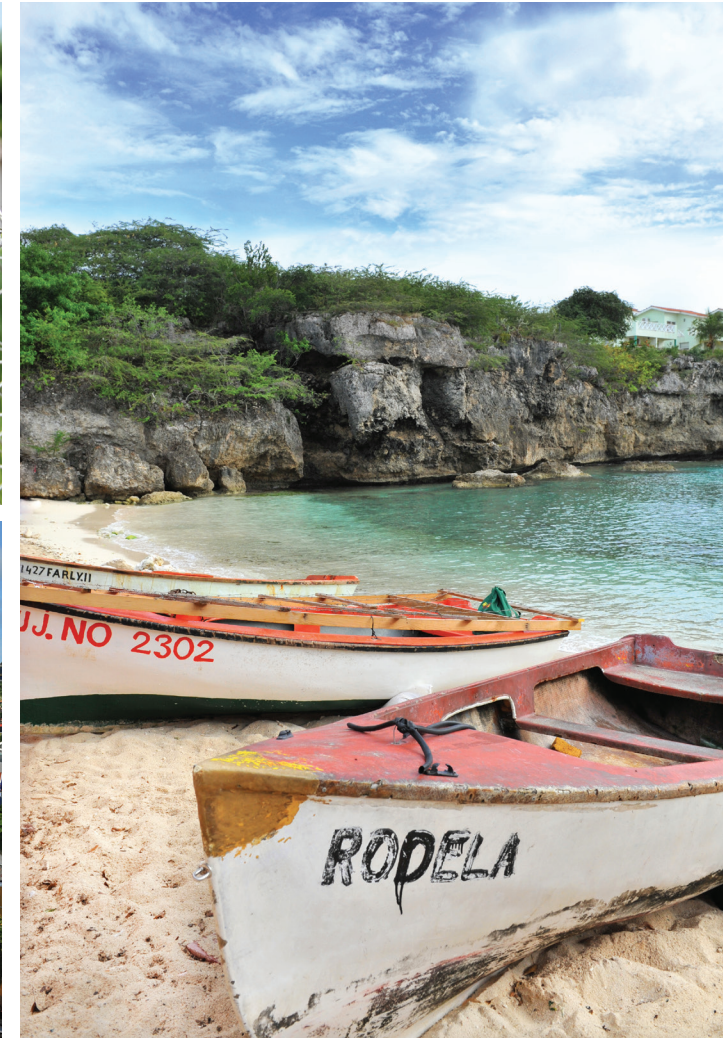




CURAÇAO

SUMMONS THE EXPLORER IN ALL

By Lola Thélin



No one ever said, "I don't love islands," especially when the living is sweet, or "dulce," as local residents of Curaçao would say. The word has become synonymous to the Dutch Caribbean island thanks to a larger-than-life installation that spells out the local expression and is proudly displayed in the port city and capital Willemstad's downtown epicenter.

Curaçao is the C in the ABC islands, along with Aruba and Bonaire, and just a swim away from Venezuela. Its history is rich, its terrain is rocky, its drinks are blue due to the locally distilled sweet blue liqueur and it's situated on the outer fringes of the hurricane belt. While under the rule of the Dutch, Curaçao, one of the five islands of the Netherlands Antilles in the Caribbean, is autonomous; its people voted to separate from the islands in 2010. The island has its own set of laws but depends on the

Dutch for military and international relations. More than 50 nationalities are represented among the island's approximately 150,000 residents. Most residents carry a Dutch passport, and it seems like everyone is trilingual, speaking Dutch, English and Papiamentu, the local dialect.

All it takes is 90 minutes to loop around the 180-square-mile island, but do it correctly and it'll require the entire day. Tagged as "One Island:





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35 Beaches,” there is almost too much beach—if there is such a thing. Although the resort beaches are beautiful, head north for more natural, public and wider beaches. Pick one, stay an hour, and move along to the next. Some do have specific characteristics: Playa Porto Mari is the ideal place to spend an entire day with its boardwalk, beachside bar and restaurant, available parasols, shower and bathroom facilities and diving and snorkeling spots. If less is more, stop at Playa Lagun, surrounded by rocky cliffs and decorated

with abandoned once-upon-a-time-colorful fishing boats. Playa Kenepa (or Knip) is made up of two coves and has a great cliffside lookout point for photo ops or exploring. Located on the northwestern tip of the island is Shete Boka National Park with its black porous terrain and exploding water.

Not much of Curaçao is new, but the Pietermaai District is often dubbed up and coming. From desecrated Dutch-style mansions that yearn to be



saved to ex-pat boutique hotels, this is definitely a neighborhood of trendy ideas. A few business samplings: Blue Bird Café for jazz; the French-inspired Déjà Vu; Ginger for Carib-Asian dishes served in a darling courtyard; Saint Tropez for a sexy and in-style evening; café and restaurant Mundo Bizarro and its Cuban-influenced interior; 27 Bar & Terrace, a late-night entertainment

spot aptly named after musicians like Janis Joplin and Jimi Hendrix lost too soon at the sweet age of 27; and Scuba Lodge & Suites, a one-stop-shop for diving, lodging, food and drinks.

A mere 10-minute stroll from the Pietermaai District is Avila Beach Hotel, the area's downtown four-star, luxury beachfront

hotel. The 65-year-old property recently underwent a renovation to modernize its private rooms but still boasts a rich history, both in culture and food. Pay attention to the art throughout the hotel—a subtle homage to the island—and be sure to reserve a table for Thursday night jazz at its Blues Bar & Restaurant. The cream of the hotel crop is the Balinese-inspired Baoase Luxury Resort

with its lavish looks and services, although its distance from any lively part of the island puts it at a disadvantage.

Back in the city center of Willemstad, history lives on. The walled fort, originally built in 1634, is now office space for island officials. The skyline remains colorful, a tradition unwillingly bestowed on residents in 1918

by the appointed governor. He complained the sunlight reflecting off the then-white buildings gave him migraines and decreed all buildings had to be painted a color at the expense of the owners. It was later discovered that the governor owned the island's only paint factory. Queen Emma Bridge, the floating pontoon bridge built in 1888 and affectionately nicknamed the Swinging Old

Lady, still opens 30 times a day for boating traffic, and The Hope of Israel-Emanuel with its floor covered in sand is the oldest surviving synagogue still in use in the Americas.

All in all from the island's fascinating old buildings to its humming neighborhoods, this Caribbean island has the making of your favorite vacation.