

The Douro & the Med
in Stunning Photos

Porthole **Cruise**

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Swedish Style
scandinavian fashion tips

Bonaire By Land
more to do than scuba

Flavor Estates
noble houses serve foodie flair

and Travel



SCORE YOUR CORTEZ

Scenic for Luxury? Or UnCruise for Adventure?



Not a Diver? No Problem

Bonaire is a diver's paradise,
but has a lot to do and see above the water.

by Richard Varr



Land-sailing "blokarts"

MY SAIL CAUGHT THE WIND AS I PICKED UP SPEED.

"Pull harder on the rope," commanded my instructor. I did so to further harness the constant and powerful trade winds and started to feel every bump in the road. That's right; I wasn't in a sailboat riding the waves, but instead in a three-wheeled "blokart" gaining speed on a racetrack in Bonaire's panoramic inland desert.

"It's such an easy activity to learn," says Donna Hudgeon with Bonaire Landsailing Adventures, one of only two such operators in the Caribbean. "After the first couple of laps, you're a rock star!"

Land sailing is just one exciting activity I found on the divers' paradise of Bonaire. I'm a fair snorkeler at best, and thus came to explore the "B" of the ABC Islands by foot, car, and by boat. And I wasn't disappointed.

Watersports abound, especially at the Atlantis Beach kitesurfing camp and at the windsurfing hotspot Jibe City along shallow Lac Bay. Waterside restaurants serve the fresh catch of the day, with some tables on piers emphasizing breezy alfresco dining at its best.

With not one traffic light, Bonaire has evaded widespread commercialization and maintains a laid-back lifestyle. And no trip to this semi-arid, boomerang-shaped island would be complete without seeing flamingos, whose numbers sometimes match the roughly 23,000 human population. Getting up close and personal with the stick-legged birds, however ... well, that's another story.

Watching Flamingos and More Subtle Birds

From the southern coastal road, I could only see a pink-orange blur of flocks in the Pekelmeer Flamingo Sanctuary — as close as we could get to one of the world's best-known flamingo breeding grounds. At Gotomeer Lake in the north, we stepped on shore for close-up views—but not too close, as the shy creatures scatter when they feel threatened.

Bird watching also took us to Lac Bay, where, within three hours, our guide pointed out 23 of the island's 247 known species. Sightings included a crested caracara, an impressive bird of prey, atop a mangrove tree and a tri-colored blue-gray heron lurking on mangrove roots — spotted only by our guide. "Many birds are so well camouflaged that your eye just passes over them," says Susan Davis of Bonaire Bird Photography Tours.



Crested caracara



Salt heaps

Salty History in the South

Pyramid-like salt heaps scintillate under the Caribbean sun, part of Bonaire's still vital salt industry. "The salt shines like diamonds," notes Tourism Bonaire's information officer, Rolando Marin, explaining how the crystals come from ponds of evaporating seawater. "We're lucky we have a lot of land for the seawater. Wind and sun, which we have every day, do the work for us." Nearby clusters of well-preserved white-and-ochre slave huts reveal the history of enslaved salt workers who used the tiny dwellings for shelter.

Docile donkeys, once used as work animals, now roam freely. The drive-through Donkey Sanctuary is home to many; they crowd our cars and smudge the windows looking for a handout.

And from a secluded beach marked by a giant boulder hails the legend of Mamparia Cutu of the Black Rock. Legend says she was a mermaid with golden hair who would lure captains to sail their vessels closer to shore, only to be plundered when shipwrecked.

From top: Danita Delimont - stock.adobe.com; gary tog - stock.adobe.com



Cactus Tastings in the Hilly North

Limestone bluffs pockmarked by wind and sun dominate Bonaire's northern topography, where gangly cactus stalks shoot out over mesquite trees. What locals call the "tourist road" parallels the western coastline and leads to the 1,000 Steps Beach, where there are spectacular ocean views from a stone stairwell that descends to the water's edge — an easy trek, actually, since there are only 67 steps.

The hilly terrain, in fact, shielded Rincon from the eyes of marauding pirates. Founded in 1527, it's the Dutch Caribbean's oldest town.

"Rincon was a like a hidden gem between the mountains," explains Izain Mercera, experience coordinator with Mangazina di Rei, a museum housed in the 1824 King's Storehouse building. Exhibits reveal glimpses of island history, highlighting, for example, how salt workers walked for seven hours to Rincon to spend weekends with their families.

At the Cadushy Distillery, I sampled the island's unique cactus liqueur — sweet tasting, with sort of a "vegetable juice" flavor. It's made from the dried inner peel of the plentiful kadushi cactus and mixed with alcohol fermented from locally grown sorghum.

NOT JUST SCUBA!

Protected as part of the Bonaire National Marine Park, the coral reefs encircling the island can be reached from almost any beachfront. At Donkey Beach, I followed puckering trunkfish and sleek blue angelfish, while also getting nicked by pesky, territorial damselfish.

Negligible currents and abundant marine life make the reefs such an important natural wonder, explains Ricardo Aguilar, Dive Operations Manager at the Divi Flamingo Beach Resort and Casino. "We don't protect it just because of the rules," he insists. "We need to protect this for our children and our grandchildren."



KRALENDIJK – CAPITAL OF PARADISE

Fort Oranje's dulled yellow walls radiate a soft glow reflected from the fiery Caribbean sunset. Shoppers stomp along Kaya Grandi's sidewalks lined with pastel-hued storefronts. Kiosks fill central Wilhelmina Plaza where vendors hawk homemade jewelry, handbags, and paintings.

From Karel's Beach Bar atop a central pier, I stepped aboard the hourly water taxi to Klein Bonaire, the undeveloped flat islet with its pristine white sand beach, one of Bonaire's best. ●

Richard Varr (x3)

