ABC ISLANDS

The ABC islands are Aruba, Bonaire and Curacao. They are the three furthest west islands of the Leeward Antilles, located north of Venezuela in the Caribbean Sea. The ABC’s are still part of The Netherlands but they don’t belong to the EU.

You can visit one of the islands to go diving, or you can island-hop and try get the best of all. If you do stay on one island, then lots of the time you do a ‘drive&dive’. As most of the dive sites are easy accessible from the shore, you drive up yourself. With a pick-up truck, you go to your dive site, marked by a yellow flag, and you go diving. Easy Peasy…

There are not a lot of currents around the islands. They are an easy spot for starting your diving career.

ARUBA

Aruba is the western-most island of the Netherlands Antilles. Its capital is Oranjestad, the city where you fly in and out from.

Aruba has lots of wrecks. Most can be dived on by all level divers. They lie in places with gentle currents and are kinda shallow. The most spectacular one is the Antilla, a 122m/400ft German freighter that was scuttled in 1941. The captain rather sank his ship than let it be confiscated.   
Other good wrecks are the Pedernales, a sunk oil tanker, and the Jane C, a freighter but there are many more. You can also dive 2 airplanes, a S-11 and DC-3, in front of Renaissance Island.  
Logical, lots of people do their Wreck Specialty on this island.

Aruba is also home to 4 types of sea turtles. The Leatherbacks, Loggerheads, Hawksbills and Green Turtles nest on the island. Between May and November, the eggs hatch and return to sea. You can spot these endangered creatures while diving. Please, never ever touch them or harass them! Not on the beach and not while diving.

You can dive Aruba the whole year round. Water temperature varies in between 26C/79F and 30C/86F. Visibility stays good, from 15m/45ft to 30m/100ft. June to October is hurricane season in the area but Aruba is just below it, so it won’t be lots affected. April to June has the calmest weather, from December to March it is rainy season.

BONAIRE

Bonaire is the eastern island of the Leeward Antilles. It is known for having some of the best shore diving spots in the world.

Bonaire is surrounded by beautiful coral reefs, forming the Bonaire National Marine Park. Because the ABC Islands are not in hurricane territory, those reefs are still mostly unharmed by storms and give place to more than 350 types of fish and 57 species of hard and soft coral.   
The bleaching of coral is still close to nothing and the government tries to protect the coral in every way possible. The shore dives even have entry and exit places so you wouldn’t step on the precious coral.  
Every diver entering the Marine Park needs to pay a $25/year fee. There are strict rules which will be explained in an orientation video.

There are 86 dive sites from which 54 are shore dives. Almost everywhere, you can just walk in the water and start diving a reef. Popular is the “Drive&Dive”. You rent a car with gear and tanks, drive up to the dive spot, marked by a yellow flag or stone, and start diving. There are also Drive Thru Fill Stations, places where you swap your one tank for another and drive further to your next dive adventure.

The dive locations are separated in zones. The sites in the north of the island are in the Washington Slagbaai National Park. The dives spots in front of the capital Kralendijk, on central Bonaire, are called the House Reef Dive Sites. They are in front of the houses and hotels. You can almost walk out of your room, directly onto the reef.  
Lac Bay is a shallow lagoon on the southeast of the island. The north of the turquoise bay has a mangrove forest while the east is bordered by a coral reef.   
The south of Bonaire has beautiful saltpans and hundreds of flamingos waiting for you when you come out of the sea.  
Klein Bonaire is a small island, 800m/0.5mi west of Kralendijk. It’s the only place where you need to take a boat to go diving. To protect the coral, all boats need to anchor on buoys. There is no shore diving on the island. Klein Bonaire is famous for its Seahorses and Turtles. Loggerheads, Hawksbills and Green Turtles are protected and monitored. Please, don’ touch or harass the animals while diving, snorkelling or being on the beach.

Bonaire has some wrecks but they are deeper or lesser reachable than the sunken ships of Aruba. Still, there are some and a very popular one, is the Hilma Hooker. The story of this ship reads like a modern fairy-tale. The Hilma Hooker was a freighter, used for smuggling whatever what was necessary, people, alcohol or drugs. In April 1984, it got into trouble before Bonaire. The law enforcement didn’t really trust what was happening and the ship got towed into port. The authorities found more than 12 tons/26.500lb of marihuana. They wanted to wait for the owner to come forward, explain what happened and claim the ship back but the dive schools wanted a wreck. The ship was docked outside the harbour still waiting for the owner when it suddenly sank with everything still inside. The pumps stopped working and in 2 minutes the ship was at the bottom of the sea. Local legends say this sinking got a little help of some divers…

You can dive Bonaire whenever you want. Rainy season is from November till March but that doesn’t mean much. The seas are calmest between June and September. Water temperatures are between 25C/77F and 29C/84F. The average visibility is 30m/100ft.  
Don’t expect to find the big stuff. There are not enough currents for sharks and mantas. But you’ll encounter the cute seahorses and frogfish, colourful nudibranchs, eagle rays and turtles.

CURACAO

Curacao is the middle island of the Leeward Antilles. Divewise, it has both what Aruba and Bonaire offer: wrecks and shore dives. Most dive shops prefer to do boat dives, but unless diving Mushroom Forest and some others dive sites, you can always get there from shore.   
If you’re diving without a guide, you are recommended to take an SMB. Almost all diving is done on the calmer westside of the island.

A popular dive spot is the Superior Producer Wreck. It sank in 1977 just outside of the harbour of Willemstad, Curacao’s capital. The freighter was overloaded with clothes and alcohol for the upcoming Christmas season. The seas were rough and the cargo started shifting, taking the ship down. People on shore were very happy. They all got new t-shirts and pants and were very drunk the next couple of days…  
The ship lies just outside of the cruise ship harbour. No dive boats are allowed to anchor on the mooring. You have to swim out for a couple of minutes before reaching the wreck. Diving is also forbidden when the cruise ships come in and out. Currents can be strong and it is a fairly deep wreck. Only more experienced divers should go and check the ship out.

Another popular site is Mushroom Forest. The movement of the waves made the coral erode at the bottom, shaping them all like mushrooms, hence the name. Now this cover creates a good home or hiding place for lots of marine animals like morays and wrasses.

Curacao has a rainy season from December till March, with some short daily shatters. The trade winds are also a bit harder this time of year. It is low season so diving and accommodation are a lot cheaper.  
Water temperatures range between 26C/79F and 30C/86F. Visibility is always good with an average from 25m/80ft.