

# Bonaire Affair



**A quaint Caribbean island has become both a Dutch architect's ultimate getaway and his ongoing project.**

**BY PIET BOON**

I first went to the Dutch island of Bonaire in the Caribbean in 1980. I really liked the island because it's just beautiful—there were no high rises or streetlights, and it was very easy to get around. Then, in 1990, a Dutch celebrity contacted me to design his house after having read an interview with me in which I said that my dream was “to build a house on the beach.” Back in Bonaire to work for him, I saw that the island hadn't changed that much. I was allowed to stay in his house over Christmas, and that was when I really fell in love.

After that, I built my own house, and then another one and another one. Now I've done 19 houses in Bonaire, all on the beach. They're all designed in the same way, inspired by the local Cunucu houses, yet look very different at the same time. The most important thing is, I build them into the wind, so there's always natural ventilation and cooling. We've done a lot of beach villas on this little corner of the island, Kralendijk, where the water is very shallow and blue. On the island I'm now also known as “Piet Bonaire” or “Boonaire.”

Building in Bonaire is very different for my team as we're used to working in the

U.S. or Asia or Europe, so on the island we don't have all the machines and equipment we usually do. A good illustration of how things work on Bonaire is salt, as a big part of the island is dedicated to collecting salt the old-fashioned way. It takes a month, because that's how long it takes for the seawater to evaporate. It's a very pragmatic way of using natural sources available on-site. We try as much as possible to work with locally sourced materials—something we do with every project, no matter where. They withstand the local climate better. For the homes in Bonaire, for instance, we used a lot of the washed-up coral for the floors.

There's only one bar in Bonaire, and if you go, everyone you know is there. It's a very laidback island. There are still no traffic lights, just a few roundabouts. It doesn't matter who you are, if you're a famous music star or a football player—no one cares, and no one will hang on you or ask for autographs.

*The author is an architect and designer based in Amsterdam. His in-the-works projects include Oosten in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, and 101 Wall Street in Manhattan.*

A residence by Piet Boon on the Caribbean island of Bonaire.