



The Wildside Dive Sites



The eastern coast of Bonaire is a beautifully rugged stretch that features coral-strewn beaches, sheer cliff lines and spewing blowholes. Buffeted by constant winds most of the year, it is beautiful to see but challenging to dive.

Do divers get lost or have problems on this side trying to shore dive? Yes. The STINAPA recommendation from park officials is to dive with an experienced guide or use a boat. The reason for this is divers should have a good knowledge of surf exits and entries. Also, the flow of water along the reef flats creates strong currents. Local guides know the entry and exit points and how to avoid the rip areas. Visitors may get caught in a current and become tired trying to get back in, leading to an accident. Most guides will not go here during windy seasons, leaving only about two months where shore diving is feasible. But those that do go know what they are doing and normally take very small groups. Thus, a guided diver doesn't have to worry about navigation and this means less wasted time and air. Also, a good guide knows about things like caverns and overhangs, any historical maritime debris, best places for marine life and how the currents play at the entries and exits. A good guide can also save the day in case things go sour.

The alternative and preferred recommendation from STINAPA is boat diving. Most dive shops don't go here as it's a very long ride from the west side. Larry's Wildside Diving has this area pretty much to itself as it dives here on a daily basis. The operation has a specially built twin engine RIB created just for these waters. The dives here are all drift dives along the walls and slopes of the east coast. Larry uses the calm waters of Lac Cai to launch and board divers. He comes in and out through the east channel and goes south as far as the **Willemstoren Lighthouse**, or north as far as Boka Spelonk. The Wildside dives are all well-supervised, safe and a real contrast from the calmer west side. Dive master Martin Heinrich paces the dive so you dive longer and get to see more, plus boat diving has all of the advantages of beach diving without the long swim and used up air.

Local guides and visitors all say the fish on this side are bigger, there are sea turtles galore and the terrain is much different. It is a fun area to see and the drifts are point A to point B (wherever you come up), so there's no swimming back to the boat like the point A to point A west side or Klein Bonaire dives.

These are intermediate dives as divers should be able to do untethered boat entries and exits and decompress in blue water.

The Wildside Dive Sites		GOOD SNORKELING			
		NOVICE	INTERMEDIATE	ADVANCED	
61	WILLEMSTOREN LIGHTHOUSE			•	
62	BABY BEACH			•	
63	WHITE HOLE / BLUE HOLE	•		•	
64	CAI			•	
65	BOKA WASHIKEMBA			•	



Eagle rays are frequently seen along the east coast

61 WILLEMSTOREN LIGHTHOUSE

Location: Lighthouse Building, far southeast coast

Depth: 25-120ft (7-36m)

Access: Boat

Expertise Rating: Intermediate to advanced



The reason for diving this side of the island is that there is a good chance of seeing blue water creatures. Also, if you like sea fans, this side of the island is the place. The flowing gorgonian sea fans in hues of purples grow tall here and are plentiful, flowing in the surge.

The reef slopes down to the sandy bottom, ending at 120ft and going off to a deeper plain. The terrain here is not as dense with coral cover as the west coast, but the corals are heartier as

they have to deal with more surge and currents. Some coral structures can be quite large and are shelter for grouper, snapper schools, angelfish and morays. You will see sea turtles on this side more often and many are older, with large carapaces.

Also, eagle rays can often be found in areas with currents and chances are good of seeing not one but many eagle rays in a squadron. Keep an eye on the blue for this kind of activity. The handy thing about boat diving is that you're more likely to see dolphins and can have them ride the bow wave.

This is the end of the island and currents converge, attracting fish that attract dolphins.

Look for spinners and bottlenose, which are the most common of the dolphins around Bonaire. Spinners are great acrobats and jump, twist and porpoise with the boat. Great fun.

62 BABY BEACH

Location: North of Cai Channel, south-east coast

Depth: 25-100ft (7-36m)

Access: Boat (no buoy, not an official park site)

Expertise Rating: Intermediate to advanced



Baby Beach is a small spit of sand south of Cai, just 500yd south of the shrimp farm. There is no BNMP site number of mooring offshore. Thus it is not a big, full-grown beach – just a junior – but still scenic.

It is not an official park dive site but some people do try to shore dive here. Again, it is a real slog complicated by surf, urchins and a rather small landmark for getting back. Go with an experienced guide and tip well if you can get one to take you.

It is a short boat ride down the coast out of Cai channel, and divers drop in over the side and swim down through a setting of flowing sea fans and sea rods. This slope isn't as deep as the

Lucky divers may see bottlenose dolphins



ones farther south and it hits the sand in the 80ft to 100ft range. The hard coral reefs seem to be layered, making for a nice terrain.

Look for tarpon and for big great barracuda, with some divers reported to have seen as many as 10 in one dive. Also, good-sized midnight parrotfish come through here solo and in groups. Reports of stingrays are common at this site. Big fish and the occasional turtle, blacktip reef shark or nurse shark make this a good bet for a special Wildside dive. Also, if boat diving, this is a drift and a great one at that.

Conch



If you go to the north side of the Lac at the Cai area, you will see mountains of conch shells from days gone by. The beach is also littered with many shells. These are from the area when conch were plentiful, before being almost totally fished out. Conch are shelled mollusks and are protected under CITES. On Bonaire they may not be taken from the sea without a permit from the Island Government of Bonaire. Conch is of special ecological importance to Bonaire's sea grass beds. Conch meat is considered a delicacy and imported conch is still served at some local restaurants. Do not take the conch shells home with you.



Schoolmasters hover at the Hole's reef top

63 WHITE HOLE / BLUE HOLE

Location: South of Lac Channel, southeast coast

Depth: 20-55ft (6-17m)

Access: Boat (BNMP Site # 62)

Expertise Rating: Intermediate to advanced



Depending on who you talk to, this little treasure is called White Hole for the white sand bottom or Blue Hole for the clear blue water. It is park site 62 and it is one of Bonaire's finest – and certainly most easy – dives once you get into it.

This is another dive that can be done by shore but is not recommended. If done by boat, the only real challenge is kicking a bit against the surge to get over the lip of a big hole in the reef filled with sand. The size of a football stadium, the hole is surrounded by fields of flowing sea fans on the ocean side. There are some more fans, rods and elkhorn coral on the shore side. The lip on the shore side is about 10ft deep or less, so take care not to get carried into the surf. Look around for pufferfish and reef squid in the shallows. Once down into the hole, there is a little surge and no current.

The first thing that strikes you is the contrast of the white sand and the blue



Larry's custom boat heads for the Cai Channel

64 CAI

Location: Cai Channel, southeast

Depth: 25-120ft (7-36m)

Access: Boat (BNMP site 63)

Expertise Rating: Intermediate to advanced



Again, the safest and sanest way to do this dive is by boat. This is because this is the main entry and exit for water coming into Lac Bay. Aside from incoming and outgoing tides, which aren't normally too dramatic, there is also the

water. Dive this site on a sunny day; it is stunning. You will notice a few tarpon, then more, and then you realize there may be 50 or 100 tarpon just hanging and glistening in the sun. It is an amazing sight. The sea floor is littered in sea fan skeletons. They are decomposing into sand and providing habitat for small fish. The sea floor is also home to rays and queen conch, one of the few places you may still see one in the wild around Bonaire.

There are overhangs and small caves with cleaning stations. Tiger groupers, puffers and trumpetfish all hide in these recesses. Look also for French and queen angelfish and various parrotfish and rock beauty angels. Goatfish, snapper and chubs all hang together. Sea rods decorate the reef wall all around the hole. Further down the wall a big shoal of schoolmasters is accompanied by a few photogenic porcupinefish. And even further down the reef, hundreds of horse-eye jacks form a cloud over the hole.

This is a great wide-angle dive and it has superb macro as well. One of the Caribbean's finest dives, it is exited by going over a field of sea fans and out to mooring number 62.

Snorkeling inside The Lac blue waters is very good



water pushed over the reef by wind-driven waves and natural surf. This water is looking for a way out and the channel is where it exits. This causes a rip current that can flow north and south as well. Only experienced guides know how to handle this, so it is by far safer and easier to go by boat, even when it is calm. If you do try this from the beach, make sure someone knows when and where, so if you get swept away, they'll know to come look for you after a few hours.

The entry to the bay channel is through a fairly shallow cut in the reef at the conch shell hills by a small, wooden pier. The boat normally goes a bit south to get into good visibility, as the actual channel can have poor visibility (another reason to boat dive).

But the dive itself gets better as the drift goes on. The reef in front of the bay mouth itself and running south has some big sea fans and sea rods (more in the shallows than deep), elkhorn corals, coral islands and a marine slope to 120ft. The dive is normally in the 35ft to 70ft range. Look for tarpon (sometimes in pairs or groups), sea turtles, eagle rays and nurse sharks nestled into the coral heads or down in the deep sand.

Bog lobsters may also be hiding here. The record for eagle rays sighted by a wildside dive master is 51 in one big squadron. Ocean triggerfish sometimes nest in this area as well.

As you drift past the channel mouth, the terrain has more ridges and sand valleys and the corals seem to be in larger groups with finger, star, lettuce and brain corals all in clusters. This provides good hiding places for French angels, French grunts and squirrelfish. Look for many black durgons and other fish in the water column. End the dive by drifting out into the blue to avoid the inshore surge and have the boat pick you up.

65 BOKA WASHIKEMBA

Location: Washikemba coast, south-east coast

Depth: 25-140ft (7-44m)

Access: Boat (no buoy, not an official park site)

Expertise Rating: Intermediate to advanced



This is a bit of a boat ride up the wildside coast to an area that has a lagoon and interesting shoreline with a reef flat that travels far out before falling into deep water. This part of the island is rarely dived and there is a good chance of seeing reef blacktip sharks and nurse sharks on every dive.

Drifting here is also quite pleasant, with seemingly endless fields of beautiful purple sea fans. The diver can explore this undersea forest and see other smaller corals and fish hiding in the fan fields. There are spotty mounds of big hard corals and the blue again has barracuda and the chance to see squadrons of eagle rays and even a manta ray.

Since this is a drift, exit in blue water and the boat will pick you up.

Tarpon in good size and number can be seen at east side sites





Snapper school above healthy coral

66

BOKA SPELONK

Location: Washikemba coast, south-east coast

Depth: 25-140ft (7-44m)

Access: Boat (no buoy, not an official park site)

Expertise Rating: Intermediate to advanced



Spelonk is one of the few wall sites along the coast and it has plenty of action. A boat dive only, this is a pretty special trip and worth the extra travel time, as all kinds of blue water fish come in here. It is the easternmost tip of the island and it attracts many species.

This is a wonderfully fishy site, with wahoo, rainbow runners, yellowfin tuna and mahimahi all seen on dives here. The drift is normally done at about 70ft along the cliff line wall. The bottom is weedy but also has hard corals. This is one of the few places on Bonaire where queen and ocean triggerfish are common. Also, Nassau groupers are found here and are normally very big. Blacktip sharks are one of the attractions of Boka Spelonk and are usually seen on every dive.

There are some pieces of wrecks at 70ft to 80ft. These wrecks, located at the base of the now-defunct old Spelonk lighthouse, are considered the island's best shipwreck array. They lie near the cliffs that created their demise, with huge boulders and a sandy floor making a brightly lit maze among the ships. There are tunnels and caves in the sheer of the cliff. Some dive shops will venture up here in the calm months. This is the best dive on Bonaire to see open-ocean fish. Mantas, hammerheads and even tiger sharks are a possibility at this unique dive site.

The Wildside folks consider this one of the better exploratory dives. They are

also considering some exploratory diving at the north tip during calm season. The area of Malmok, the northernmost point on Bonaire, is nothing but blue water. Then there's ocean, uninterrupted for a thousand miles into the northern Caribbean. The possibility of diving with bull sharks and hammerheads, something that is becoming popular in the Bahamas and other Caribbean sites, is one of the goals of exploration in the far north.

A diver watches a silvery tarpon

**SNORKELING LAC CAI**

There are a couple of good places to snorkel that will show you the magical world of the inner lagoon and mangrove swamp as a natural ocean incubator. On the southern side of Lac Bay is Sorobon, popular with windsurfers. There is easy shore entry from the sandy beaches; just keep an eye out for the windsurfers. There is a reef out toward the mouth that is designated for snorkelers and kayakers, and there are kayak moorings here. In this area by the surf line you will see a collection of hard corals with healthy and populous brain corals. The bay and reef have small and large turtles (though not as frequently seen as the outside). There are surgeonfish, angels, groupers, school-masters and many species of juvenile fish, as well as finger-sized barracuda. Some people like to night snorkel here as well.

The mangroves hold an unusual and eerie world, with barnacle-covered roots, upside-down jellyfish (*Cassiopea xamachana*), tiny anemones and an occasional queen conch all part of the sandy and plant-covered bottom. Wear a skin to protect you from the sun and the marine creatures. The jellies and anemones can sting. You must have a trained biologist or naturalist from one of the kayak tours or nature excursions show you this weird mangrove world. Watch your fins in this environment. The breeding areas are fragile and should not be disturbed or kicked, so move slowly and carefully. This whole Lac is very shallow.

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