

We made our third trip to Bonaire October 28<sup>th</sup> – November 4<sup>th</sup>, 2004. Darren and I (both divers) took our 7-year old daughter and Darren's mother (non-divers) with us on this vacation. We spent Wednesday night in an Atlanta airport hotel to eliminate any potential problems getting through Atlanta for an 8 a.m. week-day flight, so we started our travel day well-rested. We took the Air Jamaica flight from Atlanta through Montego Bay to Bonaire and had no complaints. Our flights both ways were all on time and we experienced no problems in flight. We were pleasantly surprised at how few passengers there were on these Thursday flights – a big difference from our typical experience on Saturday flights.

We again stayed at the Belmar Apartments on the south end of the island and loved it. We rented one of the 3-bedroom/2-bathroom units (#11) and found it to be very spacious and comfortable. The large covered balcony is right on the water. Typical of Bonaire, only the bedrooms had A/C, but the ocean breeze made it comfortable on the balcony and in the living area. The Belmar has a nice pool and a dock with a ladder for easy entry into the ocean. The pool was a great asset for us because it kept our 7-year-old entertained (supervised by grandmother) while we were diving. While we were there, one side of the dock was undergoing repairs necessitated by the recent hurricane. Also, some of the landscaping needed to be redone thanks to the hurricane. We always feel very safe at the Belmar as there are several office and dive staff members on-site during the day and a security guard on patrol at night.

The Belmar's dive partner changed from Toucan Dive to Buddy Dive in October 2004, but the dive shop set-up did not change. They still have the gear lockers, rinse tanks, and tank re-fills on-site. All are accessible 24/7 with you keys. The only major drawback to this set-up is that you have to drive 10-15 minutes to Buddy's (located north of Kralendijk) if you are doing any boat dives. While we like the operation and DMs at Buddy's, the drive back and forth got to be a little tedious. We purchased the 6-boat-dive & unlimited shore diving package and did three 2-tank morning boat dives plus an additional night boat dive to Klein.

Because our balcony view at the Belmar was so spectacular, we ate most of our meals there. Our kitchen was very well appointed with nice full-size appliances and every utensil and dish you could possibly want. We stocked up on groceries at Cultimara and Warehouse Grocery. We did eat at the Lion's Dive restaurant one night – good meal, but a little pricey. We ordered pizza from Don & Giorgio's and Pasa Bon Pizza on 2 different nights (remember the 7-year old?) and found both to be very good. We also ordered enough take-out from Casablanca, our favorite restaurant on Bonaire, to feed us for several meals. On our departure day, we had lunch at Buddy Dive (burgers, etc.) – it was good and reasonably priced.

The weather was not very cooperative during this visit, unlike our previous two “perfect weather” vacations here. We arrived on a drizzly, overcast day and experienced rain off and on during our entire stay. The weather definitely affected the diving on this trip. We found visibility to be significantly down all over the island, with some sites being particularly bad. On several days, we dove in drizzle or rain with no sun. In retrospect,

we were actually pretty fortunate, as we missed the “November ‘04 monsoon season” that occurred during the weeks after our visit.

We arranged for our daughter to have snorkeling lessons with Caren Eckrich of Sea & Discover Bonaire. I can't say enough good things about Caren – SHE IS FANTASTIC!!! Our daughter had never snorkeled before and Caren had her going like a pro after a couple of sessions. Caren was very flexible in scheduling the lessons around our dive schedule (this being low season), and our daughter learned more about ocean life and saw more fish and creatures than I thought possible. Caren knows the best places to take kids to find marine life. If you are taking children with you – don't pass this up. We plan to visit Bonaire again next summer, and we will definitely enroll our daughter in Sea & Discover. Check out the web site: <http://www.bonairenature.com/seandiscover/>

We experienced our first flat tire in Bonaire on this trip and, I have to say, it wasn't all THAT bad. We had been on some bumpy roads around Bopec on Sunday, and woke up to find a flat front tire on Monday morning. Then we discovered that the jack wouldn't jack the truck up high enough to change the tire☺ However, all was not lost –the Belmar office personnel called AB Carrental and they sent someone with a replacement jack immediately. The spare worked fine and we dropped the flat off at Lisa Gas Station – they had it patched in a couple of hours for 10 naf. Not too bad, all in all.

Now for the day-by-day diving/activities:

Friday: We had overcast skies on Friday morning. We dropped Jacklyn off in town at Caren's for her first Sea & Discover lesson and snorkeling session. Then we headed north to '**Ol Blue**', one of our favorite sites, for our first dive. Here we saw lots of pretty purple tube sponges and a huge green parrotfish, along with other typical reef fish. Next, we dove **Karpata** for the first time ever. The water was relatively calm and we had no problems negotiating our entry or exit. This was a very nice dive, and the topography of rolling coral cliffs here made this one of Darren's favorite sites on the island. We saw lots of urchins in the shallows, several porkfish and a school of tangs. We swung by Caren's to pick up Jacklyn on our way back to the Belmar for lunch. Jacklyn was so excited after her first-ever snorkel. Caren had taken her to the Divi and they saw lots of different fish and critters. The weather was clearer by mid-day, so we drove around the island in the afternoon to see the salt works, slave huts and lighthouse on the southern end of the island. We had a nice night dive at **Buddy's**. We saw lobsters, numerous types of crabs, and several barracudas. Of course, Buddy's resident tarpon followed us throughout the dive looking for easy prey.

Saturday: We headed up to Buddy's for the morning boat dives in the rain. We went to **Rock Pile** on Klein first. The topography here was very pretty with lots of coral mounds. We saw several goldentail eels, French angelfish, an adult drum and a cowfish. For our second dive, we went back to Klein to **Sampler**. Here we saw a large green eel, a king crab hiding in a coral head recess, a scorpionfish, scrawled filefish, and schools of small silver fish and grunts. A lot of tube sponges were present here. Despite the rain, the water was very clear on both of these dives. After lunch we took Jacklyn and Darren's mother with us to **Bopec** for a snorkel/dive. As usual, we saw an incredible amount of

life in the shallows here, including a white-spotted eel, a green moray eel, a goldentail eel, a white-spotted filefish, a scrawled filefish, a huge French angel, a drum, a school of tangs and several varieties of butterflyfish. We had a great time snorkeling with Jacklyn here. Darren did a short shallow dive here after we snorkeled.

Sunday: We woke up to another overcast, rainy morning on Sunday. We headed north again to try one of the sites on the other side of the Bopec refinery. However, the road was extremely rocky and rough and the location was very remote, so we headed back to **Bopec** again. This was a nice dive, and we saw several varieties of filefish, a couple of goldentails, schools of silver fish and tangs, and two turtles. Next, we headed far south to **Red Slave** for a dive in the rain. The water here was very mucky and visibility in the shallows was essentially zero. There was a fair amount of current and some surge as well. Gorgonians were prevalent here, and we saw schools of grunts and small silver fish. I found a reddish-brown sea horse in the coral, but got so excited in signaling Darren that I couldn't find him again when I turned back around to take a picture. After lunch, the rain stopped but the sky was still overcast. We dropped Jacklyn off at Caren's for a snorkel and headed to **Cliff** in the Hamlet complex. This site has a very nice wall with lots of colorful corals and sponges. We saw an eagle ray as well as two turtles and a soapfish. Fish were plentiful here. We picked Jacklyn up after our dive, and Caren had taken her to Andrea II for another great snorkel

Monday: Remember the rough road around the back side of Bopec on Sunday? Our left front tire sure did. We ended up having to cancel our morning boat dives at Buddy's to take care of our flat. After putting on the spare tire and dropping the flat at Lisa's for repair, we headed south to **Fish Hut**. Fish were everywhere at this site, as were tube and rope sponges. The only negative was the limited visibility. Jacklyn had another session with Caren in the morning. To accommodate everyone's schedule, Caren came to the Belmar to do the lesson and craft with Jacklyn, then took her to snorkel near the airport. In the afternoon, we dove **Oil Slick Leap**. Again, visibility was somewhat limited. We spotted a juvenile drum and a balloonfish here, but otherwise the dive was unremarkable. We did the Monday night boat dive at **Knife** on Klein and were very disappointed. We saw some orange cup coral and a large green eel, but not much else, except swarms of annoying plankton at the end of the dive. Also, visibility was not very good. This was probably our biggest let-down of the trip, as our previous experience with the night dive to Klein had been fabulous.

Tuesday: Another overcast morning. We did two morning boat dives after dropping Jacklyn off at Caren's on our way to Buddy's. Our first dive of the day was the **Hilma Hooker**, which we had done once before. The sponges growing on the wreck are always interesting, and a number of large tarpon were hanging around the wreck. The second boat dive took us to **Petrie's Pillar**, where we did a drift dive. This was one of our favorites of the trip. We saw two frogfish (yellow and green), a number of adult drums, including two swimming together, and huge midnight and green parrotfish. It was raining again when we surfaced. After lunch, we thought we would try **Cai** on the far side of Lac Bay. However, surface conditions were really rough and we decided to pass and head for **Bari Reef** at the Sand Dollar. The sky cleared and this was a beautiful dive

distinguished by lots of color. We saw many colors of star coral and sponges and lots of fish, including two juvenile French angels, three spotted drums, large and small spotted morays, and queen and French angels. Darren dove the BelMar reef on Tuesday night, and saw a number of crabs and several eels, including a chain moray.

Wednesday: We were glad to see some sun mixed with clouds. We had scheduled our remaining morning boat dives for our last day, and conditions allowed us to do two really nice drift dives on Klein. First, we drifted from **Forest** to **Southeast Point**. The water moved fairly fast during the first half of the dive, and it was a blast. Pretty coral mounds characterized the topography here. We saw two sets of large midnight parrotfish, black coral, and a number of elephant ear sponges. The second dive took us from **Captain Don's** to **South Bay**. On this dive we saw another midnight parrotfish and a medium-size turtle. After lunch, we headed to Lac Bay to watch the wind surfers and enjoy the sandy beach.

All in all, we had a really nice vacation, with the exception of the weather. We always love the “diving freedom” of Bonaire, and we found it to be a great place for a family vacation on this trip. Jacklyn had a fantastic time with Caren at Sea & Discover. She identified enough fish and creatures to earn her “Fish Finder” and “Creature Finder” status on the Sea & Discover web site. Darren’s mother enjoyed reading, relaxing and enjoying the beautiful ocean view from our balcony. Darren and I enjoyed the diving and sharing Bonaire with our family.