	BUDDY'S REEF	•			•
30	BARI'S REEF	•	•		
31	FRONT PORCH	•		•	
32	SOMETHING SPECIAL	•	•		
33	TOWN PIER	•	•		
34	CALABAS REEF	•	•		
35	18TH PALM	•	•		

24 PETRIES PILLAR

Location: Northwest coast
Depth: 15-110ft (4-36m)
Access: Shore & boat
Expertise Rating: Novice



Getting into the populated areas where many of the northern dive hotels and restaurants are situated, the reefs are often called house reefs. The diving on all of these is quite good with great fish diversity, nice selection of sponges and lots of cleaning stations. These reefs are fed from the deep channel between Bonaire and Klein Bonaire.

The marine park has designated from **La Machaca** down to **Calabas Reef** as shore dives only with the exception of **Something Special**, which has a mooring buoy. Some of these reefs are for hotel guests only, but a few allow visitors for a fee. Some want you to just check in and let them know you're diving and others ask you to sign a legal waiver of liability. Please check with the host hotel's dive center prior to making the dive to see what the current policy is on diving the desired house reef.

There are some very attractive pillar corals here, hence the name – given by the famous Capt Don – to a friend as a wedding gift. This is a lovely snorkeling site even though the park doesn't list it as so. This is not an easy entry or even easy to find, but it is easy going once in the water. The easiest way is to go by boat.

The shallows have stands of pillar corals and scatterings of other corals. Look for squid, queen and stoplight parrotfish, as well as nice staghorn coral. The drop-off begins near the area where the buoy anchor eye is drilled in 20ft and slopes down deep to 140ft. The slope is mostly hard corals and there are some tube sponges and rope sponges.

The upper reef is interesting and you may want to spend your time poking around the 20ft to 40ft area. Look for frogfish and glassy sweepers. Turtles seem to like this reef and you will probably see some greater soapfish as well.

25 SMALL WALL

Location: *Black Durgon Inn, northwest coast*

Depth: *30-70ft (10-23m)*

Access: *Shore & boat*

Expertise Rating: *Novice*



The mooring sits in 24ft of water at Small Wall and the dive is best in the 30ft to 60ft range. As you face shore, the small, vertical wall that highlights the site is to the right. The shallows have many small fish complimented by stoplight, red-band and princess parrotfish. Look for bristle worms in the gorgonians. There are also juvenile spotted drums in the protection of the corals here.

An octopus changes color to blend in with its surroundings



The little wall is a beautifully landscaped place with lots of sponge life, many small baitfish and trumpetfish roaming in and out of large growths of rope sponges. Macro critters like lettuce slugs and spotted cleaner shrimp on giant and corkscrew sea anemones make this a good place to narrow your focus. There are also spotted and golden morays in the various reef holes. Octopuses are also common here.

There are some nice invertebrates here like flamingo tongues, Christmas tree worms and brittle stars. Look for shoals of French grunts in the shallows.

26 CLIFF

Location: *Hamlet Villas, northwest coast*

Depth: *30-70ft (10-23m)*

Access: *Boat & hotel pier*

Expertise Rating: *Intermediate*



This is the site of Capt Don's underwater stone memorial that is dedicated to 'divers who have gone before us.' It is accessed from boat or shore with a shallow buoy in just 13ft of water. Snorkelers can enjoy the shallows here with some elkhorn coral and lots of Spanish hogfish picking their way through the white sandy shallows.

There are some healthy purple tube sponges and also some orange elephant ears with fairy basslets hanging around them.

This little wall is great to dive early in the morning. As fish wake up, begin moving along the reef and start cleaning at the cleaning station down the wall, the sun peaks over the wall tops and sends blue rays down through the clear Bonaire water.

Look for curious tarpon in this area. There are also lobsters found on this reef and a variety of moray eels.



A greater soapfish rests on the reef



27 LA MACHACA

Location: *Capt Don's Habitat, west-central coast*

Depth: 10-130ft (3-40m)

Access: *Dock*

Expertise Rating: *Novice*



Entry here is from the small pier on the right of the Habitat property. Just swim out following a rope that runs to the drop-off and then all the way down the reef to 120ft. For those new to the area, just follow the rope out and back and it's hard to get lost. On the left of the rope is a small, upside-down fishing boat. Newer divers wanting to log

a wreck dive can do so here. This is the *La Machaca* and it harbors all kinds of fish including mutton snapper and bluestriped grunts. At night, there are tubastrea corals that open their bright yellow polyps and make this little wreck a great spot to visit.

Critters that sometimes give divers a start are a large moray that sometimes lives in or around the wreck as well as some big tarpon that sneak up on divers at night.

On the reef below there are vase sponges with arrow crabs in residence. Look for the various corals like brain corals, finger corals and big stands of purple tube sponges.

Some sponges are growing right out of the brain corals on this reef. Way down deep on the south side of the

rope (affectionately called 'the highway' by Habitat staff) is another small shipwreck. The sand holds the promise of southern stingrays and garden eels, but it is quite deep.

Moving up top, there is a nice sandy area with lots of feeding hogfish and parrotfish.

There is also a small replica of one of the seven dwarves! Keep an eye out for a fully-grown great barracuda that seems curious about what you're doing at all times. Under the Habitat diver pier, there is always a school of tiny baitfish and an occasional octopus.

This reef is an excellent night dive and just one of the best in Bonaire. Have a beer at the Habitat bar after the dive and watch the sun go down over Klein Bonaire – the pizza is good too!

28 REEF SCIENTIFICO

Location: *Capt Don's, west-central coast*

Depth: 12-35ft (4-11m) with a mini wall to 55ft (17m)

Access: *Boat & shore*

Expertise Rating: *Novice*



The **Cliff**, **La Machaca**, Reef Scientifico and **Buddy's** are all close together and it is easy to purposely – or accidentally – swim from one to another. The science reference comes from an experiment where a grid was paid out at 40ft on this reef. Please don't disturb this site.

Look for similar terrain as **La Machaca**. Morays (green and spotted), parrotfish of all types, hogfish, angels and lots more are found here. Long processions of Creole wrasse seem to form a never-ending chain as they move up and down the reef in a long, strung out shoal. This is another favorite night-time dive.

29 BUDDY'S REEF

Location: *Buddy Dive, west-central coast*

Depth: 10-95ft (3-30m)

Access: *Boat*

Expertise Rating: *Advanced*



The reef at this popular dive resort is also good for all levels of divers and even some snorkeling action. This whole wall, starting at the **Cliff**, seems to get a constant but gentle current, keeping everything on the reef healthy.

The reef sits on a steep slope that starts at 30ft and runs down to sand at 100ft. Good sponge life, cleaning stations and lots of small and medium-sized hard

A frogfish is one of the unusual fish sometimes seen in this area



corals make this a great place to poke around. Some soft corals also punctuate the reef scene.

Look in the rope sponges and rocks for frogfish. As there are so many fish, this is very active at dusk and a late afternoon dive will deliver all kinds of sightings. Octopus, squid and turtles are also found at this site.

Dive classes are frequently done in the sandy upper reef area.

30 BARI'S REEF

Location: Sand Dollar, west-central coast

Depth: 3-110ft (1-36m)

Access: Shore

Expertise Rating: Novice



A 'bari' is a barrel, and in this case it refers to a big barrel sponge found long ago in very deep water on this reef by a Bonaire explorer. Today Bari's Reef is used for all levels of diving and every

depth is explored with fun discoveries to be had. Entry to Bari's Reef is made at the resort by beach, dock or ladder on the dock.

The sponges are still here, and more. According to the Reef Environmental Education Foundation (REEF) database, Bari has more documented fish species, a count of 317, than any other single reef in the whole of the Caribbean. Along with a few barrel sponges are tube sponges, elephant sponges, octopus sponges and vase sponges. The gentle current keeps the sponges healthy and brings in tarpon and barracuda to hunt for fish feeding in the nutrient rich environment. Even eagle rays coast by here.

Bring your macro lens. For small creatures, there's always the possibility of frogfish here. Even the rare goldspot eel may show up. Also, look for small wrasses around the reef floor, hogfish and peacock flounders. The rubble is also home to yellowhead jawfish. Look here for unusual blennies, like the redlip, and masked gobies. Take your fish checklist to this site.

This was once a junk dump and some of the stuff is still here. This provides great habitat for macro subjects. Poke around the junk, especially on night dives, and you may see some colorful and odd creatures.

31 FRONT PORCH

Location: Sunset Beach, west-central coast

Depth: 15-90ft (5-30m)

Access: Boat

Expertise Rating: Intermediate



The former Sunset Beach site is the walk-in access here, at the time of this writing. The access is quite easy and by traveling either north or south, you will encounter different things on this reef.

The area has great fish diversity. Tarpon show up on night dives and barra-

cuda are common by day. To the north there are coral heads and sponges with some open spaces in the reef.

Look at the rubbly bottom for goldspot gobies and yellowhead jawfish that incubate eggs in their maws. This makes for a great photo.

This area and south past **Salt Pier** has a sandy bottom and rubble that makes a conducive habitat for scorpionfish – so watch where you kneel or put your hands, especially at night. These fish use effective camouflage so take a second look at that rock you're about to touch.

On the south, there's an old anchor chain that leads to another old wreck, the New York tugboat. This old ship is also nice at night with some tubastrea growth on it that blossoms after dark with bright yellow polyps.

This ship is on the port side and the seabed around the wreck is good for macro life and small fish-like blennies and gobies.

Sea rods are among the reef's prettiest soft corals





32 SOMETHING SPECIAL

Location: South of Marina entrance, central coast

Depth: 10-100ft (3-30m)

Access: Shore & boat

Expertise Rating: Novice



This boat dive is also accessed by shore. The mooring is shallow, sitting in 10ft of water.

Divers like this site for the upper reef shallows as much as the deeper reef features. It is great for macro critters and the odd fish like frogfish. The fish diversity here is impressive.

On the right there is a sand chute that runs down the face of the reef slope and opens up into a broad sandy area full of garden eels. Look also for stingrays here. The reef going south is then covered in various corals along the wall. Most are low growing brain, star and plate corals. Some soft corals harbor small schools of French grunts. There are also scattered stands of branching vase and purple tube sponges. Keep an eye out for foraging spotted morays and juvenile spotted drums.

The upper reef is home to lots of open rubbly space and coral clusters. Look for hawksbill turtles poking around. The upper reef also has doctorfish surgeons, gray angels, yellowhead jawfish, sand tilefish and clown wrasses. This is a good spot for frogfish and they are usually in the 15ft to 30ft depths. Spotted scorpionfish, some very large, can be found in this habitat as well.

There seems to be a current flowing here all the time, making the area and its varied terrain a good place for a diverse fish population.

For the macro hunter, this is a superb spot. Keep an ear out for boats coming and going as they do come in quite shallow to moor.

33 TOWN PIER

Location: Downtown Kralendijk, central coast

Depth: 0-40ft (12m)

Access: Shore & boat

Expertise Rating: Novice

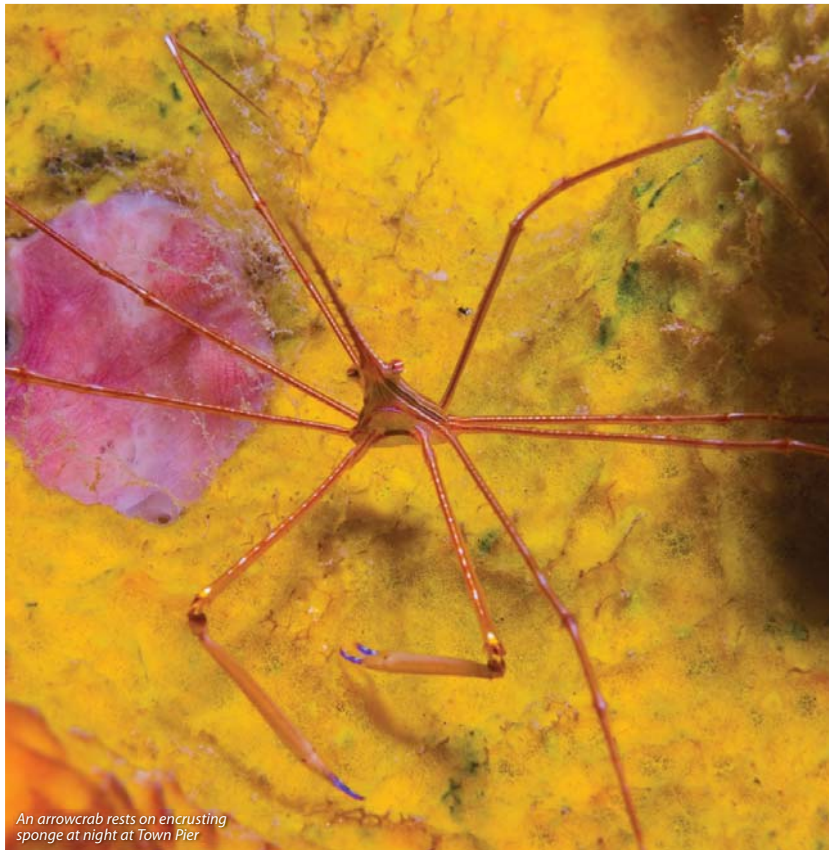


Considered one of the must-do dives in Bonaire, this site is located right in the center of town. You can have a snack at City Café and then walk over and go diving. It is the smaller pier next to the big one in front of the old Dutch fort, and usually has a couple of ocean tugboats tied up to it. It can be done any time of day, but the colorful nature of the pillars that support the pier make most people go for it at night.

Since the large clusters of tubastrea coral and encrusting sponges grow right up to the surface, even snorkelers who are bothered by an overhead environment can enjoy this dive. The bottom looks like any pier area with smattering of junk. Some old tires have big stands of branching vase sponges in them. The undulating spotted rums and various assortment of moray eels like these trashy refuges, so look at each one as you will usually see some creatures of note inside or around the edges.

The dive is usually done under the safe confines of the pier itself. The sponge life is colorful, varied and healthy. You may see some filament lines around the pilings. Recently work was done and local volunteers took the sponges off the pilings and moved them to the reef until the work was completed. They then replanted them back to the pier. A lot of hard work went into the dive that tourists continue to enjoy.

The big draw is the heavy growth of tubastrea coral on the pillars. At dusk and at night the polyps open wide to feed, turning the pier into an Aztec



An arrow crab rests on encrusting sponge at night at Town Pier

shrine of sun-yellow color and motion. On the sea floor and crawling on the pilings there are tons of arrow crabs. There are also different species of decorator and hermit crabs, bristle worms and octopuses.

This dive has special restrictions. It is only a shore dive and a certified guide must accompany divers and apply for your permission to dive here through the harbormaster. There have been limits placed on how many groups can dive here and the groups must be small, so apply early and often, to get your shot at this. Pick a guide who is good in marine creature behavior to get the best of this site.

34

CALABAS REEF

Location: Dive Bonaire and Carib Inn piers, west-central coast

Depth: 15-125ft (5-22m)

Access: Boat

Expertise Rating: Novice



This is the house reef for Dive Bonaire and the Divi Flamingo Resort. Carib Inn divers also use this as the house reef. Swim out past some anchors placed on the reef, presumably as fish attraction devices. The slope starts at

Save the Sponges



Tube sponges

In late 1988, renovations began on Bonaire's Old Pier, also called Town Pier or North Pier. In order to check for structural soundness, one out of every four of the 200 pilings beneath the pier was scraped bare of decades of growth, including sponges, orange cup corals, tunicates, tubeworms and even a few stony corals. The corals and tunicates weren't killed by being removed from their substrate, but they're not capable of reattaching.

But sponges, more primitive than corals and sea squirts, have no organs, and no systems. Sponges are basically groups of cells working together. 'Sponges,' I remembered Cathy Church telling me a few years earlier, 'can attach to anything if they're in firm contact with it long enough.'

That memory, and 50 denuded pilings, began the Sponge Reattachment Project. From May, 1989 until 1990, at least four sponges were tied onto a piling on every 'Touch the Sea' dive, in addition to the many dives dedicated solely to tying sponges. More than 600 sponges were tied onto pilings in the two years or so of the SRT Project. Almost all of them survived and flourished.

We had two advantages when working on the Sponge Reattachment Project in 1989. The pilings were completely bare, so we didn't have to worry about placing the sponges away from other growth, and the sponges were not removed from the pilings by any natural source.

The situation was quite different in 2004, after the storm surge from Hurricane Ivan rolled under the Town Pier. Ivan's waves didn't affect low-profile growth, such as stony corals and the like. However, sponge colonies that weren't firmly attached and sponge tubes with weak sections were knocked off by the waves.

The Sponge Reattachment Program, Phase Two, was led by Susan Porter (I was off-island at the time but sent suggestions). In several dives, Bonaire National Marine Park Volunteers tied dozens of sponges back onto pilings.

By Dee Scarr

about 30ft and runs down into the sand past 120ft.

This can be a wreck dive as there is a fishing type boat on the reef that attracts marine life. It sits at about 70ft deep off the Flamingo side of the reef. Look for small creatures like cleaner shrimp, nudibranchs and small morays in the clusters of coral heads. The site is usually home to bigger stuff, too, like tarpon and great barracuda. Look also for reef squid here.

Seahorses have been reported here in the past in the soft coral that is in the upper part of the reef. Look also for frogfish sitting in the rope sponges. Flamingo tongues are common in the sea plumes or sea rods.

35 18TH PALM

Location: Plaza Hotel, west-central coast

Depth: 15-120ft (15-30m)

Access: Shore & boat

Expertise Rating: Novice



This is the house reef of the Plaza Hotel and can be dived by shore or by boat. This is also a nice snorkeling site. Entry is at one of the area's only sandy beaches



A curious great barracuda can stay with divers the whole dive

and is just a walk in by a rock jetty that protects from most wave action. There is also a pier for Plaza guests at the Topsy Seagull restaurant and bar. There is a school of smallmouth grunts under this pier all the time.

The mooring is offshore at 32ft. You will see that this is a unique reef as it flows down the slope into a sandy plain with a sand chute to the south. Across this plain is another deep reef at about 80ft that doglegs out and drops down some more. The dogleg runs into the slope at the south and a sloping reef runs south. This little outer reef leg usually has big fish with tarpon around in the blue and various mid-water fish schools moving about. Big jacks also come into view and eagle rays have been seen here.

Look in the reef and along the reef slope for lobsters, decorator crabs, batwing crabs, giant hermit crabs and lobsters.

The upper reef has been host to frogfish, though not consistently. The Toucan staff do intro and instruction here daily, plus a daily shore dive, so if you're staying here ask at the Toucan/Plaza dive shop about any new developments. It is also good place for macro critters like many colors of Christmas tree worms, flamingo tongues, arrow crabs and barber pole shrimp.



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