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Go Wild in Bonaire



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Kristin Luna explores Bonaire's wild side.



When I stepped off the plane at Bonaire's bright pink-hued Flamingo Airport, I expected the usual palm-fringed Caribbean setting. What I found instead was an arid desert landscape with towering cacti and tangled masses of mangrove forests, wild donkeys and goats roaming the terrain and often causing roadblocks, and flocks of flamingos lounging in pools of still water.

This rugged, natural isle was part of the Dutch Antilles but was just recently reunited with its motherland, the Netherlands, with the [dissolution](#) of the Dutch Antilles political unit this past Sunday, when it officially became a part of the country along with Sint Eustatius and Saba. (Its neighbors Aruba and Curacao, the other entities of the ABC Islands, will remain independent.) It's also slated to be the first Caribbean isle to run on 100 percent sustainable energy with the completion of a massive conservation project in 2015; the last turbine was installed at the wind farm and the diesel engine plant, which will convert algae to fuel, is in its final testing stages.

But Bonaire going green isn't a new thing: The waters surrounding the island have been a protected marine park as far back as the 1970s. Here's how to best utilize your time when next you find yourself on the wild island.



Dive in

Bonaire's mantra is "freedom of diving," thanks to the more than 60 shore entry points that dot the coastline. Some resorts such as [Buddy Dive](#) even include a rental truck in your booking to make hauling your equipment around the island a breeze. But some of the best spots, such as the famed *Hilma Hooker*

wreck or Klein Bonaire—the uninhabited islet just offshore teeming with octopuses, giant turtles, and squid—will require boat trips through operators such as [Captain Don's Habitat](#). First-timers can spend a few days in scuba school; advanced divers can fine tune their skills by taking specialty courses such as underwater photography at Buddy.

While Bonaire is a diver's dream, you needn't be scuba certified to enjoy the underwater landscape. With 100-foot visibility, snorkeling will put you front and center with the one of the most diverse and plentiful fish population in the West Indies.

Lend a helping hand

Travelers with a desire for doing good can join conservation efforts like [Dive Friends Underwater Clean-Up Dives](#), which sends groups of certified divers out into the ocean to collect trash, or plan a trip to coincide with the annual Celebrate Our Planet Week, which recognizes the conservation of Bonaire's land through various activities like coral restoration and beach clean-up days. For more volunteer opportunities, check out [Tourism Bonaire's website](#).



Meet the locals

Those who dig wildlife but don't want to take the plunge can still enjoy Bonaire's abundant flora and fauna on land.

Spend an afternoon flamingo watching in Washington Park, admire the timid goats and lethargic iguanas on a hike through the mountains, or pay a visit to the [donkey sanctuary](#), which streams its own [live webcam](#). The [new butterfly farm](#) offers glimpses of various insects native to the region.

Hang ten

Bonaire is one of the more active islands in the region, offering a variety of sports—such as rappelling, sea kayaking through mangroves, rock climbing, spelunking, sailing regattas, kiteboarding, golfing—in a 99-square-mile plot of land. Windsurfing is one of the most popular activities, thanks to the steady tradewinds off the southeast coast, and [Bonaire Windsurf Place](#), with its quarter-mile stretch of shallow waters, is perfect for beginners or advanced surfers wanting to test the waters (and winds).

Professional child windsurfers (and stars of the upcoming documentary *Children of the Wind*) also frequent the Place, so you never know, you could very well be surfing alongside a world champion.

[Kristin Luna](#) is a San Francisco-based travel writer and avid scuba diver who tries to find herself in exotic locales more often than not. Photos: Kristin Luna