

Bonaire

The tiny unspoiled Dutch island, just over 100km from Venezuela, is a place where the clichés of the Caribbean come alive.

1. Dive mania Bonaire is almost entirely devoted to snorkelling and diving. Even the island's licence plates proclaim it a "Diver's Paradise" and, with 300 species of fish in the surrounding waters, it is not an overstatement. Hotels such as Buddy Dive (tel: 599 717 5080; www.buddydive.com) leave tanks and dive lights out on the docks so Cousteau wannabes can watch the underwater action at night. The lively Divi Flamingo Resort (below, top right, tel: 599 717 8285; www.diviresorts.com) offers diving for the disabled.

2. Local dining While Bonaire has its share of stylish continental restaurants, such as the authentic Italian Capriccio (Kaya Isariba, tel: 599 717 7230) and *typiquement français* Bistro de Paris (tel: 599 717 7070; www.bistrodeparis.com), visitors should try the local cuisine, or *kuminda krioyo*. The Henriques family runs Maiky Snack (Kaminda Nieuw Amsterdam 30, tel: 599 9 567 0078), a little lunch spot 3km down a dirt road and surrounded by huge cacti. It serves delicious *baka stoba*, a kind of beef stew with a hint of cumin and nutmeg, cooked over mesquite charcoal. At Rose's Garden Inn (Kaya Guyaba 4, tel: 599 717 6420), a cluster of outdoor tables under trellises of flowers and broad-branched flamboyant trees, Mafina Mastrum (bottom right) serves *piska salu* (salt fish with peppers). Iguana soup is an island speciality too, but no one will be offended if you decline a helping.

3. Mangroves Bonaire has some of the best preserved wetlands in the Caribbean so head off with a kayak, mask and snorkel

and a naturalist guide into the lush mangrove forest (below centre) that fringes beautiful Lac Bay. Paddle through natural tunnels formed by the twisted low-slung branches or take to the water for a chance to see some of the 20 to 30 types of fish that breed here. For more information, go to www.mangrovecenter.com.

4. Washington Slagbaai National Park

Hike or drive through almost six hectares of desert landscape, home to parrots, parakeets, iguanas and wild goats and donkeys. A dusty one-lane dirt road winds around the edge of the park, past 10-metre-high candle cacti (below left) and windblown mesquite. The Caribbean Sea is in view for most of the drive and walking paths lead down to stunning coves, some of which are calm and perfect for diving and snorkelling; others are windswept and dangerous, with huge waves crashing against the limestone shore. Find out more at www.washingtonparkbonaire.org.

5. Rincon A visit to the village of Rincon is a trip into Bonaire's past. Nestled in a valley in the island's northwest, Rincon was Bonaire's first permanent settlement. In the 16th century, Spanish settlers chose the location as a haven from pirates. Today, Rincon is a cluster of pastel cottages and some of the oldest buildings on the island, including the small stone houses where slaves lived.

6. Kralendijk Bonaire's tiny capital, Kralendijk (pronounced crawl-en-dike) is one of only two towns on the island. The rows of little buildings strung out

along the edge of the harbour are awash with tropical colours: azure blue, flamingo pink and sunshine yellow. The town pier, under which visitors stalk colourful tropical fish, is a hub of activity. Some of the buildings have been converted into shops and cafes, making them ideal spots from which to gaze out at the harbour, where – thanks to the water's depth – a cruise ship might glide by, just 50 metres from you. A few days a week, craftspeople and souvenir hawkers set up shop on the pier alongside the Venezuelan fruit and vegetable vendors.

7. Flamingos At one time flamingos were said to outnumber people on Bonaire. Since the 1950s, the bird population has diminished while the human population has more than doubled, but during breeding season 10,000 flamingos still congregate here. The stately pink birds are shy but visitors who tread softly are likely to see them either at the island's salt ponds in the national park or at Goto Meer, near the salt works. The best time to visit is sunset, when the flocks take off for their 110km-long evening flight to Venezuela for feeding.

8. Donkeys When the Spanish came to Bonaire in the 17th century, they brought donkeys to work in the salt flats. When they were no longer needed, the donkeys were left to roam wild. The population grew rapidly and became a nuisance. Until recently, donkeys often ran through town streets and grazed in people's gardens. Marina Melis, a donkey lover from the Netherlands, opened the Donkey

Sanctuary, currently home to 378 animals. Melis rescues wounded adult donkeys and orphaned foals. Her mission, beyond saving them, is to educate the public about the animals, which, she says, have "a beautiful and excellent character". She invites visitors to watch her bottle-feed the youngsters and to drive through the sanctuary, seeing the donkeys in the "wild". For more information, go to www.bonairenature.com/donkey.

9. Seru Largu The winding path that takes walkers on a leisurely 45-minute hike to the top of Seru Largu is lined with lavender, calabash and red and white saddlewood trees. The mountaintop is a perfect place for a picnic, offering stunning views of Lac Bay, Klein Bonaire (Bonaire's uninhabited little sister island) and the strange-looking piles of white salt dotting the south coast.

10. Sundays at Lac Bay The clear waters of Lac Bay are an attraction for kayakers, windsurfers and snorkellers, but a sandy mangrove-lined cove at the end of a long dirt road takes on a life of its own on Sundays, when locals hang out there. Against a backdrop of piles of bleached conch shells and old fishing nets, a scattering of snack bars draws patrons wanting to drink, dance and listen to bands such as Trio Los Principes (a Mexican-influenced group) and indigenous music created with goatskin-covered drums, copper pipes and instruments made of bamboo. According to Bonaire historian Ñapi Cicilia, "When you hear the music, you just have to move."



Photos: Judith Ritter

