



Bonaire, Netherlands Antilles
June, 1981

I would like to think that the fact that we never had a bad dive trip was the result of hours of research, but for the most part we just lucked out. Our selections were based on articles we read in dive magazines. We would select a geographic area we would like to dive - never diving the same island twice - and then go through back issues of magazines to find out what facilities and services were available. To date, we have not been disappointed and in many cases our selection, after seeing the competition first hand, was fortunately for us the best choice. Such was the case in 1981 when we chose to dive Bonaire - the peak of an underwater mountain in the Netherlands Antilles - and stay at the Flamingo Beach Hotel.



A bit of history...

The word "Bonaire" is said to derive from the native "bonah" or low country. Or it may come from the Caquetio word 'Bonay'. The early Spanish and Dutch modified its spelling to Bojnaj and also Bonaire, which means "Good Air".

Bonaire was part of the Netherlands Antilles until the country's dissolution on 10 October 2010, when the island became a special municipality within the country of the Netherlands. It is now considered the Caribbean Netherlands, or BES Islands comprising three special municipalities located in the Caribbean: the islands of Bonaire, Sint Eustatius, and Saba.

Bonaire's earliest known inhabitants were the Caquetio Indians, a branch of the Arawak who came by canoe from Venezuela in about 1000 AD. Archeological remains of Caquetio culture have been found at certain sites northeast of Kralendijk and near Lac Bay. Caquetio rock paintings and petroglyphs have been preserved in caves at Spelonk, Onima, Ceru Pungi, and Ceru Crita-Cabai. The Caquetios were

apparently a very tall people, for the Spanish name for the ABC Islands was 'las Islas de los Gigantes' or 'the islands of the giants.'

In 1499, Alonso de Ojeda arrived in Curaçao and a neighboring island that was almost certainly Bonaire. Ojeda was accompanied by Amerigo Vespucci and Juan de la Cosa. De La Cosa's Mappa Mundi of 1500 shows Bonaire and calls it Isla do Palo Brasil or "Island of Brazilwood." The Spanish conquerors decided that the three ABC Islands were useless, and in 1515 the natives were forcibly deported to work as slaves in the copper mines of Santo Domingo on the island of Hispaniola.

In 1526, Juan de Ampies was appointed Spanish commander of the ABC Islands. He brought back some of the original Caquetio Indian inhabitants to Bonaire and Curaçao. Ampies also imported domesticated animals from Spain, including cows, donkeys, goats, horses, pigs, and sheep. The Spaniards thought that Bonaire could be used as a cattle plantation worked by natives. The cattle were raised for hides rather than meat. The Spanish inhabitants lived mostly in the inland town of Rincon which was safe from pirate attack.

The Dutch West India Company was founded in 1621. Starting in 1623, ships of the West India Company called at Bonaire to obtain meat, water, and wood. The Dutch also abandoned some Spanish and Portuguese prisoners there, and these people founded the town of Antriol which is a contraction of "al interior" or "inside." The Dutch and the Spanish fought from 1568 to 1648 in what is now known as the Eighty Years War. In 1633, the Dutch, having lost the island of St. Maarten to the Spanish, retaliated by attacking Curaçao, Bonaire, and Aruba. Bonaire was conquered in March 1636. The Dutch built Fort Oranje in 1639.

While Curaçao emerged as a center of the slave trade, Bonaire became a plantation of the Dutch West India Company. A small number of African slaves were put to work alongside Indians and convicts, cultivating dyewood and maize and harvesting solar salt around Blue Pan. Slave quarters, built entirely of stone and too short for a man to stand upright in, still stand in the area around Rincon and along the salt pans as a grim reminder of Bonaire's repressive past.

During the Napoleonic Wars, the Netherlands lost control of Bonaire twice, once from 1800 to 1803 and again from 1807 to 1816. During these intervals, the British had control of the neighboring island of Curaçao and of Bonaire. The ABC islands were returned to the Netherlands under the Anglo-Dutch Treaty of 1814. During the period of British rule, a large number of white traders settled on Bonaire, and they built the settlement of Playa (Kralendijk) in 1810.

From 1816 until 1868, Bonaire remained a government plantation. In 1825, there were about 300 government-owned slaves on the island. Gradually many of the slaves were freed, and became freemen with an obligation to render some services to the government. The remaining slaves were freed on 30 September 1862 under the Emancipation Regulation. A total of 607 government slaves and 151 private slaves were freed at that time.

In 1867 the government sold most of the public lands, and in 1870 they sold the salt pans. The entire population became dependent on two large private landowners, and this caused a great deal of suffering for many people. Many inhabitants were forced to move to Aruba, Curaçao, or Venezuela.

During the German occupation of the Netherlands during World War II, Bonaire was a protectorate of Britain and the United States. The American army built the Flamingo Airport as an air force base. After Germany invaded the Netherlands on 10 May 1940, many Dutch and German citizens were interned in a camp on Bonaire for the duration of war. In 1944, Princess Juliana of the Netherlands and Eleanor Roosevelt visited the troops on Bonaire.

On 10 October 2010, the Netherlands Antilles was dissolved. As a result, the government of the Netherlands assumed the task of public administration of the Caribbean Netherlands or BES Islands

comprising Bonaire, St Eustatius and Saba. The three islands acquired new status as "special municipalities", making them part of the Netherlands itself (bijzondere gemeenten), a form of "public body" (openbaar lichaam) as outlined in article 134 of the Dutch Constitution.[12] Special municipalities do not constitute part of a province.

As a special municipality, Bonaire is very much like ordinary Dutch municipalities in that it has a mayor, aldermen and a municipal council, and is governed according to most Dutch law.

The Flamingo Beach Hotel was a paradise in paradise. The cuisine was excellent with a selection unparalleled - more about that later. The dive operation was owned by a man whose name became synonymous with diving in the Caribbean - Peter Hughes.

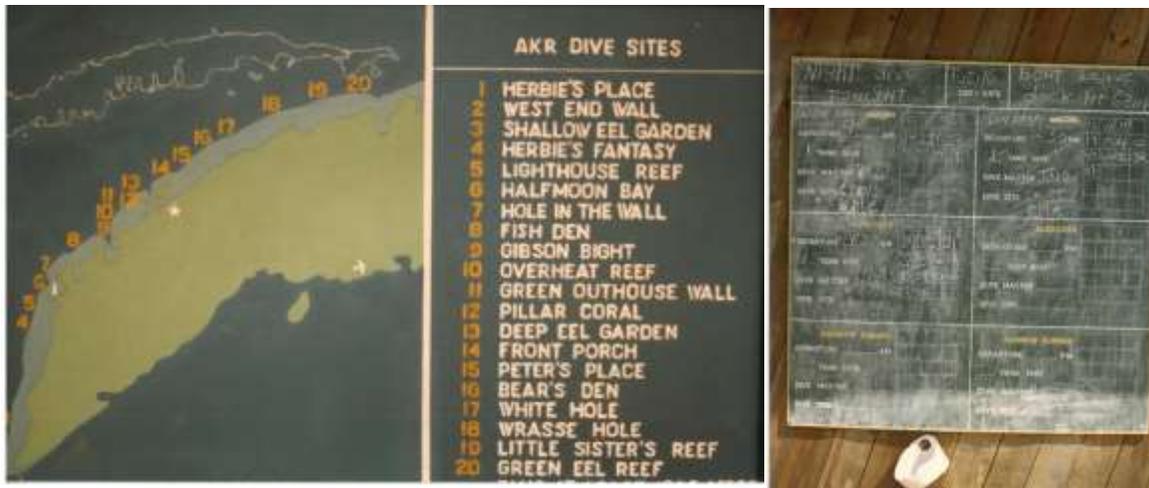


When we first met Peter, he was just beginning to build what would later become a diving empire. Tragically, on Monday evening October 8th, 2001 Hurricane Iris slammed into the coast of southern Belize causing mass destruction of the country's infrastructure and banana crop. She also capsized a luxury yacht carrying 20 members of the Richmond (Virginia) Dive Club who were in Belize for a week of rest, relaxation, and scuba diving.

Of the nearly two dozen boats that sought shelter from the storm at Big Creek Harbor only one sank; the M/V Wave Dancer, owned and operated by Peter Hughes Diving. Seventeen divers and three crew members, parents, grandparents, friends, sons, daughters, young and old, most trained and experienced in handling all types of underwater emergencies, drowned in 12 feet of water when the Wave Dancer capsized and flooded.

In 2010, Peter Hughes announced his resignation as President of Peter Hughes Diving, Inc. and the Dancer Fleet. Having built the live-aboard dive boat company from scratch over the past 25 years, Hughes reluctantly knew he had to sell the company in 2008 as a result of mounting debts due to the rapidly collapsing global economy.

Peter's operation in Bonaire was professional in every sense of the word. On islands where time for seems to have no meaning or value, Peter's dive operation ran with precision and accuracy emphasizing guest service. All a diver had to do was select one of two dives offered at the time, sign their name on the chalk board, and show up on time. Your gear would be stowed on the boat, attached to a fresh tank and ready to go. The Dive Master would never know which boat Peter would go out on for the day. it was a system we would see in other Hughes operations. In fact, if a hotel advertised that it was associated with Peter Hughes, we would be more likely to choose it over others.



This trip was also the first for some new dive equipment for us, namely the ScubaPro Mark 4 regulators which looked remarkably like the helmet of Darth Vader from the recently released Star Wars movie. Diving equipment seems to change as rapidly as car designs. With new technology come new gadgets or gadgets for other gadgets to update your supposedly sophisticated cutting edge equipment you purchased just last year. Basically we haven't replaced equipment unless it had to be replaced - broken straps et. or to make our equipment lighter for travel.

Back to the trip...After arriving at the island and the typical trip to the hotel, we had a complimentary drink and tour of the facilities, and booked our first dive.

The first dive on any trip is known as the "checkout dive." It's an opportunity for the diver to check over equipment that hasn't been used in a year, and it's also an opportunity for the Dive Master to check out the divers to gauge what kind of Bozos they'll have for the week. The checkout dive is typically in shallow water or sometimes from a beach. Ours happened to be off the end of the dock at the hotel which was fine with us since the island, being a mountain top, is surrounded by a reef and was excellent diving. The water was a comfortable 82. It was a nice coral reef with spotted eels, sea snakes, angel fish, etc.



Many of our dives were off a smaller island called Klein Bonaire or Little Bonaire - a flat uninhabited 1,500 acres island off the west coast.

"Leonarra's Reef" was just such a dive. A beautiful coral reef and a leisurely dive at 40 feet. The majority of our dives were made at 30 to 40 feet simply for the reason that the deeper you dive, the more colors you lose. Reds and yellows are lost first. Greens turn to blue, etc. And, the deeper you dive, the shorter your dive time.

"Twixt" was a lesson in navigation and an experience we were not soon to forget - certainly not an experience we wanted to repeat. In most situations, the Dive Master will lead the dive or at least make recommendations as to the route you should take and depth. In our early years of diving, our philosophy was to cover as much ground as we could to see as much as possible. A tactic we soon changed.

We entered the water, I took an initial compass reading, and we headed off in the recommended direction as fast as our little flippers could take us. While with the group, I somehow managed to swim right by a moray eel that the others swore came out after me as I passed and measured as big around as my waist and at least seven feet long. I'm sure we missed other sights as we quickly swam on. Forty five minutes into the dive and we were down to 600 psi of air. It was time to come up, but there was no anchor line.

We looked at one another through our face masks and I got the well-you've-got-the-compass look from Dad. I gave a shrug and the signal to surface. We had, or I had, overshot the boat by what seemed to be a quarter of a mile. Swimming on the surface with an inflated buoyancy device is not difficult, but it is tiring. We were exhausted by the time we belly flopped onto the platform of the dive boat. A lesson well learned and a painful reminder that we are, after all, guests in an environment that is not natural for man.



"Salt City" was a dive near the salt pans on the southern shore of the island - an area we would visit on land during our stay. As noted above in the history, the Dutch West Indies Company developed salt pans and agriculture on Bonaire using slaves brought from Africa. The Arawak Indians of the island were too small to handle the labor of mining - as was the case on Grand Cayman.



Large squares, about a quarter of an acre, are shallowly dug leaving a rim. The salt water is pumped in and allowed to evaporate. The remaining salt is then harvested. The living conditions for the slaves was less than human. Sleeping quarters were designed so that slaves could not lay straight or stand up. It was an effective means of control and a testament to the colonial view of white supremacy. The slave huts remain as a reminder of the previous conditions, and salt production continues today under the hum of mechanization.

The salt pans, no longer serving the Dutch West Indies Company fill with rain water and now serve as the nesting grounds for the pink flamingo.

God must surely have a sense of humor to create a bird with knobby knees that bend backwards, long legs, and bright pink feathers. The nest of the flamingo is just as comical as the bird but quite effective. The flamingo constructs a conical nest from twigs and mud and lays a single egg on top of the cone. Mother simply walks up to the nest, raises her tail feathers a bit, squats, and covers the egg.



Another inhabitant of the island and remnant from the earlier Dutch settlers, are goats. Goats are everywhere. They were used for meat and cheese as well as milk. Not so unusual except in how the natives fenced them in or out of an area; they used cactus. Tall cactus was planted in rows forming an impenetrable hedge.

Breakfast at the Flamingo Beach Hotel was extraordinary. The main dining area was open under a latticed roof with small tables to seat four. You got in line early, but you weren't in line for very long. After picking up your plate and selecting from a variety of fruits and breads, you placed your order for the main course with an attendant who relayed the ticket to a short-order cook. The proficiency of this cook was staggering. He would be working on four to six meals varying from eggs of any style, bacon, ham, pancakes, or French toast. By the time you reached the stove, your order was hot and ready. A true proficiando. After seating ourselves, we were usually joined for breakfast, lunch, and dinner by a number of bananaquits - a small yellow and black bird about the size of a gold finch - that would come to the tables looking for scraps and handouts, especially sugar. They would land right on the tables as you were eating.



Evening meals were available in the same are, or for an extra treat (and expense) there was a small terrace with limited seating and a more exclusive menu. The renown of their restaurant was known throughout the island. Wealthier patrons would wine and dine and listen to the soft strumming of guitars.

"Alice in Wonderland" is probably one of my favorite dives and is the frequent basis of comparison for other dives. On this particular dive, a photographer from the island's Promotion Bureau was snapping away. He wasn't long in finding subject matter for his pictures. The reef was abundant with snapper, angel fish, trigger fish, and barracuda. It really was a trip to fairyland.

We finished the week diving "Sampler", "Jerry's Jam", and "Angel City."

The diving was excellent as were the accommodations. Bonaire boasts of 365 days of storm-free diving. The weather was beautiful. It did, however, bring out the "strange" in one guest.

Our trip coincided with that of the Texas Ski and Dive Club. They were a nice group of people who like to live it up and show it off. Sitting poolside one warm afternoon relaxing before our next dive, we spied what was the epitome of ridiculous. One of the Texans was headed for the boat walking with his flippers on, wearing a thin pair of long trousers, a large knife strapped to the inside (wrong side) of his leg, long-sleeved shirt, backpack, extra pony tank, and his prescription face mask pulled down. The only thing he was short of, other than his marbles, were his tank and regulator which were already on the boat. He was a sight to behold.

Nightlife and entertainment are usually scarce at the hotels, but we never ventured into town. We were entertained one evening by a group of young musicians performing ritual dances in island costume to the beat of Calypso music. To date, it is the only time we have heard steel drums in the islands. People think Calypso when they think of Caribbean music. In fact, the most popular music when we were diving was country western and swing; native music was a rarity.

On June 22 we flew out of the islands and stowed our gear for yet another year when we would return to some enchanted island to experience the culture and charm of a lifestyle so different from our own. I hope that Bonaire does not become ensnared by the lure of tourism to the point of compromising the character of the island.