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U-S AIRWAYS

Magazine



★
**ONE
HAPPY
ISLAND**
ARUBA'S
WELL-DESERVED
SLOGAN

Oranjestad
architecture
and (right)
Boca Prins
beach in
Arikok
National Park



Little Island, Big Presence

ARUBA

Why does an island only 20 miles long boast one of the highest numbers of repeat visitors in the Caribbean? Read on.

By Jeff Book | Photos by Chris Rogers

If Aruba had an origin myth, it might start with this declaration: “In the beginning was the breeze.” The island’s ever-present trade winds shaped its landscape and development.

They give Aruba its reliably balmy weather. And they explain why the man helming our snorkel cruise has just warned us to hang on to our stuff. “If you lose something overboard, call one of the crew,” advises Robertson Thomas, flashing a brilliant smile. “We’ll help you wave goodbye to it.”

The irrepressible Thomas is a master at getting visitors to cut loose. Halfway through the cruise, he has a conga line snaking around the deck to hip-shaking music. In the steady breeze, the big Pelican Adventures catamaran sails along at a good clip. Or so it seems, until a flock of windsurfers overtakes us as if we’re dead in the water. Streaking back and forth across our bow, shooting into the air to carve 180-degree turns, they seem to be competing to see who can have the most fun. These are not your average board jockeys; they’re international champions from neighboring Bonaire and the stars of a documentary called *Children of the Wind*, premiering at the Aruba International Film Festival.

Aruba has a way of making almost any visitor feel like a child of the wind, the beach, and the turquoise sea. For me that feeling began as my

plane approached the airport, gliding low past Oranjestad’s sherbet-colored buildings, over sailboats anchored in water so clear that the boats cast inky shadows on the white-sand bottom. Aruba’s location — about 17 miles from Venezuela, out of the hurricane belt — gives it a nearly constant supply of warm, sunny days. It’s one of the Caribbean’s most-visited islands, offering virtually any diversion the modern traveler might want, from sushi to slot machines to

submarine rides. And if your ambitions begin and end with lazing by the water, sipping a cold Balashi beer, the local brew — well, that’s fine, too.

I expected Aruba to have plenty of inviting hotels, spas, shops, and restaurants. But only after landing did I realize how closely concentrated these establishments are on the leeward side, primarily in Oranjestad and along the northwest coast, with its

miles of pristine sand. The scene here contrasts dramatically with the eastern, windward coast, where waves crash against rocky bluffs and the juxtaposition of sea and desert recalls Baja California. Nature has determined what now seems to be savvy planning, leaving much of the land lightly developed. And although Aruba’s slogan, as seen on license plates, is One Happy Island, I think of it

as having two faces: Mild and Wild.

It’s easy to experience both on an island that’s only 20 miles long. Nearly 20 percent of it is preserved in Arikok National Park, which features a rugged, surf-scoured coast, sand dunes, caves, and rolling hills dotted with dense scrub and tall candleabra cactuses. Hikers and mountain bikers avidly explore this dramatic landscape. Climbers scramble

Clockwise from below: the Butterfly Farm, kitesurfing and sailing on the northwest coast, and fresh-caught red snapper with funchi



DRRESS COURTESY OF MONKEES GREENSBORO. JEWELRY COURTESY OF CANDY RASHMUN-REINO





Clockwise from top left: Aruba Ariba, a local cocktail; vendor selling fresh coconut; gouda wheels; and the shrimp, swordfish, and lobster special at Pincho's

up its rock formations, startling sleepy iguanas. Non-mountaineers can ascend narrow paths to reach the tops of the main promontories and their panoramic views.

I opted for an ABC Tours jeep safari, bouncing over dirt roads to the frothy east coast as the driver narrated the scenery and made a few noteworthy stops. At one stop we ambled down a meandering walkway to take a dip in the Natural Pool, a rock-bound bowl filled by surging waves. We gazed upon stony Mount Jamanota, Aruba's highest point at 620 feet. We admired wind-sculpted divi-divi trees, leaning leeward like green weather vanes or giant bonsai. And we stopped at the park's visitor center to learn about its natural history and the cave paintings left by the earliest natives, the Arawak Indians.

The Spanish, arriving in approximately 1500, bemoaned Aruba's lack of arable land and precious metals, dubbing it an *isla inútil* — a useless island. For most of its history, Aruba was a Dutch possession, which accounts for Oranjestad's scalloped gables and the presence of gouda and delftware in its shops. Aruba has now enjoyed a quarter-century of autonomy within

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the Dutch kingdom. The Dutch connection also helps explain the island's modern infrastructure and education system.

Most Arubans speak Dutch, Spanish, English, and Papiamentu, a widely used creole mélange of Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, and English. They take pride in the pervasive spirit of *bon bini* (Papiamentu for "welcome"). This sounds like tourist hype, but I encountered so much genuine good cheer that I began to think there was something in the (pure, desalinated) water. The 100,000-plus residents of this Caribbean crossroads represent more than 40 nationalities, and they all seem glad to be here. One happy island, indeed.

Sample the culinary counterpart to Papamien-to's linguistic gumbo at the Queen's Restaurant, popular with locals and tourists alike. It's a good place to try local specialties such as the polenta-like *funchi*, hearty *keshi yena* (Dutch cheese stuffed with meat, vegetables, and spices and baked), and satisfying *stobas* (stews). The island's savory flavors include the native Madame Jeanette chili pepper, closely related to the fiery habanero and Scotch bonnet.

Aruba is known for the quality and variety of its



WARDROBE BY CALYPSO/COURTESY OF LAFORCE STEVENS

Clockwise from right: the Natural Pool, Guadirikiri Cave, aloe plant, and jeep tour in Arikok National Park

restaurants. Naturally, fresh seafood abounds. At the Old Fisherman in Oranjestad, it's served with a minimum of fuss and a side order of soccer on the bar TV (locals root for Dutch and Spanish teams). Grouper with an apricot-ginger sauce is a signature dish at Pincho's, an intimate, open-air eatery at the end of a pier. The surefire plan here: Watch the sunset over drinks, then linger over dinner in the spot that radiated romance in an episode of *The Bachelor*. The refined French fare at Papillon includes an appetizer of cured duck breast with

asparagus, walnuts, and mixed greens; a succulent herb-crusted rack of lamb; and a tarte tatin with a tropical twist.

The island's lively nightlife ranges from dance clubs and hotel casinos to martini bars, rum bars, and cigar bars. As in Las Vegas, the casinos present live entertainment in their lounges. The entertainment factor spikes during film and music festivals, concerts by visiting artists, and Aruba's very popular carnival (held in February). Perennial favorite Moomba Beach, on hotel-lined Palm Beach, offers food and drink in a thatched-roof setting by day; at night a friendly crowd gathers to dance on the sand to DJ-spun tunes.

Balancing glitzy attractions are charming, kid-friendly ones like the Butterfly Farm, an enchantment of colorful specimens fluttering around a shady, enclosed garden. Or the Aruba Ostrich Farm, where the big birds strut and fan their feathers like leggy showgirls. And there's California Lighthouse, near the northern tip of the island (after relishing its views, relax at the beautiful and rarely crowded Arashi Beach).

Oranjestad's designer boutiques and jewelry stores score with those who consider shopping a form of recreation. (Tip: Look for lotion made from

Arikok National Park features a surf-scoured coast, sand dunes, caves, and hills dotted with dense scrub and tall candelabra cactuses.

island-grown aloe vera, a soothing souvenir.) More active types hit the water for some of the world's best windsurfing, kitesurfing, and wreck diving. Along with coral reefs teeming with marine life, Aruba offers divers easy-to-reach sunken ships, some as shallow as 30 feet. The gin-clear water means that even snorkelers can see deep-sixed vessels like the *Antilla*, a 400-foot German freighter scuttled by its captain to elude Dutch marines during World War II. Ocean fun extends to day sails, kayaking,

and deep-sea fishing, while land options include horseback rides, beach tennis, and the Tierra del Sol links, a lauded Robert Trent Jones Jr. course with lush greens planted amid cactuses and boulders.

It's easy to see why tiny Aruba has one of the Caribbean's highest percentages of repeat visitors. The island beckons with its wonderful, breezy climate, its mix of urbane comfort and raw nature, and its broad appeal to everyone from singles and honeymooners to families and retirees. But something else is going on here. After decades of tourism and legions of visitors, the island's people retain their own language, culture, and sense of pride. That translates into the kind of genuine hospitality that keeps people coming back. And each time they return, they're greeted with a welcome as warm as the tropics. ✦

Jeff Book is a freelance writer and frequent contributor to this magazine. He has written for many publications, including Four Seasons and Southern Living. You can read more of his work at jeffbook.net.

Ocean-side Lodging

Hotels are concentrated on the northwest coast — low-rise on Eagle Beach, high-rise on Palm Beach. A sampling of island inns:

RADISSON ARUBA RESORT
This fully renovated, AAA Four Diamond property on Palm Beach feels like a tropical oasis, with palm-lined pools, a casino, and a top-rated spa (with a signature aloe vera-and-rum massage). radisson.com/aruba

BUCUTI BEACH RESORT
A low-rise, adults-only boutique hotel on Eagle Beach geared to sustainable practices and barefoot elegance, including the option of a couple's massage or a romantic dinner under a beach palapa. bucuti.com



RENAISSANCE ARUBA RESORT
Set amid the sights and shops of Oranjestad, this large, lively AAA Four Diamond hotel features separate adult and family-friendly accommodations, a port-side pool, spa, casino, and a 40-acre private island, complete with water sports, hammocks, and flamingos. renaissancearuba.com



SHOTS COURTESY OF TEVA

