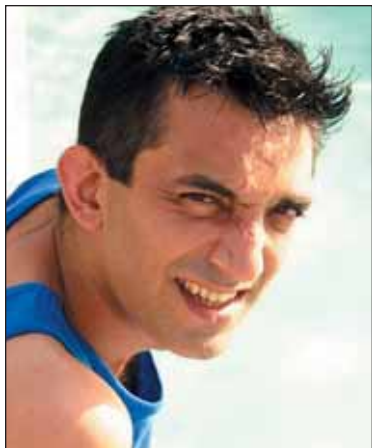


# European Flavours of the Caribbean

## Part 2 - Bonaire a Quiet, Dutch Paradise



Story by  
VERNON O'REILLY-RAMESAR  
Special to the  
European Reporter

guarded jewel. Here's an island that relies on tourism, but keeps a personal touch that is genuine. With a population of only 12,500 Bonaireans, it isn't hard to feel that you have accidentally landed at a big family gathering.

Bonaire is the second largest in land area of the "ABC" islands near the northern coast of Venezuela, with an area of 288 square kilometers. The other two islands are Curaçao and Aruba. Although the three are usually thought of as a group, Aruba is a separate, autonomous member of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, while Curaçao and Bonaire are part of the Netherlands Antilles. Bonaire is the least populated of the three islands, and the most truly Dutch in spirit.

(The Netherlands Antilles, sometimes called the Dutch Caribbean,



A SUNNING IGUANA.

Photo: Bruce Bishop

is an autonomous country within the Kingdom of the Netherlands. Other island members in the Caribbean include Saba, St. Eustatius and St. Maarten. Full autonomy in internal affairs was granted in 1954 and the Dutch Government is responsible for defense and foreign affairs.)

There is a strange phenomenon on Bonaire that although tourists

outnumber locals by a factor of five to one, it never seems that way. This may be because most of the visitors are underwater during daylight! This is scuba diving heaven for fans of the sport. The island is itself not much above sea level, with large parts of the land actually below sea level and protected by dikes of sorts.

The arid coral landscape is strewn with cacti and watapana trees (known as Divi Divi trees in Aruba). But there is a hidden story here: a story of Amerindians, European conquest and an island that has managed to pull itself out of a none too glamorous past.

As you drive to the south of the island, gleaming white hills rise in the distance. These really represent Bonaire's economic past. They are giant pyramids of salt harvested from great salt pans that cover the lower half of the island. Gazing over the pans you'll

notice there are faint dots of pink moving to and fro: these are some of the flamingoes that make Bonaire their home. In fact, Bonaire has the largest colony of these shy birds in the Western hemisphere. But it is the salt that tells the story.

The Spanish landed on the island in 1499 but the lack of natural resources made it of little interest to them. After shipping off the native Caiquetios people to Hispaniola, the island was used as little more than a penal colony. When the Dutch seized the ABC islands in 1633, they brought in slaves to harvest solar salt that was needed to preserve meat. The tiny white stone huts used as sleeping quarters for the slaves still stand nearby in mute testament. The obelisks on the coastline around the pans were used to guide the ships that came to collect the salt.

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A vast sapphire sea gives way to a flash of land. There's a screech of aircraft tires, and the Sol America plane comes to a stop. I am back in Bonaire -- a parched jewel of an island in the southern Caribbean. Leaving the aircraft and walking towards the miniscule Flamingo Airport that is dwarfed by the KLM 747 parked on the tarmac, I approach the immigration officer for admittance. In a ritual played countless times daily around the world, I hand the gentleman my documents and wait for acknowledgement. Without even opening the passport he smiles and says, "Bon Bini, welcome to Bonaire!" He opens my passport and stamps it. "Have a wonderful time," he says, "it's good to have you back".

This is the Bonaire that travel connoisseurs treasure like a carefully



A BABY FLAMINGO IN BONAIRE.

Photo: Bruce Bishop

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Continued from page 10

When slavery was abolished Bonairean salt became more expensive, and competition from other countries drove the economy into decline. The island languished for a long time until tourism saved the day. (Rock salt is now sold to those of us in northern hemispheres who need the mineral for our ice and snow-laden roads in winter.)

Take your time exploring the island, and be sure to keep a bottle of water handy, as the midday heat can be brutal. Washington/Slagbaai National

Park at the other end of the island offers a great chance to see the rugged beauty of the island close-up. Be sure to hire a jeep, unless paying for rental car repairs is part of your idea of fun. The road is really not much more of a rocky track. A bumpy ride up the mountain will reward you with a magnificent vista followed by a wild and wonderful rocky shoreline.

In Bonaire, all roads literally lead to the capital town of Kralendijk. It's best to enjoy the colourful buildings and interesting shops at a slow pace, as walking too fast will take you out of town in a mat-

ter of minutes. The main street area of Kaya Grandi only runs a few hundred metres before giving way to residences. There are some excellent high-end jewelry shops and loads of t-shirt places. Most of the best dining on the island can be found in and around the town.

For some of the best French food around at a price that won't kill your budget, try Bistro de Paris where Patrice Rannou creates extraordinary meals in an unobtrusive and unpretentious home setting. City Café serves great sandwiches for lunch at miniscule prices. It is the only place on the island that is guaranteed to be hopping and even has music and dancing on weekends. A true Bonairean experience complete with sand between your toes can be had at the Wind & Surf Beach Bar on Sorobon Beach. Host/Owner Elvis serves a mean barbeque.

Today Bonaire builds its fortune on a reputation of being a "divers paradise" and it is hard to argue with that. Every year over 60,000 visitors flock here for the best shore diving in the Caribbean. Calm turquoise and sapphire waters surround the island. Marine life is protected diligently and every visitor who plans to swim must pay an annual fee of \$10 to help protect the marine environment; divers are expected to pay \$25. Nobody seems to mind, as the rewards of exploring the undersea world are well worth the cost.

The lack of rain and strong sunshine make Bonaire the ideal place to just kick back and relax while working on the perfect tan. Finding just the right hotel is key



BONAIRE'S DRY VEGETATION.

Photo: Bruce Bishop

to enjoying a vacation in Bonaire, as the lack of nightlife means you will be spending a lot of time just lolling about.

For exploring Kralendijk on foot, and for a lively crowd and excellent views, Divi Flamingo hotel is by far the best bet. Oceanfront rooms are almost in the ocean with waves virtually lapping against the balconies. The grounds are lush, which is unusual for Bonaire, and a handy gate from the complex leads you to the downtown. Rooms start at about CAD\$140 for a garden room and \$230 for a deluxe oceanfront room. Prices are considerably lower in the off-season. The resort also has the only casino on the island.

If you have a taste for a more secluded holiday, with luxuriously appointed rooms and a seemingly endless ocean vista, Bellafonte's Chateau de la Mer is the ideal choice. It's located on the other side of the airport from Kralendijk, but has a lovely beach nearby and a private jetty that is ideal for sunbathing. Room prices

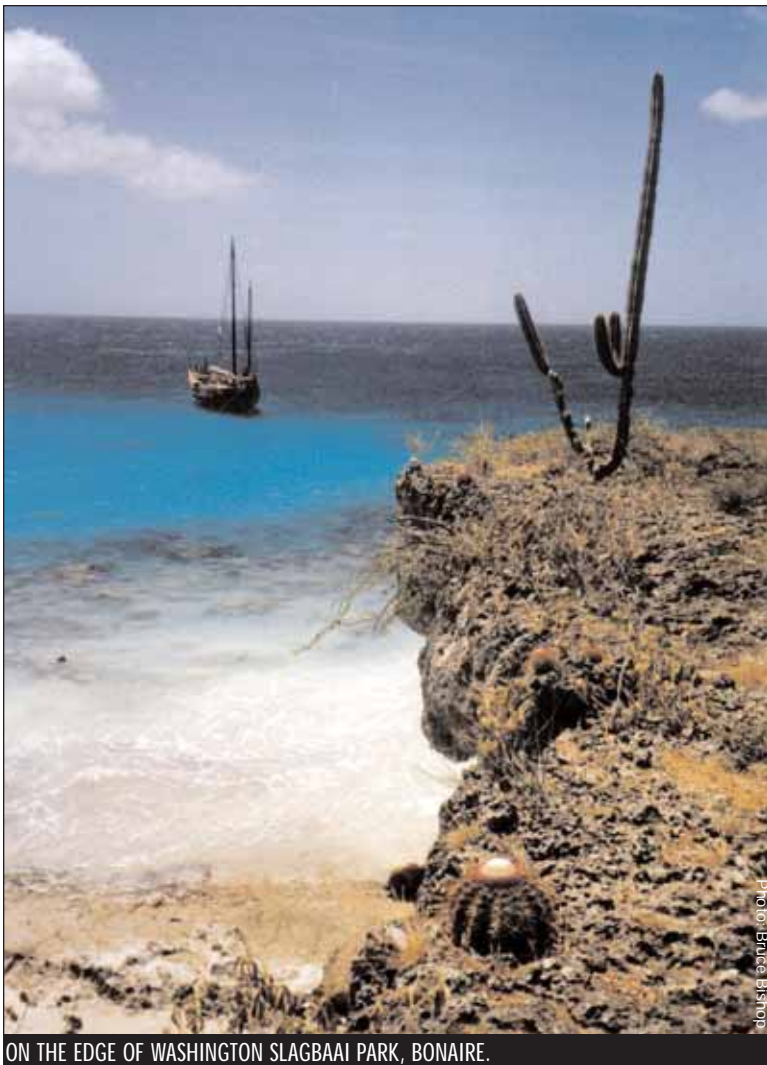
here start at \$155 in high season. For naturists, the Sorobon Beach Resort is quiet and secluded on the calm waters of Lac Bay in the southern end of the island.

There are no direct flights to Bonaire from Canada, but Air Canada flies to Aruba in high season, and Caracas, Venezuela year round. From either place, one can get direct flights to Bonaire from Caracas (via Sol America on a propeller plane for 20 minutes flying time) and via jet from Aruba on BonaireExpress.

Bonaire may not be on the beaten track, but in many ways that's part of its charm...it's the perfect Caribbean desert island. Think of the fun in telling your friends that you had a hideaway vacation on an island probably unknown to them!

#### About the Author

Vernon O'Reilly Ramesar is a freelance writer in Toronto. He recently completed research in Bonaire, Aruba and Trinidad & Tobago for Fodor's Caribbean Guide 2007.



ON THE EDGE OF WASHINGTON SLAGBAAI PARK, BONAIRE.

Photo: Bruce Bishop

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