

Piet Boon Bonaire

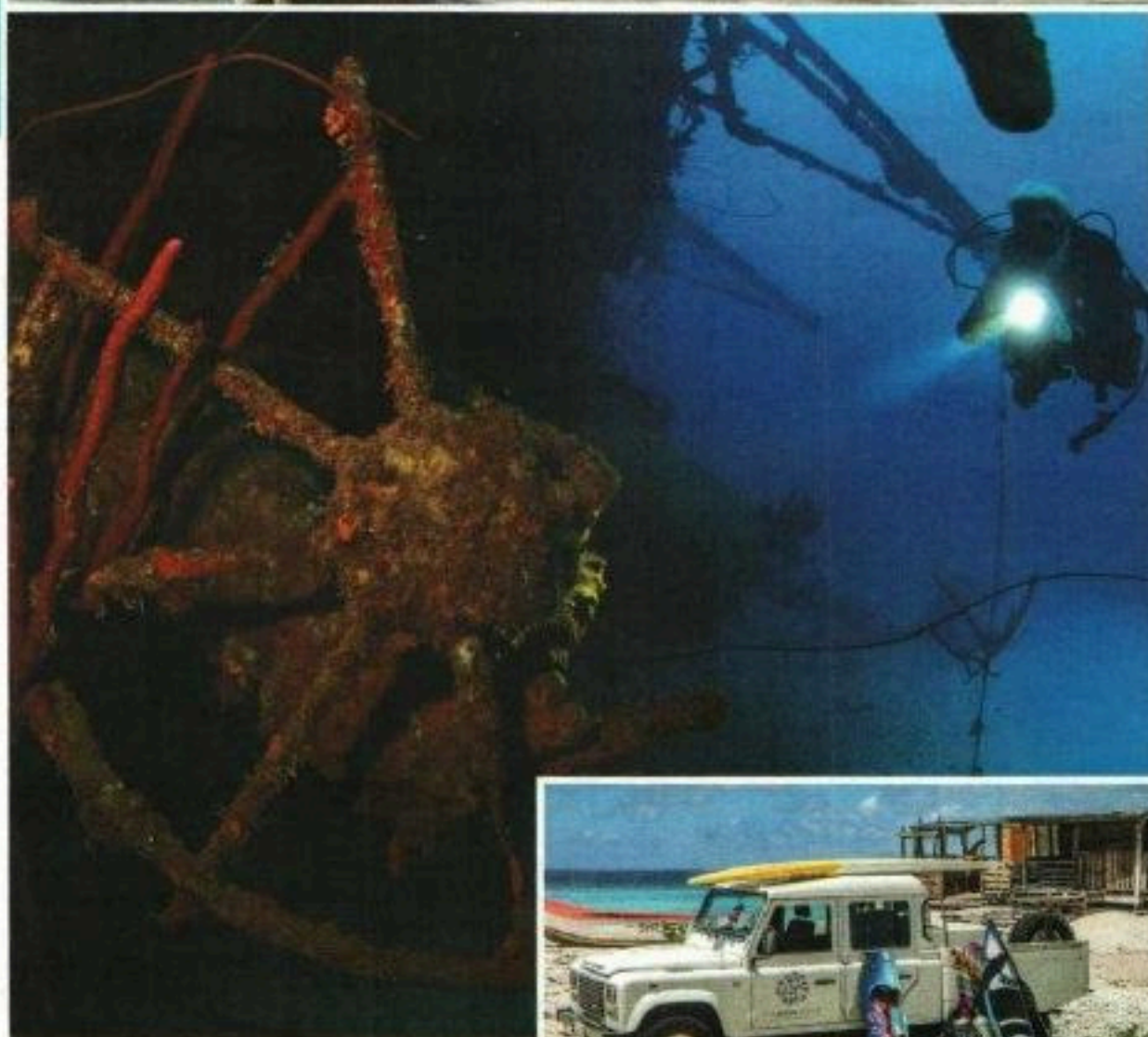
WHAT
Scuba Diving

WHERE
Bonaire

STAY
Piet Boon Bonaire

Fifty miles north of Venezuela, the 114-square-mile Caribbean island of Bonaire has been a sanctuary for divers ever since Captain Don Stewart, a pioneer of diving and reef conservation, arrived in 1962 and named most of the 86 easily accessible sites. One hundred percent of the waters and more than 20 percent of the island are a protected marine sanctuary and national park, which leads to a continued abundance of 350 recorded fish species and at least 57 species of coral in the pristine waters. While many Caribbean dive areas have been destroyed by overuse from fishing, recreation water sports, and high-rise development, Bonaire remains full of life, making every journey underwater remarkable.

Book a weeklong stay and go straight from the plane to your first dive with VIP Diving (vipdiving.com). Allow its dive butler service to take you on private excursions with a maximum of four divers to Bonaire's narrow fringing reef, which practically begins at the shoreline, making these the best 54 shore dives on the planet with easy access and entry. Head to Salt Pier and see the only Caribbean island that has salt mountains like snow. When there are no ships alongside, the area is some of the island's best diving for spotting the chain moray eel. Take a few steps into the water, snorkel out in



the clear aquamarine sea, and descend near the pylons to visit large schools of fish as well as octopi, turtles, tarpon, barracuda, and Caribbean reef squid that gather there.

The next day, visit the bright pink flamingos at Karpata or Gotomeer lagoon, and head to Tolo on the northern part of the island for leisurely dives with massive colorful sponges and corals including blade coral, purple finger sponge, star coral, and elephant ear sponges that make this dive site spectacular. The largest sponges are between 60 and 80 feet, but snorkelers will find coral in abundance as well as juvenile fish. Look for razor-sharp surgeonfish, scorpion fish, honeycomb cowfish, and flounders galore. The



water is warm (about 80 degrees all year), calm, and inviting.

The Dutch island is home to Piet Boon Bonaire (from \$3,500/week; pietboonbonaire.com), a collection of 10 freestanding villas named for its Amsterdam-based architect. Each is inspired by the traditional salt mine workers' homes found on the island, but modernized with a cool gray-neutral palette, contemporary furnishings, high ceilings, and locally sourced materials including wood, coral, and partitions made of bone-colored pebbles and crisp white linens. Each has its own pool; half are located directly on the sea. >