Aruba

Why Go?
Americans from the east coast fleeing winter make Aruba the most touristed island in the southern Caribbean.

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.'

When to Go
Average temperature for Aruba 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 island is fairly dry, averaging a little over 2.5cm of rain per month. Much of this falls from September to early December. Aruba usually misses the Caribbean hurricane season; in recent years January rains have caused minor flooding. December to April is high season. High season for cruise ships runs October to April.
**GETTING TO NEIGHBORING ISLANDS**

Plans for ferries within the ABCs perpetually run aground. But flights between Aruba and Bonaire and Curaçao are frequent and last about 20 minutes.

**Essential Food & Drink**

Because of the arid conditions, food in Aruba has always been hearty. Thick stews made with meats such as goat and chicken, and with vegetables such as okra and squash, are predominant. Spices are used to give things variety.

- **Goat (cabra) stew** A classic dish that most Arubans will say is made best by their own mother. Also appears in curries.
- **Cheese** An obvious Dutch legacy, usually eaten straight with a beer. When used in cooking it was traditionally a special treat.
- **Keshi yena** Comes in myriad variations: a cheese casserole with chicken, okra and a few raisins for seasoning. Much better than it sounds.
- **Seafood** Common and good, especially shellfish. Fish is popular in curries.
- **Funchi** Based on cornmeal, it is formed into cakes and fried, mixed with okra and fried, or used as a coating for chicken and fish.
- **Nasi goreng** Indonesian fried rice via the colonial Dutch.
- **Frikandel** Classic Dutch deep-fried, meaty snack.
- **Bitterballen** Another Dutch classic – little deep-fried meaty balls served at roadside stands.
- **Balashi** Aruba’s lager is popular because it is not Dutch or American.

**Fast Facts**

- **Area** 181 sq km
- **Population** 106,000
- **Capital** Oranjestad
- **Telephone country code** +1
- **Telephone area code** 297
- **Emergency** 911

**Set Your Budget**

- **Budget hotel room** US$80
- **Two-course evening meal** US$30
- **Beer** Afl8
- **Day at the beach** Free
- **Aruba bus** Afl2.25

**Resources**

- **Visit Aruba** (www.visitaruba.com)
- **Aruba Community Forum** (www.aruba.com/forum) Want to know the best new restaurant? The posts with opinions will pour in. Looking for a gay bar? Look here.
- **Aruba Web Cams** (www.arubawebcams.tv)
**Aruba Highlights**

1. Savor **Arashi Beach** (p141), the least-touristed of Aruba’s many fine white beaches
2. Munch a lobster at one of Oranjestad’s **traditional seafood restaurants** (p133)
3. Thar she blows! That’s wind, not whale – the waters off the northwest coast are famous for their ideal **windsurfing** (p137)
4. Frolic on a long ribbon of powdery sand at **Eagle Beach** (p135), the best beach on an island famous for them
5. It’s bottoms up, literally, at one of Aruba’s **rum shops** (p140), where the day’s events are dissected and you never know what will happen next
6. Walk, hike, drive and swim on the wild side at **Arikok National Wildlife Park** (p142)
7. Discover the island’s newest sight, the compelling **Aruba Archaeological Museum** (p133) in Oranjestad
Oranjestad

POP 33,000

Aruba’s capital 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 cruise ships are in port everything is jammed.

Oranjestad has an appealing mix of old and new structures intermingled with scads of shops, bars and restaurants. At night the town is quiet.

🌟 Sights

Oranjestad is good for walking; very little is more than a 10-minute walk from the Yacht Basin. 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.

**Aruba Archaeological Museum**
(Schelpstraat; admission free; 10am-5pm Tue-Fri, 10am-2pm Sat & Sun) Grand 1920s colonial buildings house this brilliant new museum. The engaging exhibits range from stone tools found on Aruba dating from 4000 BC to displays detailing Arawak life and the colonial era.

**Fort Zoutman**
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** (582-6099; Fort Zoutman; 8:30am-4pm Mon-Fri). See how a mélange of cultures (African, European, Caribbean and indigenous) have combined to create the island’s unique character.

**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.

**Wilhelmina Park**
Across Lloyd G Smith Blvd by the Yacht Basin is this shady refuge, replete with lush tropical gardens.

📅 Festivals & Events

**Carnival**
FESTIVAL
(Jan or Feb) This is a big deal on the islands, where a packed schedule of fun begins right after New Year’s Day. Aruba’s parades are an explosion of sound and color.

**Aruba Music Festival**
MUSIC FESTIVAL
(Oct) Aruba’s annual two-day international concert attracts international and local talent.

**Bon Bini Festival**
FESTIVAL
(admission US$3; 6:30-8:30pm Tue) Staged at Fort Zoutman by the tourism association, the event attracts some top folkloric talent from around the island; local foods and handicrafts are sold.

🛋️ Sleeping

Almost every hotel is north of Oranjestad but the one option here is worth considering.

**Renaissance Aruba Resort**
RESORT $$
(583-6000; www.renaissancearuba.com; Lloyd G Smith Blvd 82; r US$200-450; ⚩) The Renaissance Aruba Resort 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 rooms are comfortable and span the gamut, but be sure to avoid the gloomy ones overlooking the indoor atrium.

🍴 Eating

**Snack trucks** are an island institution. Look for these spotless trucks in the parking lots near the Yacht Basin serving up a range of ultrafresh 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 snacks are under Afl10.

**Old Fisherman**
CONTINENTAL $$
(Havenstraat 36; mains US$8-25; breakfast, lunch & dinner; ⚩) It smells like garlic as you enter this compact and crowded local favorite. Breakfast omelets are fluffy, while lunch highlights include excellent salads. At night seafood shines: lobster and shrimp come in various forms. Service is quick yet gracious; there’s a full bar.
Driftwood
SEAFOOD $$$
(583-2515; Klipstraat 12; mains US$18-50; dinner Wed-Mon) Toss back too many of the serious cocktails at this 1960s supper club and you’ll expect Dean Martin to walk in. It’s owned by a local fisherman, and the changing menu reflects what he and his pals have caught. Grilled lobster is simple and simply terrific. The US$25 three-course special is a bargain.

Yemanja
GRILL $$$
(588-4711; Wilhelminastraat 2; mains US$20-35; dinner) Two colonial buildings behind the Aruba Parliament have been transformed into one of Aruba’s most stylish eateries. 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. There’s a couple good veggie options as well.

Qué Pasa
INTERNATIONAL $$
(Wilhelminastraat 18; mains US$12-25; lunch Mon-Fri, dinner daily; ) The accent is Spanish but the language is global at this effusive cafe. A huge upstairs terrace is just the place to settle in for good drinks, conversation and dishes with myriad inspiration. Check out the art gallery and have a glass of chilled white.
Baby Back Grill
(Caya GF Betico Croes; meals from Afl14; ☎ 11am-11pm; ✗) 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, steaks, chicken and more for appreciative masses.

Happy Spot
(Caya GF Betico Croes; ☎ 11am-8pm) More than a dozen blenders are kept busy making milkshakes and fresh juice drinks at the open-air hut on the main shopping drag. Go on, have a triple cone.

**Drinking & Entertainment**
Aruba is not the place to come if you want the latest in techno – it caters to a post-disco crowd more prone to hitting a casino.

Cafe Chaos
(Lloyd G Smith Blvd 60; ☎ 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.

Mambo Jambo
(Royal Plaza Mall, Lloyd G Smith Blvd 94; ☎ 11am-4am) Overlooking the street from the small mall, Mambo Jambo has drinks as colorful as the straws you use to suck them down. Pop music with a Latin-Euro beat plays till very late.

**Shopping**
Numerous shopping malls cluster around Lloyd G Smith Blvd and the cruise-ship port, and most are surprisingly tired. There are vendor huts selling ‘crafts’ along Lloyd G Smith Blvd, but note these knick-knacks are mostly made by Chinese artisans. Much better is strolling Caya GF Betico Croes, Oranjestad’s main shopping street. Choices range from international luxury brands to dollar stores. It’s a lively mix. Bargaining is not encouraged.

**Resort Area**
Almost all of Aruba’s hotels and resorts are on a long strip along some of the Caribbean’s best beaches. Beginning 3km northwest of Oranjestad, the resort area has wide roads, lush landscaping and excellent beaches. It’s really a world unto itself, similar to beachside developments found the world over.

Both conveniently and accurately, the hotels and condos along Eagle Beach are known as the Low-Rise Resorts. A rapidly developing area leads north of here for about 1.5km to the High-Rise Resorts along Palm Beach. This is also where you’ll find a fast-growing zone of upscale malls and nightlife.

**Beaches**

**TOP CHOICE**
Eagle Beach
FAMILY, RESORT BEACH
Fronting a stretch of the Low-Rise Resorts just northwest of Oranjestad, Eagle is a long stretch of white sand that regularly makes lists of the best in the world. Portions have shade trees and you can obtain every service you need here, from a lounger to a cold drink. The best all-round choice for everyone, from singles to couples to families with kids.

Manchebo Beach
BEACH
Just south of Eagle, this large beach reaches out to a point. It is popular with topless sunbathers (an activity frowned on elsewhere)

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**PORT OF CALL – ORANJESTAD**
A long dock can handle several megaships at once, which is good given Aruba’s popularity as a cruise-ship destination. Once off the boat, either head off to explore or press into Oranjestad proper. Don’t be put off by the humdrum collection of shops closest to the pier. If you’re docked for a few hours, don’t miss the following:

» An excursion to the many sights on the wild Northeast Coast (p141)
» Time pounding the sand on Eagle Beach, Aruba’s best
» Oranjestad’s backstreets (p133), where old buildings hold shops and places for a local snack
and offers the best chance on the strip to get away from others.

**Palm Beach**  
*FAMILY, RESORT BEACH*  
A classic white-sand beauty, but only for those who enjoy the company of lots of people, as it fronts the High-Rise Resorts. During high season the sands can get jammed, but for some that’s part of the scene.

**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. Fortunately Aruba has scores of fun activities pegged to its wind and water. All are more energizing than the heavily promoted 4WD tours, ATV tours and numerous other acronym-related tours.

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. Day spas are also popular on Aruba and are a feature of many resorts. Treatments usually start at about US$100 and go swiftly upward.

Most activities companies will provide transport to/from your hotel.

**Diving & Snorkeling**  
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 upward 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. Noted nearby reefs include *Skalahein* 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$80 and week-long PADI open-water courses about US$400.

Most hotels have a close relationship with at least one dive operator. Conversely, many dive shops can set you up with cheap accommodation. Some recommended dive shops:

Mermaid Sport Divers (587-4103; www.scubadivers-aruba.com) Mermaid has a huge range of dive packages plus its own pool for training.

Native Divers Aruba (586-4763; www.nativedivers.com) Offers custom trips and certification training.

Roberto’s (993-2850; www.robertoswatersports.com) Group snorkeling trips US$35; custom snorkeling trips US$125 for two.

Other Activities

Aruba Active Vacations (741-2991; www.aruba-active-vacations.com; Hadicurari Beach) The island’s main windsurfing operator is based on Hadicurari Beach at the Fisherman’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.

Aruba Kayak Adventure (582-5520; www.arubakayak.com; tours from US$72) Novices and pros alike enjoy a fascinating circuit of the mangroves and shoreline near Spanish Lagoon on the south coast. Some options include lunch and snorkeling. Although you’re unlikely to encounter one now, this was one of the few spots on the island pirates were known to visit. What’s a pirate’s favorite island? Arrrrrrrrr-ruba.

Aruba Nature Sensitive Hiking & Jeep Tours (594-5017; www.naturesensitivetours.com; tours from US$80) Join the former top ranger at Arikok park who now leads hiking tours of the seldom explored parts of the island, mostly in the east. Hikes range from easy to strenuous, and longer itineraries include the use of jeeps to link areas. There’s a strong environmental focus to the tours.

Rancho Daimari (585-0290; tours from US$65) One of the better outfits for touring Aruba by horse. It offers rides to the Natural Pool and Andicuri Beach on the rugged northeast coast. Certainly, riding a fertilizer-producing critter to these attractions is better than tearing

**Resort Area**

**Activities, Courses & Tours**
1. Aruba Active Vacations..................C1
   Intermezzo Day Spa......................(see 16)
2. Links at Divi Aruba.....................C4
   Mandara Spa.............................(see 5)

**Sleeping**
3. Amsterdam Manor Beach Resort........C3
4. Aruba Beach Villas........................D1
5. Aruba Marriott Resort..................D1
6. Arubiana Inn.............................C3
7. Beach House Aruba.......................D1
8. Bucuti Beach Resort....................C4
9. Coconut Inn...............................D2
10. Hyatt Regency Aruba Resort...........C2
11. Manchebo Beach Resort................B4
12. MVC Eagle Beach Aruba................C3
13. Radisson Aruba Resort................C2
14. Sasaki Apartments......................C3
15. Sunset Beach Studios...................C1
16. Westin Aruba Resort...................C2

**Eating**
17. Bingo........................................D2
18. Carte Blanche............................C2
19. Gasparito Restaurant...................D2
20. Ling & Sons................................C4
21. Sunrise Bakery..........................D3

**Drinking**
22. Cafe O80....................................D2
23. Caribbean Store.........................D2
24. JJ Snack....................................D1

**Entertainment**
Copa Cabana Casino........................(see 10)
Stellaris Casino..............................(see 5)

**Shopping**
25. Paseo Herencia............................D1
26. South Beach Centre......................D2
across the landscape in a 4WD – as many operators promote.

**Mandara Spa**  
SPA  
(phone: 520-6750; www.mandaraspam.com; Aruba Marriott, Lloyd G Smith Blvd 101) A branch of the worldwide chain of luxe spas.

**Intermezzo Day Spa**  
SPA  
(phone: 586-0613; www.arubaspa.com; Westin Aruba Resort, JE Irausquin Blvd 77) Has several locations in the ABCs.

### Links at Divi Aruba
GOLF
(phone: 587-0685; www.divigolf.com; JE Irausquin Blvd; green fee US$85, club rental US$25) A nine-hole links amid the Divi resort empire in the Low-Rise Resorts area. Fees include the use of a cart.

**De Palm Tours**  
SIGHTSEEING TOURS  
(phone: 582-4400; www.depalm.com) De Palm’s heavily promoted tours crisscross the island, taking vacationers on a dizzying variety of trips. Tour prices start at US$40 for a sightseeing tour and most include a stop on its outdoor activities island.

### Sleeping

Accommodations on Aruba are ideally suited to the large-resort-seeking tourists the island targets. The two main clusters of resorts – the descriptively named Low-Rise Resorts and High-Rise Resorts – comprise 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.’

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 beachfront hotel would be unappreciated.

### LOW-RISE RESORTS AREA

The best area for families and fronted by Eagle Beach, Aruba’s best.

#### **TOP CHOICE**

**Bucuti Beach Resort**  
RESORT $$$  
(phone: 583-1100; www.bucuti.com; Lloyd G Smith Blvd 55B; r US$300-500; ) 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 cafe in a concrete pirate ship. (What’s a pirate’s favorite movie? Booty and the Beast.) Rates include a breakfast buffet and many other extras.

**BucutiCam**  
(phone: www.bucuticam.com) is a daily webcam picture shot at a designated time at the Bucuti Beach Resort. Vacationers pose for the folks back home, hold up signs and in some cases show off amazing tans.

**Manchebo Beach Resort**  
RESORT $$$  
(phone: 582-3444; www.manchebo.com; JE Irausquin Blvd 55; r US$300-500; ) Right on the eponymous beach, this crescent of two-story blocks sits at a discreet distance from the surf. It’s all understated luxury here, there’s no flash – although the little row of wooden cottages near the waves comes close. Most of the rooms have had a stylish refit. The resort wears its green credentials proudly; all-inclusive packages are available.

**Amsterdam Manor Beach Resort**  
HOTEL $$$  
(phone: 587-1492; www.amsterdammanor.com; JE Irausquin Blvd 252; r US$200-350; ) At the north end of blindingly white Eagle Beach, this 72-unit family-run resort mimics a Dutch village, without the frosty weather. Rooms and buildings come in a variety of shapes and sizes; all have kitchenettes. Some have sizable balconies or terraces with views.

**MVC Eagle Beach Aruba**  
HOTEL $$  
(phone: 587-0110; www.mvceaglebeach.com; JE Irausquin Blvd 240; r US$90-150; ) 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 mass-
es, who enjoy the best deal in Aruba for the location. Don’t expect any frills, but it does have a convivial bar-restaurant.

HIGH-RISE RESORTS AREA

The High-Rise Resorts area is the top-end holiday spot of Aruba, where almost all the hotels are affiliated with major chains. The properties accommodate thousands of guests, who compete for pool loungers, elbow each other on crowded Palm Beach and seek comfort in US$15 rum punches. It’s not an area that will appeal to many independent travelers. Behind the resorts there is a plethora of development adding upscale malls and nightlife to the mix.

Radisson Aruba Resort RESORT $$$
(586-6555; www.radisson.com/aruba; JE Irausquin Blvd 81; r US$275-600; W) The pick of the litter. Extensive, lush grounds; 359 rooms.

Aruba Marriott Resort RESORT $$$
(586-9000; www.marriottaruba.com; Lloyd G Smith Blvd 101; r US$300-500; W) Over 400 rooms with large balconies but seems to function as a venue for sales of time-shares.

Hyatt Regency Aruba Resort RESORT $$$
(586-1234; www.aruba.hyatt.com; JE Irausquin Blvd 85; r US$300-600; W) Has an elegant Moorish motif, but the beach is crowded, as are the tropical birds displayed in small cages; 360 rooms.

Westin Aruba Resort RESORT $$$
(586-4466; www.westin.com; JE Irausquin Blvd 77; r US$250-500; W) A cramped site and at its roots a 1970s property with 480 rooms. Also has tropical birds in cages.

INLAND

This is where the budget lodgings are found. The beach is usually about a 10- to 15-minute walk. Bonuses include being away from the crowds and closer to authentic Aruban life.

Coconut Inn HOTEL $$
(586-6288; www.coconutinn.com; Noord 31; r US$70-110; W) 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.

Arubiana Inn HOTEL $$
(587-7700; www.arubianainn.com; Bubali 74; r US$80-110; W) About a 15-minute walk east from Eagle Beach and near some food outlets, this spartan hotel is popular with Europeans on budget packages. The rooms have a dash of style and services include free coolers for taking drinks to the beach.

Sasaki Apartments HOTEL $$
(587-7482; www.sasaki-apartments.com; Bubali 143, Noord; r US$80-110; W) This simple complex is just a couple of busy roads away from Eagle Beach. The 24 studio apartments are spare in decor but have fully equipped kitchens. There's a pool, a barbecue grill and you’re a short walk from a little village of bakeries and stores.

Eating

Close to the resorts are plenty of overpriced joints, franchises (Hooters!) and fast-food outlets but a short walk or drive inland to Noord and you’ll find a nice range of locally owned places.

Carte Blanche INTERNATIONAL $$$
(586-3339; www.carteblanchearuba.com; JE Irausquin Blvd 330; dinner US$70; W) It’s like being invited to a dinner party thrown by your impossibly talented friends, except this is probably better. Fourteen seats are arrayed in a sleek open kitchen where you interact with chef Dennis van Daatselaar while he prepares a five-course meal that changes nightly. Meanwhile Glen Bonset is preparing drinks and seeing to your comfort. In high season you have to book weeks in advance; no one aged under 18 is allowed.

Gasparito Restaurant CARIBBEAN $$$
(586-7044; www.gasparito.com; Gasparito 3, Noord; mains US$20-35; W) 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.

Bingo BAR-GRILL $$
(Palm Beach 6D, Noord; meals US$10-20; W) This popular Dutch-run cafe is both a genial bar and a good place for a casual meal. Enjoy pub fare such as burgers at tables inside and out or opt for more ambitious steak and seafood mains. The bar stays open until 2am.

Sunrise Bakery BAKERY $
(Bubali 72; snacks Afl4; W) This aromatic bakery with sweet and savory
ARUBA

RUM SHOPS

Throughout Aruba’s hinterlands you will see rum shops. These island institutions are part bar, part cafe 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 the easily accessible Caribbean Store (586-5544; Noord; 8am-11pm), which is east of the High-Rise Resorts; it has stand-up tables in a dirt parking lot and a cheery bar inside.

Another good choice for locals and visitors alike is the JJ Snack (Tanki Flip, Noord; 11am-7pm). You can’t miss the Heineken banners on the outside. Inside enjoy Creole accented snacks.

Finally, for a rum shop with a strong Dutch accent try Cafe 080 (Tanki Flip, Noord; 3pm-midnight), which has old furniture under a huge shade tree. It’s at the turn for the road to the Chapel of Alto Vista.

treats is near budget hotels and close to other popularly priced takeaways, cafes and groceries.

Ling & Sons SUPERMARKET $(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.

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 in Noord is a popular place for a drink. Nearby rum shops (see the ‘Rum Shops’ boxed text) are another amiable option.

Cafe Rembrandt BAR (www.rembrandt-aruba.com; South Beach Centre; 8am-1am, to 3am Fri & Sat) A fine option for a drink with a cool crowd, this Dutch-accented cafe is in a large open space within a newish mall. But you’ll forget that as you lounge about and let the trendy tunes work their magic.

Entertainment

Nightlife in the Low-Rise Resorts area is blissfully sedate. In the High-Rise Resorts area it is focused in and around several high-concept malls with a plethora of mostly chain bars, lounges and cinemas.

Almost every high-rise resort has a casino, many of which are surprisingly 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 CASINO (Aruba Marriott Resort, Lloyd Smith Blvd 101; 24hr) One of the largest casinos, always busy and a bit flashy.

Copa Cabana Casino CASINO (Hyatt Regency Aruba Resort; JE Irausquin Blvd 85) Glitzy; cover bands offer distraction while you lose your shirt.

Shopping

Fla sny new shopping centers are appearing in the midst of the High-Rise Resorts. They give the area another jolt of activity, especially at night when visitors wander, window-shop, people-watch, have a drink in the many cafes or go bowling. Note that a lack of overall planning means that you may end up walking in the mud between high-fashion malls.

Paseo Herrencia MALL Glossiest of the new malls, it has brilliant illuminated water shows at night. There’s a cinema, dinner theatre and a lot of chain restaurants and shops.

South Beach Centre MALL Large mall that has some interesting shops and bars mixed in with predictable chains like Hard Rock.
Northwest Coast

The glitz of the resort area is quickly forgotten in this adjoining region of decent beaches, gracious homes and some significant Aruban landmarks.

💡 Sights & Activities

**California Lighthouse**  
**LANDMARK**  
Near Arashi Beach, watch for a road leading to 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 from the lighthouse knoll 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.

**Arashi Beach**  
**FAMILY BEACH**  
Near the island’s northwest tip, this is a favorite with locals and popular with families. There is good bodysurfing, some shade and just a few rocks right offshore.

**Malmok Beach**  
**WINDSURFING 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. Just south of here are the iconic old Fisherman’s Huts.

🌙 Sleeping

Almost in the shadow of the generic international resorts just south on Palm Beach, the hotels of the north are a characterful bunch with sunset views and a 30-second walk to the admittedly thin beach.

**Beach House Aruba**  
**HOTEL $**  
(586-2384; www.beach-house-aruba.com; Lloyd G Smith Blvd 450; r US$75-320; 🏨)$($) Funky doesn’t begin to describe this sprawling collection of beach huts set in a dense garden across from the ocean.

**Sunset Beach Studios**  
**HOTEL $**  
(586-3940; www.aruba-sunsetblvds.com; Lloyd G Smith Blvd 486; r US$80-140; 🏨)$($) 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.

Aruba Beach Villas  
**HOTEL $**  
(586-1072; www.arubabeachvillas.com; Lloyd G Smith Blvd 462; r $100-250; 🏨)$($) Nicely located across the coast road from Malmok Beach, the 31 units here are bright and have kitchenettes. Those facing the beach have large patios with sun chairs. Guests have free use of snorkeling and windsurfing gear, plus kayaks. The high-rise beach area is a five-minute walk south.

Northeast Coast

Aruba may be small but you’ll feel like you’ve left the island behind on its remote and wild northeast coast, where wind and wave add atmosphere to the desolation.

💡 Sights & Activities

**Chapel of Alto Vista**  
**CHURCH**  
This remote 1950s church is built on the site of one dating to 1750. The road to salvation here is lined with signs bearing prayers. Look for the divi-divi tree right out of central casting – it looks like a question mark caught in a hurricane.

**Natural Bridge**  
**NATURAL FEATURE**  
One of several natural bridge rock formations on Aruba, this one has a decent road and a gift shop. Wave action hollowed out a limestone cave on the sea cliffs that later collapsed, leaving the ‘bridge.’ It’s crowded when cruise ships are in port; otherwise it’s a moody and windswept spot (unless some group on an ATV tour roars through…).

**Ayo Rock**  
**NATURAL FEATURE**  
Just off the road to Natural Bridge, look for this smooth-sided geological wonder popular with rock climbers. It boasts ancient drawings. 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.

**Andicuri Beach**  
**SECLUDED BEACH**  
A black-pebble beach on the isolated east coast, this hidden gem is often the scene of photo shoots. It’s reached by a road that demands 4WD. Swimming can be treacherous; the winds make reading a challenge.

Donkey Sanctuary  
**ANIMAL SHELTER**  
(584-1063; www.arubandonkey.org; donations appreciated) 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. The sanctuary is usually open during daylight hours; call ahead to check.

Arikok National Wildlife Park
Arid and rugged, Arikok National Wildlife Park comprises 20% of Aruba and is the top nonbeach natural attraction.

The park has an impressive new Visitors Center (585-1234; www.arubanationalpark.org; adult/child US$5/free; ticket sales 8am-5pm, park gate 24hr) at the entrance. Here you’ll find displays on the park and its natural features, which include some rather unhappy-looking boa constrictors and rattlesnakes. There’s a small cafe and a wide veranda for soaking up the park while you enjoy your coffee.

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 with the southern one near San Nicolas, allowing a circular tour. Although slow going, it’s doable in a 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 from the friendly rangers at the visitors center. Look for the park’s three main types of trees: the iconic and bizarrely twisted divi-divi; the kwiti, 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 (584-5455; meals US$10-15; 10am-6pm) as it is buffeted by 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.

Guided hikes (US$25 per group) are lead by park rangers and cover a variety of themes. Book at least one day in advance with the visitor center.

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.

Beaches
Escape the crowds of the north at these two fine southern beaches.

Baby Beach
SECLUDED 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
WINDSURFING BEACH
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.

Drinking
Charlie’s Bar
BAR-GRILL $$
(Zeppenfeldstraat 56; meals US$8-25; 11am-late) Charlie’s Bar 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.

**UNDERSTAND ARUBA**

**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, Natalie Holloway, disappeared while on holiday. The resulting controversy has left deep scars on the island and continues to have twists and turns that beggar belief. It remains a favorite subject for sensationalist American media and has ensnared people in the Netherlands and South America as well as Aruba and the US.

**Culture**

The main form of art on Aruba is music. No style is sacred and improvisation is the rule. At times you’ll hear Creole, blues, jazz, rock, pop, rap and more. Making music is popular and many people on the island play in small groups with friends and relatives. No social gathering of any significance is complete without some live music. Aruba was not part of the slave trade and today the population is primarily mestizo, people who are a mixture of indigenous American and European heritage. About 20% of the population are Dutch and American expats.

**Landscape & Wildlife**

Aruba is 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.

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 the world’s second-largest desalination plant, south of the airport, which roars away 24/7. The need to balance the island’s healthy economy with its limited water and other resources has been a major point of discussion on the island, and a factor in elections, and locals have pressed for growth controls. This has slowed but by no means stopped the rampant development of hotels and condos on the long strip to the north.

**SURVIVAL GUIDE**

**Directory A–Z**

**Accommodations**

Aruba has a long strip of beach resorts great and small (well, not-so-big). More modest-priced places are found about a 10-minute walk inland. Camping is uncommon. High-season prices usually run mid-December to mid-April.

Hotel taxes and fees are 6% tax plus 10% to 15% service charge.

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Price Grade</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Range</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>$$</td>
<td>midrange</td>
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<td>$$$</td>
<td>top end</td>
<td>more than US$200</td>
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</table>

**Business Hours**

The following are standard business hours across the island. Exceptions are noted in
specific listings. Outside of tourist areas, much is closed on Sunday.

**Banks** 9am-4pm Mon-Fri

**Restaurants** 11am-10pm

**Shops** 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, to 1pm Sat (in tourist areas to 8pm daily)

**Children**

Aruba is a good destination for families. Almost all resorts have activities for kids. In addition, the famous reefs protect the beaches from really nasty surf, although the windward sides of the island can get rough.

**Food**

The following price categories for the cost of a main course are used in the listings in this chapter:

- **$** budget  less than US$10
- **$$** midrange  US$10 to $25
- **$$** top end  more than US$25

**Health**

There are excellent medical facilities in Aruba. Tap water is safe to drink.

**Dr Horacio Oduber Hospital** (2587-4300; off Lloyd G Smith Blvd; 24hr) is a large and well-equipped hospital, near the Low-Rise Resorts.

**Language**

If you only speak English, you won’t have a problem on Aruba. Arubans are multilingual: Dutch and Papiamento are the official languages; English is widespread.

**Money**

You can pay for just about everything in US dollars on Aruba. Sometimes you will get change back in US currency, other times you will receive it in Aruban florins (Afl).

In restaurants, a 20% overall tip is reasonable, though a 15% service charge is often added to the bill. In taxis a 10% tip is usual. Hotels usually add a 15% service charge to the bill.

**Public Holidays**

In addition to those observed throughout the region (p872), Aruba has the following public holidays:

- **GF (Betico) Croes Day** January 25
- **Carnival Monday** Monday before Ash Wednesday
- **National Day** March 18
- **Queen’s Birthday** April 30
- **Labour Day** May 1
- **Ascension Day** Sixth Thursday after Easter

**Telephone**

Aruba’s country code is 21; the area code is 297. To call any other country with a country code of 1 (most of North America and the Caribbean), just dial 1 and the 10-digit number. For other countries, dial the international access code 011 + country code + number.

GSM cell phones are compatible with local SIM cards. There is also 3G service. The main operators are **Digicel** (www.digicelaruba.com) and **Setar** (www.setar.aw).

**Tourist Information**

**Aruba Tourism Authority** (582-3777; www.aruba.com; Lloyd G Smith Blvd; 7:30am-1:40pm Mon-Fri) is a well-funded entity, with a comprehensive and useful website. It has an Oranjestad office, part of a trio of buildings that comprise the Aruban tourism-industrial complex, with helpful staff.

**Getting There & Away**

**Entering Aruba**

All visitors need a passport and a return or onward ticket to enter Aruba.

**Air**

Aruba’s **Reina Beatrix International Airport** (www.airportaruba.com) is a busy, modern airport with services (some seasonal) from North America with Air Canada, American Airlines, Delta, JetBlue, United and US Air-
ways. KLM flies from Amsterdam. Other airlines connecting Aruba with the region:
Avianca (www.avianca.com) Bogota, Colombia
DAE (www.flydae.com) Bonaire, Curacao
Insel Air (www.fly-inselair.com) Bonaire, Curacao
Tiara Air (www.tiara-air.com) Bonaire, Curacao
Venezolona (www.ravsa.com.ve) Caracas

Sea
The ABCs are part of cruise-ship itineraries that cover the southern Caribbean, often on longer 10-day and two-week trips.

Cruise ships flock to Aruba; it’s not unusual to have more than 10,000 passengers descend on the island in a day. Boats dock at the port in the middle of Oranjestad.

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 or a bike – at least for a couple of days – is essential.

To/From the Airport
Hotels and resorts usually do not do airport pickups. The taxi fare to the main resort area is about US$25; to Oranjestad is US$20.

Public buses 1 and 8 link Oranjestad to the airport every 30 to 60 minutes. You can connect to the resort areas.

Bicycle
Although there are no bike lanes on Aruba, many people enjoy riding along the mostly flat roads. You can easily rent bikes at many resorts.

Bus
The main bus depot (Lloyd G Smith Blvd) is right in the center of Oranjestad. Arubus (2588-0616; www.arubus.com) 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 one-way/round-trip Afl2.25/4.

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

Car & Motorcycle
RENTAL
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 Economy Car Rental (2583-0200; www.economyaruba.com) and Optima Rent-A-Car (2582-4828; www.optimarentacar.com).

ROAD CONDITIONS
Main roads are generally in pretty good condition; however, roads in the national park 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. Gasoline is easily found; road signs are sporadic.

ROAD RULES
Driving is on the right-hand side, seat belts are required and motorcyclists must use helmets.

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.

DEPARTING ARUBA
Passengers flying to the US absolutely must 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 often mobbed. 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.