

Get away to Aruba, it's one happy island

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Aruba turns its slogan, "One Happy Island," into fact. You will see many smiling faces if you visit the island. It isn't rocket science to figure out why everyone is so happy.

Aruba has an average temperature of 82°F, constant tradewinds, wonderful beaches, a modern infrastructure and a prosperous economy — who wouldn't be happy?

The Aruban people are an autonomous part of the Dutch Kingdom. Their history, since the year of their discovery by Spanish explorer Alonso de Ojeda in 1499, is made up of a rich mix of Arawak Indians, pirates, African slaves, Spanish and Dutch.

The name Aruba is said to be related to the Spanish phrase "oro huba" meaning "there was gold"; however, gold wasn't discovered until the middle of the 1800s.

Cha-ching!

Is it another discovery of gold? Is it Las Vegas in the Caribbean? Well, not quite. There are nine casinos on the island of Aruba. They offer all the traditional games and some very nice floor shows. The casinos may be a lot of fun, but they are not the extravagantly huge casinos of Las Vegas.

Most of the casinos are located within or are attached to major hotel chains. The legal gambling age in Aruba is 18.

Caribbean Stud Poker is an Aruban invention. The game was created in 1988 and has spread all over the world. In this game, as in blackjack, each player competes only with the dealer instead of the whole table.

The Tunnel of Love

One activity sure to please is a drive around the island. This can be accomplished in one day since the island is only about 19 miles long by five miles wide. A popular rental vehicle for exploring is an open Jeep.

The island offers much to see. The views range from desert terrain, abandoned gold mines and ruins of a pirate castle to Hooiberg (haystack) mountain, a natural bridge and caves. If you have lost your direction, take a look at the divi-divi trees. The trees always point west because of the constant trade winds.

What would be more romantic than a trip into the Tunnel of Love cave? Unless you count jumping into your lover's arms for comfort from the many bats as romantic — this wasn't it. For all you spelunkers (cave explorers) out there, it was kind of fun.

When we went, there was no guide and no map, just arrows on the walls. We were given a hard hat and a decent flashlight. It was kind of like the Hardy Boys meet Nancy Drew. We waited for a group of men and women to arrive, then went down the stairs into the dark cave and followed the painted orange arrows on the wall. There was an occasional scream from one of the women as one of the many bats flew too close to our heads. Then we came to the finale — an arrow pointed almost straight up and said "Exit."

No stairs and no ladder — just rock and a hole in the cave ceiling above! Well, I'm writing this, so it was a happy ending.

Ah, Civilization

If you are not quite as adventurous, there are many other activities on the island. Oranjestad is the capital city and is a picturesque combination of Dutch colonial architecture and pastel colors. The pretty colored buildings are the favorite vacation photograph of Aruba.

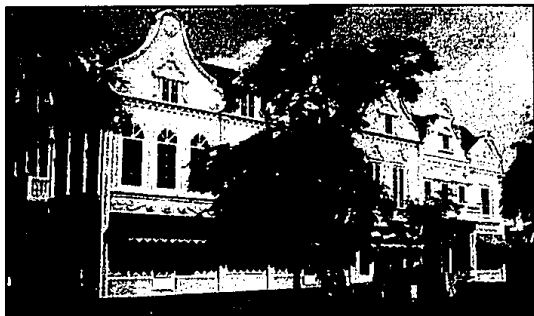
This is also the best shopping area on the island. The town's marina is an interesting place to stop by when the fishing boats come in. We saw a sharp toothed barracuda that a fisherman scooped out of the hold on his boat.

There are three nice museums to explore.

■ The Archeological Museum exhibits artifacts from the island's prehistoric period.

■ The Historical Museum displays artifacts from the early Spanish and Dutch periods.

■ Finally, the Numismatic Museum has 30,000 historic coins from Aruba and around the world.



Popular spot: The Dutch colonial architecture of the capital city of Oranjestad is one of the most photographed sites in Aruba.

A bite to eat

Aruba has a wonderful mix of restaurants. For a little fun, try The Pirates Nest Restaurant. It looks like a beached-pirate ship stranded in the sand. It is located on the grounds of the Bucuti Beach Resort.

Go when they have a special show. We saw a limbo dancer that was amazing. He placed two regular glasses on the floor and put the pole on top of them and danced his way under the pole. I wish I was that thin!

If you want a real Aruban experience, two restaurants are a must.

The Old Cunucu House is a

located in a restored homestead. The restaurant has original paintings, beamed ceilings and intimate rooms. The cuisine is both traditional and international. Friday nights there are strolling guitarists to entertain with local music.

The other restaurant is called Boonoonoonos. The name means "very special/extraordinary/fantastic." Spell check went into a coma on that one! The Restaurant serves Caribbean cuisine from Aruba and neighboring islands.

Try their Caribbean combo which consists of Jamaican jerk ribs, St. Martin stuffed eggplant, Trinidad curried chicken,

Dominique Carne con Papas, Bajan pepperpot, flying fish and San Juan garlic shrimp. Is your mouth watering yet?

Aruba is a great place to visit. They claim the number of repeat visitors are tops in the Caribbean. They also claim to be one of the top five warm climate destinations in the Western Hemisphere. I don't know — that is a pretty big area.

It is definitely a pleasant place to get rid of the stress of everyday life. This island is growing fast, just like many others in the Caribbean. Get there soon, while the charm and natural scenery is still there.

If you are going...

Jeep, Jeep

If you plan on renting a Jeep, make sure you bring sunscreen and lots of it. You don't feel the burn while you are driving around. Many of the roads on the eastside of the island are not paved and you will eat some sand. Jeeps and other rental cars are usually plentiful, but it never hurts to book ahead.

Condo talks

I know, the talks are annoying, and you don't want to buy property on Aruba. If you plan on attending some casino shows or going on a Jeep safari, you may want to consider the talks. Every major property with timeshares has them — you won't have to look very far. The talk lasts about an hour and a half, if you are firm in your refusal. We came away with two tickets to a show, casino credit, beach towels and four T-shirts for our trouble. We would have paid for the shows and casino anyway, so everyone wins. It wasn't high pressure at all.

Currency

Aruba's currency is the florin. Currently, \$1 in American equals 1.84 florins. Most major hotels and attractions take credit cards and Traveler's checks.

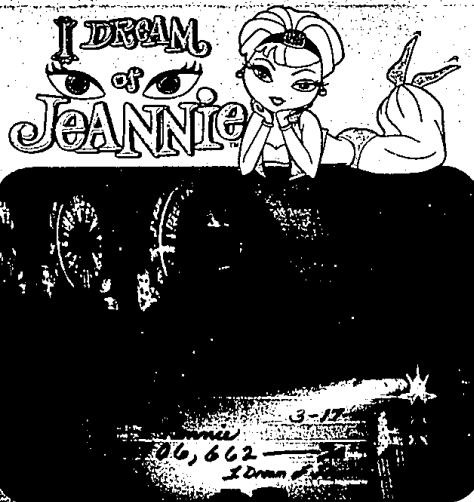
Taxes and Charges

Be prepared for additional taxes when you book your vacation to Aruba. There is a 6-percent government tax and 11 percent hotel tax that can be added to your hotel bill. If you are purchasing a package vacation, check if these are included. Many restaurants automatically add a 10-15% service charge to your bill. Make sure you don't double tip.

Papiamentu

The official language in Aruba is Papiamentu. This language has evolved from the combination of Spanish, Dutch, South American, Indian and English words. Most of the islanders speak English and many speak several languages. Here are some fun phrases to know: Good Morning: Bon Dia; Good-bye: Ayo; Thank you very much: Masha danki; Have a nice day: Pasa un bon dia; How are you?: Con ta bai? Fine, thank you: Bon, danki

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