

# ARUBA

*Gem of the  
Caribbean*



I'll be honest with you: I am not a tropical island person. I am not one of those travelers who picks vacation destinations based on the number of palm trees dotting the landscape or how promising the UV index looks. I don't enjoy tanning, sitting in a beach lounge all day, or never leaving the hotel (but if that's your bag, you certainly can do all of those things in Aruba, and do them well).

When I travel, I like a little variety, education, and exploration. For me, a Caribbean island is an island, as a beach is a beach. If you've laid out on one, you've laid out on all. That's why, when I learned what I am about to tell you, I was completely flabbergasted.

I love Aruba.

My name is Alex and I *love* Aruba.

It's been less than a month since my last trip to this perfect, breezy island, and I have spent much of that time trying to corral friends and family into a trip back.

I know it will happen because this 19x6 mile unicorn of an island is not only a non-island-lover's dream island destination – it's also an island-hopper's paradise. It's got 18 beaches, to-die-for turquoise waters, a great food scene, lots of history, a gorgeous national park, and a friendly vibe. Plus, while the Caribbean is well-known for having hurricanes and hot and humid temperatures, Aruba bests the rest with a location outside of Hurricane Alley. It also boasts year-round average temperatures between 85°F and 89°F, and a crackdown on sticky humidity and mosquitoes, thanks to Aruba's infamous trade winds. That's something I can really get behind.

Literally.







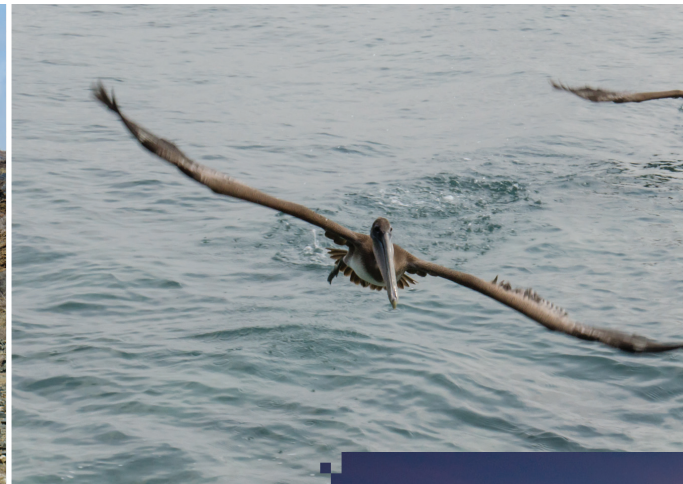
Thanks to the gusty trade winds blowing across the island, Aruba's northwestern coast is one of the best places in the world to learn windsurfing. So I did. I'll tell you right now that I have the upper-body strength of a toddler, a core made of cooked spaghetti, and some serious issues keeping my balance. When my taxi dropped me off at **Aruba Active Vacations**, I was nervous. I'd never windsurfed or even worn water socks before. My nerves calmed down when I saw a middle-aged man and his single-digit-aged son in my lesson group. After the hour-long lesson, I was still a little confused and wobbly, but after about 10 minutes of unsupervised attempts, I made sense of it all. I was having so much fun, they practically had to drag me out of the water. (If you use this company, bring a towel and cash to tip your instructor – and be prepared to go home in wet clothes, as there's no changing facility.)

After my windsurfing lesson, I spotted an "I ♥ Aruba" sign parked on the limestone edge of **Malmok Beach's** coast. From the shell and

broken coral "beach" area, you also have a clear view of the sunken **SS Antilla**, a German cargo ship scuttled by her own crew in April of 1939. It's the third largest shipwreck resting on the floor of Caribbean waters, and thanks to colonization by local sponges, crustaceans, fish, and coral over the years, she's a favorite for dives and snorkels.

**Baby Beach** (which is actually a man-made lagoon) is another snorkeling favorite. Located on the laid-back southeastern tip of the island, it's got powder-soft sand, a long stretch of shallow water perfect for families and fish, beach loungers, and a refreshment stand. It's about a 45 minute drive from the main drag of Palm Beach's high-rise hotel zone. If you are short on time, join a 6½ hour **ABC Tours Aruba Jeep Safari** that stops by Baby Beach, with time for snorkeling and swimming. It also stops at the breathtaking and secluded **Andicuri Beach** where daredevils can cliff jump while others take a dip in the wavy sea or rest on the beach.





I joined the half-day tour of the **Natural Pool**, and despite trepidation from the owner, I hopped behind the wheel of a company Land Cruiser, switching gears between the smooth city streets to the jumps and bumps within the **Arikok National Park**. Considered a national treasure, Arikok National Park showcases a stunning arid landscape full of volcanic rock, impossibly beautiful limestone coasts, a historic gold mill, and a host of indigenous reptiles and bird life. Spending a day kicking up dust and swimming in a small-and-slippery rock pool inside Arikok became a highlight of my trip – even if my back didn't agree.

No matter what shenanigans I got into on the island, I always made sure to be back in time for the infamous happy hour at **Bucuti & Tara Beach Resort**. Familiar faces lined the bar, smiling and sipping on frozen cocktails (beware, the default rum is not gluten-free),

waiting to watch the blazing sun set out across a wide stretch of **Eagle Beach**. Rooms here are clean and comfortable with stocked minibars, an air purifier, humidifier, robes, Aruba Aloe bath products, and even in-mirror TVs in the bathroom. Ditch the plastic bottles. They can't be recycled on the island anyway. Instead, use Bucuti's free, reusable metal water bottles. The tap water in Aruba is some of the best drinking water in the world. Have at it.

My best hotel find was their **Elements Restaurant**. Presented on an iPad, the menu is actually designed to be restrictive diet-friendly. It features a wide variety of gluten-free, organic, natural, vegetarian, vegan, and dairy-free items that go way beyond the expected pasta and salad options to include spicy Asian-style beef skewers, duck breast with orange sauce, potato leek soup, and more. And everything is delicious.








As hard as it was to peel myself away from the menu here, I was surprised to find a few more spots with great gluten-free options. If you are looking for some authentic Dutch-style pancakes, hit up **Linda's Dutch Pancakes and Pizzas**. This small, unassuming spot has sweet and savory crepe-style pancakes with dairy-free and gluten-free options.

For a somewhat-still-local spot, you can stop by **Zeerovers** in **Savaneta** that serves up fish so fresh you'll have to smack it. The menu here is simple. Catch of the day by the piece or pound, local shrimp, fries, fried plantains, and onions in vinegar are the only items up for grabs. The batter-less goods are fried in large barrels of oil, served with a lime slice and hot sauce, and enjoyed on communal picnic tables that overlook the bay. If you're lucky, you can watch the fisherman bring in the catch off the back docks while you soak in the vibrant atmosphere and sip a beer (sorry folks, no cider here).

While I normally prefer to go off-path for restaurants when traveling, I couldn't resist checking out the hot stone restaurant **Le Petit Café**. To my delight, all of the hot stone menu items – like lobster, chicken, shrimp, and steaks – and their accompanying sides (hold the fries!) are gluten-free. What's better is that if you make your request clear, they will prepare your meal in a different area, with clean utensils. Plus, the brother and sister owners are open to feedback and questions regarding gluten-free diners, so if you haven't had a sizzling, hot stone meal before, now's the time.

Next time you're mapping out a getaway and want to explore an island, you know my suggestion! My name is Alex and I love Aruba. 



**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:**

**Katherine Alex Beaven** is a writer/photographer and world traveler. Whether on assignment or on vacation, Alex can usually be found at the nearest food cart or restaurant sniffing out the local gluten-free goodies. Her photography site, [katherinealex.com](http://katherinealex.com), features some of the wildlife, landscapes, and portraits she's taken along the way.