



Caribbean Cool

A trip to Curaçao transcends a day at the beach. BY ELYSE GLICKMAN

WHEREVER THERE'S A TROPICAL ISLAND, images like blue skies, sandy white beaches, palm trees, exotic flowers, sunsets and a silhouetted couple will appear in its promotional materials ... and why not? The formula works well, promising world-weary travelers an escape from the everyday, whether it happens to be in Hawai'i, Tahiti, Indonesia, the Maldives or the Caribbean. Curaçao — which completes the ABC island chain with Aruba and Bonaire in the southern Caribbean — proves no exception. And yes, *of course* it has all of the requisite ingredients, along with golf, spas and waterfront resorts of every description.

While we're discussing water, Curaçao offers a beach for every type of visitor. Playa Lagun and Jan Thiel are noted diving destinations. Easy-going, no-frills Playa Piscado and Playa Grandi in Westpunt (as far west as one can drive) are known for turtles, snorkeling, working fishermen and local patronage. Amenities abound at family-friendly, palapa-lined Blue Bay Beach, Playa Porto Marie (near the town of Sint Willibrordus) and Cas Abao Beach. Kleine Knip, Grote Knip and Playa Kenepa Grandi prove essential for heavenly sunsets, romantic moments and reflection. Adventurous, outdoorsy types and animal lovers, meanwhile, will want to explore trailheads near many of the aforementioned beaches as well as dedicate at least one full day to exploring national nature preserve Christoffelpark via guided safaris or its eight hiking trails.

INFO TO GO

Curaçao International Airport, also known as Hato International Airport, the island's primary airport, lies on the island's north shore about eight miles from the capital, Willemstad. Airlines with routes to the island include American Airlines, JetBlue, United Airlines, KLM, Copa and Air Canada. Visitors staying a week will want to book a car in advance in order to explore the island. Familiar companies such as Alamo, Eurocar and Enterprise have offices at Hato as well as Willemstad.

Most stores and restaurants in Willemstad and resorts accept major credit cards. However, as gas stations and many of the most interesting casual dining spots accept cash only, visitors should withdraw a sufficient amount of the local currency, the Netherlands Antilles guilder.



CURAÇAO KALEIDOSCOPE:
(Left to right) Colorful buildings,
Playa Porto Mari sign, local
paintings at the market, a goat
near a beach, and Papagayo
Beach Club

PHOTOS: © CURAÇAO TOURIST BOARD

LODGING

BAOASE LUXURY RESORT CURAÇAO

Curaçao's pinnacle resort features 23 immaculate suites (some with plunge pools) plus a plush Caribbean-style villa for up to eight guests on its private Isla Kiniw near Spanish Waters Bay.

2 Winterswijkstraat, Willemstad
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RENAISSANCE CURAÇAO RESORT & CASINO

The location at the historic Rif Fort offers a prime spot for those wanting a city getaway, with many of the island's most significant sites, shopping, top restaurants and waterfront activities steps away.

Baden Powellweg 1, Willemstad
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SANTA BARBARA BEACH & GOLF RESORT

The 2,000-acre property brings only-in-Curaçao outdoor pleasures to one gorgeous spot, including a top-tier tennis facility, the Pete Dye-designed Old Quarry Golf Course, excursion packages, a kids' program and, naturally, white-sand beaches.

Santa Barbara Plantation, Porta Blancu, Nieuwpoort
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Surf, sand and nature aside, Curaçao also offers a different kind of paradise for travelers who would never book a beach destination when left to their own devices. The island contains a surprising wealth of museums, a long-established arts scene, cosmopolitan neighborhoods and villages, and a treasure trove of architectural delights. Willemstad's skyline and harbor entry (featuring the Queen Emma floating bridge) received UNESCO heritage status in 1997, since then becoming one of the most photographed capital cities in the world.

Although the famed buildings lining Willemstad's busy Punda neighborhood suggest "Amsterdam by the Sea," the island's cultured personality reveals itself as one strolls down its side streets and ventures into other neighborhoods such as Pietermaai Smal, Scharloo and Otrabanda and villages beyond the city center. In addition to the Dutch, whose first trade ships arrived at the dawn of the 16th century, other groups placed their definitive cultural mark, from the Arawak people who migrated to the island from the South American mainland in centuries prior to Antillean Creole blacks tracing their roots to Africa. East Indian, Surinamese, English, Spanish and French settlers also contributed to the mix defining the island today.

Much of the island's character and cultural institutions, however, result from its Sephardic/Portuguese Jewish community, first arriving in 1651 at the height of the Inquisition.

Although the population today is predominantly Roman Catholic, many people born and raised on Curaçao are keenly aware of what its most prominent Jewish families contributed to their way of life.

"The Jews were welcomed on Curaçao because the Dutch knew they could help build the local economy," says guide Emlyn Pietersz. "They moved on from agriculture during their settlement period into other industries ... providing employment to the locals in the process. They are also credited for bridging the gap between black and white residents and being the glue holding communities together because of their value of teaching everybody to respect one another."

It's a legacy any visitor can appreciate. While Punda makes a natural starting point for a Curaçao vacation with its paint box assortment of galleries, boutiques and cafés, a visit to Mikve Israel Emanuel Synagogue, the oldest temple still in regular operation in the Americas, since 1732, brings depth and context to everything else around it. The adjoining Curaçao Jewish Museum, redesigned during 2018–2019 to be relatable for people from all backgrounds, features a new timeline structure in front of the courtyard entrance that puts the island's entire history in context with the rest of the world.

Scharloo, a short walk over the Wilhelmina Drawbridge, is emerging as Willemstad's boho-chic quarter with its mix

CREATIVE SIDE:
Nena Sanchez Gallery

PHOTO: © CURAÇAO TOURIST BOARD

DINING

DEJA VU

Sophisticated French classics like escargots Bourguignon and Chateaubriand flaunt a Caribbean flourish. Try zesty originals including the Chef's Guacamole Explosion (incorporating *funchi*, a crunchy spinach polenta) and locally caught fish. Fantastic mixology, too.

Pietermaai 80, Willemstad
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FORT NASSAU RESTAURANT

Enjoy locally inspired cocktails and exquisitely prepared dishes, particularly grouper and shrimp, served against a panoramic backdrop of Willemstad and the Bay. Lovingly built into the historic landmark, the venue adds depth to dinner.

Fort Nassauweg,
Willemstad
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GOUVERNEUR DE ROUVILLE RESTAURANT & CAFÉ

Get a bright start to the day in the café with fresh and flavorful breakfast sandwiches and plates and the Handelskade skyline view. The former historic home comes alive at night with its modern approach to Caribbean recipes.

9F De Rouvilleweg,
Otrobanda Waterfront,
Willemstad
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of restored and converted Baroque mansions (including the notable Wedding Cake House, housing the National Archive of the Dutch Caribbean); murals by internationally renowned Curaçao artists Francis Sling and Garrick Marchena; local hangout bars and eateries like Beyglz; and boutiques like Integra Natural, selling handcrafted bath and skincare goods.

It is worth renting a car, meanwhile, to visit Landhuis Bloemhof, a museum outside the downtown core. Under the direction of owner May Alvarez Correa Henriquez, the former plantation transformed into a sprawling and dynamic arts center. After years of training in Europe followed by her own successful career, the writer and patron of the arts set out to provide talented island artists with few resources a place to perfect their craft and display their work. Daughter Nicole Henrique now presides over the museum, which continues May's mission of supporting Curaçao artists as an atelier and display space. It also houses *Cathedral of Thorns*, an internationally acclaimed work in progress led by Dutch artist Herman van Bergen. At the adjoining Number Ten, ranked as the best coffee house outside downtown Willemstad, guests can enjoy exotic warm drinks, fresh-pressed juices and pastries as May and husband Max did amid modern canvases, sculptures, informal garden landscaping and eclectic furnishings.

Other one-of-a-kind cultural institutions include the Kura Hulanda Museum (an emotional experience documenting the African slave trade); the Curaçao Maritime Museum; and Landhuis Rooi Catootje, filled with the belongings of the Maduro family, one of the island's most prominent Jewish families. The adjacent Mongui Maduro Museum & Library contains numerous books and records on Jewish and general Curaçao history in a modern, climate-controlled environment. Those traveling with kids will be delighted to discover the Children's Museum, occupying the former home of one of

the last members of the Maduro family, just a few steps away.

Curaçao's food scene also expresses lush eclecticism and internationalism. Even with an incredible array of restaurants at all price points, visitors should first plan to visit Plasa Bieu (The Old Market — touted as the island's first food hall). Vendors whose families held the various stalls for generations peddle a variety of simple but tasty dishes built from original recipes going back decades. These blend influences from Africa, the Netherlands, Portugal (via the Sephardic Jews) and others. Several fine-dining spots (particularly those listed) and unforgettable casual spots such as La Bohème, Beyglz, Iguana Café, Bali Mixed Asian Lunchroom and Williwood also do a good job of putting the island's captivating melting pot of flavors and influences on display.

As Blue Curaçao orange liqueur is one of the island's most famous exports, it's no surprise the Senior & Co. Distillery is one of the most visited attractions. Beyond samples and branded merchandise, display cases of memorabilia tell the story of another of the island's most prominent Sephardic Jewish families.

Anybody who appreciates live music and craft cocktails, however, will want to dive right in to the local nightlife. While Willemstad hops almost every night of the week, the Thursday night institution, Punda Vibes, infuses an extra shot of adrenaline into a night out. After this wraps for the night or the main restaurants close, the party continues at Mundo Bizarro, where imbibers can kick back on wrought iron chairs or old sofas placed on the sidewalk. As its menu includes a large selection of rum and the ambience evokes 1950s Havana, it's a good place to indulge one's inner Ernest Hemingway. Other fun hangouts include the Blackjack Lounge and Bar, known for its retro tiki creations; the classic rock-themed 27 Bar & Terrace; and Cuba Shango Bar & Lounge.