

**FEBRUARY 2023 • CARIBBEAN CALLING: BONAIRE & CURAÇAO • GUIDE TO MEXICO CITY • 24 HOURS  
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# HOLLAND HERALD

*"A wide array of marine  
life thrives in Bonaire's  
protected waters"*



# SWEET BLUE DREAMS

Just off the coast of Venezuela, Bonaire and Curaçao are delicious snippets of the Dutch Caribbean, where cultures mix and the seas contain great treasures.

Text and photography Jurriaan Teulings





## Bonaire



**A**s a citizen of the chilly part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, I'm not used to thinking of the sea in Caribbean terms. It is something to either conquer or to be swallowed by, not to swim in. And yet, here I am, floating in the warm, clear waters surrounding Bonaire, a boomerang-shaped island not far off the Venezuelan coast. Far away from home, yet technically still in the same country.

Welcome to the leeward side of the Dutch Caribbean, a wonderful collection of three islands often referred to as 'ABC': Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao. My visit encompasses the latter two.

### Poseidon's treasures

Located within one of the world's oldest marine reserves and considered to be the healthiest in the Caribbean, Bonaire's coral reefs are a source of great national pride. Scorpionfish, frogfish, pufferfish, parrotfish, cowfish and, why not, a Christmas tree worm: floating above this carnival of strange creatures, I watch as they dance around weird shapes that make up a forest of corals. Scuba diving is no time to let one's jaw drop, but I would if I could. Sure, I've seen these images before, but only on TV, in my living room (a place where I belong) and not 12m underwater (a place I certainly do not belong). Our species traded gills for lungs a long time ago and yet, within minutes, some ancient instinct kicks in, and I am perfectly at peace. My brief visit feels like a homecoming.

I'm on a so-called 'discovery dive', a carefully orchestrated experience for first-time scuba divers. My grasp of the underwater lexicon of hand signals is limited to the 'okay' sign, but Jurgen Pfalz, my diving instructor, proves to be a great mime. When he looks clownishly excited, I follow his gaze and spot the green sea turtle swimming high above us at the water surface's silvery ceiling. We watch as the creature seems to poke its head into another dimension to take a breath of air. Then, in a spectacle fit for a Michelangelo painting, it slowly moves towards the sea floor amid

shimmering shafts of light, like an angel descending from the heavens.

Nearby, a set of floating PVC pipes adorned with corals remind us of humanity's impact. A positive one, for a change. Pfalz prepared me for this odd sight before we entered the water. "You'll find that they look a bit like Christmas trees," he joked, referring to the structures that are nurseries used in Bonaire's reef renewal programme. Close to the surface, the nurseries provide favourable conditions for young corals to grow to an appropriate size. These corals will then be attached to the reefs the programme is designed to maintain and restore.

### Many shades of blue

In 2019, Bonaire proudly declared itself the world's first 'Blue Destination'. Based on the World Bank's Blue Economy concept, a Blue Destination makes 'sustainable use of ocean resources for economic growth, improved livelihoods and jobs while preserving the health of the ocean ecosystem': a perfect synergy between nature, culture and economy. Visitors looking to snorkel or dive in the marine park that surrounds the island are required to purchase a 'nature tag'. The proceeds go to STINAPA Bonaire, an NGO in charge of protecting Bonaire's nature parks, and which is almost entirely funded this way. In an effort to create more awareness, new arrivals are also encouraged to sign the 'Bonaire Bond': an online pledge to be mindful, and respectful, of the island's natural wealth.

This wealth is not limited to the reefs. Lac Bay, a shallow lagoon on the south-eastern shore of Bonaire that is the largest of its kind in the Dutch Caribbean, is fringed by extensive mangroves. On a quiet afternoon, I join Hans Voerman of Outdoor Bonaire on a kayak tour. "Conservation efforts on Bonaire started over 50 years ago," he tells me as we carefully navigate a system of channels through the mangroves. Surrounded by spidery branches that emerge from the shallows in tunnels of greenery, an impressive silence embraces us »

#### Previous pages

Bonaire and Curaçao boast excellent diving and snorkelling sites; a food truck in Bonaire

#### Right page, top from left to right

Maya's Corner Café in Bonaire; kayaking through the mangroves at Lac Bay, Bonaire; aboard a Bonaire marine park boat.

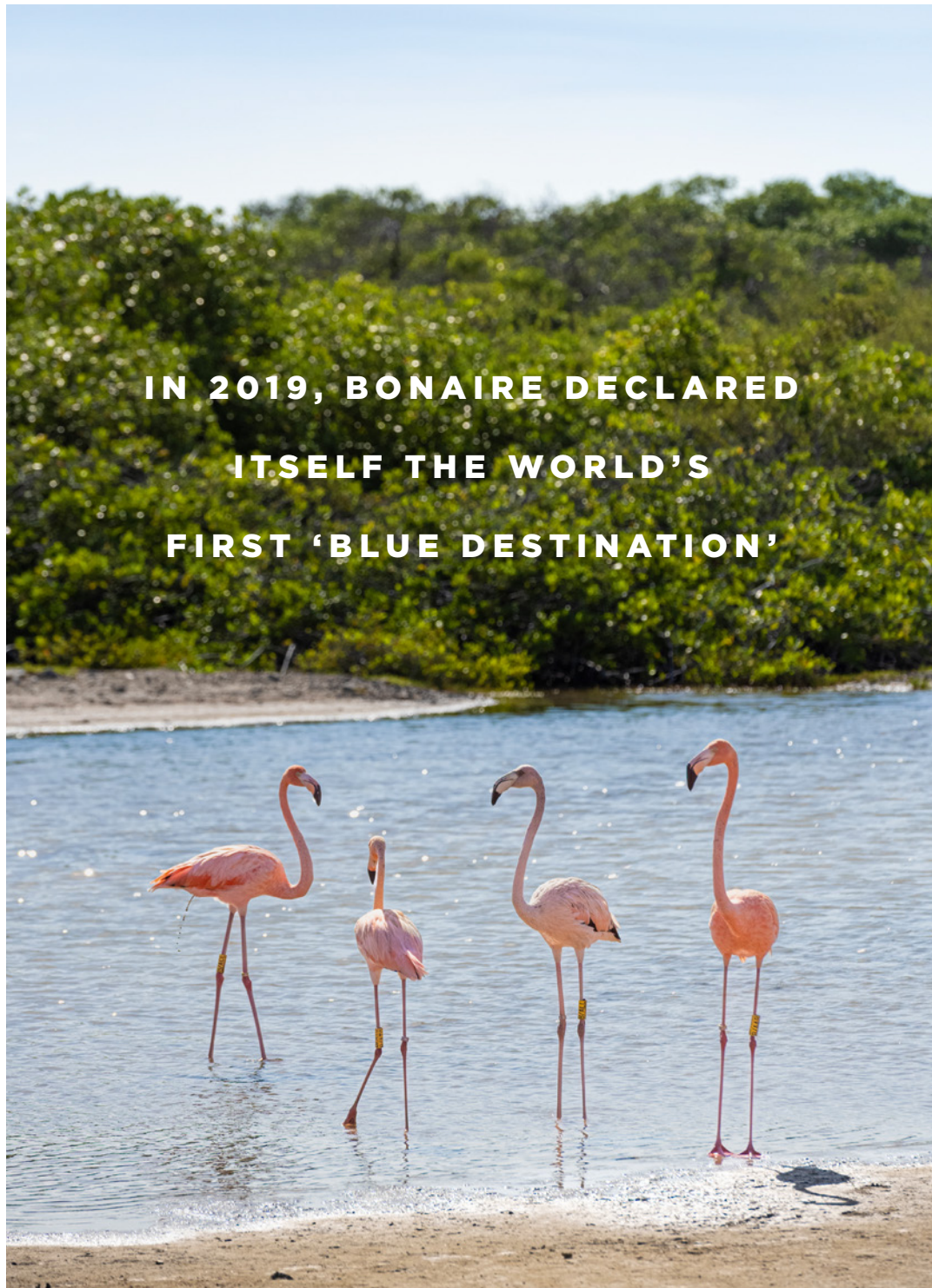
**Bottom** Goto Lake, Bonaire



**AN IMPRESSIVE SILENCE  
EMBRACES US AND THE OUTSIDE  
WORLD CEASES TO EXIST**







**Above** Goto Lake is a saltwater lagoon in the north of Bonaire and is known as a flamingo hotspot **Left page** A café in the candy-coloured UNESCO World Heritage Site of Punda in Willemstad, Curaçao

# CURAÇAO SETS ITSELF APART AS THE REGION'S CULTURAL POWERHOUSE



Curaçao



and the outside world ceases to exist. “These mangroves have been protected by the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands for a long time,” says Voerman. “Which is lucky for us, because when developers started building a resort here, we were able to stop them – it had to be demolished.”

Though Bonaire’s charismatic flamingos tend to steal the show, the wetlands are a crucially important breeding, wintering and foraging area for herons, egrets and pelicans. Often referred to as ‘the ocean’s nurseries’, these mangroves also offer a critical foraging ground for endangered juvenile green turtles and rainbow parrotfish. I’m relieved to find that there are no mosquitos and the ‘monster barracudas’ that, according to Voerman, occasionally visit these parts are nowhere to be seen. “You should mention that this is the ideal place for people who scare easily,” he suggests. “You won’t find any snakes or crocodiles here.” In these utterly peaceful mangroves, I had forgotten that those were even options.

### Colourful character

Neighbouring Curaçao is just a hop, skip and a jump away. At night, the island glows on Bonaire’s horizon. The flight from Bonaire’s Flamingo International Airport to Curaçao’s Hato International Airport takes less than half an hour, and from there, it’s just another 15 minutes to my hotel in Willemstad.

Like Bonaire, Curaçao boasts excellent diving and snorkelling sites, but aside from its reefs and beaches, the largest of the ABC Islands sets itself apart as the region’s cultural powerhouse. I’ve arrived at the tail end of Siman di Kultura, Curaçao’s ‘Culture Week’, when companies, schools and institutions celebrate the island’s customs. This year’s event coincides with Curaçao Pride. And while the rainbow-coloured LGBTQ+ parade across the floating Queen Emma Bridge that connects Willemstad’s Punda and Otrobanda districts isn’t part of the official programme, the festive atmosphere of bystanders joining in is a sign that local customs aren’t set in stone.

Willemstad’s big eye-catcher is the candy-coloured UNESCO World Heritage Site of Punda. At first glance, the picture-perfect set of warehouses along Handelskade reflect in the waters of St Anna Bay like a tropical version of Amsterdam. On closer inspection though, the architecture, while rich in those typically Dutch gables, harbour elements of Portuguese and Spanish colonial architecture as well. Similarly, Papiamentu, the Portuguese-based creole language spoken across the ABC Islands, is peppered with traces of Dutch. Papiamentu’s strong resemblance to the creole spoken on the Cape Verde archipelago off the African coast exposes a darker chapter in Curaçao’s history, when the island served as a key distribution centre in the Transatlantic slave trade.

### Melting pot of all sorts

Culinary traditions reveal an even denser mix of cultures that continue to evolve. When I chat with Edward Soares, a former representative of the tourist board who is now CEO of the Kura Botanica Hotel, he points out that *funchi*, a staple of Curaçao cuisine, is actually of Italian influence. “It’s our version of polenta,” he says. “After World War Two, a ship with Italian migrants destined for South America stopped here for repairs, and some of the families decided to stay. Later, more Italians arrived to work at the oil refinery, along with many others from all over the world, and now Curaçao is home to around 65 nationalities.”

Over the centuries, the island’s melting pot has also produced some rather surprising results whose exact provenance remain a mystery, Soares observes. That said, Dutch culture remains the most obvious constant in the island nation. Dutch is widely spoken, and nobody seems to mind that the biggest music festival in this Caribbean island nation, which has reeled in some big stars, is named North Sea Jazz. And, at this tropical latitude, which is not only safely below the hurricane belt but also blissfully free of European seasons, children enjoy a week-long *herfstvakantie* (‘autumn holiday’) in October. »

**Top** Enjoying the fine sand and turquoise waters of Grote Knip, one of Curaçao’s main beaches

**Bottom from left to right** The floating Queen Emma Bridge that crosses St Anna Bay in Willemstad, Curaçao; street art in Otrobanda, Willemstad; a biker riding over Queen Emma Bridge



**THE DELICIOUS LIONFISH  
OFFERS A GREAT OPPORTUNITY  
FOR SUSTAINABLE DISHES**

**Left page** Daredevils jumping off the high limestone cliffs at Playa Forti in Curaçao

“We somehow seem to realise that the Dutch culture is inside us,” says Soares.

### Preserving and conserving

Soares takes great pride in Curaçao’s UNESCO-listed buildings, some of which have remained in a state of disrepair. “My main goal here was to restore something that already exists,” he says, referring to Kura Botanica, which recently opened in Kura Hulanda Village, a block of 18th-century buildings that are being restored in Otrobanda. This part of Willemstad is still a little rough around the edges, but multiple urban renewal projects are set to change that. Along with the Kura Hulanda Museum that already exists on the compound and impressively exhibits the horrors of the Transatlantic slave trade, Kura Hulanda Village will house bars, restaurants, galleries and a residential area. Since the inception of the Kaya Kaya Festival, the surrounding streets have become a permanent home to an abundance of art installations and extensive murals whose bright colours rival those of Handelskade.

One small business that has already opened in Kura Hulanda Village is Lionfish Caribbean. Its name refers to an invasive species that has appeared on reefs around the Caribbean, posing a threat to the marine biodiversity. Lisette Keus, who started hunting the lionfish as a conservation effort, presents a silver lining: the fish happen to be delicious and thus offer a fantastic opportunity for a menu of sustainable dishes. The more you eat, the better it is for the environment. And nothing goes to waste: even the fish’s fins are used for jewellery.

Sadly, my ‘Lionfish ‘n Chips’ and local Brasa beer are my last meal here before I head back home, so Keus’ ceviche will have to wait. As with the lionfish, my experiences in Bonaire and Curaçao have left me wanting more. Hopefully a trip to Aruba will be on the menu soon, or maybe I’ll gobble up the Windward Islands, or Saba and its Mount Scenery volcano rising 887m from the Caribbean Sea that is, oddly, the highest point in the Netherlands. «



JURRIAAN TEULINGS IS A WIDELY PUBLISHED TRAVEL WRITER AND PHOTOGRAPHER. HERE ARE HIS TIPS FOR BONAIRE AND CURAÇAO.

## Curaçao

### Willemstad retreat

Formerly known as Hotel Kura Hulanda in the up-and-coming neighbourhood of Otrobanda, Kura Botanica is a more intimate, greener and completely refurbished version of its predecessor. I loved its sense of history, and collection of rare palm species around the pool. [kurabotanica.com](http://kurabotanica.com)

### Sweet nothing

I must confess: the beach access, mere steps from my room at the Curaçao Marriott Beach Resort, was pretty hard to beat. I was more than happy to spend a day here, exploring nothing but the stunningly aquamarine waters lapping at my feet. [marriott.com](http://marriott.com)

### Artful cooking

Curaçao’s unique character and flavours were on full display during my cooking workshop at Vittle Art, a project run by a family of devoted culinary artists who also had some great stories to share. [vittleart.com](http://vittleart.com)

### Plantation-to-table

Touring Curaçao’s plantation houses is a unique way to discover the island’s

history, along with some excellent art galleries, restaurants and even a library. My favourite, Hofi Cas Cora, boasts a fresh, veggie-laden menu, great views of its organic farm, and a set of adorably grumpy donkeys. [hofिकासcora.com](http://hofिकासcora.com)

## Bonaire

### Sustainable stays

Both Harbour Village Beach Club and Captain Don’s Habitat boast impressive Blue Destination certifications for their efforts in sustainable tourism. Harbour Village is the luxurious option and the one I enjoyed most, though Habitat’s simple rooms are a better match for those who would rather spend their budget on more dives. [harbourvillage.com](http://harbourvillage.com); [habitatbonaire.com](http://habitatbonaire.com)

### Goat-free

Much of Bonaire’s landscape has been reduced to species that the many free-roaming goats won’t, or can’t, eat. Not so at Tera Barra, a fenced, five-hectare garden where Johan Blerk and a team of volunteers are restoring the island’s greenery to its natural state. It’s a lovely place to

contemplate a time before goats, among butterflies and hummingbirds. [terabarra.com](http://terabarra.com)

### Beach fine dining

At Brass Boer restaurant, which is located at Delfins Beach Resort and owned by Dutch chef Jonnie Boer and his wife Thérèse, it quickly became abundantly clear to me why the World Food Travel Association recently certified Bonaire as a Culinary Capital. [brassboer.com](http://brassboer.com)

The Bonaire segment of this article was made possible with the help of Sapa Pana Travel. [sapanatravel.nl](http://sapanatravel.nl)

## Book this story



KLM operates one daily flight to Bonaire’s Flamingo Intl Airport and one daily flight to Curaçao’s Hato Intl Airport from Amsterdam Airport Schiphol.

For information on how to compensate for your expected share of your flight’s CO2 emissions go to: [flyresponsibly.klm.com](http://flyresponsibly.klm.com).

Book your flight on [klm.com](http://klm.com).