

Diving in Bonaire

Bonaire currently boasts over 355 species of fish as counted by experts and novices via REEF survey. It has healthy corals, clear water and plenty of dive sites. It is blessed as a diving destination and it wants to stay that way. Thus, it has established the entire marine ecosystem as a preserve and park. The nice thing about Bonaire, and somewhat unusual, is that virtually the whole population of 12,000 people has bought into the reef conservation philosophy that has been part of the island verve for a few decades now.

Can you say 'dive Nazi'? That's what many visitors may think when first confronted by all of the marine park rules and regulations. And Bonaire residents don't care. If you come here with a nonchalant attitude about the reefs and their inhabitants, they would rather you take your money, dive gear and attitude elsewhere. This somewhat militant but refreshing attitude of 'fish first' sets the island apart from just about every other dive destination in the world.

Bonaire established the first national park in the Caribbean in 1969 and the first marine park 10 years later. Now, Bonaire Marine Park is the island body charged with governing the use of the waters surrounding Bonaire in order to protect its marine life. The Marine Park extends from the high water mark to the 200ft (60m) depth contour, encompassing the entire coast of Bonaire and Klein Bonaire – an area of about 2700 hectares, including coral reef, seagrass, and mangroves.

Bonaire Marine Park is a model of its kind in the Caribbean (and the world for that matter), protecting the marine environment in its care while maximizing safe levels of use for recreation and commerce. It maintains more than 100 public moorings, conducts extensive scientific research, provides informa-



Iguanas are ubiquitous on the island

tion to users and monitors human and natural impacts.

Recognized worldwide as an exemplary marine park, it has eliminated destructive fishing practices and discharge of polluted ballast water. It has also banned spearfishing, collecting of corals, shells, and other marine life, and use of anchors.

Every diver and snorkeler must first go through an orientation covering the park's rules. These are conducted by dive masters at the dive shops before a newly arrived diver is allowed to start diving. Divers are also asked to do a shore checkout dive to get weight right so improper buoyancy doesn't cause a diver to crash into the reef on boat dives.

Admission fees are the sole dependable income of the park. Whether you are a diver, snorkeler, fisherman, yachtsman or windsurfer, if you use the water, you must purchase an admission tag. Tags are available at dive shops, windsurf centers and the Marine Park headquarters at Barcadera. Cost is \$10 for snorkelers and \$25 for divers. The tags are good for a full year so divers going to Bonaire twice in a year don't have to pay again unless they want to.

A diver descends to see a large elephant ear sponge

