

Aruba

One Happy Island

Bon Bini to Aruba, where strong Dutch traditions combine with the essence of Latin American charm. While only 20 miles from tip to tip, Aruba is a land of incredible contrasts. The windward coast is rugged and wild—a dry desert scattered with cacti and divi-divi trees permanently twisted at 45-degree angles by the constant trade winds. The scene on the leeward side is remarkably different: a buzzing port boasts first-rate restaurants, luxury boutiques, jewelry emporiums, and modern shopping malls galore. Miles of some of the most inviting beaches in the Caribbean attract swimmers and water-sports lovers alike.

FACTS

ARUBA
+
BONAIRE
+
CURAÇAO
+
ABC ISLANDS
OF THE LESSER
ANTILLES

ARUBA IS JUST 15
MILES OFF THE COAST
OF CENTRAL AMERICA
AT THE EPICENTER OF
SOME WORLD TRADE
ROUTES. ITS STRATEGIC
LOCATION HAS MADE IT AN
IMPORTANT COMMERCIAL
PORT FOR CENTURIES.

IT'S ALWAYS SUMMER
ON ARUBA, AND IT'S
ALMOST ALWAYS DRY.
THE AVERAGE
ANNUAL RAINFALL IS
ONLY 20 INCHES.



Cruise ships dock in Oranjestad, the historic Dutch capital on Aruba's southwestern coast. The city's name is a nod to the Dutch Royal House of Orange-Nassau, the ancient royal family of the Netherlands. Once part of the Netherlands Antilles, Aruba now enjoys independent status within the Kingdom of the Netherlands. However, the lasting Dutch influence is highly visible from the harbor's vantage point. The waterfront is backed by multicolored gingerbread houses with Dutch elements and tropical flair, making for a fantastic photo op from the deck of the cruise ship.

In the harbor surrounding the port, luxury yachts mix with fishing boats painted in splashy hues. Near the dock, vendors set up stalls and proffer an exotic array of fruits, vegetables, and fresh fish. Aruba is known as a shopper's nirvana, and the open-air marketplace merely whets the palates of retail-hungry

visitors. On L.G. Smith Boulevard, which runs along the waterfront, Renaissance Mall, Renaissance Marketplace, and Royal Plaza are filled with imported merchandise. Boutiques are housed in restored Dutch-colonial structures marked by pastel facades and ornate tiled roofs. Tucked inside these architectural gems, extensive collections of fine watches, designer jewelry, diamonds, and colored gemstones can satiate any thirst for luxury.

From the cruise terminal, it's a 10-minute walk into downtown Oranjestad. Visitors who are craving culture should visit the Aruba Historical Museum in Fort Zoutman, the island's oldest structure. The tricolor Willem III Tower was added to the Dutch fort in the late 1800s. Within the restored complex, relics from Aruba's colonial era are on display. Oranjestad's Archaeological Museum (Continued on page 104)



* **ORANJESTAD**
Aruba's charming capital is filled with colorful buildings.

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ROLEX

BEACHES

There's a reason why more than one million people visit Aruba every year.



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focuses on earlier Aruban history, exhibiting artifacts from the Amerindian era, which began roughly 4,000 years ago when the first recorded inhabitants paddled to the island from South America in hollowed-out logs across miles of treacherous ocean.

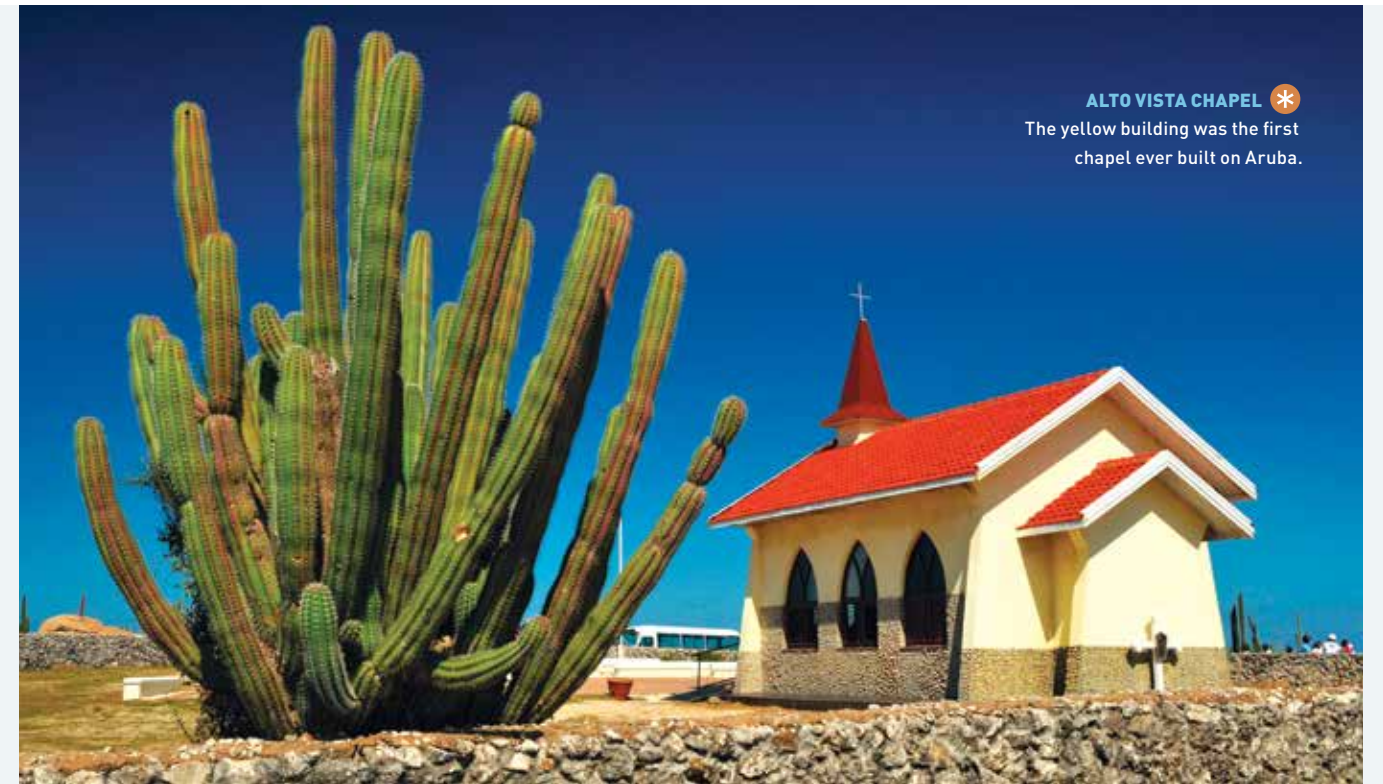
The Amerindians were joined by the Caquetios of the Arawak tribe around AD 1000, and Spanish explorers followed some 500 years later. The Dutch took control of the island in 1636 and held on tight for approximately 350 years, save for a brief period in the early 1800s when the English took over.

The typical modern Aruban has a mixed ancestry, claiming Caquetio, Amerindian, African, and European roots. More than 40 distinct nationalities add to the indigenous melting pot of the Aruban population, which is around 100,000. The cultures have mingled together seamlessly to form “one

happy island”—the Aruban motto. The locals’ extremely welcoming nature helps fuel the tourism industry, which has become the mainstay of the island’s economy.

The cruise industry has a long history with Aruba. In 1957, the island was called on by its first ship, the *Tradewind*. Its cruise guests were welcomed by Aruba’s signature flavor of local hospitality during a festive party at the island’s first luxury hotel, the Aruba Palm Club. Royal Caribbean International began visiting Aruba during the 1970s. More than a half-million cruise guests now pass through the port annually.

In total, more than one million people travel to the island each year to experience its many charms, which are as diverse as its population. Many come for the glorious beaches—sun-kissed strips of white sand cooled by trade winds and lapped by sapphire and teal waters. The southwestern coast is home



ALTO VISTA CHAPEL ✨
The yellow building was the first chapel ever built on Aruba.

to seven miles of such beaches, all of which are open to the public, so there’s a stretch to suit every taste.

For glamorous people watching, head north from Oranjestad along the coast to Palm Beach, a two-mile-long seashore often ranked among the world’s finest beaches, where water-sports concessions, beach bars, restaurants, and shops are all flanked by high-rise resorts and hotels. Malmok Beach is a narrow, sandy stretch backed by sprawling homes. The waters offshore are often dotted with sailboats and catamarans carrying eager snorkelers. Steps away, the secluded Boca Catalina Bay is a superb place to take a private swim.

While the beaches are an obvious choice, there’s so much more to the island than just sun and sand. Aruba’s distinct topography and semi-arid climate allow for an array of activities, many of which aren’t available on other Caribbean islands: ecological explorations, desert safaris, horseback

riding, and undersea and over-water adventures.

The ecological exploration can begin right at Palm Beach. Across from the Divi Aruba Phoenix resort, the Butterfly Farm is a joyous place for visitors of all ages. The tropical garden is aflutter with a multitude of the graceful species’ wings. Arrive early in the morning to witness some of the colorful creatures emerging from their cocoons to take flight for the first time.

At Bubali Bird Sanctuary, a bevy of birds rest their wings in the surprisingly lush vegetation. Both active birders and those just curious will delight in spotting Caribbean parakeets, tropical mockingbirds, blue-tailed emeralds, and possibly even a scrub flycatcher. The man-made wetland is a resting and breeding area for more than 80 species of migratory birds.

Continue the nature tour at the Aruba Aloe Museum & Factory. The influence of the aloe vera plant touches many aspects of Aruban culture, especially [Continued on page 108]

TIPS FOR TRAVELERS

1

Tap water comes from the world’s second-largest desalination plant. Not only pure, it’s considered among the **tastiest in the world**.

2

Because of a **strong undertow** and crashing waves, **swimming on the northern coast is not recommended**.

3

Most restaurants **include a service charge**, which is shared among **servers** and **kitchen staff**.



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GUADIRIKIRI CAVE

The cave features holes in its roof that allow sunlight in, making flashlights unnecessary.

health and healing. It was introduced to the island in 1840, and shortly thereafter, the leafy wonder covered nearly two-thirds of the island. Aloe vera's natural healing qualities are intensified by the southern Caribbean sun and desert-like climate on Aruba. The science behind it all is explained during the tour, the highlight of which is the chance to purchase the soothing lotions and creams. Stock up on pre- and post-sun skincare products. The southern Caribbean sun can be scorching, but the deceptive breeze keeps many visitors from noticing until it's too late.

The ubiquitous 17-mph trade winds affect almost everything on Aruba, right on down to the near-perfect weather. The breeze keeps the temperature hovering around 82 degrees Fahrenheit year-round, drives out the humidity, and keeps the clouds at bay, so rain showers are a rarity. The trades also cause the rough conditions off the windward coast and even stir up the surf in certain areas to the south and east. One end result: some stellar water sports.

Windsurfers and kitesurfers flock to Aruba from around the globe, drawn by the excellent water conditions. Harness the wind's power without getting wet by sailing, parasailing, or even land sailing. Active enthusiasts can also partake in tennis, golf, dune sliding, horseback riding, and other land-bound pursuits.

Twenty-one miles of well-marked hiking trails wind past the most interesting sites in the Arikok National Park, an ecological reserve on the northeastern coast that encompasses 18 percent of Aruba's total landmass. The park showcases a varying cross section of untouched landscapes harmoniously hosting a variety of habitats and their microclimates. A picturesque trail leads travelers by a century-old adobe home known as Cunucu Arikok and oversized stone outcrops marked by ancient rock drawings. Along the Miralamar trail, hikers encounter bicoastal vantage points where the drastic differences between the northern [Continued on page 110]

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Dutch goods such as Delft porcelain, figurines, chocolate, and cheese (like Gouda); skin- and hair-care products made of locally produced aloe.



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Customs allows up to one pound of hard cheese back into the US.



WHERE TO GO

Most Guaranteed shopping can be found along L.G. Smith Boulevard and in the Royal Plaza Mall and the Renaissance Mall.



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ALOE VERA

Since farmers began planting aloe vera on Aruba in 1890, it has influenced everything from art and architecture to health and healing. At one point, the plant covered almost two-thirds of the island's surface.

and southern seaboards are simultaneously visible.

The Caribbean Sea constantly ebbs and flows with fervor against the limestone cliffs on the park's northeastern border. Over time, the pounding waves carved out a series of shallow caverns such as Fontein Cave, where ancient pictographs prove the Amerindians once took shelter there. At the Guadirikiri Cave, two large chambers are punctuated by holes in the roof that allow sunlight to stream in, negating the need for flashlights. The third cavern worth exploring is Huliba Cave, where a heart-shaped entrance earned it the nickname Tunnel of Love.

Tucked into the coastline, small bays known as *bocas* are oases of serenity amid the desert terrain. Dark-blue water fades to a soothing shade of turquoise as it flows into Boca Prins, an inlet sliced from rocky plateaus. At the shore, white sand gives way to brighter sand dunes and undulating green hills studded with exotic cacti and indigenous flora grazed by the occasional goat or donkey. (Continued on page 112)



BULOVA



South Sea Pearls

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Forty-eight species of native trees are represented in Arikok, some of which are so scarce they only grow within the boundaries. The untilled territory offers refuge to native wildlife species; the Aruban whiptail lizard, the Aruban burrowing owl, and the Aruban parakeet all live only on this island.

Aruba's central region is known as the *cunucu*, a quaint countryside filled with curious divi-divi trees, towering cacti, and enigmatic clusters of gigantic boulders of tonalite. The stones in the Casibari and Ayó Rock formations weigh several tons each, yet appear to be haphazardly strewn about the land; this condition perplexed ancient Amerindians and continues to puzzle modern geologists.

Aruba's rugged landscape is an ideal habitat for the world's largest bird: the ostrich. Get acquainted with both ostriches

and their cousins, the emus, at the Aruba Ostrich Farm, just north of Ayó. During the educational tour, visitors learn fun facts about the world's fastest bird and even have an opportunity to hand-feed the not-so-shy critters.

Farther north on the eastern coast, a winding road lined with white crosses leads to the charming, bright-yellow Alto Vista Chapel, the island's first Roman Catholic church. The seaside edifice, built by native Indians and Spanish settlers in 1750 and reconstructed in 1953, exudes a deep sense of tranquillity and history.

At the northwestern tip of Aruba, the California Lighthouse stands guard over land and sea from its cliffside perch. The scenic landmark is named in honor of a ship that sank in 1916 in the rough waters a few miles offshore. The lighthouse offers rewarding 360-degree views of the

rippling sand dunes and weather-beaten coastline to the east and of the marshmallow-white beaches backed by the opalescent blue sea to the west.

Experienced scuba divers can view remnants of the lighthouse's namesake wreck on the seafloor off the northern coast. However, novice divers shouldn't fret; there are more than 20 dive sites—including eight wrecks—in the waters surrounding Aruba, where plentiful coral reefs are swarming with aquatic creatures of all shapes, sizes, and colors. The species that populate the waters are just as diverse [Continued on page 114]

SHORE EXCURSIONS



Let Royal Caribbean's experts help you make the most of your time in port. Refer to the Shore Excursion Guide in your stateroom, tune in to channel 15, or visit the Explorations! desk for more information.

* SEE

ARUBA SEA & SEE ISLAND TOUR

Experience the beauty of Aruba on a tour around the island and under the sea. Cruise on the *Seaworld Explorer*, a semi-submarine with glass windows that allow guests to see amazing sea life and the wreck of the *Antilla*. Return to land and visit the California Lighthouse to get magnificent views of waves crashing on the coast.

* DO

KUKOO KUNUKU PALM BEACH TOUR

Hop onto the Kukoo Kunuku open-air bus for a fun-filled ride to three of Aruba's most famous landmarks. Next, head to Palm Beach for relaxation or adventure.

* EXPLORE

HALF-DAY JEEP ADVENTURE

Experience Aruba's most impressive landmarks in a 4x4 Jeep Wrangler with stops at the Ayo Rock Formation, Natural Bridge, Alto Vista Chapel, and California lighthouse before a refreshing swim at Arashi Beach.

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TURQUOISE WATERS

The waters surrounding Aruba are some of the clearest in the world.

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as the people who populate the island. Divers may encounter queen angelfish, damselfish, lobsters, an array of octopus species, giant ruby sponges, brain coral, sea anemones, sea horses, stingrays, rainbow runners, and more. These factors led *Scuba Diving* magazine, in its 2011 Readers' Choice Awards, to recognize Aruba as the No. 1 wreck-diving and No. 3 advanced-diving destination in the Caribbean.

Off the northwestern coast of Malmok Beach, divers can descend to the wreck of the World War II German freighter the *Antilla*. The 400-foot-long wreck is one of the largest in the Caribbean. Two miles off Malmok Beach, Malmok Reef is a scene of leaf and brain corals, lobsters, stingrays, and huge barrel sponges in purples, oranges, and

greens. *Debbie II*, an intentionally sunk fuel barge where schools of fish often gather, is an added bonus. Farther south, the *Jane Sea* freighter stands on end and extends from the floor straight toward the surface. Divers plunge past the ship's hull and cabins, where sea fans, pillar coral, and brain coral thrive.

The *Pedernales* wreck is the best choice for beginning divers. In 35 feet of water, sizable pieces of an oil tanker torpedoed during World War II are spread out among an underwater garden of coral. Novices can also consider Arashi Reef, located just a half-mile off Arashi Beach. The reef teems with brain coral, large star corals, and many sea fans, as well as parts of a sunken *Lockheed Lodestar*.

Snorkelers can also get in on the undersea action. The man-made lagoon at Baby Beach is protected by a reef brimming with sponges, coral, and tropical fish, making it a popular destination for underwater explorers as well as families with young children.

All snorkelers will find pleasure in the waist-high waters off De Palm Island, where Aruba's endemic blue parrot fish mingle by the dozen. At De Palm, guests can also sunbathe, swim, enjoy the water park and water slides, play a game of volleyball, take a banana-boat ride, and dance to Caribbean and Latin tunes. Much like Aruba itself, De Palm Island offers a diverse array of activities for all visitors to revel in. ☺

best of aruba



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