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Bonaire's Town Pier

IF PICASSO BUILT A REEF...

Bonaire, Netherlands Antilles – Make no mistake. The waters of this small Dutch island 85 miles east of Aruba make for spectacular scuba diving, with endless coral ranges, abundant and exotic reef fishes, sponges, gorgonians and other marine life.

Except, right now, I'm about to take in one of the Caribbean's most famous and unlikely dive spots: Underneath the Bonaire Town Pier. At night.

It may sound like the antithesis of great diving, but a night dive at the Town Pier is something else, renowned for its idiosyncratic blend of nature and mankind. The pier's a working, commercial structure, not inclined to make concessions to the natural world. It's located right in the middle of Kralendijk, Bonaire's major town, on a waterfront lined with restaurants and bars, hotels, little paved plazas and a mile-long promenade. And because it's a pier, it's a perfect environment for the vibrant orange cup corals that, unlike most corals, can flourish in the shade of hundreds of square feet of overhead cement. And night-time is the time to see them.



The Town Pier at Kralendijk – and its tugs



Trash becomes environment – an old ladder at Salt Pier, a few miles down the island

We start just after dusk, gearing up on the street-front quay, adjacent to the pier. The only light is from lampposts spotted along the promenade and on the pier. Tourists stroll by, eyeing us curiously. We ourselves nervously eye the two black tugboats moored alongside the pier. For safety, Bonaire requires that we have a local guide and that we have permission from the harbormaster to dive that night – the tugs can be scheduled at any time to fire up their engines and move out to assist ships to and from the harbor, or at the oil storage depot up the coast.

Working our way down the narrow stone steps next to the pier, we wade into the water, pull on our fins and get our masks and dive lights set. Then we slip under the dark surface, 10 or so divers in single file, following our guide.

Quickly, we begin seeing the things that make this dive so singular. It's an unremarkable sandy bottom but as a working pier it has the key signs of human presence: lots of debris – cast-off truck tires, old sections of pipes and metal bars, bottles and cans, pieces of board.

But there's a fine point underwater at which trash transitions into environment – a length of rope becomes encrusted with algae or even coral, a sea fan polyp takes hold and begins a colony on a broken ladder, a hollow pipe becomes home to a white spotted eel, an octopus takes up residence in an old tire, visible only as two big eyes staring out of the blackness.

If Picasso Built a Reef - continued



Orange cup coral – night-time

plankton they pull from the current. Corallite for corallite, they're larger than life and even in patches they embody the phrase marine biologists sometimes use to describe corals: "a wall of mouths."

Along with this, brown and purple tube sponges and encrusting red sponges grow off the cement. Decorator crabs, with bits of sponge glued to their bodies for camouflage, hang out on abandoned tires. An eel pokes its head out of its adopted home in an old pipe lying on the sand. Our dive-lights illuminate these wondrous creatures a bit at a time, surrounded by darkness while the pilings cast bizarre, jumpy shadows everywhere as we move our beams.

We follow the double row of pilings to the far end of the pier, aware of the dark tug-boat hulls parked above us to our left. We square the corner, staying inside the pier's L-shaped perimeter, finding arrow crabs, balloonfish, more coral, sponges and eels along the way. Then our guide leads us across the open sand, in-shore from the base of the "L," about 50 feet to the right of the main pier, to something divers look for all over the ocean – a pair of four-inch-long, reddish seahorses, hanging out with their tails wrapped around a cluster of sea rods tangled with old rope.



The Town Pier's resident seahorses

Beyond this, the bare cement of a pier's pilings makes an ideal substrate for the larvae of corals or tunicates or sponges to settle and start growing. Since the pilings are 10 to 20 feet apart, they form discrete, vertical reefs that begin attracting little fishes, crabs, all the creatures that settle on, bore into or hang out in a reef environment. It's like a reef put together by Picasso: The parts are there, but they're arranged differently.

And then there are the corals themselves. They're not the familiar reef-building species like star and brain corals, whose photosynthetic algae require access to sunlight. Instead, the pilings are rich with orange cup corals – exuberant, vivid patches of bright-orange corallites (or calcium carbonate cups) that encrust the cement surfaces.

While reef-building corals get most of their food and a reef-building boost from their photosynthetic algae friends, algae-lacking orange cups have no such fallback. Orange cup corals occur in clusters of a hundred or less rather than the thousands that make up a structure of reef-building corals.

But orange cups compensate for this with exaggerated corallites, intense coloration and thick, fleshy tentacles they extend to troll for the microscopic



Dee Scarr and fish friends

Like clumsy fish-paparazzi, we maneuver for position to shoot pictures while the seahorses sway with the gentle current and try to ignore the whole thing. They look bored. Eventually, we make our way back under the pier to the shallow beach and stone steps of the Kralendijk waterfront to break down our gear and swap stories.

To punctuate my Town Pier night dive, I go back with some friends a few days later to spend a morning with naturalist Dee Scarr. Her "Touch-the Sea"

If Picasso Built a Reef - continued

programs use the pier setting for day-time dives to help people better understand fish and other marine life.

Equipped with jars of sliced hot dog, we settle on the bottom at about 20 feet while she leads us through experiences hand feeding chunks of meat to little four-eye butterflyfishes and bluehead wrasse. They're grabby, especially the butterflyfishes, like tiny, hungry, buoyant Labrador retrievers. No eels are in evidence this day, but Scarr persuades us to pet a scorpionfish she's made friends with – an ugly 10-inch fish best known for the venomous spines it uses to defend against predators and to really, really hurt divers who come in contact with it.

She leads us to a porcelain-white frogfish, a little creature that camouflages itself so well you'd swear it was just a lump of, well, something, not a fish. Most frogfishes are orange or yellow and try to look like a bit of sponge, but this one stands out for being white, except that it still doesn't look like a fish. I try my hand – literally – at persuading some little blue-striped gobyfishes to swarm onto my fingers and clean my nails the way they clean dead scales off bigger fishes. But at this cleaner station, the nature I most come into contact with is the fire coral that constitutes their home base.

Underscoring our tugboat nerves of the night dive, the tugs start their engines while we're down there on this morning and the roar is overwhelming. More than that, sound travels faster in water than in air, but not in discernable directions. At times it seems like they're right above us – an impossibility, since we're well protected on the inside of the L-shaped pier. This goes on for 10 or 15 minutes, until they apparently move off somewhere.

Two things stand out in this daytime visit compared to the night dive. The tires themselves aren't so different but at this moment, in the daylight, they're swarming with brown chromis, little tan damselfish that are busy skimming their way across the rubber surfaces. This is a process called finning, and they're building a nest and laying eggs right on the tires.

In the daylight, the orange cup's corallites are closed up, as are most other coral species during the daytime. But brain or star corals are dramatic even when closed, perhaps more so. Closed up, the orange cups stand out for being so stark and negligible that you'd pass right by them without a serious glance.

Perhaps it's a lesson about not judging things by their surface.