

Aruba, Bonaire & Curaçao

Slaves, Dutch traders, Indians, pirates and more have all contributed to the rich and unique stew that is the ABCs: Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao. Close to Venezuela and South America, these small islands are far away in every other sense. Although they have long been on the trade routes, they are not like the islands of the Eastern Caribbean either, as they have a heavy Spanish influence on top of the Dutch and African.

And just as you start generalizing about all three you have to stop, as they are really quite different. Aruba is the kid who opens the door for others – in this case hundreds of thousands of tourists a year who find winter refuge on its fine beaches. Bonaire is the kid who blows off school. Ringed by some of the most fabulous reefs on the planet, it concentrates on its natural pleasures. Meanwhile, Curaçao is busy working hard to play hard. It mixes commerce with Unesco-recognized old Willemstad and a coast of hidden beaches.

These differences, plus others like wealth and population size, have brought the ABCs to where they are today: three very separate places going in their own directions. Once unified as the Netherlands Antilles, these three islands in the Lesser Antilles are now busy growing up and finding their own identities. You may wish to get acquainted with all three.

FAST FACTS

- **Area** Aruba: 181 sq km; Bonaire: 285 sq km; Curaçao: 471 sq km
- **Capital** Aruba: Oranjestad; Bonaire: Kralendijk; Curaçao: Willemstad
- **Country code** Aruba: ☎ 297; Bonaire: ☎ 599; Curaçao: ☎ 599-9
- **Departure tax** Aruba: included in ticket; Bonaire: international US\$20, interisland US\$6; Curaçao: international US\$22, interisland US\$7
- **Famous for** Aruba: beaches; Bonaire: diving; Curaçao: city and rural charm
- **Language** Dutch, Spanish, English, Papiamentu
- **Money** Aruba: Aruban florin (Afl); Bonaire & Curaçao: Netherlands Antillean guilder (NAf or ANG); US\$1 = Afl1.79 = NAf1.78 = €0.65 = UK£0.51
- **Official Names** Aruba; Bonaire; Curaçao
- **People** Arubans; Bonairians; Curaçaoans
- **Phrase** Bon bini (Welcome!)
- **Population** Aruba: 104,000; Bonaire: 14,500; Curaçao: 138,000
- **Visa** Most nationalities do not need a visa for a 90-day stay on each of the islands; see p812



HIGHLIGHTS

- **Bonaire's Reefs** (p799) Enjoy Unesco-recognized natural beauty from your hotel's back dock
- **Arashi Beach** (p791) Savor the least-touristed of Aruba's many fine white beaches
- **Willemstad** (p802) Immerse yourself in Unesco-recognized Dutch colonial heritage, with the grit of a busy port town
- **Curaçao's Beaches** (p809) Explore hidden beaches on the jagged west coast, all linked by a road through lush lands
- **Nighttime Kralendijk** (p797) Sample the wonderful little restaurants and bars of Bonaire's village of a capital

ITINERARIES

- **Three Days** Pick one of the ABCs and stay there, as this is the minimum time required to enjoy any of the three islands.
- **One Week** Either have a very relaxing time on one island or try two, depending on your taste.
- **Beaches and Diving** Decide you're going to find your favorite beach and dive spot on each island and then compare and pick your best of all three. Take as long you can; two weeks would be a start but a month is really the minimum. Lucky you!

CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

Average temperature for the ABCs year-round is a perfect 28°C (82°F). High noon is a bit warmer and at night it can get breezy, but mostly you'll be fine in shorts and T-shirt. The islands are fairly dry, averaging a little over 1in (2.5cm) of rain per month. Much of this falls from September to early December. The islands usually miss the Caribbean hurricane season, although

a couple passed to the north in 2007 and dumped a lot of water.

As always, when you go depends on how cold you are. If you just have to warm up December to April, then you can join the crowds during high season. Otherwise, the islands are more accessible and rates much cheaper other times of the year. The high season for cruise ships runs October to April. Outside of these times the port towns can be almost sleepy.

HISTORY

For information on Aruba's, Bonaire's and Curaçao's history, see p780, p792 and p799, respectively.

THE CULTURE

If Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao were named, say, Moe, Larry and Curley and their initials were MLC, it might be easier for outsiders not to link them so closely. For despite their proximity geographically and alphabetically, the cultures of the three islands have many differences, mainly due to their history after colonization.

Bonaire was populated with a few thousand African slaves who worked the salt flats. After slavery ended, their descendants lived quiet lives farming and raising animals, largely ignored by the world. Not until the explosion of postwar tourism and scuba diving did the island open itself to the outside. The result is a large island with a small population of African-Caribbeans rooted in traditional ways, yet welcoming of the opportunity brought by travelers from around the world.

Curaçao was also populated by African slaves, but its superb port drove its economy after slavery ended and the cultural roots today are a mix of African-Caribbean, Latin American and European. Willemstad is at times relaxed, frenetic and buttoned-down. The population is growing and there's money to be made. Out in the country – increasingly the home of commuters – traditional ways of life are fading.

Aruba had neither resources to exploit nor any geographic advantage, so it was large ignored during the colonial era. Here the indigenous population survived and were later joined by immigrants from Latin America looking for work in the refinery and Dutch people who were simply looking for sun. It feels new and it largely is, with wealth coming

HOW MUCH?

- **Tanks of air for a week of diving on Bonaire** US\$200
- **Aruba beach access** Free
- **Tour of Curaçao's harbor** US\$20
- **Cold beer** US\$2 to US\$3
- **Night at beach resort** US\$100 to US\$300

DAG NETHERLANDS ANTILLES

In Dutch 'dag' means goodbye and that's what's happening to the Netherlands Antilles. Really nothing more than grab-bag of Dutch holdings in the Caribbean, it never was an entity that had popular appeal. Islanders always saw themselves as residents of their island first.

The Netherlands Antilles was always destined for a break-up and laws were written to allow this. Aruba flew the coop first, in 1986, and never looked back. It is an independent country within the Netherlands, which effectively means it's autonomous but saves a lot of money on operating embassies, having a military and the like. The other five island-nations within the NA began holding votes and talks about their future in 2005. By 2008 it was clear: the NA was being disbanded. Curaçao and Sint Maarten are going the route of Aruba. Bonaire, Saba and Sint Eustatius are going much closer to the Netherlands and will effectively be municipalities of Holland and nice warm, beautiful ones at that.

from the one million visitors who arrive each year. Still there is a bit of island culture to be found and locals love a good gossip session fueled by rum.

Because of these differences, the ABCs have never been close. Politically they were linked within the Netherlands Antilles, but with the dissolution of that political entity (above) they are more separated than ever.

ARTS

The main form of art on the ABCs is music. Here it takes on a vibrant mix of European, African and new forms. No style is sacred and improvisation is the rule. At times you'll hear Creole, blues, jazz, rock, pop, rap and more. Some songs combine all of these elements and more. Making music is popular and many people on the islands play in small groups with friends and relatives. No social gathering of any significance is complete without some live music.

The best architecture on the islands is the Caribbean-colored old Dutch colonial styles, with their thick walls defending against the heat. An excellent place to see this architecture in its purest form is at the restored Hotel Kura Hulanda (p805) in Willemstad, Curaçao.

Modern buildings tend to be utilitarian. The only flair in architecture you'll find is in buildings such as resorts for tourists, although here the styles can range from the derivative of traditional styles to modern styles with no roots or context in the ABCs.

ENVIRONMENT Wildlife

The ABCs are primarily arid, with cactuses and other hardy plants that can make do with the minimal rainfall each year. Reptiles –

especially huge iguanas – are the main creatures native to the land. However, each island has mangroves in some parts and these attract more birds than the islands do tourists. Some of the species are quite spectacular, from Bonaire's flamingos to the brightly colored parrots found everywhere.

In the water is where the ABCs are truly rich in life. Coral reefs grow in profusion along the lee coasts of all three islands, especially Bonaire. Hundreds of species of fish and dozens of corals thrive in the clear, warm waters. Sharks, dolphins and rays are among the larger creatures swimming about.

Environmental Issues

All three of the ABCs suffer from an ongoing shortage of fresh water, which mostly comes from desalination plants. The reef concerns common throughout the region are germane here as well. See p48 for details.

Aruba's most visible environmental woe is the puffing stacks of the oil refinery at the south end of the island, although smog also comes from world's second-largest desalination plant, south of the airport, which roars away 24/7. Locals have pressed for growth controls that balance the island's healthy economy with its limited water and other resources. This has slowed but by no means stopped the development of hotels and condos on the long strip to the north. At busy times, roads through Oranjestad are jammed. The waters around Aruba are for the most part quite clean; diving and swimming are good. Many hotels feature tropical birds, such as parrots, in small cages where guests pointedly ignore the 'Don't Touch' signs. These sociable birds are not meant to be cooped up.

Bonaire has few major environmental concerns. Protections of the marine park are strict and any environmental damage from the salt ponds is limited mostly to the ponds themselves. Green initiatives include a plan to finally put all that wind to use producing electricity, a new program to discourage plastic bag use, and the replacement of septic tanks with sewers.

One only has to glimpse the *Mad Max*-like array of blazing pipes and belching stacks to know that the number one environmental issue on Curaçao is air and water pollution from the Venezuelan-run oil refinery and other industry built on the inner harbor (Schottegat) of Willemstad. Given the importance of these installations to the local economy, efforts to control their negative effects are modest at best. The growing traffic problem and exhaust-spewing diesels means that getting stuck in a traffic jam is both a possibility and very unpleasant.

FOOD & DRINK

Because of the arid conditions, food in the ABCs has always been hearty. Thick stews made with meats such as goat and chicken, and vegetables such as okra and squash, have been predominant. Spices were used to give things variety. The Dutch brought a love of cheese, but dishes made with this have mostly always been a special treat.

Even today most fruits and vegetables are imported. Seafood, however, is common and good, especially shellfish. While a huge array of foods is available in places geared toward visitors, locals have been quick to forsake goat stew and an appetite for fast food has exploded. Traditional food includes the much-loved *funchi* (fungi elsewhere in the region), which is based on corn meal, *cabrito* (goat), curries and fish.

Dutch and American brands dominate the ABC beer market. However Aruba's Balashi can be found throughout the island where it is popular because it is *not* Dutch or American, but rather local. You will at times see it on Bonaire and Curaçao as well. It is a typically light pilsner-style lager.

ARUBA

When you see a Nathan's hot dog vendor on the beach and groups of men going orgasmic when the New York Giants make a

three-yard gain, you could be forgiven for thinking you're in New York, albeit a much warmer version. Indeed it is Americans from the east coast fleeing winter that make Aruba the most touristed of the ABCs.

And that's not really surprising given that it has miles of the best beaches, plenty of package resorts and a compact and cute main town, Oranjestad, which is ideally suited for the two-hour strolls favored by day-tripping cruise-ship passengers. It's all about sun, fun and spending money (lots of money – it's an expensive island).

But venture away from the resorts and you'll find that Aruba offers more. At the island's extreme ends are rugged, windswept vistas and uncrowded beaches. Arikok National Wildlife Park is an alien landscape of cactuses, twisted *divi-divi* trees and abandoned gold mines.

Mostly, however, Aruba is a place to do as little as possible. It wears its hospitality on its sleeve and in the national anthem, which includes the unlyrical line 'The greatness of our people is their great cordiality.'

History

Humans are first thought to have lived on Aruba some 4000 years ago. Spain claimed the island in 1499, but its inhospitable arid landscape provoked little colonial enthusiasm and the native Arawaks were largely left alone. The Dutch took claim in 1636 and, except for a British interlude in the early 19th century, have maintained control since.

Prosperity came to the island in the form of the huge oil refinery built to refine Venezuelan crude oil in the 1920s. This large complex occupies the southeastern end of Aruba and dominates the blue-collar town of San Nicolas. Jobs at the plant contributed to the development of a local middle class. Automation meant workers had to look elsewhere, and the island has successfully transferred its economy from dependence on refining oil to relaxing tourists.

The three islands of the ABCs have never been chums, and Aruba was able to leverage its affluence to break away from the rest of the Netherlands Antilles and become an autonomous entity within the Netherlands in 1986. Talk of achieving full independence has not become anything more than that: talk.

Aruba made an unwanted media splash in the US starting in 2005 when an Atlanta teenager disappeared while on holiday. The

resulting controversy has left deep scars on the island (see p784).

Orientation

Smallest of the ABCs in landmass, Aruba is not quite 30km long and 9km wide. Life is centered on Oranjestad. Almost all the hotels and resorts stretch north from here along Eagle and Palm Beaches. The far north is classically barren and windswept, and is dominated by the California Lighthouse. In the south of the island there are various industries interspersed with some good beaches. Inland you'll find the homes of ordinary Arubans scattered throughout the low rolling brown hills known in Papiamentu as *cunucu* (country). The east features the wilds of Arikok National Wildlife Park, and much rugged and inaccessible shoreline.

Driving the length of the island when there is little traffic takes about 40 minutes. Road signs – especially street signs – and building numbers are scarce.

Getting There & Away

Flights to Aruba land at **Reina Beatrix International Airport** (AUA; ☎ 297-582-4800; www.airport.aruba.com); for information, see p813. Airlines flying between the ABC islands change frequently; see p814.

Getting Around

If you just want to stay at your hotel with only a few forays into Oranjestad and perhaps a hotel-arranged tour, then you won't need a car. Taxis and local buses will get the job done; however, buses don't travel to the more extreme parts of the island to the north, east or south, or into Arikok National Wildlife Park. For freedom to explore Aruba, a car – at least for a couple of days – is essential.

BUS

The **main bus depot** (Lloyd G Smith Blvd) is right in the center of Oranjestad. **Arubus** (☎ 297-588-0616) buses 10, 10A and 10B serve the hotel areas from Oranjestad. Buses run every 15 to 30 minutes from 6am to 11:30pm and cost US\$1.30 one way. Buses 1 and 8 link Oranjestad to the airport every 30 to 60 minutes.

Buses do not go to the rugged parts of the island to the north, east or south, or into Arikok National Wildlife Park.

CAR

You'll know the tourists not only by the V-registrations of their rental cars but also by their actual use of turn signals. All the major car-rental companies have offices at the airport. It's worth comparing prices with local outfits, including the following:

Economy Car Rental (☎ 297-583-0200; www.economyaruba.com)

Optima Rent-A-Car (☎ 297-582-4828; www.optimarentacar.com).

TAXI

Taxis are easy to come by at hotels and resorts. Fares are set for fixed distances. From the airport to the High-Rise Resorts costs US\$25, for example. Extra passengers cost US\$2 and you can charter a taxi for touring for US\$45 per hour.

ORANJESTAD & THE NORTH

Oranjestad (pop 27,000) is a large island town that combines a mix of local commerce with the breathless pursuit of visitor business. It's an interesting place to wander around, if for no other reason than the glimpse of daily Aruban life it provides. But when the cruise ships are in port, it is best to stay well clear as everything is jammed.

At other times, there's an appealing mix of old and new structures intermingled with scads of shops, bars and restaurants. At night when the boats have reabsorbed their passengers the town is quiet.

Almost all of Aruba's hotels and resorts are northwest of town. This area has wide roads, lush landscaping and excellent beaches. It's really a world unto itself, similar to beachside developments found the world over.

Orientation

It's hard to get anywhere on Aruba without passing along Lloyd G Smith Blvd, Oranjestad's main street and the central island artery linking the tourist resorts of the north with the airport to the south. Little in Oranjestad is more than a 10-minute walk from the Yacht Basin in the town center.

Large tourist developments begin less than 3km north of Oranjestad's center. Both conveniently and accurately, the hotels and condos along Eagle Beach are known as the Low-Rise Resorts. A rapidly developing area stretching for

ARUBA

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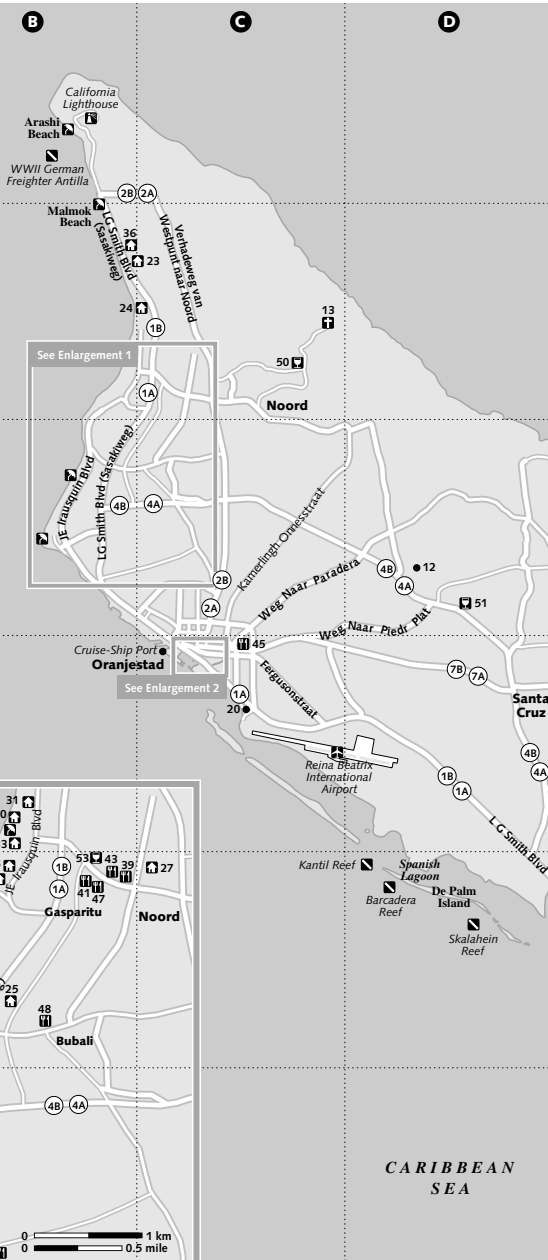
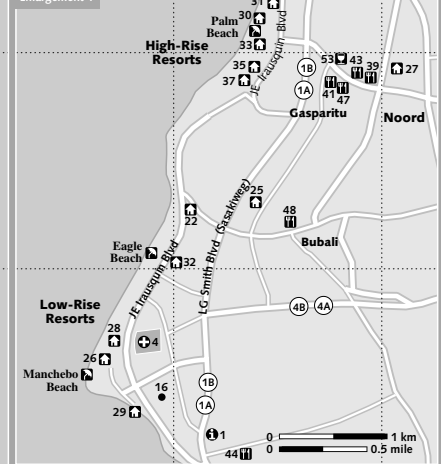
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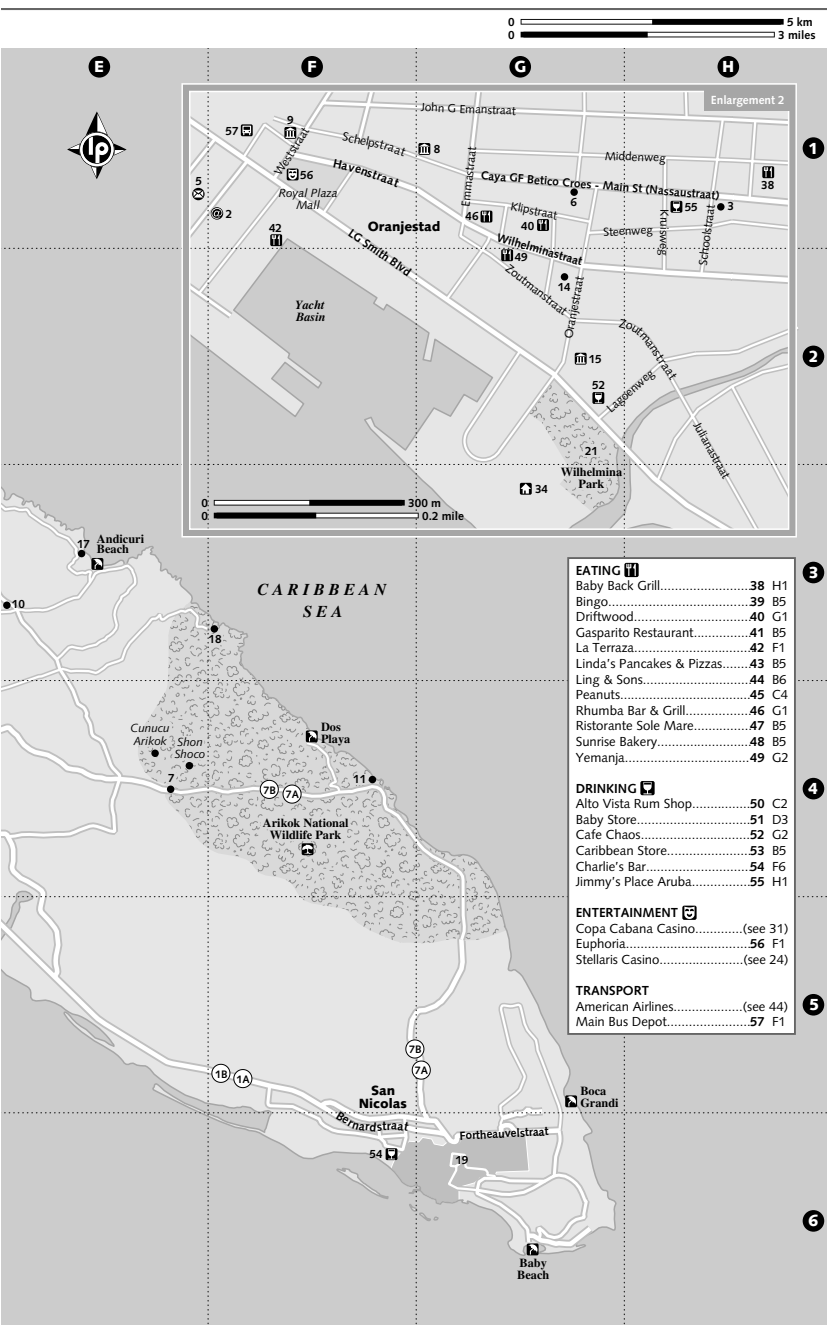
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Enlargement 1



ARUBA, BONAIRE & CURAÇAO



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THE SAD CASE OF NATALEE HOLLOWAY

On the night of May 30, 2005, an 18-year-old American teenager, Natalee Holloway, disappeared while on school fun trip to Aruba. That she has never been seen again is about the only fact anyone involved in the case can agree upon.

Fueled by nonstop coverage on American cable TV stations, the disappearance became a sensation in the US, Aruba and in the Netherlands. Many claimed that Holloway had been drinking heavily and had ended up in the company of Joran van der Sloot and two brothers that night.

Hundreds of volunteers searched the island for any trace but nothing was found. Meanwhile suspicion pointed to the three local men. And that's where it stayed for the next several years. During that time, they were jailed at different times for questioning but prosecutors were unable to build a case sufficient for bringing charges. Meanwhile coverage on American TV was constant. With their fairly small audiences, the cable channels need sensational events to draw viewers. With Holloway they had a pretty American blond who was lost in a foreign land, a surefire ratings – and profits – builder. (Cynics will note that women who disappear who are not young, cute and American are ignored by these shows.)

In the meantime, Holloway's relatives were accusing Aruban authorities of incompetence, corruption and collusion. Some Americans even launched a boycott of the island.

For Arubans, who pride themselves on their 'happy island,' it was simply too much. Anger and resentment grew. Meanwhile the lack of a body or evidence meant that the cops couldn't move forward, even as allegations continued to swirl around the original three suspects. The case finally began unraveling in late 2007 when van der Sloot proved a) unable to stay silent, and b) unable to resist the spotlight of Dutch TV. Soon tapes were made of him admitting that Holloway died while she was with him and that he got others to help him dispose of the body.

Exactly how Holloway died was still another question for prosecutors as they pondered their next move in a case that could live longer than its original victim.

about 1.5km leads to the High-Rise Resorts along Palm Beach. This area – about 6km north of the Yacht Basin – is also where you'll find many restaurants and shops.

Information

BOOKSTORES

Like the rest of the ABCs, bookstores on Aruba are more like stationery stores. Hotel shops usually have selections limited to hackneyed potboilers; if your reading aspirations go beyond the turgid prose of Patterson or Clancy, bring books from home.

De Wit Bookshop (☎ 297-582-1273; Caya GF Betico Croes 94; ☎ 8:30am-5pm Mon-Sat) Bestsellers, magazines and Barbie.

INTERNET ACCESS

Café Digital (☎ 297-588-5459; Warfstraat; per hr US\$6; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Sat, 11am-6pm Sun) Cheap international phone calls, across from Port of Call Mall.

INTERNET RESOURCES

Community Forum (www.aruba.com/forum/) Almost every imaginable question and issue is discussed on the tourism authority's community forum area. Looking for a gay bar? Look here. Wondering about the cost of a taxi?

Ask here. Want to know the best new restaurant? The posts with opinions will pour in.

MEDIA

Among the many free tourist publications, *Aruba Tips for Travelers* is a delightful read as it is written by a local who has a lot of insight.

MEDICAL SERVICES

Dr Horacio Oduber Hospital (☎ 297-587-4300; Sasakiweg; ☎ 24hr) Near the Low-Rise Resorts, a large and well-equipped hospital.

MONEY

ATMs are easily found across the island; all offer you cash in Aruban and US currency. Hotels and banks change money at average rates.

POST

Post office (Port of Call Mall; ☎ 8am-noon, 1-4pm Mon-Fri) Near the cruise-ship port; small.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Aruba Tourism Authority (☎ 297-582-3777; www.aruba.com; Lloyd G Smith Blvd; ☎ 7:30am-noon & 1-4:30pm Mon-Fri) Helpful staff can answer questions.

Part of a trio buildings that comprise the Aruban tourism-industrial complex.

Sights

Oranjestad is good for walking. It lacks any real must-see sight; rather, it's best to just stroll and enjoy the scores of small Dutch colonial buildings painted in a profusion of colors. All of the following sights are easily visited on foot.

Fort Zoutman (Oranjestraat) is not much to look at, but what's left dates from the 18th century. Best-preserved is the **Willem III Tower**, built to warn of approaching pirates. Fortunately, at that time Aruba was seen as having little in the booty department and pirates typically gave the island a pass.

In the base of the tower is the **Aruba Historical Museum** (☎ 297-582-6099; Fort Zoutman 4). See how a mélange of cultures (African, European, Caribbean and indigenous) have combined to create the island's unique character but not just yet: the museum was closed in 2008 for reconfiguration.

Nearby, note **Dr Eloy Ahrends House** (Oranjestraat), an elegant, thick-walled 1922 house, which is now part of the city-council complex. At night it's lit up like an emerald. Across Lloyd G Smith Blvd by the Yacht Basin, **Wilhelmina Park** is a shady refuge replete with lush tropical gardens.

Housed in a restored old merchant's house, **Access Art** (☎ 297-588-7837; Caya GF Betico Croes; ☎ 10am-8pm Mon-Sat) displays a wide range of works by artists from Aruba and the region. Look for the ethereal works by Johannes van Boekhoudt. A veranda has breezy views of shoppers from the 2nd-floor location.

The **Aruba Numismatic Museum** (☎ 297-582-8831; Zuidstraat 7; admission US\$5; ☎ 9am-4pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon Sat) doesn't just have displays of Aruba's unusual currency past and present (at one time a coin shortage forced locals to cut up coins like pies), but it also has thousands of items used as money worldwide from the 3rd century BC to the present.

Stone tools found on Aruba dating from 4000 BC will be the dowager stars of the **Aruba Archeological Museum** (☎ 297-582-8979; Shelpstraat) once it opens in new quarters that are actually old: some grand colonial buildings from 1929 are being restored and will be the home of the museum and its fascinating collection.

Activities

Much as people think they want to spend days on end by the beach or pool, the reality is that they soon get bored. Scores of companies on Aruba offer pricey diversions such as 4WD tours, ATV tours and numerous other acronym-related tours for people who left their Viagra at home. The activities that really do the island proud involve wind and water.

Most activities companies will provide transport to/from wherever you are staying.

DIVING & SNORKELING

While it is not quite Bonaire, Aruba has some world-class diving around its shores. One of the most popular spots is the wreck of the large WWII German freighter *Antilla*, which is close to shore and at times is visible above the surface. It lies between Arashi and Malmok Beaches.

Visibility is often upwards of 30m, which makes for excellent fish-spotting and photography. Reefs are plentiful with many right off **De Palm Island**, the barrier island off the southwest coast. **Kantil Reef** here has a steep drop-off, and it's easy to spot perky parrotfish, bitchy barracudas and spiny lobsters. Other noted nearby reefs include **Skalaein** and **Barcadera**.

Costs for diving and snorkeling are competitive. Daily snorkeling gear rental is about US\$20, two-tank dives with all equipment about US\$75 and week-long PADI open-water courses about US\$400.

Most hotels have a close relationship with at least one dive operator. And many dive shops can set you up with cheap accommodation. Recommended dive shops include the following:

Mermaid Sport Divers (☎ 297-587-4103; www.scuba-divers-aruba.com)

Native Divers Aruba (☎ 297-586-4763; www.native-divers.com)

Roberto's (☎ 297-993-2850; Holiday Inn Beach, High-Rise Resort area) Custom snorkeling trips, rates US\$125 for two, US\$175 for four.

SE Aruba Fly'N Dive (☎ 297-588-1150; www.searuba.com)

GOLF

The **Links at Divi Aruba** (☎ 297-586-1357; JE Itrausquin Blvd; greens fee US\$80) is a nine-hole addition to the Divi resort empire in the Low-Rise Resorts area. Fees include the use of a cart. Club rental is another US\$25.

HORSEBACK RIDING

Rancho del Campo (☎ 297-585-0290; www.ranchodelcampo.com) is one of the better outfits for touring Aruba by horse. It offers rides to the Natural Pool and the Natural Bridge on the rugged northeast coast. Tours cost from US\$60. Certainly riding a fertilizer-producing critter to these attractions is better than tearing across the landscape in a 4WD – as many operators promote.

KAYAKING

Aruba Kayak Adventure (☎ 297-582-5520; www.arubakayak.com; tours from US\$72) takes novices and pros alike out on a fascinating circuit of the mangroves and shoreline near Spanish Lagoon on the south coast. Although you're unlikely to encounter one now, this once was a pirate's hangout. What's a pirate's favorite island? Arrrrrrrrrr-ruba.

SPAS

Day spas are popular on Aruba. Many of the resorts feature world-class services, including **Mandara Spa** (☎ 297-520-6750; www.mandaraspaspa.com; Aruba Marriott Resort, Lloyd G Smith Blvd 101) and **Intermezzo Day Spa** (☎ 297-586-0613; www.arubaspaspa.com; Westin Aruba Resort, JE Irausquin Blvd 77), which has several locations, including the Westin Aruba Resort.

WINDSURFING & KITESURFING

It always seems to be blowing on Aruba. That, coupled with the usually flat water on the west side of the island makes Aruba a premier place for windsurfing and kitesurfing.

Aruba Active Vacations (☎ 297-741-2991; www.aruba-active-vacations.com) is the island's main windsurfing operator. It's based to the right on the beach at Fishermen's Huts, a prime bit of windsurfing water south of Malmok Beach. Rentals start at US\$55 per day and a variety of lessons are available. It also does kitesurfing for similar rates.

Tours

Scores of companies offer day trips on sailboats and yachts. Many are pegged to the sunset. Other outfits organize pub crawls aboard colorfully decorated school buses replete with horns blaring what might be 'Babba-loo!!!'

De Palm Tours (☎ 297-582-4400; www.depalm.com) has a near lock on mainstream organized tours. Its heavily promoted tours crisscross

the island taking vacationers on a dizzying variety of trips. Tour prices start at US\$39 for a sightseeing tour.

Popular with kids and kidlike adults, the **Atlantis Submarine** (☎ 297-588-6881; www.atlantisadventures.com; adult/child US\$100/50) is the Aruba edition of the attraction found at islands throughout the Caribbean and Hawaii. In an hour-long tour, you submerge over 30m and, as one of the New Jersey–minted passengers might say, 'go swimming with the fishes.'

Festivals & Events

Every Tuesday night, the **Bon Bini Festival** (admission US\$3; ☎ 6:30-8:30pm) is staged at Fort Zoutman by a local tourism association. The event attracts some top folkloric talent from around the island, and local foods and handi-crafts are sold.

As elsewhere in the region, **Carnival** is a huge, feathered-boa deal. The climax is the Grand Parade that closes down Oranjestad the Sunday before Ash Wednesday. It's so big that the next day is a national holiday so Aruba can sleep it off.

Sleeping

Accommodations on Aruba are ideally suited to the sort of mass-market tourism the island targets. The two main clusters of resorts – the descriptively named Low-Rise Resorts and High-Rise Resorts – are all fairly large three- and four-star properties. This is not the island for little boutique inns or posh five-star resorts. In fact the area between the two clusters is rapidly filling in with what could give it the name 'Time-Share Land'.

For the beachside resorts, trawl through online booking services; no one pays rack rates, although 20% tax and service charges are common. Although the major chains dominate, you can find interesting, locally owned places at a reasonable price.

BUDGET

Lower-priced places to stay tend to be inland away from the beaches, although the drive or walk can be fairly short. Most have a certain utilitarian charm and are good choices for divers or others planning all-day activities where the joys of a beach-front hotel would be unappreciated.

Coconut Inn (☎ 297-586-6288, 866-978-4952; www.coconutinn.com; Noord 31; r US\$65-100; ☎ ☎ ☎) Near the collection of restaurants in Noord on a

small road north of Noord Ave, the Coconut has a few of the eponymous trees in its simple grounds. The 40 rooms are motel-room basic but the pool is a large rectangle of aqua joy.

MIDRANGE

The bulk of Aruba's accommodations are midrange in price. Condo-type units can be the best value, as they come with fully equipped kitchens.

Arabiana Inn (☎ 297-587-7700; www.arubianainn.com; Bubali 74; r US\$85-100; 🏠 📺 🚿) About a 15-minute walk east from Eagle Beach and near some food outlets, this 18-room small hotel is popular with Europeans on budget packages. The rooms have a dash of style and services include free coolers for taking cold drinks to the beach. Offers wi-fi access.

MVC Eagle Beach Aruba (☎ 297-587-0110; www.mvceaglebeach.com; JE Irausquin Blvd 240; r from US\$100; 🏠 📺 🚿) Thank Dutch taxpayers for this amazing deal right across from Eagle Beach. Owned by the Dutch Navy, it's a basic two-story block with 16 rooms facing a small pool. Although beefy seaman-types abound, it's open to the masses, who enjoy the best deal in Aruba for the location. Don't expect any frills, but it does have a convivial bar-restaurant where you can debate the finer points of the Battle of Jutland.

ourpick Sunset Beach Studios (☎ 297-586-3940, 800-813-6540; www.aruba-sunsetblvds.com; Lloyd G Smith Blvd 486; r US\$90-130; 🏠 📺 🚿) Right across the coast road from rocky Malmok Beach, this 10-room property has a carefree funky charm. Units in front can take in the sunset, while those in back view the pool. All have kitchenettes. Some of the island's best windsurfing is right out front. Offers wi-fi access.

Aruba Beach Villas (☎ 297-586-1072, 800-320-9998; www.arubabeachvillas.com; Lloyd G Smith Blvd 462; r \$120-250; 🏠 📺 🚿) Nicely located across the coast road from breezy Malmok Beach, the 31 units here are bright and have kitchenettes. Those facing the beach have large patios with sun chairs. Guests, who include many windsurfers, have free use of snorkeling and windsurfing gear, plus kayaks. The high-rise beach area is a five-minute walk south. Offers wi-fi access.

TOP END

The difference between a midrange resort and top end one on Aruba may be the deal you get online.

Renaissance Aruba Resort (☎ 297-583-6000; www.renaissancearuba.com; Lloyd G Smith Blvd 82, Oranjestad; r US\$175-450; 🏠 📺 🚿) The Renaissance Aruba Resort is in Oranjestad and splits its 560 rooms between a large complex with a casino and shopping mall in the heart of town, and a lush tropical complex out by the water. The two are linked by little shuttle boats that leave from a watery atrium in the city complex and both are linked by boat to a third facility: a small island offshore with a beach. The comfortable rooms span the gamut, but be sure to avoid the gloomy ones overlooking the indoor atrium. The resort offers wi-fi access.

Amsterdam Manor Beach Resort (☎ 297-587-1492; www.amsterdammanor.com; JE Irausquin Blvd 252; r from US\$200; 🏠 📺 🚿) At the north end of blindingly white Eagle Beach, this 72-unit family-run resort mimics a Dutch village. Rooms and buildings come in a variety of shapes and sizes; all have kitchenettes. Some have sizable balconies or terraces with views.

Bucuti Beach Resort (☎ 297-583-1100; www.bucuti.com; Lloyd G Smith Blvd 558; r US\$200-300; 🏠 📺 🚿) One of the classiest choices among the Manchebo Beach low-rises, the 63-room Bucuti has a vaguely Spanish feel. Guest rooms are large, with kitchenettes and deep balconies, many with ocean views. The Tara wing is quite luxurious. There is a café in a concrete pirate ship. (What do you get if you cross a pirate with zucchini? A squashbuckler.) Children are discouraged. Offers wi-fi access.

Divi Aruba All Inclusive (☎ 297-525-5200; www.diviaruba.com; JE Irausquin Blvd 45; all-inclusive r US\$275-500; 🏠 📺 🚿) The 203-room Divi Aruba is an older property with mature palm trees that give it a relaxed Polynesian feel. There is a large section of units in one-story blocks euphemistically called *casitas* that have a retro concrete-block charm. Rates are all-inclusive and the food is in the 'piles o' chow' category, but the beach here is good and sweeps down to a companion property, the Divi Tamarijn.

Costa Linda Beach Resort (☎ 297-583-8000; www.costalinda-aruba.com; JE Irausquin Blvd 59; apt US\$250-500; 🏠 📺 🚿) There's nothing overly exciting about the five-story Costa Linda, an older time-share property (dig those '70s graphics baby!). But it has a fine position on Manchebo Beach and the one-, two- and three-unit apartments are large, with good-sized balconies and full kitchens. Offers wi-fi access.

The High-Rise Resort area is the top-end holiday ghetto of Aruba. Almost all the hotels are affiliated with major chains. The properties pack in thousands of guests who compete for pool loungers, elbow each other like seals on Palm Beach and seek comfort in US\$15 rum punches. It's not an area that will appeal to many independent travelers but you may find an incredible deal online (quite common really) or your dowager aunt may demand the entire family have a group holiday.

These are the major properties; all offer wi-fi access.

Aruba Marriott Resort (☎ 297-586-9000; www.marriottaruba.com; Lloyd G Smith Blvd 101; r US\$200-450; 📶 📺 🍷) Over 400 rooms with good balconies but seems to function as a venue for sales of Marriott time-shares.

Holiday Inn Sunspree Resort (☎ 297-586-3600; www.aruba.sunspreehotels.com; JE Irausquin Blvd 230; r from \$250; 📶 📺 🍷) Older, huge, 630 rooms, not recommended.

Hyatt Regency Aruba Resort (☎ 297-586-1234; www.aruba.hyatt.com; JE Irausquin Blvd 85; r US\$200-550; 📶 📺 🍷) Has an elegant Moorish motif, but the beach is crowded as are the tropical birds displayed in small cages; 360 rooms.

Radisson Aruba Resort (☎ 297-586-6555; www.radisson.com/aruba; JE Irausquin Blvd 81; r from US\$300; 📶 📺 🍷) Possibly the nicest of the bunch. Extensive, lush grounds; 359 rooms.

RIU Palace Aruba (☎ 297-586-1941; JE Irausquin Blvd 230; d from US\$500; 📶 📺 🍷) Feels and looks huge, with 450 rooms. All-inclusive, unlimited booze policy may not be compatible with afternoon bingo sessions broadcast loudly in the pool area.

Westin Aruba Resort (☎ 297-586-4466; www.westin.com; JE Irausquin Blvd 77; r US\$200-450; 📶 📺 🍷) A cramped site and at its roots a 1970s property with 480 rooms. Also has tropical birds in cages.

Eating

Aruba has the best line-up of restaurants on the ABCs. There are plenty of over-priced joints, franchises (Hooters!) and fast food outlets near the resorts but a short walk or drive inland in Noord you'll find a nice range of locally owned places. Oranjestad also has some fine choices.

BUDGET

Snack trucks are an island institution. Look for these spotless trucks in the parking lots near the Yacht Basin serving up a range of ultra-fresh food from sunset well into the wee

hours. Locals debate who sells the best conch sandwich and you may want to conduct your own research. Other tasty options include ribs and anything with curry. Most everything is under Afl10.

Ling & Sons (☎ 297-583-2370; Schotlandstraat 41; 📶 8am-8pm Mon-Sat, 8am-1pm Sun) All those kitchenettes demand a good supermarket and this is it. It has a large deli, a salad bar and more.

Sunrise Bakery (☎ 297-587-9200; Bubali 72; snacks Afl4; 📶 8am-5pm) This aromatic bakery with sweet and savory treats is near budget hotels and close to other popularly priced take-aways, cafés and groceries.

Linda's Pancakes & Pizzas (☎ 297-586-3378; Palm Beach 6D, Noord; meals Afl7-12; 📶 lunch & dinner Tue-Sun) Near several other places to eat, the nice covered terrace here is a good spot for breakfast pancakes, burgers or, as you'll guess from the name, good homemade pizza.

Peanuts (☎ 297-583-4343; Caya GF Betico Croes, Oranjestad; mains Afl8-18; 📶 breakfast, lunch & dinner Wed-Mon; 📶) Come out of your shell at this cute upscale café aimed at locals. The name refers to the iconic local sauce, which is served with a variety of grilled meats. Other good options include spicy soups, seafood salads and fall-off-the-bone ribs.

Baby Back Grill (☎ 297-563-3880; Caya GF Betico Croes, Oranjestad; meals from Afl12; 📶 lunch & dinner) This is like a snack truck, but it doesn't go anywhere and there are shady picnic tables. This completely open-air restaurant grills up tender ribs through the day for appreciative masses.

MIDRANGE

Rhumba Bar & Grill (☎ 297-588-7900; Havenstraat 4, Oranjestad; mains US\$8-25; 📶 lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) This open-air restaurant has a good outdoor café vibe. Settle into one of the wicker chairs and watch the day-trippers stampede when someone yells 'cheap watches!' Salads, sandwiches and seafood are featured.

Bingo (☎ 297-586-2818; Palm Beach 6D, Noord; meals Afl12-28; 📶 dinner; 📶) Near Linda's, this popular Dutch-run café is both a genial bar and a good place for a casual meal. Enjoy bar fare like burgers at tables inside and out or opt for more ambitious specials like ham with melon or garlic *gambas* (shrimp). The bar stays open until 2am.

La Terraza (☎ 297-583-6046; Marina Mall, Oranjestad; meals US\$10-15; 📶 lunch & dinner Mon-Sat; 📶) Enjoy the views over the yacht basin from this large 2nd-floor café. Dine outside on

the terrace or inside in the air-con. Enjoy well-presented casual fare such as salads, sandwiches, pasta and grilled seafood. It's popular with families.

Ristorante Sole Mare (☎ 297-586-0077; Palm Beach 23, Noord; mains US\$15-30; 🍷 dinner; 🍷) It's hard to resist the appealing facade on this family-run Italian classic. Once inside you won't resist the food either. Classic pasta dishes like *spaghetti alle vongole* are joined by excellent garlicky seafood creations. The wine list is short but has key words like Chianti.

TOP END

Gasparito Restaurant (☎ 297-586-7044; Gasparito 3, Noord; mains US\$17-30; 🍷 dinner; 🍷) Gasparito has fine Aruban dining inside a classic old country house or outside on the candlelit patio. Old family recipes prepared here include *keshi yena*, a meat-filled cheese wonder, and shrimp marinated in brandy and coconut milk. A vegetarian platter is the menu sleeper: plantains and more in a Creole sauce.

Driftwood (☎ 297-583-2515; Klipstraat 12, Oranjestad; mains US\$18-32; 🍷 dinner Wed-Mon; 🍷) Toss back a couple too many of the serious cocktails at this 1960s supper club and you'll expect Dean Martin to walk in. Owned by a local fisherman, the changing menu reflects what he and his pals have caught. Grilled lobster is simple and simply terrific.

Yemanja (☎ 297-588-4711; Wilhelminastraat 2, Oranjestad; mains from US\$24; 🍷 dinner; 🍷) Two colonial buildings behind the Aruba Parliament have been transformed into the island's most stylish eatery. Cobalt blue glassware provides accents to the sleek and airy dining areas. Most items on the menu are grilled over wood. Try the seared tuna, the marinated rock lobster or the tenderloin.

Drinking

With resorts hogging so much of the waterfront, Aruba lacks the kind of bamboo beach shacks peddling rum punches that are basic to so many a Caribbean holiday. Instead, opt for a local spot where you can make friends and let the evening drift away. Bingo (opposite) is a popular place for a drink. Rum shops (p790) are another amiable option.

Cafe Chaos (☎ 297-588-5547; Lloyd G Smith Blvd 60, Oranjestad; 🍷 7pm-2am Sun-Fri, 7pm-4am Sat) Crooners warble from the jukebox at this smallish place popular with local professionals. On many nights there's live acoustic, jazz or blues.

Jimmy's Place Aruba (☎ 297-582-2550; Kruisweg 15; 🍷 4pm-2am Sun-Thu, 4pm-4am Fri & Sat) A friendly and low-key bar popular with gay and lesbian visitors. Watch for live music and themed dance parties; climaxes after 2am.

Entertainment

CASINOS

Almost every high-rise resort has a casino, many of which are quite small. Slot machines are by far the most common game, and facilities at even the flashiest places are not comparable to anything in Las Vegas. Slots are typically open 10am to 4am, tables 6pm to 4am.

Stellaris Casino (☎ 297-586-9000; Aruba Marriott Resort, Lloyd G Smith Blvd 101) One of the largest casinos, always busy and a bit flashy.

Copa Cabana Casino (☎ 297-586-1234; Hyatt Regency Aruba Resort; JE Irausquin Blvd 85) Glitzy; cover bands offer cover while you lose your shirt.

NIGHTCLUBS

Aruba is not the place to come if you want the latest in techno or even something that's simply late.

Euphoria (☎ 297-588-9450; Royal Plaza Mall, Oranjestad; 🍷 9pm-4am) On the top floor of the small mall, Euphoria dazzles with light shows. Most nights it's a mixture of reggae, house and hip-hop.

Shopping

Numerous shopping malls cluster around Lloyd G Smith Blvd and the cruise-ship port. Most international luxury brands are amply represented. Bargaining is not encouraged. For a local experience, stroll Caya GF Betico Croes, Oranjestad's main shopping street.

NORTHEAST COAST

Near Arashi Beach is a road leading to the **California Lighthouse**, on the island's northern tip. This tall sentinel is named for an old shipwreck named *California*, which is *not* the ship of the same name that stood by ineffectually while the *Titanic* sank (despite much local lore to the contrary). The views over the flat land extend in all directions, and when it's especially clear you can see all the way to Oranjestad. The surf is always pounding and dunes extend far inland.

On the opposite side of Aruba from the high-rises, **Chapel of Alto Vista** is a remote 1950s

church built on the site of one dating to 1750. The road to salvation here is lined with signs bearing prayers, starting in temptation at the Alto Vista Rum Shop, east of Noord. Look for the *divi* tree right out of central casting; it looks like a question mark caught in a hurricane.

Further south along the northeast coast are two popular natural attractions. **Natural Bridge** is one of several on Aruba, but this one comes with a decent (and well-signed!) road and a gift shop. Wave action hollowed out a limestone cave on the sea cliffs that later collapsed, leaving the 'bridge.' Mobs descend when cruise ships are in port, but other times it's a moody and windswept spot.

A detour back inland takes you to the **Natural Pool**, a depression behind a limestone ridge that often fills with sea water thanks to wave action. Given the rough swimming conditions on the east coast of Aruba, this is a good spot for a dip. Again, your enjoyment may depend on the number of day-trippers with the same goal. The road out here passes by **Ayo Rock**, a smooth-sided geologic wonder popular with rock climbers. It also has some ancient drawings. And take time to stop at the **Donkey Sanctuary** (☎ 297-584-1063; donations appreciated; 🕒 usually daylight hr, call) where you can make an ass out of yourself petting these winsome critters. Originally brought to Aruba by the Spaniards, many donkeys now live in the wild where they fall prey to speeding tour buses. Injured ones are brought here to recuperate.

For postcard shots, you should also visit **Casibari Rock**, about 1.5km west of Ayo Rock.

Steps lead to the top where there are good views across the island.

ARIKOK NATIONAL WILDLIFE PARK

Arikok National Wildlife Park comprises 20% of the island. It's arid and rugged, and can easily occupy a full day of exploring. The **park entrance hut** (admission free; 🕒 office 7am-5pm, park 24hr) has useful maps and other information. To get here, follow the marked roads east from the busy *cunucu* town of Santa Cruz (a place locals say still feels the most like the Aruba where they grew up – ignoring the KFC).

Two gardens inside the park entrance are worth visiting. **Cunucu Arikok** and **Shon Shoco** have short trails with signs and labels describing the many native plants. More than 70% of the types of plant here are used in traditional medicine. The land is mostly pretty scruffy and there are remnants of old gold mines built long ago by Europeans and slaves.

The principal road is about 11km long and links the west entrance near Santa Cruz with the southern one near San Nicholas, allowing a circular tour. Although slow going, it's doable in your budget rental car. A 4WD vehicle will let you enjoy tracks off the main circuit that include sand dunes, rocky coves, caves and remote hiking trails. Watch out for the many iguanas as you drive and stop once and a while and listen for the bray of wild donkeys.

Numerous hiking trails lead across the hilly terrain. Bring water and ask for recommendations at the entrance hut. Look for the park's three main types of tree: the

RUM SHOPS

Throughout Aruba's hinterlands you will see rum shops. These island institutions are part bar, part café and part social center. Here's where you'll meet anyone from taxi drivers to accountants. Although there are dozens and they come in all sizes, it's not hard to identify them as they invariably are plastered with Balashi, Amstel and/or Heineken signs. The rum itself is often locally produced and may drive you to drink – beer.

The rules are simple: you stand, drink rum – or beer – have a snack and unburden yourself to whoever is nearby. On Friday after work, crowds spill out into the streets. A good place to sample this culture is **Baby Store** (☎ 297-585-0839; 🕒 6:30am-8:30pm), which is on the main road 2 miles (3km) north of Santa Cruz near the Piedra Plat Church. Beers cost Afl3 and a *frekedel* (a Dutch-derived meatball made with plantain) is Afl2.

An especially accessible rum shop, **Caribbean Store** (☎ 586-5544; Palm Beach; 🕒 8am-11pm), can be found in Noord, east of the resorts; it has stand-up tables in a dirt parking lot and a cheery bar inside. Another popular stop for locals and visitors alike is the **Alto Vista Rum Shop** (🕒 11am-7pm) near the Chapel of Alto Vista. San Nicholas is also good for rum shops; you'll see them on most corners.

ARUBA'S BEACHES

Aruba has the best beaches of the ABCs; most are along the south and west coasts. Here are some you won't want to miss, going counterclockwise from the north.

- **Arashi Beach** Near the island's northwest tip, this is a favorite with locals and popular with families. There is good body surfing, some shade and just a few rocks right offshore.
- **Malmok Beach** Shallow waters extending far out from shore make this a popular spot for windsurfers. Not the best place for simple sunbathing as it's rather rocky.
- **Palm Beach** Classic white-sand beauty, but only for those who enjoy the company of lots of people as it fronts the array of High-Rise Resorts.
- **Eagle Beach** Fronting a stretch of the Low-Rise Resorts just northwest of Oranjestad, Eagle is a long stretch of white sand. The best all-around choice for everyone, from singles to couples to families with kids.
- **Manchebo Beach** Just south of Eagle, this large beach reaches out to a point. Popular with topless sunbathers (an activity frowned on elsewhere).
- **Baby Beach** Nice curve of sand in the uncrowded south. The waters are calm. Nearby Coco's Beach is almost as nice, except for the view of the refinery.
- **Boca Grandi** Reached by a rough road, this small cove is often deserted but for a few windsurfers. As is typical of windward beaches, conditions here are often hazardous, albeit dramatic.
- **Andicuri Beach** A hidden gem on the isolated east coast, this black-pebble beach is often the scene of photo shoots. Near the Natural Bridge, the beach is reached by a road that demands 4WD. Swimming can be treacherous, and the winds make reading a challenge.

iconic and bizarrely twisted *divi-divi*; the *kwihî*, with its tasty sweet-sour long yellow beans; and the *hubada*, which has sharp, tough thorns. Spiky aloe plants abound – see how many of the 70 varieties of cactus you can identify.

Near the coast you will see a small creek, which is the only natural supply of water on Aruba. It flows into a mangrove by the ocean. Here you can also see vast **sand dunes**. At **Boca Prins** on the coast there is a dramatic and dangerous beach in a narrow cove that forms explosive surf. Nearby, your table stays crumb-free at **Boca Prins Cafe** (☎ 297-584-5455; meals US\$8-16; ☎ 10am-6pm) as it is totally open to the constant winds.

For safer swimming, a rough road leads north to **Dos Playa**, which as the name implies is two beaches. Otherwise, from Boca Prins you can head south along the wave-tossed coast and end up in San Nicolas.

SAN NICOLAS

A small town near the island's ill-placed **oil refinery**, San Nicolas preserves Aruba's former rough-and-ready character long since banished from Oranjestad. Prostitution is legal here and a string of windowless bars in

the 'Red Zone' open at night. It's all tightly regulated and the streets are pretty safe.

Charlie's Bar (☎ 297-584-5086; Zeppenfeldstraat 56; meals US\$6-20; ☎ 11am-late) is the big draw here. Started in 1941, it is still run by the same family and is a community institution. The walls are lined with a hodgepodge of stuff collected over the decades: everything from beach flotsam to local sports trophies to artwork by customers. The food combines local dishes with plenty of fresh seafood.

South of San Nicolas and the oil refinery are dramatic vistas and cliffs.

BONAIRE

Bonaire's worldwide appeal to divers is its amazing reef-lined coast, all of which is a national park. But while no diving (or snorkeling) initiate will be disappointed, Bonaire also has much to offer above the surface, including world-class windsurfing. Although the beaches are mostly slivers of rocky sand, several take on a pink hue from ground coral washed ashore. Also in the pink are the flamingos found throughout the salt flats and mangroves of the south.

Bonaire has a real community feel: your innkeeper may be your divemaster by day or your waiter at a friend's restaurant at night.

Much of the infrastructure on the island supports diving: where else can you find a hotel with a drive-through air-tank refilling station? However, there are some good restaurants, and the main town of Kralendijk has a modest but enjoyable nightlife. If you're not a diver – or an avid reader – you may not find much to fill a week on Bonaire, but a few days will pass delightfully. And just in case you forget why most people come, check out the license plate of the car in front of you, it says: 'Diver's Paradise.'

History

The Arawaks lived on Bonaire for thousands of years before Spain laid claim in 1499. A mere 20 years later there were none left as the Spanish sent all the natives to work in mines elsewhere in the empire. The only reminder that the Arawaks once lived on Bonaire are a few inscriptions in remote caves. No one knows what they mean.

The depopulated Bonaire stayed pretty quiet until 1634, when the Dutch took control. Soon the Dutch looked to the flat land in the south and saw a future in salt production. Thousands of slaves were imported to work in horrific conditions. You can see a few surviving huts at the south end of the island (p798). When slavery was abolished in the 19th century, the salt factories closed. The population, a mix of ex-slaves, Dutch and people from South America, lived pretty simple lives until after WWII, when the reopening of the salt ponds (this time with machines doing the hard work) coupled with the postwar booms in tourism and diving gave a real boost to the economy.

Meanwhile relations with Curaçao, capital of the Netherlands Antilles, slowly turned frosty. Locals felt ignored by their wealthier neighbor and lobbied for change. In 2008 Bonaire returned to direct Dutch rule as a rather far-flung municipality within the Netherlands. See p779 for details on the dissolution of the Netherlands Antilles.

Orientation

Bonaire is the second largest of the ABCs at 285 sq km. The main town of Kralendijk is just north of the airport. Major roads loop

north midway up the island to Rincon and south past Lac Bay, the southern tip and the salt pans. Rough secondary roads circle the far north and Washington-Slagbaai National Park, and reach parts of the remote east coast. You can drive the main roads in half a day.

Almost all hotels and other businesses are in or near Kralendijk.

Getting There & Away

Bonaire's **Flamingo Airport** (BON; ☎ 599-717-5600) is immediately south of Kralendijk. For information on flights from the rest of the world, see p813.

Airlines flying between the ABC islands change frequently; see p814.

Getting Around

There is no public bus service on Bonaire. However, dive operators will haul you wherever you need to go. You can see all of the island in one or two days of driving, so you might consider renting a car for just that period. Many places to stay offer packages with a car thrown in cheap.

Most international car-rental firms are at the airport. The main local operator is **AB Carrental** (☎ 599-717-8980; www.abcarrental.com).

There are a couple of gas stations in Kralendijk, including **Gas Ekspres** (☎ 599-717-7171; Kaya Tribon; ☎ 7am-10pm).

Taxis from the airport to hotels in Kralendijk cost US\$8 to US\$18 depending on which end of town you're going to. A taxi to any place on the island costs no more than US\$25.

KRALENDIJK

pop 3100

Bonaire's capital and main town has a long seafront that's good for strolling day or night. The smattering of low-rise colonial-era buildings in mustard and pastels add charm. The small but delightful selection of restaurants, cafés and bars mean that fun is never far. Shops are limited but you can get all the essentials – including pricey baubles.

Orientation

Located one block back from the waterfront, Kaya Grandi is the main commercial street.

Hotels can be found south of the cruise-ship port on Julio A Abraham Blvd, as well as north past the sea inlet on Kaya Gobernador N Debrot.

Information

BOOKSTORES

Bring reading material from home, as it's easier to spot a manta ray off the reef than it is to find a decent book.

Addo's Bookstore (☎ 599-717-6618; Kaya Grandi 36; ☎ 9am-1pm, 3-6pm Tue-Fri, 9am-5pm Sat) A welcome addition! Bestsellers, regional fiction, guidebooks and maps.

EMERGENCY

Scuba Diving Emergencies (☎ 599-717-8187)

INTERNET ACCESS

Most hotels have internet access points.

Bonaire Access (☎ 599-717-6040; Harbourside Shopping Centre, Kaya Grandi 31; per 15min US\$4; ☎ 10am-6pm) Wi-fi password US\$10 per day.

Chat 'n' Browse (☎ 599-717-2281; Kaya Gobernador N Debrot 79; per hr US\$8; ☎ 7:30am-7pm Mon-Fri, 7:30am-6pm Sat & Sun) Top choice. Stocks phonecards, Cuban cigars, ice cream and more. Wi-fi password US\$5 per day.

INTERNET RESOURCES

Bonaire Insider (www.bonaireinsider.com) A compendium of news, info and lively comments.

Bonaire Talk (www.bonairetalk.com) This newsgroup and bulletin covers Bonaire issues and information.

InfoBonaire (www.infobonaire.com) Lots of highly useful island info.

MEDIA

The *Bonaire Reporter* (www.bonairereporter.com) is a free newspaper that actually covers controversial issues on the island. *Bonaire Affair* and *Bonaire Nights* are both good tourist freebies.

MEDICAL SERVICES

St Franciscus Hospital (☎ 599-717-8900; Kaya Soeur Bartola 2; ☎ 24hr)

MONEY

Prices are given in local currency more often on Bonaire than Aruba, but US dollars are just as welcome. ATMs are common in Kralendijk.

POST

Post office (☎ 599-717-8508; Kaya Simon Bolivar 11; ☎ 7:30am-noon & 1:30-4pm Mon-Fri)

TOURIST INFORMATION

Bonaire Tourist Office (☎ 599-717-8322; www.tourismbonaire.com; Kaya Grandi 2; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri) Answers questions and has a good selection of brochures.

Sights

Follow the cannons south along the waterfront to **Fort Oranje**, a small bastion built in the 1700s by the Dutch and modified often through the years. It's now the courthouse.

The small one-room **museum** (admission free; ☎ 8am-noon & 1:30-4:30pm Mon-Fri) has a good display of vintage photos among other displays. Behind an unmarked door to the left of the museum are the cleanest public toilets in town.

Slightly out from the town center, the **Bonaire Museum** (☎ 599-717-8868; Kaya J Ree 7; adult/child NAF2/1; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-5pm Mon-Fri) is in an 1885 house filled with folklore displays. Look for the detailed paintings of local mythology by Winifred Dania.

JanArt Gallery (☎ 599-717-5246; Kaya Gloria 7, Antril; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Thu & Sat, 5-7pm Fri) is a bright blue-and-yellow house brimming with local art. Just off Kaya Papa Cornes.

Activities

CYCLING

Roads to the south end of the island with its windswept flat expanses and Lac Bay are ideal for cycling.

Cycle Bonaire (☎ 599-717-2229; Kaya Gobernador N Debrot 77; ☎ 8:30am-4:30pm) Rents high-end bikes from US\$15 per day, organizes guided excursions.

De Freewielen (☎ 599-717-8545; Kaya Grandi 61; ☎ 8:30am-5:30pm Mon-Fri, 8:30am-1:30pm Sat) is run by a Dutch cyclist, with rentals per day from US\$14.

DIVING & SNORKELING

For details of the Bonaire Marine Park, see the boxed text, p799.

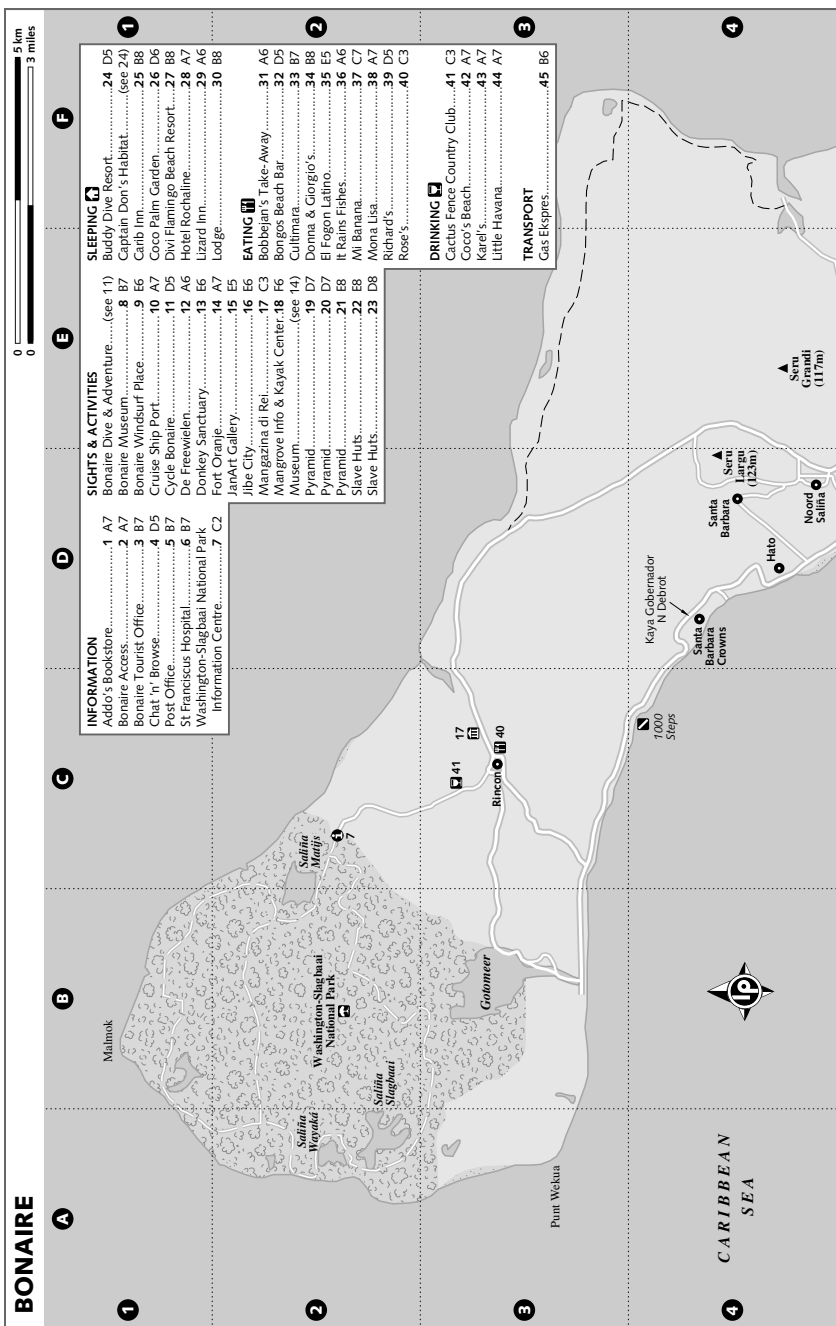
KAYAKING & WINDSURFING

For details on kayaking and windsurfing on Lac Bay, see p798.

Tours

Karel's (☎ 599-790-8330) Runs daily boats (US\$14 per person; four trips per day) to Turtle Beach on Klein Bonaire. It also has a pirate-themed sunset cruise (US\$40), with an open bar guaranteed to keel-haul your liver.

Outdoor Bonaire (☎ 599-791-6272; www.outdoorbonaire.com) Leads active tours that include rock climbing, kayaking, caving and more; tours from US\$40.





Sleeping

Bonaire has an interesting and varied selection of places to stay. Unlike other Caribbean islands it doesn't have much in the way of large resorts; instead places are smaller and more personal. Divers are catered for at many places; at some you can enjoy excellent shore-diving right off the back deck. Prices are lower on average than much of the region, and wide variations in rooms mean that you have numerous choices at most places to match your budget.

See the tourist information websites for oodles of apartment and condo rentals. Many are being built near the airport.

our pick Lizard Inn (☎ 599-717-6877; www.lizardinnbonaire.com; Kaya America 14; s/d from US\$56/62; 📶 📺 📺) A new budget place five minutes' walk from the shore; has a nice little compound of basic but comfortable rooms. Nothing is fancy but the showers are superb, the TVs satellite, the mattresses firm and the owner, Khalito Gooma, a helpful gem. Offers wi-fi access.

Hotel Rochaline (☎ 599-717-8286; www.hotelrochalinebonaire.com; Kaya Grandi; r US\$60-70; 📶 📺 📺) Right in the center of town, the hotel runs a popular café. The rooms are basic but the location is excellent. Offers wi-fi access.

Coco Palm Garden (☎ 599-717-2108; www.cocopalmgarden.com; office: Kaya van Eps 9; r & apt US\$70-110; 📶 📺 📺) Coco Palm rents a variety of rooms and apartments in various brightly painted houses in a little neighborhood just south of the airport. Bed sizes vary, as do amenities like sofas, patios, kitchens etc (although you can always count on a hammock). The office has a pool and wi-fi, and is near all the units.

Lodge (☎ 599-717-5410; www.thelodgebonaire.com; Kaya Inglaterra 12; r US\$75; 📶 📺 📺) Balinese teak furniture and statues lend an exotic air to this otherwise simple B&B near the centre. Twelve

rooms face a small courtyard. The decor is basic, but there's wi-fi and the bathrooms are nicely tiled.

Carib Inn (☎ 599-717-8819; www.caribinn.com; Julio A Abraham Blvd; r & apt US\$100-160; 📶 📺 📺) There are eight simple units here in a small compound right on the water; most have kitchens. You can get your tanks refilled and a dock allows for easy dive-boat pick-up. It's a short walk to the center. Offers wi-fi access.

Buddy Dive Resort (☎ 599-717-5080; www.buddydive.com; Kaya Gobernador N Debot 85; r from US\$120, apt from US\$190; 📶 📺 📺) Divers never had it so good: the reef is right off the deck and there's a drive-through air-tank refill station out front. The more than 70 rooms and apartments are large and in two- and three-story blocks. All apartments have kitchens and views.

Divi Flamingo Beach Resort (☎ 599-717-8285; www.diviresorts.com; Julio A Abraham Blvd 40; r US\$120-200; 📶 📺 📺) This hodgepodge of a resort has standard rooms in all shapes and sizes – some in largish blocks, others hutlike. Coats of bright paint have given it a tropical motif and the two pools are newly refreshed. It has full dive facilities and a small casino. Offers wi-fi access.

Captain Don's Habitat (☎ 599-717-8290; www.habitatbonaire.com; Kaya Gobernador N Debot; r & apt US\$160-300; 📶 📺 📺) Belying that logo of a pirate flag bearing a skull impaled by a sword, the Captain runs a very comfortable resort. The large 85 units are set on spacious grounds. Air tanks are available 24 hours a day. (And the resort is a leader in local environmental causes.) Offers wi-fi access.

Eating

The Kralendijk area has a splendid collection of places to eat. You can find everything from simple places with scrumptious local fare to beachside barbecues to fine (yet casual) dining.

Bobbejan's Take-Away (Kaya Albert Engelhardt 2; meals from Naf20; 📶 dinner Fri-Sun) Don't let the name fool you; there are tables here out back under a nice tree. But getting one is a challenge as *everybody* comes here for the super-tender ribs and the velvety peanut sauce on the Indonesian plate of chicken satay.

Bongos Beach Bar (☎ 599-717-7238; Eden Beach Resort, Kaya Gobernador N Debot; meals US\$8-20; 📶 lunch & dinner) Classic stereotypical beach joint. Watch the sunset while you get sand in the cracks of your toes; tables in a shady hut plus

VISITORS AS ATMS

Government fees for visitors to Bonaire add up quickly:

- Park diving fee: US\$25 (nondiving US\$10)
- Room tax: US\$5.50 per day
- Departure tax: US\$32 (US\$8 within the ABCs)
- Security tax: US\$1.40

out on the beach. Burgers and casual fare through the day. On Friday nights there's a popular barbecue.

Mi Banana (Kaya Nikiboko Noord; meals NAF10; ☎ lunch Tue-Sun, dinner Tue-Thu) A local fave, this simple place in Antriol serves a huge range of plate specials including spicy fish, goat and pork-chop numbers. Good for take-away as well.

ourpick El Fogon Latino (☎ 599-717-2677; Kaya Nikiboko Zuid; meals NAF10-20; ☎ lunch & dinner Wed-Mon) Direct from Colombia, this little café has tables on a porch or in its breezy dining room. The light and crispy fried Dorado filet is superb, as are the many other meaty plate meals. Skip the potatoes for the succulent fried plantains. It's on the road to Lac Bay.

Donna & Giorgio's (☎ 599-717-3799; Kaya CEB Hellmund 25; mains NAF20-40; ☎ dinner Thu-Tue) This inviting open-air restaurant is on a quiet corner across from the water. The classic Italian menu has many treats: a *antipasti misto* for the indecisive, a *pasta gamberoni* for those wanting garlicky shrimp, and eggplant parmigiana for those wanting sensual comfort. Book.

Mona Lisa (☎ 599-717-8718; Kaya Grandi 15; mains NAF30-40; ☎ dinner Mon-Sat) This local institution is a tropical version of a traditional Dutch brown café. Choose from excellent food displayed on a changing blackboard menu. Specials include a Dutch cheese salad and soup made with local fish. All the seafood is excellent. Book.

It Rains Fishes (☎ 599-717-8780; Kaya JNE Craane; mains NAF30-40; ☎ dinner Mon-Sat) Enjoy creative seafood fare at this stylish open-air bistro across from the shore. Everything is spot-on, right down to the pepper grinders on the tables. Service is jolly and must-have dishes include the garlic *gambas* and the fish special.

Richard's (☎ 599-717-5263; Julio A Abraham Blvd 60; mains NAF30-40; ☎ dinner Tue-Sun) The mood of casual elegance at the open-air tables on the water is set by the white tablecloths accented by blue napkins. There's nothing between you and the ocean but the dock where the daily fresh fish specials are delivered. Reserve.

The best supermarket is **Cultimara** (☎ 599-717-8278; Kaya LD Gerharts 13; ☎ 7:30am-7pm Mon-Sat, 8am-2pm Sun), with a decent but hardly upscale selection.

Drinking

Bongos Beach Bar (opposite) is good for a sunset drink. Kralendijk does not party late – there are fish to spot at dawn.

Little Havana (☎ 599-701-0717; Kaya Bonaire 4; ☎ 5pm-2:30am) A classic atmospheric bar in a historic whitewashed building. Walk through the open doors and you pass back many decades in time. Sit at the rich wooden bar and enjoy a fine Cuban cigar while album covers featuring jazz greats stare down from the walls. The tunes lean towards classic rock.

Coco's Beach (☎ 599-717-8434; Kaya Bonaire; ☎ 11am-midnight) Lots of tropical plants and tables covered in local fabrics set the mood at this fun outdoor bar on the waterfront. On Saturday a steel band plays at 7pm.

Karel's (☎ 599-790-8330; Waterfront; ☎ 10am-2am) Two bars set on a concrete pier over the water. Many drink specials include free rum punch at 5pm Tuesday.

NORTH OF KRALENDIJK

The road north along the coast is like a roller-coaster, but in good shape. There are great vistas of the rocky seashore and frequent pullouts for the marked dive sites. About 5km north of Kralendijk the road becomes one way, north, so you are committed at this point. After another 5km you reach a T-junction. To the right is the direct road Rincon. Turn left (west), following the coast until the road turns sharply inland. Good views of the large inland lake, Gotomeer, are off on the left. Flamingos stalk about in search of bugs. The road passes through some lush growth and ends in Rincon.

Bonaire's second town, **Rincon** is rather sleepy and that may simply be because it's old. Over 500 years ago Spaniards established a settlement here a) because it was fertile and b) because it was hidden from passing pirates. Most of the residents are descended from slaves, who worked the farms and made the long trek to the salt flats in the south. Homes have a classic Caribbean look and are painted in myriad pastel shades.

The town has a popular **market** (☎ 8am-2pm Sat) with a oodles of the area's produce. Almost any day of the week you can pause at **Rose's** (☎ 599-562-6364; meals from NAF10; ☎ lunch Thu-Tue), a local institution run by Rose herself. A genial mix of folks enjoy plate lunches of local fare (fish stew, goat, fried chicken etc) at tables scattered under trees. You can get a beer here pretty much during any daylight hour.

About 1.5km on the road to the coast, look for **Mangazina di Rei** (☎ 599-786-2101; www.mangazina.nadirei.org; adult/child US\$10/free; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri),

the second-oldest stone building on Bonaire. It has been restored and includes exhibits about its use as a storehouse for provisions that were doled out to slaves. Tours are fascinating and include a glass of tasty sorghum juice.

Washington-Slagbaai National Park

Covering the northwest portion of the island and comprising almost 20% of the land, Washington-Slagbaai National Park is a great place to explore. Roads are rough and all but impassable after a rain, but it's well worth the effort. The terrain is mostly tropical desert, and there is a proliferation of cactuses and birds. Look for flamingos in the lowlands and parrots perched on shrubs. Large bright green iguanas are just one of the many reptile species you might find. You'll also see lingering evidence of the aloe plantation and goat ranch that used to be here – don't run over any wild descendents of the latter.

There is an excellent **information center** (☎ 599-717-8444; www.stinapa.org; adult/child US\$10/5; ☹ 8am-5pm, last entry at 2:45pm) and museum at the entrance; the latter has an excellent history section on the island. From here you can take one of two drives: a five-hour, 33km route or a three-hour, 24km route. Regular cars are discouraged but not banned. There are picnic, dive and swimming stops along the way.

Two hikes are best done well before the heat of noon: the 90-minute Lagadishi loop, which takes you past ancient stone walls, a blowhole and the rugged coast; and the two-hour Kasikunda climbing trail, which takes you up a challenging path to the top of a hill for sweeping views.

The park entrance is at the end of a good 4km concrete road from Rincon. Along the way you'll pass the **Cactus Fence Country Club** (☎ 599-568-9613; ☹ from 11am Sun), which – true to its name – is surrounded by one of the living cactus fences common on Bonaire. There's no golf here, but there is good music, a barbecue and a friendly crowd.

EAST OF KRALENDIJK

The road from Kralendijk to Lac Bay is a highlight. Off the main road, a branch goes around the north side of the water. At first you drive through groves of cactus so thick that it's like driving through someone's crew cut. Close to the water there are dense man-

groves and flocks of flamingos. It's a popular ride for cyclists.

Along this road, the **Mangrove Info & Kayak Center** (☎ 599-790-5353; www.mangrovecenter.com; ☹ Mon-Sat) is right on the mangroves and offers kayak tours (from US\$25). It has displays with information about the protected Lac Bay mangroves, which are part of the marine park. About 5.5km from the turn-off the road ends at Lac Cai, a sandy point with a small beach, a snack stand, and mountains of huge pearly white and pink conch shells.

Lac Bay itself is one of the world's premier windsurfing destinations. The wind-swept shallows are good year-round for beginners; peak conditions are November to July and pros descend in May and June.

At the end of the main road on the south side, locally owned **Bonaire Windsurf Place** (☎ 599-717-2288; www.bonairewindsurfplace.com; ☹ 10am-6pm) rents equipment (from US\$40) and gives lessons (from US\$45). It has a glassed-in café and a good veranda for watching the action on the water.

Next door, **Jibe City** (☎ 599-717-5233; www.jibe.city.com; ☹ 10am-6pm) has similar rates and a café open to the breeze.

South of Lac Bay, a good road follows the flat windward coast, which has pounding surf along a desolate coast. You'll see nary another human.

SOUTH OF KRALENDIJK

The south end of Bonaire is flat and arid, and you can see for many miles in all directions. Multihued salt pans where ocean water evaporates to produce salt dominate the landscape. Metal windmills are used to transfer water out of the ponds. As evaporation progresses, the water takes on a vibrant pink color from tiny sea organisms. The color complements the flamingos, which live in a sanctuary and feed in the ponds.

Along the coast you will see the legacy of a vile chapter in Bonaire's past: tiny restored **slave huts**. Living conditions in these minuscule shelters are hard to imagine now, but they were home to hundreds of slaves, who worked in the salt ponds through the 19th century. The three different-colored 10m **pyramids** along the coast are another legacy of the Dutch colonial era. Colored flags matching one of the pyramids were flown to tell ships where they should drop anchor to load salt.

DIVING IN BONAIRE

Bonaire's dive sites are strung along the west side of the island. The closeness of the reefs and the clarity of the waters make for unparalleled access for divers. You can reach more than half of the identified dive sites from shore (or your hotel!). The range of fish species is amazing, and diving goes on around the clock.

For all of its fame as a diving location, Bonaire doesn't slouch in the organization department. The Unesco World Heritage **Bonaire Marine Park** (☎ 599-717-8444; www.bmp.org) covers the entire coast of the island to a depth of 200ft (60m). There are almost 90 identified dive sites and they are numbered using a system adopted by all the dive operators on the island. Most maps show the sites and as you are driving along coastal roads you'll see painted yellow rocks identifying the sites. See the Diving & Snorkeling chapter for information on diving off Klein Bonaire, p56. It's the vast arid mass just west of Kralendijk.

Conservation is taken seriously. All divers must purchase a tag from any dive operator with the proceeds going to infrastructure maintenance. Tags good for one year coast US\$25, a day-pass aimed at visitors off cruise ships costs US\$10. Snorkelers and those using the parks on land pay a US\$10 fee to get a tag good for the year. Divers new to Bonaire must receive an orientation from a dive operator. It goes without saying: don't touch or collect anything.

The park website is an excellent resource. Additionally, the widely distributed and free *Bonaire Dive Guide* has basic descriptions and a map of all the sites. One of the most famous is **1000 Steps** on the west coast. It's named not for the 72 steps from the road down to the water but the way the climb feels when you return. Myriad coral here supports turtles, eels and many other fish.

A good guide to Bonaire's waters is *New Guide to the Bonaire Marine Park* by Tom van't Hof.

Every place to stay has a relationship with a dive operator or conversely – like Captain Don's Habitat – is a dive operator with a place to stay. Most offer myriad packages.

Bonaire Dive & Adventure (☎ 599-717-2229; www.bonairediveandadventure.com; Kaya Gobernador N Debot 77; ☎ 8:30am-4:30pm) is a well-regarded free-standing dive operation. It has a full range of rental equipment. Unlimited tanks of air or nitrox for six days cost US\$120.

With so many sites accessible from land, snorkelers also find Bonaire a very rewarding destination. Most diver operators have snorkeling options. Additionally **Sea Cow Charters** (☎ 599-785-7727) offers good-value tours by day and night (from US\$30).

Just north of the slave huts, **Pink Beach** is a long sliver of sand that takes its color from pink coral washed ashore. It's pretty rough and you'll want a thick pad for sunbathing, but the swimming (not to mention the diving and snorkeling) is good. The beach is even better to the south at the **Vista Blue** dive spot.

On the south side of the airport runway, 2.5km east of the coast road, the nonprofit **Donkey Sanctuary** (☎ 599-9560-7607; adult/child US\$6/3; ☎ 10am-4pm) is home to offspring of donkeys left to wander the island when slave-era salt production ceased. About 400 are still wild, others live here after they get sick, injured or, as the staff say, just get lonely.

CURAÇAO

Curaçao balances the real with the surreal. The real is a bustling island with a traffic-bedeveled capital, Willemstad. The

surreal is all the reasons that make it an appealing place.

It has a rich history dating back to the 16th century and central Willemstad boasts fascinating old buildings and excellent museums. Remnants of plantations dot the countryside and some are now parks. The west coast has oodles of beautiful little beaches, many good for diving.

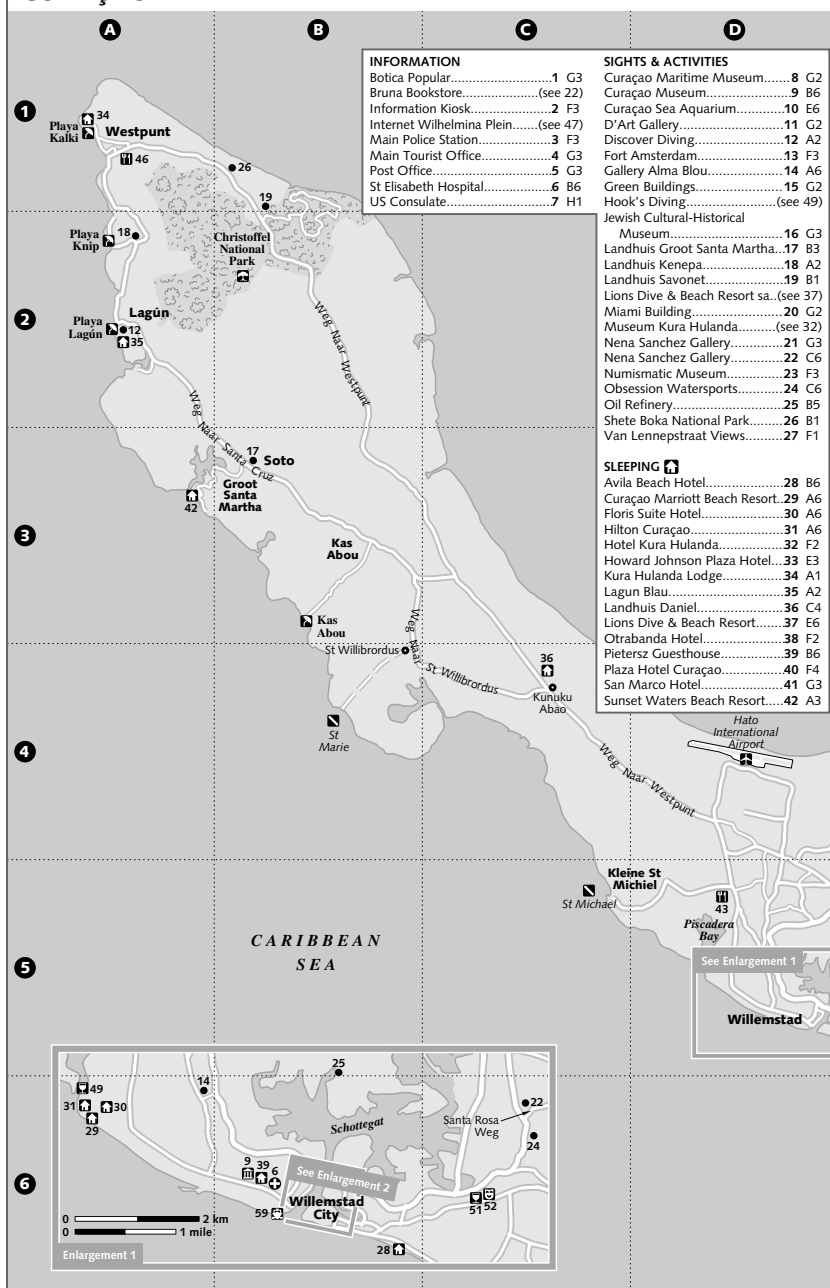
Back on the real side, Curaçao has a lot of economic activity beyond tourism, which means that Willemstad, apart from its historical core, has factories, many humdrum neighborhoods and at times bad traffic. Catering to visitors is not the primary aim.

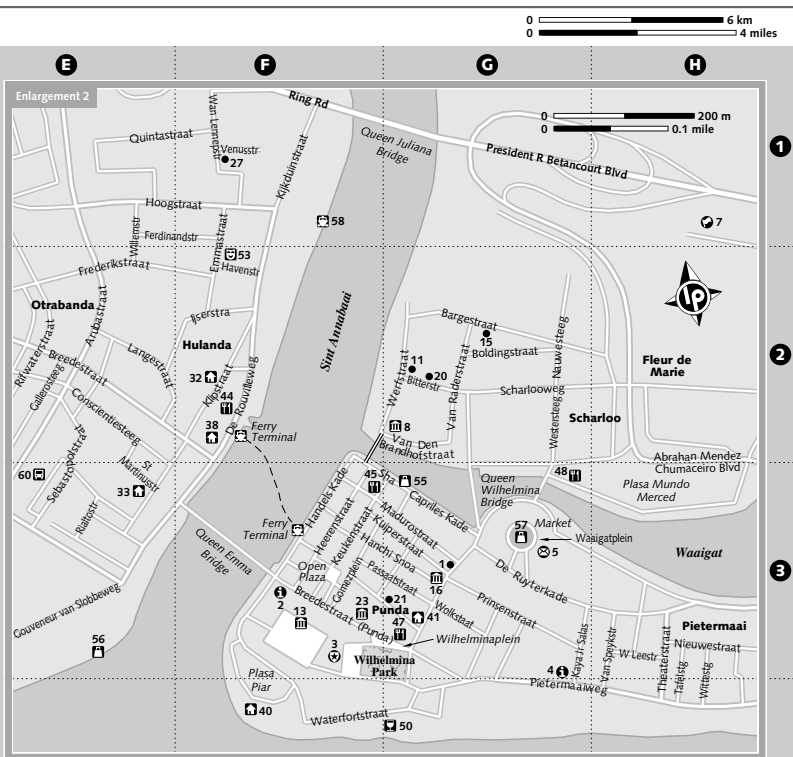
All this makes Curaçao the most balanced of the ABCs; urban pleasures vie with natural wonders for your attention.

History

Like Aruba and Bonaire, Curaçao was home to the Arawaks until the Spanish laid claim in

CURAÇAO





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1499. Origins of the island's name are lost with one story linking it to the name of an Arawak tribe, while another more improbably says that it derives from the Spanish *curación* (cure) in honor of several sailors who were cured of illness on the island.

Either way, the arrival of the Spanish proved the opposite of a cure for the locals, who were soon carted off to work elsewhere in the empire or killed. The Dutch West India Company arrived in 1634, and so did slavery, commerce and trade. Half the slaves destined for the Caribbean passed through the markets of Curaçao. Many of the plantation houses have been restored and can be visited, including Landhuis Kenepa (p809), which has displays on Curaçao's African heritage.

The end of slavery and colonialism sent Curaçao into a 19th-century economic decline. Subsistence aloe and orange farming provided a meager living for most. Oil refineries to process Venezuelan oil were built in the early 20th century and this fuelled the economy. Relative affluence and Dutch political stability have made Curaçao a regional center for commerce and banking. Tourism and a growing expat population provide additional income. Curaçao is on its way to being an independent entity within the Netherlands, just like its rich and envied neighbor Aruba. See p779 for details.

Orientation

Curaçao is the largest of the ABCs at 471 sq km. Willemstad is home to almost two-thirds of the population and surrounds Schottegat, one of the world's finest deep-water ports. The coast on both sides of Willemstad is where most of the large resorts are found. The lower third of the island is arid, rugged and little visited. Half of the island is northwest of the capital. It's pretty, at times verdant and perfect for diving on the lee side. A good road loops around the area. At the northwest tip is the little town of Westpunt.

Getting There & Away

Curaçao's **Hato International Airport** (CUR; ☎ 599-9-839-3201; www.curaçao-airport.com) receives international flights; see p813 for details. Airlines flying between the ABC islands change frequently; see p814.

The departure tax is US\$32 which may or may not be included in your airfare. For flights to Aruba and Bonaire, the fee is US\$8.

Getting Around

See p807 for details on getting around the island from Willemstad, which is the transport hub of Curaçao.

WILLEMSTAD

pop 72,000

Willemstad is both a big city and a small town. Residents live in the hills surrounding Schottegat, and much of the city is sprawling and rather mundane. But this all changes radically in the old town. Here the island's colonial Dutch heritage sets a genteel tone amid markets, museums and even a nascent café culture. Wandering the Unesco World Heritage-recognized old town and absorbing its rhythms can occupy a couple of days. The Queen Emma Bridge regularly swings open to let huge ships pass through the channel, a sight in itself, and these interruptions 'force' you to take one of the enjoyable water ferries.

Once the capital of the dissolving Netherlands Antilles, central Willemstad seems content to remake itself as the favored destination for a growing number of cruise-ship passengers and visitors.

Orientation

The old town of Curaçao is split by Sint Annabaai, which is really a channel to Schottegat. On the west side is Otrobanda, an old workers' neighborhood, which still has shops popular with the masses and a mixture of beautifully restored buildings and areas rough around the edges. East of the channel – and linked by the swinging Queen Emma Bridge – is Punda, the old commercial center of town, and home to stores, offices and markets. North across the Queen Wilhelmina Bridge is the old port and warehouse neighborhood of Scharloo.

Arching over all is the 56m-high Queen Juliana Bridge, which allows even the largest ships to pass underneath. (If more bridges are needed, the Netherlands will need more queens.)

A multilane ring road circles Schottegat and links the busy suburbs. It is often a traffic and smog nightmare.

Information

On Sundays when cruise ships are in port many places open that are normally closed for business.

BOOKSTORES

Bring books you really want to read from home. Finding good titles on Curaçao can be hit or miss.

Bruna Bookstore (☎ 599-9-738-8394; Zuikertuin Mall, off Santa Rosa Weg) Excellent selection of books and magazines at the new upscale mall near Asia de Cuba bar.

EMERGENCY

Main police station (☎ 911; Wilhelminaplein, Punda; 🕒 24hr)

Tourist emergency line (☎ 599-9-465-3333)

INTERNET ACCESS

Internet Wilhelmina Plein (☎ 599-9-461-9609; Wilhelminaplein 25, Punda; per hr US\$2; 🕒 8am-7pm Mon-Fri, 10am-6pm Sat) Laptop connections, cheap calls, web cams and more.

INTERNET RESOURCES

Curaçao (www.curaçao.com) Curaçao Tourism Board's website has good community forums.

Gay Curaçao (www.gaycuraçao.com) A good source for gay and lesbian information.

MEDICAL SERVICES

Botica Popular (☎ 599-9-461-2376; Columbusstraat 15, Punda; 🕒 8am-8pm) Full-service pharmacy.

St Elisabeth Hospital (☎ 599-9-462-5100; www.stelisabethhospital.com; Bredestraat 193, Otrobanda; 🕒 24hr) Large and well equipped.

MONEY

ATMs are common and give a choice of local or US currency. US dollars are accepted everywhere, and banks will change money during usual hours. There's also a **foreign-exchange desk** (🕒 8am-7pm Mon-Sat, 8am-4pm Sun) in the departure hall of the airport.

POST

Post office (Waaigatplein 1, Punda; 🕒 7:30am-5pm Mon-Fri) Buy stamps at this faded monolith for international postcards/letters (NAf1.55/2.85).

TOURIST INFORMATION

Information kiosk (🕒 8am-4:30pm Mon-Sat, open Sun when cruise ship is in port) This kiosk by the Queen Emma Bridge on the Punda side has a wealth of information and is everything the unhelpful main tourist office (☎ 599-9-434-8200; Pietermaai 19) is not.

Dangers & Annoyances

Curaçao's urban mix includes some real povery. Although street crime is not a huge

problem, it is important to exercise the sort of caution you may have forgotten on Aruba or Bonaire.

In some of the deeper recesses of Otrobanda, drug-related crime is an everyday problem.

Sights

To fully explore Willemstad you'll need at least a very full day, but probably two.

PUNDA

The much modified **Fort Amsterdam** is now home to government and official offices. Inside the large courtyard you can soak up the rich colors of the Dutch colonial architecture dating from the 1760s. Parts of the old battlements weave through the complex, and there is a small **museum** in the church that has been under renovation for some time.

Since 1651 the oldest continuously operating Jewish congregation in the western hemisphere is the Mikvé Israel Emanuel Synagogue, which houses the **Jewish Cultural-Historical Museum** (☎ 599-9-461-1633; Hanchi Snoa 29; admission US\$5; 🕒 9-11:45am & 2:30-4:45pm Mon-Fri). Items from the long history of the congregation are displayed; the building dates to 1732.

The **markets** (p807) are always fascinating and a good place to see the dwindling amount of commerce in Punda aimed at locals rather than tourists.

One of Punda's sedate pleasures is sitting on the wall along the Sint Annabaai channel and watching huge ships pass while the Queen Emma Bridge shuttles back and forth to make way and pedestrians risk it all in daring leaps.

For details on using the Queen Emma Bridge and ferry service across Sint Annabaai, see p807.

The **Numismatic Museum** (☎ 599-9-434-5500; Kaya Prince; admission NAf3.50; 🕒 10am-4pm Tue-Fri) has stamps from around the world (dare we say it lest the curators go, well, postal, the 1693 building – Punda's oldest – is more interesting).

OTROBANDA

One of the best museums in the Caribbean, **Museum Kura Hulanda** (☎ 599-9-434-7765; Klipstraat 9; adult/child NAf15/9; 🕒 10am-5pm) is part of the sensational hotel of the same name and is inside 19th-century slave quarters. The brutal history of slavery in the Caribbean is documented here in superb and extensive exhibits. Look for the unflinching account by John

Gabriel Stedman of slavery in 1700s Suriname. On Wednesday evenings at 7:30pm, reenactors bring this sordid period to life in a living history show (adult/child NAF 15/7.50). At all times the museum has guides ready to answer questions and give context.

Follow Wan Lennepstraat uphill into a safe and historic neighborhood for great views of the city and harbor.

About half a mile (800m) north in a residential neighborhood, the **Curacao Museum** (☎ 599-9-462-3873; Van Leeuwenhoekstraat; adult/child US\$3/1.75; ☎ 8:30am-4:30pm Mon-Fri, 10am-4pm Sun) is housed in an 1853 hospital for yellow-fever victims. Inside the beautiful verandas is lots of historical stuff, sort of like you'd find in a huge attic.

SCHARLOO

The **Curacao Maritime Museum** (☎ 599-9-465-2327; www.curacaomaritime.com; Van Brandhofstraat 7; adult/child NAF10/6; ☎ 9am-4pm Tue-Sat) is the other superb museum in Willemstad. Engaging displays trace the island's history detailing how the Dutch West India Company kicked Spain's butt to gain control of the ABCs through to the commercial boom of the 20th century, when the port was where commerce from the US, Europe, the Caribbean and Latin America met. Well worth the 90-minute time investment are the museum's **harbor tours** (adult/child NAF20/12.50; ☎ 2pm Wed & Sun) which take in the industrial specter of Schottegat.

The docks in the neighborhood are mostly closed, but wander around and you'll see many building restorations in progress, including the art deco **Miami Building** (Bitterstraat 3-9). At night a counter across the street serves beer to cheery locals. Another amazing colonial survivor is the rambling **green building** on the south side of Bargestraat just east of Van Raderstraat. Note the arched veranda with a profusion of neoclassical details. Throughout Scharloo, old mansions are being saved from a unique form of rot caused when the salt trapped in the original coral building blocks escapes and literally dissolves the structure.

GALLERIES

Willemstad has a thriving art scene.

D'Art Gallery (☎ 599-9-462-8680; Werfstraat 6, Scharloo; ☎ 9am-5pm) is in Scharloo behind the restored mansion, Villa Maria, and specializes in contemporary styles.

The **Nena Sanchez Gallery** (☎ 599-9-461-2882; Windsraat 15, Punda; ☎ 10am-6pm Mon-Sat) displays the vibrant and colorful works of the longtime local artist. There is a **second location** (☎ 599-9-738-2377; Bloempot Shopping Center) near the upscale Zuikertuin Mall off Santa Rosa Weg.

Located about 3km northwest of Otrobanda, **Gallery Alma Blou** (☎ 599-9-462-8896; Frater Radulphusweg 4; ☎ 9am-12:30pm & 2-5:30pm Mon-Sat) has the largest collection of works by local artists. It's housed in the restored Landhuis Habaai, a Dutch plantation house from the 17th century.

Tours

Several local historians offer tours of the Unesco World Heritage-listed old town. They cost US\$10 to US\$20 per person and booking is essential.

Old City Tours (☎ 599-9-461-3554) Architect Anko van der Woude focuses on the buildings of Otrobanda during a weekly walk (NAF11; ☎ 5:15pm Thu).

Otrobanda Tours (☎ 599-9-767-3798) Jopi Hart leads walks through the historic working-class neighborhood. They take place at 5:15pm on Wednesday.

Talk of the Town Tour (☎ 599-9-747-4349)

Custom walks of Punda led by Eveline van Arkel (by appointment).

Tour Guide Curaçao (☎ 599-9-526-8930) Michael Brouwer leads walks around the old town and elsewhere on the island.

Sleeping

With the very notable exceptions of Avila Beach Hotel and Hotel Kura Hulanda, accommodations in Willemstad place function over form (when they function...). Note that some beachfront properties are a mile or two from Punda.

BUDGET & MIDRANGE

Curaçao could use more decent budget accommodations.

Pietersz Guesthouse (☎ 599-9-462-5222/9510; www.pietersz.com; Roodeweg 1, Otrobanda; r US\$40-75; ☎) One of the largest food wholesalers to Curaçao and Bonaire has, rather incongruously, two historic guesthouses near each other in a serene part of Otrobanda. Both have been restored and the rooms are both comfortable and large. The decor is basic but there are kitchenettes and some are good for families as they sleep four. The center is just 400m east of the guesthouse.

DIVING & SNORKELING IN CURAÇAO

Curacao's reefs are home to almost 60 species of coral, much of it the hard variety. That coupled with the 98ft (30m) visibility and the warm water make the island very popular with divers, especially locals. The main areas for diving are from Westpunt south to St Marie; central Curacao up and down the coast from St Michael; and the south, beginning at the Curacao Sea Aquarium. The latter coast and reefs have been protected as part of the **National Underwater Park**. There are hundreds of species of fish, including reef octopus, trumpetfish, bridled burrfish and yellow goatfish.

Most resorts have relationships with dive operations. Among the better-known operators are Discover Diving (p809), Lions Dive & Beach Resort (p808) and **Hook's Diving** (☎ 599-9-461-0515; www.hooksdiving.com; Hook's Hut, Piscadera Bay).

Otrobanda Hotel (☎ 599-9-462-7400; www.otrobandahotel.com; cnr Breedestraat & De Rouvillweg, Otrobanda; r US\$80-100; 🏠 📺 🚰) Despite the premier position on the water, this 45-room hotel could use a bit of lodging Viagra (although it is six stories...). Still if you can get a good deal, the uninspired rooms and so-so pool area (but with great views!) will seem inconsequential. Rooms do have high-speed internet.

San Marco Hotel (☎ 599-9-461-2988; www.sanmarcocuracao.com; Columbusstraat, Punda; r US\$90-120; 🏠 📺) This six-story pile shouldn't be your first choice but it's a useful option simply because it often has rooms available (which are clean). But if you make a reservation, get as many confirmations as possible, as the front desk can be shambolic. The included breakfast is not appetizing. Offers wi-fi access.

Howard Johnson Plaza Hotel (☎ 599-9-462-7800; www.howardjohnson.com; Bionplein, Otrobanda; r from US\$105; 🏠 📺 🚰) The American motel classic has a brightly colored 50-unit, four-story hotel overlooking the channel in Otrobanda. Rooms have that king-size-bed vibe and include high-speed internet, fridges and more.

ourpick Avila Beach Hotel (☎ 599-9-461-4377; www.avilahotel.com; Penstraat 130; r US\$110-400; 🏠 📺 🚰) Ever expanding, the Avila Beach combines rooms in the 18th-century home of a Dutch governor with new wings of increasingly luxurious accommodation. The grounds are elegant and the beach is a fine crescent of sand. Not all the 156 rooms receive wi-fi. There is a small museum (adult/child NAF5/3; open 10am to noon Tuesday, Wednesday, Friday and Sunday) in the hotel, dedicated to revolutionary Simón Bolívar, who stayed here plotting his assault on the Spanish.

Plaza Hotel Curacao (☎ 599-9-461-2500; www.plazahotelcuracao.com; Plasa Pier, Punda; r US\$120-200; 🏠 📺 🚰) Recent renovations have helped

this prominent hotel at the entrance to Sint Annabai, but it still has some rough edges. Most of the average rooms in the 14-story tower lack balconies, but the views of ship traffic from the mezzanine-level pool are superb. Part of the hotel is built into old battlements and the pool bar is a fine place for sunset views of cruise ships leaving port.

TOP END

A new upscale Renaissance Resort (a Marriott brand) should be open at the Fort Riffart cruise ship port by 2009.

Hilton Curacao (☎ 599-9-462-5000; www.hiltoncaribbean.com; John F Kennedy Blvd, Piscadera Bay; r US\$180-300; 🏠 📺 🚰) The address is fitting, as Kennedy was president about the time this 1960s veteran was envisioned. It has vast grounds that include the 17th-century remains of Fort Piscadera and two rather old-fashioned pools. Depending on your room choice, from your large balcony your room will either view Piscadera Bay or power-plant smokestacks. Which to choose? Offers wi-fi access.

Curacao Marriott Beach Resort (☎ 599-9-736-8800; www.marriott.com; John F Kennedy Blvd, Piscadera Bay; r US\$200-300; 🏠 📺 🚰) With its own beach on Piscadera Bay, this 247-room resort has a lush tropical feel. Rooms have decent-sized balconies, and most have views of the large pool and ocean. Offers wi-fi access.

Hotel Kura Hulanda (☎ 599-9-434-7700; www.kurahulanda.com; Langestraat 8, Otrobanda; r US\$220-500; 🏠 📺 🚰) One of the Caribbean's finest hotels is also a sight in itself. Architect Jacob Gelt Dekker took a run-down workers neighborhood in Otrobanda and created an amazing hotel that is really a village of restaurants, cafés and rooms. (Many a shot in tourist brochures showing 'Curacao' was taken here.) The 80 rooms, with their hand-carved mahogany

furniture and old-time luxuries, may make you feel like a plantation pasha. Offers wi-fi access.

Floris Suite Hotel (☎ 599-9-462-6111; www.floris-suitehotel.com; John F Kennedy Blvd, Piscadera Bay; ste US\$250-350; 🏠 📺 📶) The Floris' striking and minimalist design makes up for it not being right on the beach. The 71 rooms – more like suites – are large and look out onto lush grounds with Piscadera Bay beyond; all have high-speed internet (there's wi-fi in the lobby). If you subscribe to *Wallpaper*, you will feel right at home.

Eating

The cafés on the Wilhelminaplein are delightful places to while away an hour. Keep your eyes open for humble backstreet eateries serving good traditional fare. But keep your wallet closed for most of the touristy places lining the Punda side of Sint Annabai and the Waterfront Terrace in the old walls south of the Plaza Hotel.

Centrum Supermarket (☎ 599-9-869-6222; cnr Weg Naar Westpunt & Weg Naar Bullenbaai; 🕒 8am-7:30pm Mon-Sat, 8am-1pm Sun) A popular large supermarket with a bakery and a deli.

Sombrero (Westersteeg, Scharloo; snacks under NAf6; 🕒 7am-11pm) Ask the name of this unsigned stand and people will point at the shape of the roof. But a sign isn't needed to find the long list of simple local street fare on offer. Sit on a plastic chair on the sidewalk, enjoy the passing parade and delight in empanadas, sandwiches and beer.

Indian Suriname Food (☎ 599-9-528-3398; Maanstraat 3, Punda; meals from NAf8; 🕒 lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) One of a few simple little places hidden in Willemstad's narrow back streets, this one has four tables and serves excellent fresh rotis with myriad fillings.

ourpick Plein Cafe (☎ 599-9-461-9666; Wilhelminaplein 19-23, Punda; meals from NAf8; 🕒 7:30am-11pm) This Dutch café and its neighboring twin are so authentic that if it were 30°F (-1°C) and raining, you'd think you were in Amsterdam. Waiters scamper among the outdoor tables with trays of drinks and dishes of simple food like sandwiches (try the *frikandel*, a meaty Dutch classic). Often busy with locals in the evening. It's a wi-fi hot spot.

Music Restaurant (☎ 599-9-434-7700; Hotel Kura Hulanda, Langestraat 8, Otrobanda; mains US\$12-25; 🕒 lunch & dinner) One of several excellent restaurants in the Kura Hulanda, you can dine under a

canopy of lush tropical trees here. The menu is eclectic – from salads to sandwiches to pasta – with regional touches, like Cuban banana cream soup.

Guerneur De Rouville (☎ 599-9-462-5999; De Rouvilleweg 9, Otrobanda; mains US\$15-25; 🕒 lunch & dinner, bar until 1am) Excellent Caribbean food is served in this restored colonial building in Otrobanda. Try the *karni stuba*, a piquant beef stew. Enjoy wide views of Punda and the waterfront from the tables on the shady veranda. There's also a secluded courtyard and a fine bar.

Astrolab Observatory (☎ 599-9-434-7700; Hotel Kura Hulanda, Langestraat 8, Otrobanda; mains US\$23-40; 🕒 dinner Tue-Sat; 📺) The top restaurant in the Kura Hulanda is set amid little fountains and gardens that will have you thinking of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The food changes daily, reflecting both what's in season and the whim of the chef, who creates a fusion of French and Caribbean cuisines.

Drinking

Yes, you can drink curaçao here, but note that the namesake booze of the island is now a generic term for liquor flavored with bitter oranges. For obscure reasons the concoction is often dyed blue. While duty-free shops burst with stuff from numerous distillers, locals prefer rot-gut rum and beer – in that order.

The Plein Cafe (left) is an atmospheric choice for a drink.

Blues (☎ 599-9-461-4377; Avila Beach Hotel, Penstraat 130; 🕒 5pm-midnight Tue-Sun) On a pier over the water, this swanky bar is the coolest venue in town. It has live jazz Thursday and Saturday and happy hours nightly plus a good tapas menu.

Asia de Cuba (☎ 599-9-747-9009; Zuikertuin Mall; 🕒 5pm-late) Set in an open-air building at an upscale mall off Santa Rosa Weg, this hip and stylish venue morphs between being a gregarious spot for drinks and snacks with friends early in the evening to a dance venue later on. DJs and live bands play cutting-edge dance tracks.

Lyrics (Waterfortstraat, Punda; 🕒 10pm-3am Thu-Sat) A popular gay bar built right into the touristy arches of the old waterfront walls, Lyrics is popular with locals and visitors. Look for the rainbow flag right out front.

Music Factory (☎ 599-9-461-0631; Salina 131; 🕒 8pm-2am Mon-Wed, 8pm-3am Thu, 8pm-4am Fri & Sat) This cheery bar is a good place near sev-

eral clubs to hook up with locals and find out what the latest clubs are. Finance your holiday with the NAf100 prize for karaoke singing on Wednesday nights. It is about 3km east of Punda.

Hook's Hut (☎ 599-9-462-6575; Piscadera Bay; ☺ to 1am) This beach café on calm Piscadera Bay appeals to visitors and expats. Lounge at tables on the sand while enjoying sandwiches and seafood (mains US\$8 to US\$20; lunch and dinner) to the beat of a steel band. Several humble and nameless joints in nearby fishermen's huts cater to beach-going, beer-drinking locals.

Entertainment

NIGHTCLUBS

Willemsstad has several clubs catering to the local passion for music and dancing. Places come and go, check out the free weekly *K-Pasa*, which lists entertainment around the island. The beach-party place *Wet & Wild* (p808) lives up to its name on weekend nights.

Studio 99 (☎ 599-9-465-5555; Lindberghweg; cover varies; ☺ 9pm-1am Tue-Thu, 10pm-4am Fri & Sat) Near a couple of other clubs and the Music Factory bar, this huge and popular place has karaoke and DJs during the week and local bands on weekends. It is located about 3km east of Punda.

THEATER

Teatro Luna Blou (☎ 599-9-462-2209; www.lunablou.org; Havenstraat 2-4) Offers a varying schedule of offbeat films, dance and live theater. There's a shady open-air café before performances.

Shopping

Real shops favored by locals are fleeing Punda for strip malls in the suburbs, leaving a lot of watch and gem vendors in their wake. Still you can find some interesting items by wandering the back streets and waterfront.

Floating Market (Sha Capriles Kade) A colorful place to see piles of papayas, melons, tomatoes and much more. The vendors sail their boats the 70km from Venezuela every morning.

Market (Waaigatplein; ☺ 7am-2pm Mon-Sat) Near the Floating Market, this large UFO-shaped market sells cheap household goods, snacks and more. An extremely nice man will fix your shoes for NAf1.

Heavily hyped, **Fort Riffart** is a shadow of its former solid self. The walls have been punched out for gift shops aimed at the hordes plowing through from the nearby cruise-ship port.

Getting There & Around

Watching the long Queen Emma Bridge move ponderously aside for passage of a huge ship is one of the simple pleasures of Willemsstad. There's always someone literally leaping onto the end as it swings away from Punda. If the bridge is open, look for flags by the pilot's cabin: orange means it has been open less than 30 minutes, blue means it has been open longer and *may* soon close. When the bridge is open, two old free public ferries nearby cruise into action. The four-minute ride on these is a treat in itself.

BUS

The bus network is designed to transport the local commuter, but a couple of routes are useful for visitors: No 4B links the airport to Otrobanda (20 minutes, departs hourly) and No 9A follows the coastal road to Westpunt (one hour, every two hours). The **bus stations** (☎ Punda 599-9-465-0201, Otrobanda 599-9-462-8359) are near the post office in Punda and near the base of Arubastraat in Otrobanda. Fares are NAf1.25 to NAf1.75 depending on distance; buses run from about 7am to 9pm. Note that trying to cover the island north of Willemsstad by bus will be an all-day affair, with a lot of patient waiting by the side of the road.

CAR

One of the greatest challenges to getting around Willemsstad (and the rest of Curaçao) is the lack of road signs. Where they do exist, the sun is fading them into oblivion. Fortunately, locals are happy to help.

Because attractions are so spread out across Curaçao, you may choose to rent a car. All the major international car-rental agencies have counters at the airport.

TAXI

Plans call for the installation of meters in taxis, meanwhile fares are fixed. From the airport to most hotels and Willemsstad costs US\$12 to US\$20. Taxis hang around hotels, otherwise order one from **central dispatch** (☎ 599-9-869-0747).

SOUTH OF WILLEMSTAD

Residential neighborhoods make up much of the land immediately south of the center of Willemstad and there is long beach parallel to the coast road. Spaanse Water, a large enclosed bay to rival Schottegat, is becoming an upscale residential area as people are drawn by its beaches and sheltered waters. There's little further south to the tip of Curaçao except arid scrub.

Sights

Following the coast south from Punda for a little over 4km you get to the **Curaçao Sea Aquarium** (☎ 599-9-461-6666; www.curaçao-sea-aquarium.com; Bapor Kibra; adult/child US\$15/7.50; 🕒 8:30am-5:30pm). On a man-made island, this heavily hyped attraction anchors an entire development that includes hotels, bars and artificial beaches.

The Seaquarium, as it's known, is home to over 600 marine species including sea lions, sting rays and sharks. Visitors can swim in pools with the inmates (snorkeling US\$34, diving US\$54). More controversial is the play-with-the-dolphins attraction in which visitors for a fee can get in the water with mammals (US\$80 to US\$160). The hype encourages one to kiss and hug the dolphins. There's no word on the dolphins' views on this.

Sleeping

Condos are proliferating like sharks to chum. **Royal Resorts** (☎ 599-9-465-6699; www.royalresorts.com) represents many of these time-share properties and villas. Rates for multiroom units begin at about US\$300 a night.

Lions Dive & Beach Resort (☎ 599-9-434-8888; www.lionsdive.com; Bapor Kibra; r US\$160-200; 🕒 📺 📶) No more just a beach dive for weary divers, Lions Dive is now a full-service resort with very comfortable rooms in three-story buildings right on the beach. And divers will still find the eponymous dive shop here.

Eating & Drinking

Lions Dive & Beach Resort has a couple of sedate restaurants.

Wet & Wild (☎ 599-9-562-0400; Bapor Kibra; meals US\$6-20; 🕒 9am-late) By day this ribbon of white sand is a family-friendly beach café and bar with a full range of activities (adult/child NAF6/3; not charged if you just eat and drink). By night the name takes on new and

at times literal meanings as it transforms into a beach club and disco. Music is provided by DJs and the in-house radio station (Dolphin Radio 97.3FM). The action gets frenetic after midnight from Thursdays onwards when the shadowy recesses of the beach provide no end of lurid cover.

NORTH OF WILLEMSTAD

Looping around the northern part of Curaçao from Willemstad is central to any visitor's itinerary. Parks, villages and beaches all await discovery. You can do the loop in a day but spend time on any of the fine beaches and you'll need two. (Nonstop, the drive would take a little over two hours.)

Buses travel along both coasts to/from Willemstad and Westpunt about once every two hours.

West Coast

There are scores of often beautiful beaches hidden in coves along the west coast.

About 6km north from Otrobanda, **Kleine St Michiel** is a traditional fishing village on a tiny bay. The small ruins of a 17th-century Dutch fort are on the cliffs above the water. There are a few beachfront cafés and bars. On weekends there is usually a live band playing a heady mix of Curaçaoan Creole. The place gets jammed.

To head to the north end of the island via the northwest coast, take the main road, Weg Naar Westpunt (literally, 'road to Westpunt'), 8km from Willemstad to Kunuku Abao, where you turn left or west onto the Weg Naar St Willibrordus. For 18km you drive through some of the most lush countryside in the ABCs. At some points huge trees form canopies over the road.

Shortly after the turn west, the road runs past old farms with thatched roofs and salt flats with pink flamingos. The village of St Willibrordus is dominated by an old church.

About 4km past the village, look for signs to the beautiful beach **Kas Abou**. It's another 4km down a narrow toll road (NAF10 to NAF12.50 per car), but the reward is worth it, with turquoise waters, good snorkeling and an excellent café-bar.

Passing through the hamlet of Groot Santa Martha, there are a couple of stores where you can stop for a cold drink. **Landhuis Groot Santa Martha** (☎ 599-9-864-2969; admission NAF5; 🕒 8am-

CURAÇAO'S BEACHES

The west coast of Curaçao north of Willemstad is a serrated edge of little coves, many hiding beautiful white-sand beaches. Beaches like **Kleine St Michiel**, **Kas Abou**, **Playa Lagún**, **Playa Knip** and **Playa Kalki** are lapped by azure waters and have rental loungers, snorkeling gear and cafés. But for real joy, look for beaches less-trammeled. There are dozens in and around the ones above. If you see a little road heading towards the water, take it and you may be rewarded.

Closer to Willemstad, two private beach clubs, **Hook's Hut** (p807) and **Wet & Wild** (opposite) offer myriad activities, bars, restaurants and often raucous fun well into the night (or morning).

4pm Mon-Fri) is one of the best preserved of the dozens of Dutch colonial houses that dot the islands. A sugarcane plantation was started here in the 17th century to supply the rum and molasses trade. The main house dates from 1700 and is part of a large complex of relics from the era. Recent restorations have worked wonders, and the complex is now a vocational school for mentally and physically challenged people. Some produce beautiful handicrafts which are for sale.

A 3km side road from Groot Santa Martha twists through the hills to the coast and the **Sunset Waters Beach Resort** (☎ 599-9-864-1233; www.sunsetwaters.com; all-inclusive per person US\$150-220; ♿ ♻️ 🗑️). This secluded low-key resort is built on the side of a hill above the beach. The well-maintained rooms are comfortable and many have balconies. The lobby has wi-fi. Watch for herds of goats.

At Lagún the road nears the coast and the first of many fabulous beaches. **Playa Lagún** is a narrow and secluded beach situated on a picture-perfect narrow cove sided with sheer rock faces. There's shade and a snack bar. Just back from the sand, **Discover Diving** (☎ 599-9-864-1652; www.discoverdiving.nl) rents diving and snorkeling equipment (US\$9), leads tours and gives lessons. Its introductory dive for novices is a bargain at US\$60.

On the south cliffs overlooking the cove, **Lagun Blau** (☎ 599-9-864-0557; www.lagunblau.nl; apt from US\$95; ♿ ♻️ 🗑️) is a new 12-unit compound built around a pool. These good-sized, sun-drenched bungalows are a good deal for families and divers. Offers wi-fi access.

About 2km on from Lagún is **Landhuis Kenepa**, the main house of another 17th-century plantation. The hilltop site is stunning, but the real importance here is that this was where a slave rebellion started in 1795. Several dozen torched their miserable huts and joined up with hundreds of others who were refusing to work. Eventually the plan-

tation owners regained control and killed the leaders, but the event set in motion protests that continued for decades. A museum here, the **Museo Tula** (☎ 599-9-888-6396; adult/child US\$3.50/1; 🕒 9am-4:30pm Tue-Sun), tells this story and explores the African roots of Curaçao.

Down the hill from the plantation, **Playa Knip** is really two beaches. Groot Knip is the size of a football field, while Klein Knip is, well, small. Both have brilliant white sand, shady shelters, azure waters, places to rent snorkeling gear and snack bars. Avoid weekends when half the island shows up for a dip.

In the small village of Westpunt, **Playa Kalki** has parking, lockers and kayak rental. On the main road you'll have a tough time missing **Jaanchie's** (☎ 599-9-864-0126; mains US\$6-15; 🕒 noon-8pm), a local institution where you can sample a full menu of island delicacies, like okra soup and goat stew. Some of the meats are rather exotic but fear not: it all tastes like chicken. Don't worry about choosing, the waitresses will sort you out.

Willemstad's superb Hotel Kura Hulanda has opened a beach resort here, the **Kura Hulanda Lodge** (☎ 599-9-839-3600; www.kurahulanda.com; Westpunt; r from US\$200; ♿ ♻️ 🗑️). The grounds are a tropical garden, there's a private white-sand beach and the common areas are in thatched huts around a pool. The 74 units are in a more substantial villas and come with various view and size options. There is a dive shop onsite. Offers wi-fi access.

From here the road turns east and heads south along the northeast coast.

East Coast

The windward side of the island is rugged and little developed. To take this route from Willemstad, stay on Weg Naar Westpunt past the junction at Kunuku Abao as you head north.

SURFING THE WIND & WAVES

The best place for surfing – by wind or wave – is an isolated beach, **Playa Canoa**, on the east coast, about 8 miles by an at times rugged road from Willemstad. The wind and wave conditions are good through much of the year and you'll find both good breaks and flatter areas for windsurfing.

Get information and rent gear at **Obsession Watersports** (☎ 599-9-736-5659; Schottegatweg Oost; ☹ 9am-6pm Mon-Sat). Rates for surfboards and windsurfboards start at US\$30 per day.

Just beyond the turn look east for the orchid- and bougainvillea-lined entrance to **Landhuis Daniel** (☎ 599-9-864-8400; www.landhuisdaniel.com; r US\$35-65; ☹ ☺ ☻), a rambling lodge and restaurant run by a Dutch family. The eight rooms are basic (some are fan only), but the pool and gardens have country charm, and there's wi-fi access. The restaurant (mains US\$8 to US\$20; open breakfast, lunch and dinner) draws many for its changing menu of local, Creole and French dishes prepared with ingredients from the organic garden. Kids love all 25 types of pancake on offer.

About 25km north of Willemstad lies **Christoffel National Park** (☎ 599-9-864-0363; admission US\$10; ☹ 7:30am-4pm Mon-Sat, 6am-3pm Sun), an 1800-hectare preserve formed from three old plantations. The main house for one of the plantations, **Landhuis Savonet**, is at the entrance to the park. It was built in 1662 by a director of the Dutch West India Company.

The park has two driving routes over 32km of dirt roads, and sights include cactuses, orchids, iguanas, deer, wave-battered limestone cliffs and caves with ancient drawings. At the entrance is an excellent museum and a café. You can also make arrangements to tour the park by horse. Call ☎ 599-9-697-8709 for details.

Just north, **Shete Boka National Park** (☎ 599-9-864-0444; admission NAF\$; ☹ 9am-5pm) is a geologic and oceanic festival. Trails lead from a parking area right off the coast road to natural limestone bridges on the shore, sea turtle sanctuaries, a big blowhole and isolated little beaches in narrow coves. Boka Tabla, a cave in the cliffs facing the water is the most popular – and closest – walk.

The road after the park follows the wind-swept northeast coast to Westpunt.

DIRECTORY

ACCOMMODATIONS

All three islands have beach resorts, with Aruba having by far the most. Bonaire has lots of small inns geared toward divers. Curaçao has the most varied range of places to stay, with some interesting non-beach choices in Willemstad. Camping is uncommon. High-season prices usually run mid-December to mid-April. Rates – and crowds – fall by a third or more during other times.

Hotel taxes and fees are as follows: Aruba, 6% tax plus 10% to 15% service charge; Bonaire, US\$6.50 per person plus 10% to 15% service charge; and Curaçao, 7% room tax plus 12% service charge.

ACTIVITIES

Diving is the number one activity on the ABCs, with the azure waters and pristine reefs of Bonaire being a destination of dreams for many (p799). It is also popular on Curaçao (p805) and Aruba (p785). Snorkeling is also ideal, and the waters around the islands never get below a comfy 70°F (21°C).

Swimming is popular. Although the best beaches are on Aruba (p791), you can find good ones on Bonaire (p799) and some very nice hidden ones on Curaçao (p809).

Bonaire is big with windsurfers, who find near ideal conditions on Lac Bay (p798). On Aruba, go to Malmok Beach (p786) and on Curaçao, make your way to the remote Playa Canoa on the north coast (left).

Away from the water, activities are less common. Besides the thrills of resort pursuits as diverse as tennis and shuffleboard, there is golf on Aruba. All three islands have extensive national parks that make for good exploring, but the arid terrain gets hot and at noon you will understand what it means to be a lizard. Hiking in these areas is best done early and late in the day when you can also enjoy sunrises and sunsets respectively.

BUSINESS HOURS

Most banks are open from 8am to 4pm Monday to Friday. Most stores are open at least from 8am to 6pm Monday to Friday

and until 2pm Saturday. Larger supermarkets and shops aimed at visitors stay open until at least 8pm.

CHILDREN

The ABCs are good destinations for families. Almost all resorts have activities for kids – some quite extensive. In addition, the famous reefs protect the beaches from really nasty surf, although the windward sides of the islands can get rough. However, note that unlike Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao are not overstocked with sights specifically aimed at kids, like amusement parks or themed attractions.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Cable TV chatter aside (see p784), Aruba is a safe for tourists as is Bonaire. Curaçao is generally safe although a few rough areas in Willemstad bear caution (p803). On all three, take the usual precautions regarding dark alleys and leaving valuables lying around or in parked cars.

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

Visa-free travel to the ABCs means that most people will not need diplomatic assistance prior to traveling. For official dealings with the islands, other nations go through the Netherlands. There are no embassies or consulates on the ABCs.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Carnival (January or February) This is a big deal on the islands, especially Curaçao where a packed schedule of fun begins right after New Year's Day. Aruba's parades are an explosion of sound and color.

Simadan (Early April) Bonaire's harvest festival is usually held in the small town of Rincon, and celebrates traditional dance and food.

Séu Parade Curaçao's 'Feast of the Harvest' features parades replete with lots of folk music and dancing on Easter Monday. People in rural areas go a little nuts.

Aruba Music Festival (October) Aruba's annual two-day international concert attracts international and local talent.

GAY & LESBIAN TRAVELERS

The ABCs are tolerant of homosexuality, and gays and lesbians should expect little trouble. Curaçao even has a prominent gay bar.

HOLIDAYS

The ABCs observe the following holidays:

New Year's Day January 1

Good Friday Friday before Easter

Easter Monday Monday after Easter

Queen's Birthday April 30

Labour Day May 1

Ascension Day Sixth Thursday after Easter

Christmas Day December 25

Boxing Day December 26

In addition to the above, each island has its own holidays. Note that some of these could change as the Netherlands Antilles is dissolved.

Aruba GF (Bético) Croes Day (January 25); Carnival Monday (Monday before Ash Wednesday); National Day (March 18)

Bonaire Carnival Rest Day (usually in January); Bonaire Day (September 6); Antillean Day (October 21)

Curaçao Carnival Monday (Monday before Ash Wednesday); Flag Day (July 2); Antillean Day (October 21)

PRACTICALITIES

- **Newspapers & Magazines** Each of the islands has English-language newspapers aimed at tourists that combine oodles of local PR with dollops of international news. Newspapers from the US are surprisingly hard to find. International magazines are available.
- **Radio & TV** Most hotels have at least a few satellite TV channels in English. The islands have numerous FM and AM radio stations. On Aruba, 89.9FM features the cheery boosterisms of the Dick Miller Show between 7pm and 8pm.
- **Video Systems** NTSC, the standard used in North America.
- **Electricity** 110AC to 130AC (50 to 60 cycles), North American two-pin sockets are used.
- **Weights & Measures** Metric system.

INTERNET ACCESS

There are internet places across the ABCs. Wi-Fi is increasingly common at hotels and many also have a computer guests can use.

LANGUAGE

If you only speak English, you won't have a problem on the ABCs. Some locals may have limited English skills, but the sheer numbers of English-speaking visitors coupled with the fact that locals often speak a polyglot of languages, including English, means that you will always be able to sort things out.

MEDICAL SERVICES

There are modern hospitals on all three islands. For Aruba see p784, for Bonaire see p793 and for Curaçao, see p803.

MONEY

You can pay for just about everything in US dollars on the ABCs. Sometimes you will get change back in US currency, other times you will receive it in Aruba florins (Afl) or Netherlands Antillean guilders (NAf or ANG) on Bonaire and Curaçao. Both currencies are divided into units of 100. Some of the coins are quite charming such as the square Aruban 50-cent piece. Most ATMs on Aruba and Curaçao let you withdraw currency in US dollars.

TELEPHONE

The area code for Aruba is ☎ 297, for Bonaire and Curaçao it is 599. To call from North America and elsewhere, dial your country's international access code (011 in North America) + ☎ 297 or 599 + the local number. On Curaçao, a 9 has been added in front of all the seven-digit numbers. When dialing within an island, omit the area code.

Telephone service on the ABCs is reliable. All the usual warnings about pirates posing as phones in hotel rooms apply on the ABCs. Your international dial-home services may or may not work, which means you will probably have to pay extortionate hotel rates. Worse are scores of private pay phones that have signs touting 'Phone Home!' for those feeling guilty about leaving their kids, dog or parents' money at home. Few disclose rates, which cost US\$3 or more per minute.

To call home, use phonecards bought in convenience stores – which clearly trumpet their low rates – or call from internet places, which always have cheap rates.

EMERGENCY NUMBERS

- **Ambulance** ☎ Aruba 911, Bonaire 114, Curaçao 912
- **Fire** ☎ Aruba 911, Bonaire 191, Curaçao 911
- **Police** ☎ Aruba 911, Bonaire 911, Curaçao 911

If you have a GSM mobile phone, you can purchase a SIM card for local service for US\$20, which includes US\$6 of calling credit. Local rates start at US\$0.10 per minute; to the UK and US from US\$0.33 per minute. The two carriers on Aruba are **Setar** (www.setar.aw) and **Digicel** (www.digicelgroup.com), which also serves Bonaire and Curaçao. Cell phone shops are common.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Aruba Tourism Authority (www.aruba.com) A well-funded entity, with a comprehensive and useful website. See p784 for the office in Oranjestad.

Curaçao Tourism Board (www.curaçao.com) Offers a mixed bag of services. For the equally mixed quality of personal assistance, see the tourist office in Willemstad (p803).

Tourism Bonaire (www.tourismbonaire.com) Does a good job of promoting the island and answering questions. See p793 for the office in Kralendijk.

TRAVELERS WITH DISABILITIES

The many international resorts on Aruba are all generally accessible as are the ones on Bonaire and Curaçao. All three of the islands are fairly flat and stairs are uncommon so they don't pose an impossible challenge even if there are few local accessibility regulations.

VISAS

Travelers from most countries can visit the ABCs without a visa for up to 90 days.

WOMEN TRAVELERS

Women should take their usual precautions on a visit to the ABCs.

WORK

Foreigners will find it difficult to get a job without sponsorship.

TRANSPORTATION

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Entering Aruba, Bonaire & Curaçao

All visitors need a passport and a return or onward ticket to enter the islands; US citizens see the boxed text, p830.

Air

Aruba is the main entry point for the ABCs, with extensive service from North America and the Caribbean. However Bonaire and Curaçao are gaining nonstop flights from North America; all three have nonstop service from Europe.

ARUBA

Aruba's **Reina Beatrix International Airport** (AUA; ☎ 297-582-4800; www.airportaruba.com) is a busy, modern airport.

Passengers flying to the US absolutely must take heed of their airline's warning to check in three hours before flight time. Actually four hours might be better because all US-bound passengers clear customs and immigration *before* they leave Aruba. Most flights back to the US leave during a small timeslot in the afternoon and the US-staffed immigration facilities are not up to the task. If possible, try to avoid going home on a weekend when things are the worst. Once ensconced in the terminal, there are bookstores, places for internet access and fast food places just like the ones at home.

The following airlines serve Aruba from these cities (some services are seasonal):

Air Canada (☎ 800-247-2262; www.aircanada.com)

Toronto

American/American Eagle (☎ 297-582-2700; www.aa.com; Ling & Sons Super Center, Schotlandstraat 41, Aruba) Boston, Miami, New York, San Juan

Avianca (☎ 297-582-5484; www.avianca.com) Bogota, Colombia

Continental (☎ 800-1507; www.continental.com) Houston, Newark, New York

Delta (☎ 800-1515) Atlanta, New York

JetBlue (☎ 297-588-5388; www.jetblue.com) New York

KLM (☎ 297-582-3546; www.klm.com) Amsterdam

Tiara Air (☎ 297-588-4272; www.tiara-air.com)

Punto Fijo

United (☎ 297-582-9592; www.united.com) Chicago, Washington

US Airways (☎ 800-1580; www.usairways.com) Boston, Charlotte, Philadelphia

Venezolana (http://ravsava.com.ve) Caracas

BONAIRE

Bonaire's **Flamingo Airport** (BON; ☎ 599-717-5600) is indeed painted pink and should be named for John Waters. It is immediately south of Kralendijk. See p796 for departure tax info.

The following airlines serve Bonaire from these cities (some services are seasonal):

American Eagle (☎ 599-717-3598; www.aa.com) San Juan

Continental (☎ 599-717-7474; www.continental.com) Houston, Newark

Delta (☎ 599-717-7474) Atlanta

KLM (☎ 599-717-7474; www.klm.com) Amsterdam

CURAÇAO

Curaçao's **Hato International Airport** (CUR; ☎ 599-9839-3201; www.curaçao-airport.com) has a decent level of services and amenities for passengers after security. There are ATMs in the departure area. The departure tax is US\$32, which may or may not be included in your airfare. For flights to Aruba and Bonaire, the fee is US\$8.

The following airlines serve Curaçao from these cities (some services are seasonal):

Air Jamaica (☎ 876-922-3460; www.airjamaica.com) Kingston, Montego Bay

American (☎ 599-9-736-7799; www.aa.com) Miami

Avianca (☎ 599-9-839-1182; www.avianca.com)

Bogota

Continental (☎ 800-231-0856; www.continental.com) Newark

Delta (☎ 800-221-1212) Atlanta

KLM (☎ 599-9-736-1422; www.klm.com) Amsterdam

LIAT (☎ 888-844-5428; www.liat.com) Trinidad

Sea

CRUISE SHIPS

The ABCs are part of cruise-ship itineraries that cover the Caribbean.

Cruise ships flock to Aruba; it's not unusual to have more than 10,000 passengers descend on the island in a single day. Curaçao has similar aims with new facilities under construction in Willemstad. Bonaire's relationship with cruise ships is more complex. The port can't handle many but the money is welcome. Many locals take a dim view, going so far as to blame cruise ships for spoiling Christmas in 2007 (visiting boats prevented freight barges from using the port in December, which meant that some items in stores ran out).

YACHTS

The ABCs are off the typical yachting routes and receive few boats.

GETTING AROUND

The only way to get between the ABCs is by air. On the islands, many travelers opt for a rental car for all or part of their visit. Public transportation outside of the core of Aruba and Curaçao is limited, although taxis are common.

Air

Although there is no other option, interisland service in the ABCs has a checkered past. The routes are busy, but have not proved profitable for airlines. Operators come and go with such frequency that you should double-check that an airline truly exists before trying to make a booking. Fares typically depend on when you book them and average US\$80 to US\$150 one way between islands.

The following airlines provide air service between the ABCs.

DAE (Dutch Antilles Express; ☎ 599 717 0808; www.flydae.com) The largest airline with service between all three islands.

Insel Air (☎ 599 9737 0444; www.fly-inselair.com) Flies from Curaçao to Aruba and Bonaire but not between the two nonstop.

Tiara Air (☎ 297-588-4272; www.tiara-air.com) A small carrier.

Bicycle

Although there are no bike lanes on the ABCs, many people enjoy riding along the many

flat roads on each of the islands, especially Bonaire. You can rent bikes at many resorts and bike shops.

Bus

Aruba (p781) and Curaçao (p807) both have limited networks of local buses.

Car & Motorcycle

Major car-rental companies can be found at each of the ABC airports. In addition, there are numerous reliable local firms that offer competitive rates. For details on car rental agencies for Aruba, see p781, for Bonaire, see p792 and for Curaçao, see p807.

Main roads are generally in pretty good condition; however, roads in national parks and other remote spots can be quite rough.

Consider renting a 4WD or other vehicle with high ground clearance if you want to go exploring. Driving is on the right-hand side, seat belts are required and motorcyclists must use helmets. Gasoline is easily found.

Road signs are sporadic. Outside of well-marked resort areas, you will soon discover just how friendly the locals are as you stop often for directions.

Taxi

Taxis are available on all the islands; see p781, p792 and p807 for Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao, respectively.