

travelgirl

the travel and lifestyle magazine for women

Savvy, Sexy & Sophisticated

September/October 2005

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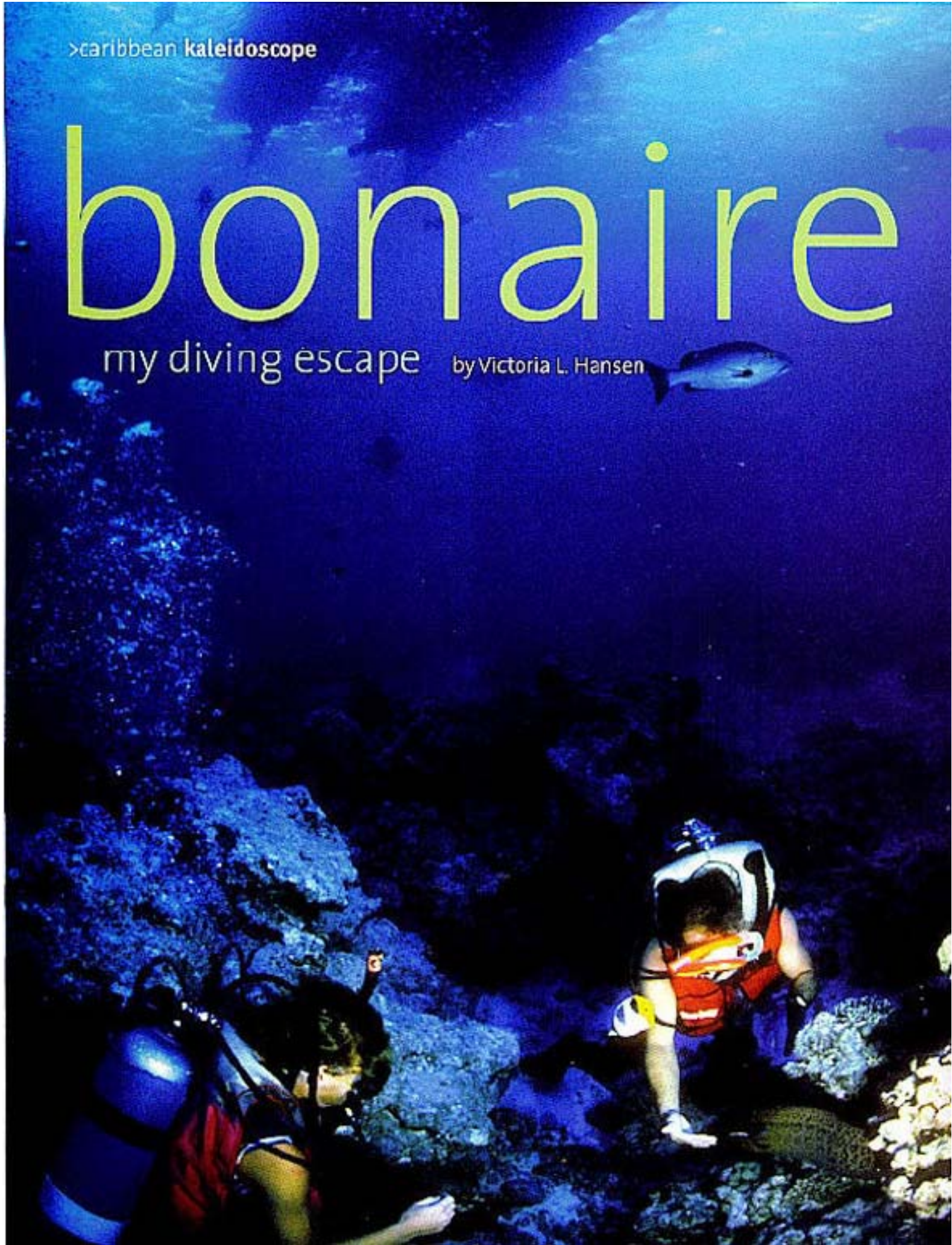
ISLANDS GALORE: Nautical Nantucket
Stress-free Jamaica Joy on Jeju
Beautiful Bonaire Luxury in the Bahamas

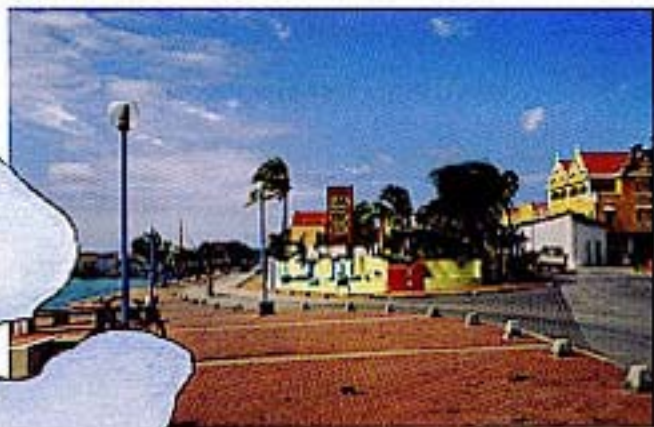
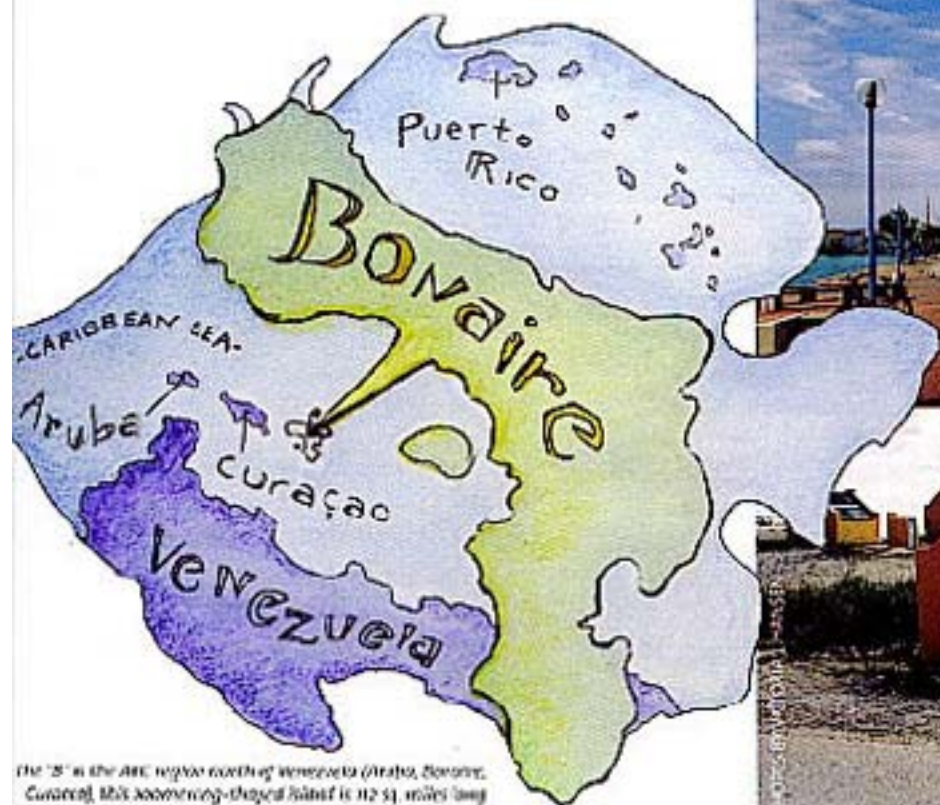


>caribbean kaleidoscope

bonaire

my diving escape by Victoria L. Hansen





The 'B' in the ABC region north of Venezuela (Aruba, Bonaire, Curaçao). This zooming-shaped island is 112 sq. miles long and is more than seven miles at its widest point.

The timing was right. I anxiously grabbed the paper envelope with my frozen hands, in yet another cold February in snowy New England. Having just arrived from the sunny South, my body stiffened with its new reality. I desperately needed an antidote to this new icy existence up north, a break that would help me ease into this new hemisphere. And that's when an invitation fell into my hands, like a ray of sun, banishing my troubles away: a whole weekend in Bonaire, not only a diving paradise, I was soon to find out, but a world of possibilities for escape.

Paradise Found

One of the Netherlands Antilles, more commonly known as the "ABC Islands" (Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao), Bonaire is located 50 miles off the coast of Venezuela and 80 miles from Aruba. A mere five hours from New York's JFK airport, the trip included a quick (shopping) stopover in Montego Bay, Jamaica. As we approached the cerulean waters of the Caribbean, the transformation began, inside and out: The chill of salt grew stronger, the sun seemed nearer and the oppressive winter of my New Home was a thought in the distance.

A gentle sea breeze lightly brushed the leaves of a luscious tropical garden, welcoming us to our hotel, the Harbour Village Beach Club, a villa-style resort and marina with yellow stucco and terracotta-tile roofed buildings and beautifully landscaped grounds. A stone's throw from the sea, this understated, elegant hotel offers a variety of beautiful views of yet the same ocean on a private beach.

For the first time in a while, I welcomed the fact that I had too much on my plate. After all, there was plenty to offer any type of travelgirl in search of paradise, especially one who dives, soaks, wants a day at the spa or just wants to lounge on the beach to soak up the sun.

Above: Unfriendly Bonaire requests that visitors pick up used bottles and take them home due to limited landfills and the dangerous levels of mercury and cadmium which can contaminate well water. Also aren't the only element of diving from the early days of Dutch colonization; songs and dances of the old African tradition have evolved into many modern day festivals and are an important part of the island's culture.

Opposite page: Bonaire is called the "Fish Capital of the Caribbean." Its reefs — which encircle the island with a crisis of living coral — boast the highest diversity of fish species in the sea.

Leaving the decadent bedroom was hard enough. Decorated with a mix of European and grand plantation styles, the elegant rooms focused on the most important architectural element: the view of the sea. Around me, rich fabrics complemented a mixture of mahogany and wicker furniture that led to a lovely veranda. The breeze came in gently, reaching all the way to the bathroom, which had a huge soaking tub. European fixtures and its own beautifully tiled and glassed-in area along with a separate shower. This effect created a unique steam-room-type enclosure with pleasing doe-vera-infused soaps, shampoos and skin products.

The veranda offered a fabulous setting — overlooking the beach, yet somewhat private with wonderful palms and tropical foliage. It was perfect for a relaxing breakfast serenaded by the birds, or serious lounging in the hammock.

First priority: dinner and drinks on the beach. We started out at the Lighthouse Bar & Grill on the marina, where Gregorio, an award-winning bartender, made me one of his specialties, a *Brendares*, named after the highest peak on Bonaire. The list of ingredients for this yummy adult milkshake included Baily's, pina coloda mix and rum. Next, it was off to the center of town (*Kralendijk*) for dinner.

It Rains Fishes. Well, not exactly, but at this island restaurant, with its bright island décor and inside or outside seating, fish is the specialty.

On Bonaire, a meaty fish called wahoo is the local favorite, and it's prepared in as many different ways as there are restaurants on the island (and that's a lot!) My preference that evening was for a wonderful mustard cream sauce, but a survey of the table revealed that there wasn't a bad choice on the menu. To wash down the local fish, I tried the local beer, *Anisiel Bright*. Brewed on Curaçao with desalinated ocean water, the beer is very smooth, light and refreshing. I only wished I had brought home a six-pack or two; it was that addictive.

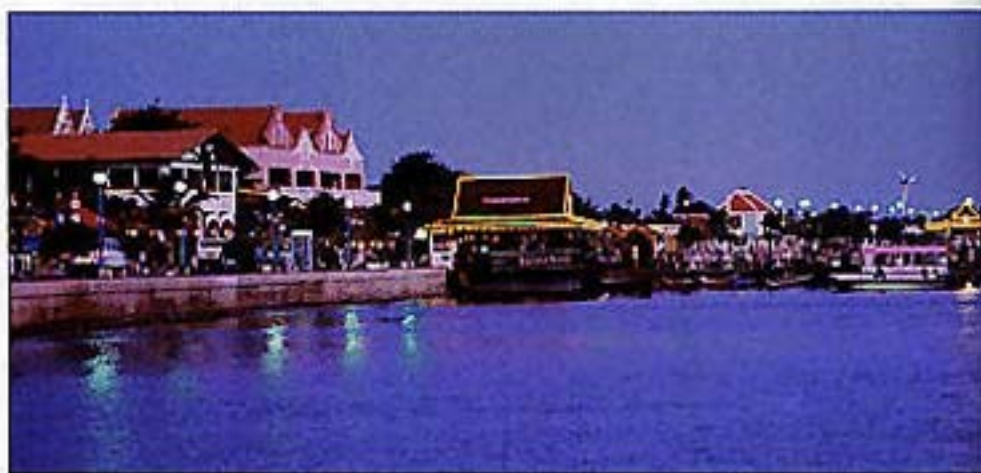
Time to Dive In

The next morning was what I was really in Bonaire for: diving. This is known as a prime dive destination, in part because divers can enter the gorgeous turquoise waters straight from the beach, rather than needing to take a lengthy boat trip out to a reef.

Looking at the dive site map for Bonaire, you could almost say it is one giant dive site, particularly along the lee-

ward side of the island. It's the norm on Bonaire to drive to the beach, park and set out from the shore. As we drove along the coastal road, we saw the yellow painted rocks that clearly and conveniently mark each dive site.

Bonaire is very eco-friendly and environmentally conscious, a place as dedicated to marine research and study as it is to diving and windsurfing. When you dive, windsurf or boat in Bonaire, you are enjoying the Bonaire Marine Park, which encompasses the entire perimeter of the islands of Bonaire and Klein Bonaire. Divers are asked to purchase an admissions tag for \$10, which is a very small price to pay to experience some of the most spectacular diving in the world. The Marine Park is managed by a nongovernmental, not-for-profit agency called STINAPA (*Stichting National Parken*



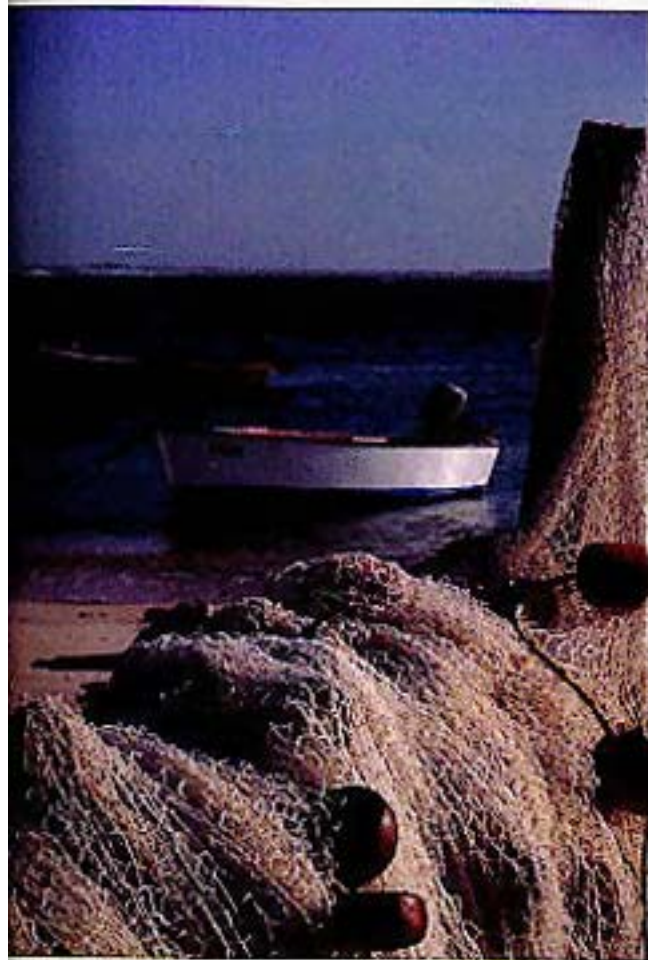
Restaurants with a view: *Wahoo*, the local fish favorite, can be found prepared in as many different ways as there are restaurants on the island.

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Nederlandse Antillen); its focus is to ensure that the marine life is maintained and used in a "sustainable manner." Much of the agency's funding comes from the admissions fees collected from divers. Each tag is good for a year, allowing access to the sea around Bonaire for not only diving but also windsurfing and boating.

In addition to the Marine Park, STINAPA also manages the Washington Sloop National Park, the *Brendares* cave system and the *Karpata Ecological Centre* (all in Bonaire).

We met our dive masters, Leo and Patrick, at the Great Adventures Dive Shop, located within the resort. Our first dive would also be at our hotel, at a site called "Something Special." Our first discovery below the waterline was a wreck



Scenes from daily life in Bonaire: Fresh for "good air"—Bonaire is ranked first in the Caribbean for shore diving — where reefs are accessed via walking into the turquoise waters. You won't see any boarded up windows here — lucky Bonaire has been out of the path of every hurricane on record. Most days on Bonaire embody the laidback spirit of the island.



PHOTOS BY VICTORIA L. MASSIE

named "Our Confidence." The ship has an interesting background — it was the first to arrive at Bonaire. The vessel was first a Danish fishing boat, then a transport for World War II refugees, then a Caribbean interisland freighter. It lies in a semi-upright position just 55 feet below the surface and the mast is only 22 feet below sea level, offering enjoyment to snorkelers and divers alike.

We continued across and under the marina entrance to a wonderful reef wall. While I am a certified diver, I had not been diving in a few years, so my nerves were a bit unsettled and my skills were rusty. Many thanks to Patrick and my other dive buddies. I gradually became more comfortable. The surroundings helped, too: At a depth of about 45 to 50 feet in 81-degree water, the colors were so vibrant. The bright blues and yellows of the sleeping hogfish; the pinks, oranges and greens of the coral and a rainbow of other fish. I had forgotten the incredibly relaxing feeling of the underwater world. The clarity was fantastic.

After lunch at the hotel restaurant, La Bahadra, it was on to the second dive of the day. At lunch, we discussed what sea life was common to Bonaire, and I decided there were three sightings I wanted to make a priority on this trip.

Victoria's "Marine Life to See While Diving" checklist, if you will:

1. Sea turtle
2. Seahorse
3. Eel

The Parade of Wonders Continues

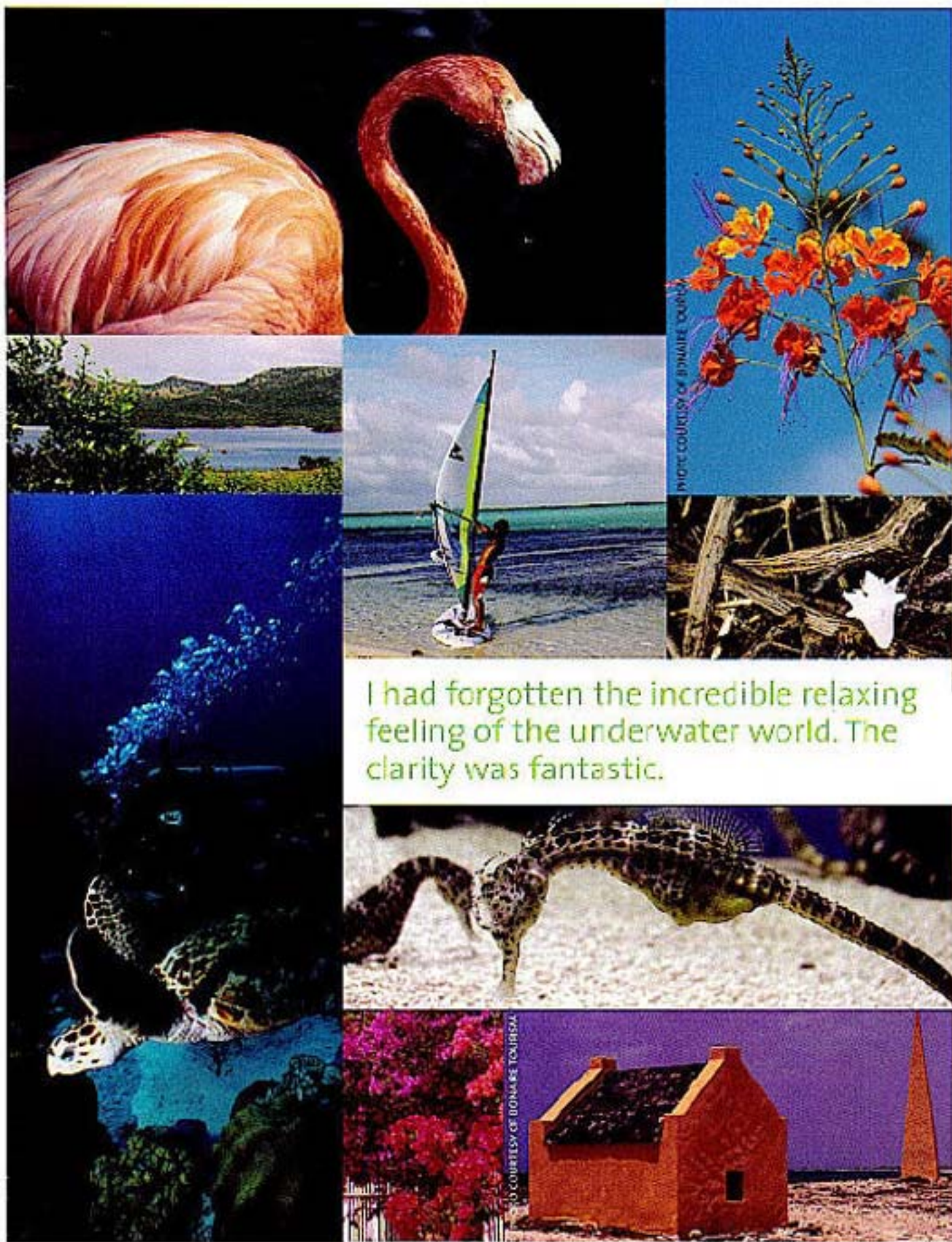
Our afternoon dive site, "Windsack," was near the airport. The wind had begun to pick up, making entering and exiting the water a little more challenging as we tried to navigate around the rocks. Again, dive masters Patrick and Leo soothed my novice nerves with encouragement: "Don't worry. Relax. Breathe. Take it easy. This is not a competitive sport; it is a leisure sport, Victoria."

Then underwater we went.

This time we went down about 60 to 65 feet, where the magnificent display continued. I swam with huge schools of fish and watched two puffer fish slumbering. Then Patrick pointed out a young sea turtle swimming by. My excitement, underwater clapping and a little scream of glee scared the fish and off it went about its day. But what a treat, and I got to put a check next to one "must see" on my list!

When I am on vacation, I always try to push myself a bit more than I normally do, especially when it comes to trying something new, whether that be food, drink or sport. So when it was announced that a night dive was an option for the evening, I jumped at the opportunity. Needless to say, I was more nervous than I was for the other dives, but that was not going to stop me.

Leo said more than once that the dive we would be doing would probably not be the best dive for my first night dive. But I didn't care; I was excited and eager. The site was "City Marina," located in Kralendijk, considered one of Bonaire's best night dive locations.



I had forgotten the incredible relaxing feeling of the underwater world. The clarity was fantastic.

Etienne was our dive master. As the site name suggests, the dive would be under boats and the main city dock. In the dark waters, we were treated to some unbelievable colors—amazing shades of coral and glowing sponges. Just as everyone had told me, you see things completely differently on a night dive.

Suddenly, there it was, on the floor of the ocean: an eel. Only three dives in, and I had already spotted two marine creatures from the list. It was a unique dive experience, with the darkness and the navigation up and down between the dock's pylons. Leo's warnings were warranted. It was all a bit too much for me to manage and I had to cut the dive short. But I can still say that I did it!

I was exhausted, having done more dives in one 24-hour period than I had done during the past three years. But no rest for the weary—it was off to meet some friends for a torchlight dinner on the beach back at the resort restaurant, La Balandra.

The soft sounds of the ocean waves breaking on the beach, a light breeze, the glow of the torches and that great feeling of my toes in the sand. As I sat at the table drinking an Amstel Bright, I thought to myself, I could easily get used to this type of lifestyle.

The setting made for a wonderfully romantic dinner, as I could see from the happy faces of a couple just a few tables away. The cuisine further complemented the mood, from beginning to end. I started with a creamy soup that was presented in two parts: half pumpkin and half mixed vegetable. The head chef, Alberto, hails from Caracas. I chose a seafood pasta dish for my entrée, while others at the table enjoyed succulent grilled lobster. I slept very well that night in my enormous bed, listening to the calming sound of the ocean.

Another Day, Another Dive

My fourth and final dive was a short boat ride away at the "South Bay" dive site off the coast of Klein Bonaire. I felt much more relaxed and ended my diving series on a high note. We dove to depths of 80 feet and once again, the clarity was amazing.

At one point, Etienne was motioning to me, pointing to something. I couldn't figure it out at first; all I could make out was a bright blue flashlight lying on the ocean floor. I thought, "big deal, a flashlight." Then Etienne carefully parted a sea plant to reveal what he was really trying to show me: a SEAHORSE! Bingo! The final thing on the list!

It was so cute, just hooked around a plant and hanging out. The little guy could tell there was some commotion around him (I contained my excitement this time and didn't scream) and he moved about, trying to hide in the plant. I thought the sea turtle was awesome to see, but this was even better. I had only seen a seahorse in an aquarium before. How lucky I was to catch a glimpse of this rare creature in its natural habitat!



PHOTO BY VICTORIA L. HANSEN

If you have been here before or maybe just lost a shoe in the ocean, perhaps it's on the Shoe Tree. It's not your typical shoe tree, but a real tree with shoes hanging from it—just one example of the unique charm you will find on the windward side of the island.

With my wish list viewing complete, I went on to explore more of the reef. This time when a sea turtle came by, I made sure I didn't scare him away. Every time I would come up having seen so many different types of fish, I wished I knew their proper names rather than saying "the little black fish with yellow spots" (Gobi fish) or the "school of long blue fish" (Bogus). It was obviously time to invest in a book on saltwater fish, in preparation for my next diving adventure.

Wonders Above Water

That afternoon we were off on a tour of the island. I expected Bonaire to be lush and tropical, but the interior was actually dry and desertlike. It was April and the island was still quite green, apparently an uncommon sight that was due to the unusual recent rains prior to our arrival, according to Nick Davies, the general manager of the Harbour Village Beach Club. The greenery provided a sharp contrasting backdrop for the many pink flamingos that we saw roaming wild through the countryside.

As we made our way to the windward side of the island, we stopped at a dive site called "Red Slave," not to dive, but for a bit of historical perspective. Remains of slave huts still remain standing, surrounded by nothing but ocean, sand and marsh. Their small size was emphasized by a diver's truck parked next to one.

The windward side of the island has fewer homes and fewer dive sites. However, this is the side of the island that is home to another sport greatly celebrated on Bonaire: windsurfing.

La Bay seemed to be a Mecca of sorts for surfies and those who simply enjoy watching them (like me!). We soon discovered that what looked like a beach shack was in reality a crossroads for not only beginner windsurfers, but also for Olympic and world-class surfing enthusiasts.

Our next stop was a tour of the mangroves and a lesson on marine life from Gerard van Erp, manager of the Mangrove Info and Kayak Center. Located near Lac Bay, Bonaire is an excellent destination for travelers looking for a vacation that



goes beyond the traditional Caribbean beach action, such as excursions by kayak or solar-powered boat.

That night we decided to check out the island's nightlife. We were told there was a band from Curacao playing at City Café, so after a delicious dinner at Rum Runners on the beach, we headed into town.

We arrived at City Café around 11 pm and things were only just getting started. This was what I would call an all-purpose hangout, with a dive shop, a restaurant, a bar and a cyber café. The band (the Vampires) played a great selection of '60s and '70s music while locals and tourists thined, drank and partied the night away. The following afternoon, we returned to City Café to enjoy the restaurant's lunch menu. I was pleased to find out that City Café is a chameleon type of a place — its daytime atmosphere was as great as the nightlife scene.

We celebrated our last night with champagne and a sunset cruise aboard the Harbor Queen. The perfect cap to a wonderful, action-packed weekend. As the sun set on one side of the boat, the moon rose on the other, shining high over the mountains from between the clouds. It was a dramatic sight, indeed. It was one last vision from "My Diving Escape" that my camera could never capture, but my mind will never forget.

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