

The Drier Side of Bonaire

by Marcie Connelly-Lynn

Noted for its world-class diving sites, the “drier” side of Bonaire is many times forgotten. The salt mountains of the south, the largest pink flamingo sanctuary in the Caribbean and the wild and barren Washington Slagbaai Park in the North all contribute to a side of Bonaire that some mistakenly overlook.

Though diving is what comes to mind when thinking about Bonaire, we were expecting non-diving guests and needed to plan activities that were not water-based...somewhat of a challenge for a sailboat moored next to an island...but hey, we’re good hosts! After a day of wandering around downtown Kralendijk...clean, bright and alive with shops and restaurants...we checked out possibilities for island exploration at the tourist information office, rented a van and set off to explore.



View from the turnout at Gotomeer

The island of Bonaire is shaped like a boomerang. The northern part is rough, hilly, arid terrain and the location of Washington Slagbaai National Park, our first day’s endeavor. Equipped with a picnic lunch and lots of water, we left mid-morning in our non-air-conditioned van and headed north along the leeward coast. The whole island is only 24 miles long by 7 miles wide max and much of the road we traveled was one-way. Our chances of getting lost were drastically diminished.

Our first stop was Gotomeer, a large salt pond and pink flamingo sanctuary. There’s a small turnout for vehicles above the lake that affords an impressive panoramic view. There are twice as many pink flamingos in Bonaire as there are people and you can easily distinguish the hundreds of slender pink bodies contrasting with the blue lake water below. In addition to the view, the turnout area was the home of countless iguanas, birds and whiptail lizards, which were obviously used to handouts. The entire pack hustled towards us en masse as soon as stale crackers were offered.



Sharing lunch with the whiptail lizards

Traveling through Rincon, the oldest town in Bonaire, a smaller well-signed road leads to the entrance of Washington Slagbaai Park, a 13,500-acre game preserve. The uniformed rangers were pleasant and knowledgeable, but cautioned us seriously about exiting the park no later than 5PM.

“What happens if we’re late?” I asked.

“We lock you in.” was the simple reply...no smile.

We opted to have lunch at the park entrance under a large dividivi tree, which provided both shade and seating. The whiptail lizards with their iridescent turquoise tails, backs and feet, provided endless entertainment. There were hundreds of them and they weren’t shy in the least, insisting upon their share of the lunch. These toothless beggars clambered at our feet for any snacks available and with very little inducement, would climb up our arms or legs for a proffered treat.

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The park roads are not paved and provided a challenge for the driver and test of endurance for the passengers. The 34 km ride took more than 5 hours including several stops to view the scenery and rest our bones from the bumpy ride. There are blowholes, a lighthouse, outstanding scenery, a climb up to Brandaris (the highest point in Bonaire at 241 meters) and a multitude of beaches to explore. We could have spent the entire day at Playa Kokolishi with its large rock formations and natural coral “benches”, but the clock was ticking and we kept moving.

Without a doubt, the best part of the park visit was the host of animals we saw. Lizards, iguanas, goats, parrots, trupials and a myriad of other vibrant birds delighted us throughout the visit. The iguanas are colorful, numerous and large...about 4-5' long from their snouts to the tips of their long, striped tails. They're herbivores and enjoyed our banana peels as a snack. Knowing they were herbivores, however, did not preclude me from shrieking and beating a hasty retreat when one became a bit too aggressive for my comfort level.



Iguanas, though herbivores, weren't my cup of tea.

The park map, provided by the rangers, showed both long and short routes. After a couple of hours, we keyed in on the “short” route without hesitation. We entered the park just before Noon and barely made it out a few minutes after the aforementioned 5:00pm. The disgruntled rangers were waiting for

us to close the gates and politely accused us of “lollygagging”...a first in our cruising careers. Exhausted and dehydrated, we returned to the boat for cocktails and sustenance and planned a day for heading south.



Salt mountains dominate the landscape in the south

The southern terrain is low-lying with wetlands and mangroves. The most distinguishing features are the enormous mountains of salt piled along the shore. Many of the islands we've visited once produced salt, however Bonaire is the only one that continues to do so. Cargill Salt is one of the world's largest salt producers and manufactures about 2,000 tons/hour for export, primarily for use in water softeners and ice control applications. As we drove along, the blue-green of the sea on one side contrasted sharply with the rust-red water of the saltpans. Modern windmills, used to pump water from one saltpan to another, dot the countryside and seem incongruous with their surroundings.

Remnants of the past are profuse in Bonaire. Slave huts, constructed in the mid-1800s, line the beach opposite the saltpans. Built to provide minimal shelter for the slaves who worked the salt ponds and collected the salt, they remain standing as an integral part of Bonaire's history.

Donkeys, once used to help cart the salt to the waiting ships, run loose. They're everywhere and are also considered a part of Bonaire's heritage. Observing the “Watch Out for Donkeys” street

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signs (written in local Papiamentu), we stopped frequently to let donkeys cross the street in front of us. Many times they waited at the window in hopes of handouts and we learned to save apple cores and banana peels for just such occasions



Donkeys aren't shy in Bonaire.

The Willemstoren Lighthouse stands sentry at the most southern point of the island before the solitary road turns north again allowing a view of the windward coast. Unusual sculptures line the shore, a combination of imagination and the endless supply of jetsam. Pink flamingos are plentiful. Wild donkeys and goats comb the scrubby landscape for food. Midst this flat, barren setting lies Lac Bay, a mecca for windsurfers. Whether you opt to participate or just sip a cold beer and watch, the scene is colorful and lively. Across the bay at Cai, a long, bumpy, dusty ride away, mountains of conch shells line the beach. A sign reminds visitors to leave the shells in tact...these, too, are part of the heritage Bonaire is striving to maintain.

Two full days to explore Bonaire was barely adequate and we could have taken closer to a week if time was not an issue. Unquestionably, diving is extraordinary in Bonaire, but the “drier” side is not to be missed.