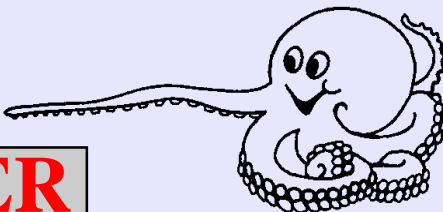


# THE REEF SEEKER



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June - 2009

## **BONAIRE 2009 TRIP REPORT**

How can you not love going to a place that when you first arrive, they greet you with "Welcome home, Ken"?

Our group this year was 16 strong and consisted of Bonaire veterans and some newbies. The vets included Wil & Linda Lemley, Jim & Diana Cooper, Laurie Kasper, Jay Wilson, Charlie Pincus, Pat O'Brien, and me (Ken Kurtis.) The newbies were Deborah Butt, Sue Krauth, Connie Reisch, Christie Mathes, Susan Oder, and Donna & Cecilia Groman.

This was our umpteenth trip to Bonaire (I've truly lost count but I think it's around #10) and we wouldn't keep coming back if it wasn't worth it. The diving is very good. The reefs seem pretty healthy overall (more on that in a bit) and a lot of that certainly has to be credited to the attitude of all the dive staff on the island, and especially at Buddy's. You are frequently reminded, from the initial orientation to the individual dive site briefings, to please be respectful of the reef and to not only avoid touching things, but also to really master the art of hovering so as to minimize reef contact.

A lot of the credit for this progressive attitude probably has to go to

the legendary Captain Don Stewart (still holding court - even in his mid-80s - over at Capt. Don's Habitat, right up the road from Buddy's). Captain Don was the one who instituted the idea of a mooring system at the dive sites around the island and was an early preacher of the cause of conserving Bonaire's reefs as a valuable natural resource. And this decades-long push to protect what they have definitely shows in the quality of the dives you see all around the island.

But one dive you won't be able to do any more (at least not for a while) is. . . the Town Pier. It seems that Hurricane Omar swung too close to Bonaire back in October and caused some significant damage. Specifically, it essentially blasted all the sealife off of the Town Pier. So the Pier is closed as a dive site, partly because it'll give it time to recover - if that's even possible - and partly because the Harbormaster has never been too keen on divers under his pier in the first place.

But that still leaves plenty of places to go diving. Bonaire has some 86 named dive sites, some accessible from both boat and shore and some (on Klein Bonaire) accessible by boat only. But you've got a lot to choose from.

One of the outstanding sites on this trip was Alice in Wonderland,

which is in the southern area of Bonaire towards the Salt Pier. It's part of Bonaire's double reef system which means when you hit the edge of the inner reef (depth is about 80 feet at the sand), you keep going out and within another couple hundred feet you'll find the outer/second reef (it usually tops out around 40-50 feet) which a lot of divers simply never both to explore.

But the dive we did at Alice was simply wonderful. There are a lot of soft corals at the reef shoulder and they are continually waving in the slight surge, fish are darting all about, some trying to feed, some trying not to get eaten, and others trying to get cleaned. There's always something going on.

We also explored the outer reef at this site, hoping to encounter some pelagics, and were treated to some massive coral formations, a bevy of garden eels across the sandy plain on the way over to the outer reef, and then a very cooperative and inquisitive little Hawksbill Turtle as we came back to the main reef.

We also did a lot of dives on the Buddy house reef which is also marked on the maps as Buddy's Reef. We did a dusk &/or night dive there every evening and a few afternoon dives as well. (Some of the more intrepid members of our

group even did two pre-dawn dives on the reef.) It's an easy dive since you enter from the dock at Buddy's, and it's a really good dive whether you go left (south - towards Sand Dollar and Bari Reef) or right (north - towards Captain Don's and Reef Scientifico).

One of the highlights of Buddy's Reef is that there are now TWO resident seahorses in an easy-to-find area. There's a brown one (who's been there for about a year) and a red/orange one (who's a more recent arrival). Although they're in the same general area - sometimes only a few feet apart - they don't seem to be "buddies". So it was a delightful treat on one of our dusk dives to find that they were occupying the same sea fan, only inches apart. I managed to snap off some quick shots and about a minute later, the red one moved off. Although we saw the two of them again frequently, we never saw them together again. (In fact, I've NEVER seen two seahorses the same space, so it was a special treat.)

The other great thing about doing the dusk and night dives at Buddy's were that we were always accompanied by Tarpon. Anyone who's been to Bonaire will surely have at least one story about Tarpon. What they've learned to do over the years (and not just the ones near Buddy's but all over the island) is to find divers on night dives and hang around the edges of the light beams. Although the Tarpon are good nighttime hunters (they're very good at sensing movement - even in the dark), sometimes divers' lights spook hidden animals and the Tarpon get a meal they might otherwise have missed. You also quickly get used to the idea that

the Tarpon will pass VERY close to you, sometimes literally inches away.

What made this year's Tarpon encounters so wonderful was that there were THREE of them on almost every dusk or night dive that we did. The smallest of the three was about four feet long, the middle one was a 5-footer, and the biggest one probably was around 6-feet. They are constantly on the move while hunting, zipping in and out amongst each other, and somehow they avoid colliding with us or the reef as well. On almost all of our dives, they'd hook up with us early on and then stay with us for the duration, frequently following us all the way back to the exit stairs on the dock.

We also had one dive where we watched in amazement as an octopus hunted along the reef. He would slither around and spread his entire mantle over a small rock or area - like a fisherman casting a net - trapping everything inside. Then he'd probe to see if there was a snack waiting for him underneath. A couple of times we saw small fish skitter away out from under the edge of his mantle and a couple of times, he struck paydirt.

But probably the most amazing

find on one of the night dives was made by Laurie Kasper. She found a weight pouch from a weight-integrated BC. Normally this wouldn't be that big of a deal, but it was from one of the divers in our group who had lost it a few hours earlier (on one of our dusk dives), we vaguely knew the area in which it was lost, Laurie was convinced she could find it, and don't lose sight of the fact that we were now searching for it at NIGHT. So it was one of those things where you couldn't just see it in the distance. Your light beam had to fall right on top of the pouch. Oh . . . and did I mention the weight pouch was BLACK???? Pretty amazing find.

We also did what's become a Bonaire tradition for us which is a midnight night dive. We used to do the dive STARTING at midnight but - as we've gotten older - we're quite content with doing the dive so it ENDS at midnight. Either way, it's got the "midnight" caché to it. And this year, we did the dive Tuesday night so I could literally say that, since my birthday was Wednesday, I got to start my birthday off by being underwater.

Of course, a trip to Bonaire isn't all about diving. We always try to

## DIVING VACATIONS

**October 11-18 • Sea of Cortez**

**February 7-13, 2010 • Florida  
(Manatees & Caverns)**

**Yap, Maldives, Fiji, Bonaire??**

go find the members of the resident flamingo flocks (and the national symbol of Bonaire) and we hit the motherlode this time when we encountered hundreds of them wading in shallow water, at the south end of the island, looking for the brine shrimp that give them their distinctive pink color.

We also paid a visit to a new Bonaire attraction, the Butterfly Farm. It's out in the middle of nowhere but we found it somewhat interesting. It's a very large greenhouse-type structure, about 400 square meters, and contains a couple of dozen species of butterfly around a central Koi pond. The butterflies are imported from Costa Rica but they're trying to breed them in Bonaire and the place is open to the public. They charge an admission fee of \$12 but, since we had the group with us, we got them to give us a group rate of \$10/head.

Although you come to Bonaire for the diving (the license plates still read "Diver's Paradise"), Bonaire is also full of wonderful places to go eat. We had our final night farewell dinner at our favorite restaurant, Cactus Blue, owned/run by Corrina Wegere & hubby Hagen. Corinna used to be the dive manger at Buddy Dive which is how we first met. We've known them for years and it's always a treat to dine with them. If you stop in to see them you MUST have the "Bite & Kiss" which is a shrimp dish appetizer that Hagen prepares (he does all the cooking) which is simply out of this world. It's described on their menu as "Jerk-rubbed shrimp with soured cream and mango salsa." REALLY good.

We also went to a restaurant in the middle of town which has been

## UPCOMING BOAT DIVES

|     |          |                     |                               |           |
|-----|----------|---------------------|-------------------------------|-----------|
| Sun | Jun 14   | <i>Cee Ray</i>      | Catalina (West End)           | \$140/155 |
| Sat | 27       | <i>Great Escape</i> | Santa Barbara Island          | 160/175   |
| Sun | July 12  | <i>Great Escape</i> | Farnsworth/Cat. backside      | 150/165   |
| Sat | 25       | <i>Great Escape</i> | San Clemente (back)           | 165/180   |
| Sat | Aug. 8   | <i>Cee Ray</i>      | <i>Olympic</i> wreck/Catalina | 140/155   |
| Sun | 30       | <i>Great Escape</i> | Santa Barbara Island          | 160/175   |
| Sun | Sept. 13 | <i>Great Escape</i> | Catalina (West End)           | 140/155   |
| Sat | 26       | <i>Great Escape</i> | San Clemente (frontside)      | 165/180   |

Prices are listed as 14-day advanced purchase/regular. Food/air included all trips. All diving to be done on compressed air only - no nitrox. Fuel surcharge may apply.

there for some time but which we've simply never frequented before (but we'll go back). It's called Papagayo, it's nothing fancy, but they have the best hamburgers we've ever had. They're HUUUGE. And do NOT make the mistake I made of ordering the "Dubble Burger" (yes, that's how it's spelled on the menu). It was really good, but it was enormous.

If you go to Papagayo, be brave and try the Bitterballen. It's listed as a "Dutch specialty" and it's some sort of a soft meat that is then rolled into a ball, covered in bread crumbs, deep-fried, and is served with a spicy mustard. It was quite good, actually.

And we had another great meal at Pasa Bon Pizza which is just south of Buddy Dive and which has really good pizzas, outstanding lasagna, and is another meal that shouldn't be missed.

This is the second year in a row we've driven over to Rincon, in the middle of the island, to go have lunch at a place called the Rose Inn and try their renowned goat stew. (It tastes better than it sounds) And for the second year, we got skunked because the place was closed. Last year, it was because we went on a Wednesday and

they're normally closed on Wednesday. This year, it was because we went on May 21 which is Ascension Day, a religious holiday, and everything in Rincon (and many other parts of Bonaire too) was closed. However, it seemed that most Rinconians observed the holiday not by spending time in church but by spending time at some of the local outdoor bars throughout the town. Well, to each his own.

It was once again a wonderful trip. Bonaire's fairly easy to get to (about 10-12 hours from LA), there are many interesting and unusual creatures to be seen, the diving's relatively non-strenuous (some our folks opted not to do shore dives - which are much easier than CA shore/beach dives - and just did the non-boat dives from the dock at Buddy's), there's plenty of good places to go eat, and you're sure to come back with some great memories, like we did.

So what are you waiting for??? We'll probably go back again in 2010 around the same time (at Buddy's again) so if you're interested in joining in on the fun, give us a call. And that way, all the great times you just read about can be YOUR memories.

## THE SCUBA SHOW

It nice seeing many of you at the Scuba Show this past weekend. (I'm writing this literally only a few hours after I got home.) I can't say that there was much new stuff that I saw at the show, but there certainly were a lot of divers. It seems the aisles were packed and the seminars also seemed well-attended. One nice thing was talking to a number of the travel providers that we deal with, and a lot of them were saying it sounds like many of you still plan on doing some dive travel, despite the sometimes gloomy economic news. That's good all the way around, not only for the industry, but also for you as an individual, since nothing can lift your spirits like a nice vacation. (Just ask our Bonaire

folks.) So if you made it there, hopefully you had a good time, learned something, and enjoyed yourself overall.

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## UPCOMING LOCAL TRIPS

We've got two local trips on the books for June. On Sunday, June 14, we'll be taking the Cee Ray out to Catalina for a day of diving the West End. Then two weeks later, on Saturday, June 27, we'll be taking the Great escape out to Santa Barbara island to frolic with the sea lions and whatever else we can entice into our vicinity. For either of these trips, give us a call at 310/652-4990 to get signed up and join in on the fun.

## CHAMBER DAY 2009 - \$115,000

The number pretty much speaks for itself. And this economy, simply amazing. We raised \$115,000 for our Catalina Hyperbaric Chamber this year. Many thanks to all of you who made this edition of Chamber Day such a resounding success. When you add up all the people who attend Chamber Day or Eve, those who volunteer, the shops that promote it, the boats that donate their time, the AOP people who make it happen, you've got well over 1000 involved in pulling it all together. We truly couldn't do it without you. So thank you very much and make a note that next year, Chamber Day will be held on Wednesday, May 5, 2010.

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## PICTURE PAGE - Bonaire 2009

(All pix by Ken Kurtis © 2009)



**Spanish Hogfish  
getting cleaned**



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**Huge  
Midnight Parrotfish**



**Tarpon  
at night**



**Buddy Dive seahorse  
with Flamingo Tongue**



**Pair of  
Spotted Drums**