

Fun in the Surf & Sun: Beaches & Active Pursuits

Warm sunshine and beautiful beaches are Aruba's major attractions. The seemingly endless strips of white, sugary sand along the southwestern coast rank among the Caribbean's widest and most beautiful, and the shallow aqua surf is ideal for swimming. Toys like jet skis, waverunners, parasails, and banana boats are plentiful. Near the island's western tip, steady winds draw windsurfers, while the shallow waters and abundant marine life attract snorkelers. Shipwrecks, sunken planes, and coral reefs dot the entire leeward coast, keeping scuba divers happy, and along the south-central coast, mangrove forests, barrier islands, and calm seas combine for favorable kayaking conditions. For those who prefer to see the wonders of the sea without getting wet, submarines and glass-bottom boats make daily excursions. Anglers can struggle with barracuda, wahoo, marlin, and tuna in the deep waters not far from the coast.

Although dramatically beautiful, the northern coast of the island is pounded with waves. The stunning vistas and craggy limestone bluffs are great for hikes and picnics, but playing in the current is treacherous and strongly discouraged.

Land-based activities include bicycling, golf, hiking, horseback riding, birding, ATV-ing and tennis.

1 Beaches

All of Aruba's beaches are public, but chairs and *palapas* (shade huts) provided by resorts are the property of the hotels and for guest use only. If you use them at a hotel other than your own, expect to be charged. Few of the smaller beaches have facilities other than a shade hut or two, so if you venture afar for privacy, bring your own food, water, and gear. Beer cans and charcoal ash litter a few remote areas, but Aruba's beaches are expansive, and trash is easily avoided. The following beach tour starts at the island's northwest tip, near the California Lighthouse, and moves counterclockwise.

The calm surf and sandy bottom make **Arashi Beach**, near the California Lighthouse at the island's northwestern tip, one of Aruba's best swimming sites. Snorkelers like it for the elkhorn coral, while sunbathers spend lazy minutes watching pelicans fish. The white sand is soft, but look out for pebbles and stones. Although there are no facilities in the immediate area, a few beach huts provide shade.

Just a few minutes south, **Boca Catalina**, with its gentle, shallow water and plentiful fish, is another good spot for snorkeling. The sand is white, with some pebbles and shells, but the real hazard is horse manure left behind by some horseback-riding tours. This beach has no facilities, but it offers seclusion and tranquillity.

A bit farther south, **Malmok Beach** is another popular swimming and snorkeling spot with tiny coves, white sand, vast shallow waters, and abundant fish. This strand has no facilities, but you can fantasize about the accommodations in the nearby mansions. A scuttled German freighter on the seabed not far from the coast attracts divers. The steady winds make the beach extremely popular with windsurfers.

The island's mecca of windsurfing, though, is just minutes south at **Hadicurari**, or Fishermen's Huts. Every June, this site hosts the Hi-Winds World Challenge, an important pro-am windsurfing competition, but on any day, you can watch the brilliantly colored boards and sails dance along the waves. The shallow water is also excellent for swimming. A sunken wreck resurfaced in a recent storm and sits frozen and upright, like a rusted ghost ship that ran ashore. Facilities include picnic tables and shade huts, but the white-powder-sand beach is flecked with pebbles and shells at the water's edge.

Home of the High-Rise hotels, **Palm Beach** ★★ is Aruba's best spot for people-watching. This stretch of white sand, adjacent to Hadicurari, is also great for swimming, sunbathing, sailing, fishing, and snorkeling. The resorts sift the sand daily to get rid of pebbles and sharp shells, ensuring a beach as soft as talcum powder. Located smack dab in the heart of things, it can get crowded, though, and hotel guests stake out the scores of *palapas* (tropical beach umbrellas) sprouting from the sand early in the morning. With two piers and numerous watersports operators, Palm Beach is also busier and noisier than Aruba's other beaches. The least crowded areas are to the north, between the Holiday Inn and the Marriott, and to the south, between the Wyndham and the Divi Phoenix. (Potential

Aruba Beaches



drawbacks in those areas are the massive timeshare complex Marriott is building just north of the Holiday Inn, where you may want to avoid construction noise, and the wind around the Phoenix, which is sometimes powerful.) On the other hand, as you walk along the shore, you can wander through the splendid gardens of the beachfront resorts, watch the thriving bird and iguana life, and stop for a cold tropical drink at one of the many open-air bars. The eponymous trees, coconut and date palms, were planted in 1917.

Separated from Palm Beach by a brief outcrop of limestone that's home to a splendid green flock of parakeets, **Eagle Beach** ★★★ is across a small road from the La Cabana resort and several timeshare resorts. The wide beach here stretches as far as the eye can see. The sugar-white sand and gentle surf are ideal for swimming. The ambience is relaxed and quiet. A couple of bars, as well as numerous *palmapas* and chairs maintained by the hotels, punctuate the expansive strand. Shaded picnic areas are provided for the public, and the beach is popular with tourists and locals alike on weekends. Prime sand conditions are directly in front of La Cabana and the Amsterdam Manor.

For sheer tranquillity and open space, **Manchebo Beach** ★★★, also known as Punto Brabo, is top-notch. Because the sand here stretches 110m (361 ft.) from the shore to the hotels, congestion is never a problem. The handful of smaller resorts that occupy this coveted location, next to Eagle Beach, offer beverages and food, and the discreet atmosphere makes Manchebo one of Aruba's only topsoptional beaches. The white-powder sand is spectacular, but the surf is steady and brisk. With no watersports in the area, serenity is guaranteed. The premier spots are in front of the Bucuti Beach and Manchebo Beach resorts.

Druif Beach meets Manchebo Beach farther east along the coast. The sand remains white but the strand narrows considerably, and the surf becomes more restless. Rocks and pebbles come out in profusion here. The beach between the Divi Aruba Beach Resort and the Tamarijn resort is the widest stretch in the area; the strip south of the Tamarijn is also nice.

South of Oranjestad and across the street from the Talk of the Town Beach Resort, **Surfside Beach** is sleepy and intimate. Although the hotel operates a bar and provides towels and beach chairs for guests, the small strip is also popular with Arubans, especially residents of nearby Oranjestad. The calm waters are great for swimming, but there are prettier beaches; Surfside's proximity to the capital is its major selling point.

The beaches of **Renaissance Island** are restricted to guests of the Renaissance resort, who board a skiff in the hotel's lobby in downtown Oranjestad for the 10-minute trip to the private island. The 40-acre tropical retreat features cozy white-sand beaches, intimate coves, and protected swimming areas. One secluded area is tops-optional. Hammocks span the palm trees, and beach chairs are also provided.

In the hamlet of Pos Chiquito between Oranjestad and Savaneta, **Mangel Halto** is a favorite picnic spot. Its white-powder sand and shallow water are additional enticements for Aruban families, especially on weekends.

The charm of **Rodger's Beach**, south of San Nicolas, is initially overwhelmed by the gigantic oil refinery looming on the western horizon. Like something out of Orwell's *1984* or Dr. Frankenstein's lab, the smoke-belching towers contrast bizarrely with the idyllically beautiful Caribbean waters. The refinery is harmless (they say)—no obvious water pollution, no stench (if the wind's blowing in the right direction)—and the gentle, protected waters are ideal for swimming. The narrow strip of soft, white-powder sand is popular with locals, but tourists who want to get away from the more familiar sites show up as well. *Palapas* and giant sea grape bushes provide shade. There's also a small bar and grill, an array of colorful fishing boats, and shower facilities. Equipment, including snorkeling gear, can be rented nearby at an easy to spot shop called **Jada**. The water is shallow for almost 15m (49 ft.) out, and multicolored fish and coral formations are easy to spot.

Baby Beach ★★, near Aruba's easternmost tip, is a prime destination for families with young children. Like a great big bathtub, this shallow bowl of warm turquoise water is perfect for inexperienced swimmers, thanks to the protection of rock breakwaters. The water is never deeper than 1.5m (5 ft.), and the powdery sand is friendly to bare feet. Be on the lookout for gnarled driftwood and sharp shells, though. Giant sea grape bushes and *palapas* offer protection from the sun. Facilities are restricted to a refreshment stand and washrooms. On weekends, the beach is very popular with Arubans, who party with music and barbecues. Coral reefs farther out used to be popular with snorkelers, but a recent storm did a lot of damage and the surf is rough outside the protected lagoon; keep an eye on the kids if they tend to stray. Bring your own towels and snorkeling gear.

If you find yourself sometimes snarling at children, avoid Baby Beach and drive north a few minutes to **Boca Grandi** ★★, a virtually deserted expanse of dramatic sand dunes and sea grasses. The

salt air and terrain are reminiscent of Cape Cod, but the aqua, azure, and sapphire waters are unmistakably Caribbean. A penitentiary crowns limestone bluffs rising behind the dunes, and the inmates suffer the ultimate punishment: viewing the ocean and beach and knowing they can't enjoy it. The low-lying sea grapes provide next to no protection from the sun, and pockets of trash and jetsam mar some of the intimate coves. The sand has pebbles, too, but the steady breeze and rolling surf are excellent for advanced windsurfing. Because the surf is riled up most of the time, Boca Grandi is appropriate for strong swimmers only.

Boca Prins (☼, in Arikok National Park on the north coast, also boasts dunes and hardy seaside vegetation, but the rough-and-tumble waters here make swimming out of the question. You'll need a car, preferably an all-terrain vehicle, to get here on the rutted dirt roads. Plan a picnic lunch, or eat at the nearby cafe also called Boca Prins, walk along the limestone cliffs, and slide down the dunes instead of risking the water.

Dos Playa, a 15-minute walk west along the coast from Boca Prins, is an even more popular picnic spot. With crashing waves and a rugged coast, it too is picturesque but unsuitable for swimming.

2 Hitting the Water

BOATING

Aruba offers sailing adventures on yachts and catamarans day and night. Some include snorkeling, swimming, and lunch; others feature sunset vistas. For night owls, dinner-dance-and-booze cruises include a midnight dip in the sea (see chapter 8). If you have something special to celebrate, you may want to charter a private yacht (about \$175–\$200 per hr.).

De Palm Tours (☎ 297/582-4400; www.depalm.com) offers more sailing options than anyone else—six different snorkel sails on catamarans and trimarans, and several sail-only cruises. Some cruises feature dinner catered by Le Dôme (see chapter 4); others offer “snuba,” a cross between scuba and snorkeling. Ranging from 2 to 5 hours in length, the trips depart daily in the morning and afternoon and at sunset. Prices start at \$39 and climb to \$99.

Boarding at the Hadicurari Pier at Moomba Beach between the Holiday Inn and Marriott, **Jolly Pirates** (☎ 297/583-7355) features 4½-hour sail, snorkel, and rope-swing (think Tarzan plunging into the sea) cruises (daily; \$50, including tasty, full-service barbecue

lunch); 2-hour sunset trips (Mon and Fri; \$26); and 3-hour afternoon sail and snorkel tours (Tues–Thurs and Sat; \$30). All three options include an open bar, and unlike on any of the catamaran tours, the bartender circulates, takes your order, and brings your drinks to you while you relax and enjoy the ride.

Mi Dushi Sailing Adventures (☎ 297/586-2010; www.arubaadventures.com) offers three cruises on a 23m (75-ft.) sailing vessel built in 1925. The 5-hour morning cruise combines sailing, snorkeling, swimming, and a rope swing, with continental breakfast, barbecue lunch, and open bar. The boat departs from the De Palm Pier Tuesday through Friday at 9:30am. The price is \$59, \$20 for children 6 to 12, and free for children under 6 (though they get no lunch). Also featuring shallow reef snorkeling, swimming and rope swing, the 3-hour sundown cruise sets sail at 3:30pm from the same pier on Tuesday and Thursday, and costs \$35 and \$20 for children; the price includes snacks and an open bar for adults. On Wednesday and Friday, the boat leaves at 5pm for a 2-hour all-you-can-drink sunset sail with light snacks. This party is \$25 for adults and \$20 for children under 12.

Pelican Adventures (☎ 297/587-2302; www.pelican-aruba.com) offers morning, afternoon, and sunset cruises on four different catamarans. The 2½-hour snorkel cruise departs daily at 2pm and includes snacks and open bar (\$38; \$17 for children). The 3½-hour brunch cruise features continental breakfast, champagne lunch, snorkeling, and open bar (Wed and Fri, 9:30am; \$50, \$35 for children). The sunset booze cruise lasts 2 hours and includes snacks and drinks (Tues–Sat, 5pm; \$35, \$17 for children). The 4-hour dinner cruise leaves at 5pm; the \$63 charge (\$35 for children; children under 4 are free) includes a meal at the informal Pelican's Nest restaurant at the end of the Pelican pier and unlimited drinks once aboard the catamaran. All trips leave from the Pelican Pier near the Holiday Inn, and private charters can be arranged.

Red Sail Sports (☎ 877-RED-SAIL in the U.S. and Canada, 297/586-1603 in Aruba; www.redsailaruba.com) boasts four large catamarans and several sailing options. The 4-hour morning snorkel sail visits three snorkeling sites and includes a deli lunch and an open bar (daily at 9:15am; \$50, children 3–12 \$30). The 2½-hour afternoon snorkel sail includes snacks and beverages (daily at 2:30pm; \$40, children \$20). The 1½-hour sunset cruise features snacks and rum punch (daily at 5:30pm; \$38, children \$19). On full-moon nights only, the 2-hour moonlight sail includes wine and

cheese (8:30pm; \$40, children \$20). For a truly special evening, the three-course **dinner cruise** (★ ★) will set you back \$95 (\$45 for children), but considering the elegant table settings, white-glove service, unlimited champagne, and delicious food, it's worth the splurge. All trips leave from Hyatt Pier, and group charters are available.

Operated by the same folks who own Mi Dushi, **Tattoo** (☎ 297/586-2010; www.arubaadventures.com) conducts nocturnal booze and dance cruises with dinner buffet and \$1 to \$3 drinks (Wed and Fri, 8pm–midnight; \$39, adults over 18 only). On Wednesday and Friday, it offers a 4-hour snorkeling and swimming cruise that departs from De Palm Pier at 11:30am. The \$35 price (\$20 for children) includes a barbecue lunch, but alcoholic drinks are extra (\$2–\$3 per drink). All Tattoo cruises feature a rope swing and three-level water slide.

How about a yacht cruise? Family-owned **Tranquilo** (☎ 297/585-7533; www.visitaruba.com/tranquilo) has several programs. On Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday, a 6-hour lunch cruise features snorkeling, fishing, lunch, and drinks during a trip down Aruba's south-east coast (10am; \$65). Available upon request for a minimum of eight people, the 2-hour sunset sail is \$35 per person. An exclusive 3-hour sail for two is offered on Wednesday and Saturday at 5pm. It includes a menu of lobster, shrimp, or Argentine steak and total privacy (\$475 for you and your love). Charter cruises, available on request, start at \$120 per hour.

Catamaran cruises from the Pelican Pier (behind the Holiday Inn) are conducted by **Wave Dancer Cruises** (☎ 297/582-5520; www.arubawavedancer.com). A 4-hour trip with three snorkeling stops, snacks, lunch, and drinks is \$50; a 2-hour tour hits one snorkeling reef and includes snacks and drinks for \$25; and a 2-hour sunset cruise is an extended happy hour at sea (\$25).

DEEP-SEA FISHING

In the deep waters off the coast of Aruba you can test your skill and wits against barracuda, amberjack, sailfish, wahoo, blue and white marlin, kingfish, bonito, and black- and yellow-fin tuna. Chartered boats, with captain, crew, advice, tackle, bait, lunch, and soft drinks, usually accommodate four to six anglers. **De Palm Tours** (☎ 297/582-4400; www.depalm.com) books half-day tours beginning at \$250 per boat. The price for full-day trips goes as high as \$600. **Pelican Adventures** (☎ 297/587-2302; www.pelican-aruba.com) half-day rates are about \$300; full-day excursions cost \$600. **Red**

Sail Sports (☎ 877-RED-SAIL in the U.S. and Canada, or 297/586-1603 in Aruba; www.redsailaruba.com) offers half-day expeditions for \$350 and full-day trips for \$700 for a maximum of four. You can also try your luck with **Mahi Mahi Fishing Charters** (☎ 297/587-0538; www.aruba-mahimahi.com), **Rainbow Runner** (☎ 297/586-4259), **Teaser Charters** (☎ 297/582-5088; www.teasercharters.com), or any of the other individually owned boats docked at the **Seaport Marina**, Seaport Marketplace 204, Oranjestad (☎ 297/583-9190); their captains offer slightly cheaper prices.

PLAYING WITH WATER TOYS

How many different toys will you try out this vacation? Choose from jet skis (\$45 single, \$55 double per ½ hr.), banana boat or tube rides (both towed behind a speedboat; \$15), Hobie Cat sailboats (\$20 per hr.), waverunners or rhino riders (high-speed jet boats; \$45 single, \$55 double per ½ hr.), water skis (\$35 per 15 min.), paddleboats (\$15 per hr.), and floatbeds (sturdier than a raft; \$5 per day). Check out any of the watersports operators along Palm Beach or contact **De Palm Tours** (☎ 297/582-4400; www.depalm.com), **Island Watersports** (☎ 297/593-5436), **Pelican Adventures** (☎ 297/587-2302; www.pelican-aruba.com), **Red Sail Sports** (☎ 877-RED-SAIL in the U.S. and Canada, or 297/586-1603 in Aruba; www.redsailaruba.com), or **Unique Sports of Aruba** (☎ 297/586-0096; www.visitaruba.com/uniquesports).

Available exclusively on De Palm Island through De Palm Tours, small one- to three-person trimaran sailboats called Waveriders can be rented with or without a captain, depending on your sailing ability. Captained tours include a trip across the channel to a mountain of snow-white sand. Plastic toboggan in hand, you can clamber up the hill and sled down the steep slope.

KAYAKING

Aruba Kayak Adventures, Ponton 90 or the activities desk at the Costa Linda (☎ 297/582-5520; www.arubawavedancer.com/arubakayak), offers a 4-hour kayak tour along the southern coast. Boats launch not far from Savaneta daily at 9:30am, then hug the coastal mangroves, past Pos Chiquito, Mangel Halto, and Spanish Lagoon, formerly a pirate hideout. After crossing the calm lagoon to De Palm Island, paddlers can snorkel, sunbathe, and lunch at the island's restaurant before kayaking the final leg to Barcadera Beach. The \$77 price includes hotel pick-up and drop-off, training, boat and snorkeling equipment, and lunch.

KITESURFING

With the help of large inflatable kites, about 27m (89 ft.) of flying line, and small surfboards with foot straps, kite surfers at Malmok Beach skim across the water at 48kmph (30 mph) and launch themselves 3 to 15m (10–49 ft.) in the air. Kite surfing has many of the same elements and thrills as snowboarding and windsurfing, but with a relatively easier learning curve. Aruba's calm, shallow waters make the island ideal for giving it a whirl. **Kite Surfing Aruba** (☎ 297/586-5025 or 733-1515; www.kitesurfingaruba.com) has 2½-hour introductory lessons for \$100. Only comfortable swimmers at least 10 years old need apply. **Vela Windsurf and Kite Surf Center**, next to the Marriott, is a joint operation of **Pelican Adventures** (☎ 297/587-2302; www.pelican-aruba.com) and **Vela Windsurf** (☎ 800/223-5443; www.velawindsurf.com). It offers a suite of introductory classes that break the art into specialized segments (which means more instruction time and a higher price tag).

PARASAILING

You can ascend 180m (591 ft.) above the sea in a boat-towed parachute after making arrangements with one of the watersports centers along Palm Beach or by calling **Caribbean Parasail** (☎ 297/586-0505), **Island Watersports** (☎ 297/593-5436), **Pelican Adventures** (☎ 297/587-2302; www.pelican-aruba.com), or **Red Sail Sports** (☎ 877-RED-SAIL in the U.S. and Canada, or 297/586-1603 in Aruba; www.redsail.com). Although flight time is only 10 minutes, the exhilaration lasts all day. Expect to pay about \$50 for a single-seater, \$70 for a parachute built for two. Some operators restrict flights to persons over 6 years of age weighing between 41 and 109 kilograms (90–240 lb.). If underweight, an option is to pair up. Bring a waterproof camera.

SCUBA DIVING & SNORKELING

Aruba offers enough coral reefs, marine life, and wreck diving to keep scuba divers and snorkelers busy. The coastal waters have an average temperature of 80°F (27°C), and visibility ranges from 18 to 30m (59–98 ft.). Snorkelers: Be forewarned that waves can be choppy at times in some locations. Divers should wear wet suits, especially for deeper dives (the water doesn't always feel like 80°F). The best snorkeling sites are around Malmok Beach and Boca Catalina, where the water is calm and shallow, and visible and kinetic marine life is plentiful. Dive sites stretch along the entire southern, leeward coast.

For those who like toys, there's Power Snorkel, which uses motorized jet packs to pull you through the water. Don't expect to see many fish, though, as the noise and bubbles scare them away. Plus, your focus is on not crashing into other swimmers or not losing your swimsuit, rather than on the beautiful corals that you go buzzing past.

Besides snorkeling, snuba is another non-scuba underwater option. Snuba divers breathe compressed air through a regulator on a hose attached to a tank floating at the surface. Though entertaining, interference with the line, guide, other snuba divers attached to the same tank, and unintended encounters with the razor-sharp reef make the experience at times frustrating and potentially painful.

THE OPERATORS

Pelican Adventures ★ (☎ 297/587-2302; www.pelican-aruba.com), probably the island's premier dive and snorkeling operation, has desks at the Aruba Beach Club, Holiday Inn, La Cabana, Playa Linda, and Wyndham. The full-service, 5-Star PADI-certified Gold Palm operator has two dive boats (one can handle up to 25 divers) and an array of diving options. Two-tank morning boat dives are \$60, one-tank morning or afternoon boat dives are \$40, and one-tank night dives are \$45. Packages include 7 days of unlimited diving for \$325 (try out an operator before committing to a package, though; Pelican is recommended, but judge for yourself). Non-diving boat passengers pay \$25, or \$30 to snorkel, space permitting. Snorkeling cruises include instructions, equipment, stops at three sites, snacks, and an open bar for \$30. Pelican also conducts 1-day introductory scuba courses (\$75) and full-fledged PADI open-water certification instructions (\$350).

Red Sail Sports ★ (☎ 877/RED-SAIL in the U.S. and Canada, or 297/586-1603 in Aruba; www.redsailaruba.com), another full-service, 5-Star PADI-certified Gold Palm operator, has locations at the Allegro, Hyatt, Marriott, and Renaissance. Its dive prices are slightly higher than Pelican's: Two-tank morning boat dives are \$65, one-tank morning or afternoon boat dives are \$40, and one-tank night dives are \$45. Packages include unlimited diving within a 7-day period for \$300, a better value than Pelican's 6-day package (there are blackout dates). Non-diving boat passengers pay \$18, space permitting. Snorkelers are charged \$22, including equipment, but Pelican, Red Sail, and other operators offer an array of snorkeling-only excursions that visit multiple sites. Red Sail also offers 1-day introductory scuba and refresher courses that include instructions, a

Tips Take the Plunge

If you weren't born with gills, you'll have to learn certain skills and gain an understanding of your equipment before you scuba dive. Contact PADI, NAUI, or SSI for instruction. Certifying 70% of U.S. divers and 55% of divers worldwide, **PADI (Professional Association of Diving Instructors)**, 30151 Tomas St., Rancho Santa Margarita, CA 92688-2125 (☎ 800/729-7234; www.padi.com), is the world's largest diving organization. Equally respected but less of a marketing powerhouse, **NAUI (National Association of Underwater Instructors)**, 1232 Tech Blvd., Tampa, FL 33619-7832 (☎ 800/553-6284; www.nauui.org), is a not-for-profit association that's been around for 40 years. The last of the Big Three is **SSI (Scuba Schools International)**, 2619 Canton Ct., Ft. Collins, CO 80525-4498 (☎ 970/482-0883; www.ssiusa.com).

morning pool session, a one-tank boat dive, and all equipment for \$79. Pool-only introductory courses are available for children (\$40). The PADI open-water certification course is \$350.

Only two other operators boast PADI affiliation. **Unique Sports of Aruba** (☎ 297/586-0096; www.visitaruba.com/uniquesports), on Palm Beach at the Aruba Grand, is another popular operation. Its two boats can accommodate a maximum of 16 divers, and its rates are slightly cheaper than those of Pelican and Red Sail. Although **S. E. Aruba Fly 'n Dive** (☎ 297/588-1150; www.searuba.com) operates out of Oranjestad harbor, it specializes in dives along the island's southeast coast. The "fly" part of the company's name refers to its package dive tours to Aruba's sister islands, Bonaire and Curaçao. The weekend special to Bonaire, a veritable diver's paradise, includes 2 nights' accommodations, a two-tank boat dive, unlimited shore dives, and round-trip air transportation on Fly 'n Dive's own plane. Open to certified divers only, the package is \$335 during the high season, \$320 at other times (air tax and equipment are included).

Two other dive schools operate in the resort area. **Aruba Pro Dive** (☎ 297/582-5520; www.arubaprodiver.com), with a desk at the Costa Linda, specializes in small groups. **Mermaid Sport Divers** (☎ 297/583-5546; www.scubadivers-aruba.com) is located between

the Bucuti Beach and Manchebo Beach resorts and offers a free dive to anyone who spots a sea horse.

See “Boating,” earlier in this chapter, for a comprehensive list of snorkeling operators.

THE SITES

At the island’s extreme northeast point, the **California wreck** has haunted the ocean floor for almost 100 years. While traveling from Liverpool to Central America, the wooden passenger ship ran aground, its merchandise, clothing, and furniture eventually washing ashore. Tour guides often circulate the romantic notion that the ship was the only vessel to have heard the *Titanic*’s distress signal. It’s a nice story but a bunch of malarkey. The ship that ignored the *Titanic*’s flares was the *Californian*, which was torpedoed by a German submarine off the coast of Greece in 1915. About 14m (46 ft.) beneath the ocean’s surface, Aruba’s *California* is draped in orange and yellow sponges, plate coral, and anemones. Grouper, jewfish, lobster, and barracuda make frequent appearances, and a dense reef of staghorn and pillar corals forms a breakwater beyond the ship. Due to strong currents and choppy seas, this dive is strictly for advanced divers, and only when the water is unusually calm.

At **Arashi Reef** ★, around the island’s northern tip from the *California*, pieces of a Lockheed Lodestar litter the silty bottom of tranquil Arashi Bay. The wings, cockpit, and front half of the fuselage sit upright in a frozen take-off position. Maybe the neighborhood angelfish, parrotfish, sergeant majors, yellowtail snappers, caesar grunts, gray chromis, and blue tangs are contemplating how to reassemble all the pieces. Just south of the plane parts, brain coral, star coral, and sea rods dot the strip before dropping off to a ledge painted with sea fans and multicolored encrusting sponges. The plane’s depth of 11 to 12m (36–39 ft.) is ideal for novice divers and snorkelers.

Just south of Arashi Reef, the 120m-long (394-ft.) **Antilla wreck** ★★ is the Caribbean’s largest shipwreck. Once a German freighter, the ship was scuttled in 1941 when threatened by Allied forces. The wide compartments make diver penetration easy. It’s one of the island’s most popular dives, though, so you may have to wait in line to have your photo taken inside. Covered by giant tube sponges and coral formations, the 18m-deep (59-ft.) ghost ship is swarmed by angelfish, silversides, moray eels, and the occasional lobster. Octopus, sergeant majors, and puffers can also be spotted.

Leaf and brain coral await you at **Malmok Reef**, just south of the *Antilla*. This 21m-deep (69-ft.) bottom reef's dozing lobsters and stingrays are popular with underwater paparazzi, and the giant purple, orange, and green barrel sponges pose for the camera as well. The *Debbie II*, a 36m (118-ft.) fuel barge sunk in 1992, attracts schools of fish, including barracudas.

Southwest of Malmok Reef, the mangled midsection is all that remains of the *Pedernales*, an American flat-bottomed oil tanker torpedoed by a German submarine in 1942. Cabins, washbasins, lavatories, toilets, and pipelines are scattered about for easy viewing. The bow and stern were hauled back to the United States, refitted with a new hull, and used to transport troops for the Normandy invasion. Chunks of the hull, supports, and cross beams litter the sandy bottom. The wreckage attracts caesar grunts, squirrelfish, trumpet fish, groupers, parrotfish, angelfish, silversides, and yellow-tail snappers. Keep an eye open for snake eels and spotted eagle rays, too. White tunicates and orange cup corals coat the metal undersides. At a depth of only 6 to 9m (20–30 ft.), the *Pedernales* is popular with novice divers and snorkelers.

Off the coast of Oranjestad, **Harbor Reef** features an abundance of hard and soft coral formations, including giant brain coral and orange, black, and blue sponges. Nearby, the aging **pilot boat wreck** is encrusted with sponges and brain, star, and sheet coral. The queen angels, parrotfish, and Spanish hogfish bathe the 11m (36-ft.) vessel in fiesta colors, while a barracuda and a pair of green morays keep divers alert. You may also spot the occasional stingray or spotted eagle ray.

Two twin-engine aircraft wrecks—both unclaimed drug runners—which used to form an artificial reef 46m (151 ft.) from **Renaissance Island's** main beach, were washed away in a November 2004 storm. The landing gears and engines of one can be found amid the mangroves on the back side of Renaissance Island. The wrecks were replaced by a vintage 1970s Aruba Airlines passenger jet that was sunk 26m (85 ft.) down. The plane sits in take-off position; the airline logo on the outer hull is still legible. In only 4m (13 ft.) of water and a bit farther off Renaissance Island's main beach, a sunken barge with crowds of swarming fish is also perfect for snorkeling.

Nearby, **Sponge Reef** is the home of a remarkable array of sponges, including orange elephant ears, purple and yellow tubes, vases, and small baskets. Interesting leaf and plate coral formations are also found in the area.

Farther east but still only 6.4km (4 miles) southwest of Oranjestad, **Barcadera Reef** stretches from depths of 6 to 27m (20–89 ft.), accommodating both divers and snorkelers. Dense clusters of elkhorn, staghorn, and finger corals populate the reef, and along the sandy bottom, brain corals and huge sea fans hold sway. Wrasses, scorpionfish, blue and stoplight parrotfish, damselfish, and pink-tipped anemones also set up housekeeping in the area.

West of Barcadera Reef at a depth of 27m (89 ft.), the *Jane Sea wreck* rests in a thick grove of star, boulder, plate, and brain coral. This 75m (246-ft.) Venezuelan cement freighter was sunk in 1988 to form an artificial reef after it was caught with a cargo of cocaine. Blanketed with hydroids, fire coral, and encrusting sponge, the anchor chain is completely rigid. The ship's sides are orange with cup corals and home to French and queen angels. Keep your eyes peeled for barracudas, green morays, tropicals, and gorgonians, and watch your head when entering the radio room and mess hall.

Even before snorkelers leave the dock of **De Palm Island** (east of the *Jane Sea* wreck), overfed blue parrotfish looking for a snack greet them. Though it's tempting to feed them, be warned that their powerful beaks and digestive tracts are designed to munch on rock hard corals, and not doing so is healthy neither for the fish nor the reef, not to mention somewhat risky for your delicate fingers. More adventurous snorkelers can swim out 27m (89 ft.) for a dense coral reef that supports blue tangs, triggerfish, sergeant majors, grunts, and blue and stoplight parrotfish. Sleeping nurse sharks are around as well. Water depths start at 1.2m (4 ft.) at the dock but drop off to 36m (118 ft.) by the time you're 364m (1,194 ft.) out. Divers, who usually reach the reef by boat, are likely to spot a barracuda or two.

Off the central coast of De Palm Island, **Mike's Reef** ★★ offers one of Aruba's best reef dives. Enormous clusters of gorgonians, brain coral, flower coral, and star coral dominate the environment, while brilliant purple and orange sponges direct the procession of rainbow runners and barracuda. This reef is especially popular with macro photographers (underwater photographers who specialize in close-up and extreme close-up shots).

Just east of Mike's Reef and 110m (361 ft.) out from Mangel Halto Beach, **Mangel Halto Reef** ★★ slopes from 4.5m (15 ft.) to ledges and ridges that plunge to depths of 33m (108 ft.). The area boasts an array of deep-water gorgonians, anemones, and sponges. Mobile marine life includes copper sweepers, grunts, sergeant majors, lobsters, blue tangs, butterfly fish, stingrays, yellow tails,

and jacks. You may even spot a sea horse. At the greater depths, octopuses, green morays, nurse sharks, tarpons, and large barracuda inhabit small caves and overhangs. In early spring, graceful sea turtles appear on their way to lay eggs on the nearby beaches.

Continuing east along the coast, **Isla de Oro Reef** rests off the old fishing village of Savaneta. Close to the mangrove-lined shore, the reef is usually swept by a running current, and visibility is excellent. Beginning at 6m (20 ft.), yellow stingrays, lobster, and Spanish hogfish dart along the walls of staghorn, star, brain, and plate corals. Toward the ultimate depth of 36m (118 ft.), sheet and leaf corals form ledges and caves—home to large morays, and parrotfish.

A bit farther east, **Commandeurs Reef** slopes from 12 to 27m (39–89 ft.) below the surface. Sheet and leaf coral here attract extensive marine life such as snappers, grunts, and French and queen angels. On occasion, runners and barracuda patrol the area.

UNDERWATER TOURING

If you loved Captain Nemo and *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, don't miss your chance to cruise 45m (148 ft.) below the sea in a submarine.

Atlantis Adventures (☎ 800/253-0493 in the U.S., or 297/588-6881; www.atlantisadventures.com) operates a spacious, modern ship with large portholes for maximum ogling. After a comprehensive orientation on shore, you board a catamaran for the 30-minute sail to deeper water, then transfer to the *Atlantis VI*, a 20m-long (66-ft.), fully pressurized vessel. During the gentle descent, you'll pass scuba divers, coral reefs, shipwrecks, and hundreds of curious sergeant majors, blue chromis, creole wrasse, parrotfish, and angelfish. Brain and sheet coral, sea whips, and tube and barrel sponges are just as easy to spot during the hour you're submerged. The crew's commentary is expert, informative, and very wry. Depending on the season, trips depart 3 to 6 times each day. Each excursion takes 1½ hours, though you are only underwater for 30 minutes. The cost is \$84 for adults and \$35 for children younger than 16. All passengers must be at least .9m (3 ft.) tall. It's worth the splurge, but for a cheaper option consider Atlantis's other ship, the *Seaworld Explorer*. This glass-bottom boat remains above sea level, but its observatory is 1.5m (5 ft.) below the surface. The narrated tour covers Arashi Reef and features an up-close encounter with a scuttled German freighter, encrusted with coral and teeming with other marine life. The daily voyages are \$37 for adults, \$20 for children under 12, gratis for anyone under 2. The *Atlantis VI* trip leaves from a pier in front of the Crystal Casino in Oranjestad; the *Seaworld Explorer* excursion departs from Pelican Pier on Palm Beach.

If you don't mind getting a little wet but have no desire to learn to scuba dive, consider the Sea Trek "helmet dive" offered by **De Palm Tours** (☎ 297/582-4400; www.depalm.com). Donning a wet suit and a TeleTubbies-inspired helmet that supplies a continuous flow of air, you'll descend 6m (20 ft.) beneath the sea to a 105m (344-ft.) walkway, where you can feed the fish, view a sunken Piper Cub, and generally experience life underwater. If you can walk and breathe, don't deprive yourself of the fun. The 20- to 25-minute stroll is \$89. The CD-ROM featuring you in full aquanaut regalia seated at an underwater cafe is another \$35, but worth it. (*A word to the wise:* Although Sea Trek and other fun activities are on De Palm Island, don't let anyone convince you to spend all day there if you just want to relax. Its beaches are rocky and generally dismal compared to those of the main island.)

WINDSURFING

Aruba's world-class windsurfing conditions attract competitors from around the world every June for the Hi-Winds World Challenge, one of the region's most popular windsurfing competitions and the only Professional Windsurfing Association Grand Prix event in the Caribbean. Wind speeds on the island are best in May, June, and July, when they average 20 to 25 knots, and calmest from September through November, when they range from 10 to 20 knots.

The area around **Malmok Beach** and Hadicurari, or Fishermen's Huts, is the most popular windsurfing spot on the island. Sailed by novices and pros alike, it features slightly gusty offshore winds, minimal current, and moderate chop. The water is shallow more than 60m (197 ft.) out from the shore. **Boca Grandi**, on the extreme eastern coast, is for advanced and expert wave sailors only. The very strong current here moves out to sea, and on-shore waves rise from 1 foot to mast high on the outer reefs. Around the island's eastern tip, the calmer waters of **Rodger's Beach** are excellent for beginner and intermediate windsurfers. Offshore winds are moderate, the current is slight, and the waves have negligible chop.

Most windsurfing operations cluster around Malmok Beach, where equipment rental averages \$35 to \$40 for 2 hours, \$45 for half a day, and \$55 to \$60 for a full day. Two-hour beginner lessons with equipment are about \$50; 6-hour introductory courses are \$135. Operators include **Aruba Boardsailing Productions**, L. G. Smith Blvd. 486 (☎ 297/586-3940; www.arubawindsurfing.com); **Aruba Sailboard Vacations**, L. G. Smith Blvd. 462 (☎ 297/586-2527; www.arubasailboardvacations.com); **Unique Sports of Aruba**,

J. E. Irausquin Blvd. 79 (☎ 297/586-0096; www.visitaruba.com/uniquesports); and **Vela College of Windsurfing**, next to the Marriott, a joint operation of **Pelican Adventures** (☎ 297/587-2302; www.pelican-aruba.com) and **Vela Windsurf** (☎ 800/223-5443; www.velawindsurf.com). Like any good college, Vela has prodigious course listings; its offerings include Intro to Harness Use—Da Cool Stance and Modern Science of Body Drags. Aruba Boardsailing Productions, Aruba Sailboard Vacations, and Vela are windsurf specialists—a good bet for novices.

3 Hitting the Links

Tierra del Sol Golf Course (☎ 297/586-0978; www.tierradel-sol.com), designed by Robert Trent Jones II, is Aruba's only championship course. With its desert terrain, ocean vistas, and challenging winds, it's an interesting one, located on the island's northwest tip near the California Lighthouse. Aruba's persistent winds are a factor during most approach shots, when club selection can be decisive, but gusts can affect putts, too. The arid links are flat for the most part, the Bermuda grass fairways are fairly wide for desert links, and the greens are accommodating. Although there are no hidden breaks, most putts are fast. Obstacles include sand bunkers, cacti, coral rock formations, and water hazards (referred to locally as *salinas*). The par-5, 534-yard 14th hole, with its crosswinds, narrow greens, and sand bunkers, may be the course's most challenging hole; play it cautiously. Views of the ocean and the California Lighthouse make hole 3 one of the most picturesque. For high-tech geeks, each golf cart is equipped with a GPS satellite dish and a color video screen that provides graphic hole and green overviews, and many other options. A morning tee time from December through March is \$133; afternoon rounds drop to \$98. During the summer, mornings are \$88, afternoons \$68. Packages are available. Guests renting Tierra del Sol villas (see chapter 3) can opt for unlimited golfing privileges. The course also offers a 1½-hour "No Embarrassment" clinic for golfers of all levels. A pro shop, driving range, putting green, chipping green, locker rooms, spa, and restaurants are on-site.

The newly opened **Divi Links**, near Druif Beach, across the street from the Divi Aruba Resort (☎ 297/581-653; www.divigolf.com), offers a less pricey yet elegant alternative. Although it has only nine greens, the course allows a second pass to simulate an 18-hole round. The course has two par-5 holes, two par-3s, and five par-4

holes. Six holes play either over or alongside the numerous man-made lagoons, and each hole has three tees for different level players. Fees are \$105 for 18 holes, \$70 for 9 holes. The course is open daily from 7:30am to 5pm. Start before 1pm to complete 18 holes. Golf carts and clubs can be rented at the on-site pro shop; however caddies are not available. A clubhouse with a panoramic view of the course has a restaurant and bar where you can watch the instant replay of your last shot, caught on camera for you to critique or relive.

If putt-putt's more your style, **Adventure Golf**, on L. G. Smith Boulevard, across from La Cabana (☎ 297/587-6625; www.arubaonline.com/adventure), has two 18-hole miniature courses surrounded by a moat, where you can float in paddle boats. Video and table games, a batting cage, a go-cart racetrack, and a restaurant and saloon also provide diversion. During the week, the center's open from 5pm to 11pm; on weekends the fun starts at noon. An 18-hole round is \$7. Paddleboat rides are \$4, and go carts are \$6.

4 Other Active Pursuits

BICYCLING

Aruba is small—maybe too small for cyclists who think nothing of biking 60 miles a day. The exotic terrain is flat for the most part, but heading into the wind is a challenge, and the sun is intense at mid-day. You know to bring plenty of water, a hat, and sunscreen. The most scenic roads trace the northern coast. They're not paved, so think mountain bike. Bring a bandana, too, to cover your mouth against the dust. To rent a bike, call **Melchor Cycle Rental**, Bubali 106B (☎ 297/587-1787), or **Pablito's Bike Rental**, L. G. Smith Blvd. 234 (☎ 297/587-8655). Prices start as low as \$15 per day. **Rancho Notorious**, Borancana 8E, Noord (☎ 297/586-0508; www.ranchnotorious.com), offers a couple of guided mountain bike tours that visit Alto Vista Chapel and the California Lighthouse. One's 2½ hours long (\$35); the other tacks on a bit of snorkeling (\$45, snorkeling gear included). Bikers must be at least 8 years old to take the tours.

BIRDING

Although no organized tours are offered, ardent birders have the opportunity to spy 170 different species in Aruba. In early winter, migratory birds swell the number to about 300. In the High-Rise area, the Bubali Bird Sanctuary's ponds and wetlands attract more than 80 species, including brown pelicans, black olivaceous cormorants,

herons, and egrets. Arikok National Park, which makes up much of the island's north-central region, is home to hummingbirds (common emerald and ruby-topaz), rufous-collared sparrows, ospreys, yellow orioles, American kestrels, black-faced grassquits, yellow warblers, Caribbean parakeets, long-tongued bats, common ground doves, tropicbirds, crested caracaras, and Aruban burrowing owls. For more information, see chapter 6, "Exploring the Island."

BOWLING

Eagle Bowling Palace, Pos Abao z/n, inland from the Low-Rise hotels (☎ 297/583-5038), has 16 lanes, a cocktail lounge, and a snack bar. It's open daily from 10am to 1am, but children under 12 must clear out before 7pm. Depending on the time of day, lanes rent for \$10 to \$12 per hour. Shoes are another \$1.25. Reservations are recommended.

HIKING

The sun is hot, and shade is scarce, but if you bring water and a wide-brimmed hat, traipsing around Aruba's hills and coastline is full of rewards: otherworldly rock formations, bizarre cactus groves, fluorescent parakeets, and dewlapped lizards. Hiking boots are nice, but sneakers are fine. There are no organized tours; Arikok National Park has many clearly marked trails. Scale the island's highest hills, explore abandoned gold mines, tiptoe around plantation ruins, trek through caves, and comb sea bluffs for coral and bones. See chapter 6, "Exploring the Island."

HORSEBACK RIDING

Time to get back in the saddle? Several ranches offer morning and midday excursions, and, if you're hopelessly romantic, rides off into the sunset. Wear long pants or bring a large towel to protect yourself from the sun. Hats with chin straps, sunglasses, and sunblock are strongly recommended.

Based at a 17th-century coconut plantation on the northern coast, **Rancho Daimari**, Tanki Leendert 249 (☎ 297/586-6286; www.visitaruba.com/ranchodaimari), offers 2-hour trips at 8:30am and 2pm daily. Trails lead through Arikok National Park and to the Natural Pool, where snorkeling and swimming in the restorative waters are encouraged. The price is \$60, and for an extra \$25 per person you can have a private honeymoon or sunset ride.

Rancho del Campo, Sombre 22E, Santa Cruz (☎ 297/585-0290; www.ranchodelcampo.com), has two different tours. The Natural Pool ride crosses through Arikok National Park to the

jagged north coastline and the Natural Pool for swimming and snorkeling. This 2½-hour trip starts at 9:30am and 3:30pm daily and costs \$50. The 3-hour Natural Bridge excursion passes by the Ayo rock formations. This trip begins at 8:30am daily and costs \$70. Private tours are available for \$100 per person.

Rancho Notorious, Borancana 8E, Noord (☎ 297/586-0508; www.ranchnotorious.com), offers several options. The 2-hour beach tour passes through the countryside on the way to Malmok Beach, with pick-up times of 8:30am and sunset (\$65). Passing by Alto Vista Chapel and the small white-sand cove of Boca Pos di Noord, the 2½-hour tour follows trails through the countryside to the northeast coast (pick-up times at 9am and 4:30pm; \$55). With pick-up at 8:30am and 3pm, the 3-hour tour covers more countryside, Tierra del Sol, the California Lighthouse, and Malmok and Arashi Beaches. The price is \$65. Finally, the beach and snorkeling tour includes a trot along Malmok Beach and snorkeling at Malmok Reef. Departing at 8:30am and 3pm, this 2½-hour tour is \$55.

OFF-ROADING

For those who want a rough and ready island adventure, there are several places to rent an all-terrain vehicle. **Georges**, L. G. Smith Blvd. 124 (☎ 297/593-2202), next to the Harley Davidson store in Oranjestad, rents Yamaha Breeze automatics for \$20 per hour or \$80 per day, and Warrior 350's for \$30 per hour and \$120 per day. For an organized tour, check in with **DePalm Tours**, L.G. Smith Blvd. 142 (☎ 297/582-4400; www.depalm.com); **Rancho Daimari**, Plantage Damairi (☎ 297/586-6284 and -6285; www.visitaruba.com/ranchodaimari), or **Rancho Notorious** (☎ 297/586-0508; www.ranchnotorious.com).

TENNIS

Most of the island's beachside hotels have tennis courts, many of them lit for night play. Some also boast pros on hand to give clinics or individual instruction. Nonguests can make arrangements to play at hotel courts, but guests have priority. The island's best facilities are at the **Aruba Racket Club**, Rooi Santo 21, Palm Beach (☎ 297/586-0215), which features eight lighted courts, swimming pool, fitness center, and bar and restaurant. The club is open Monday through Saturday from 8am to 11pm and Sunday from 3 to 8pm. Rates are \$10 per hour per court, and lessons are \$20 for a half-hour or \$40 per hour. The club is near the Tierra del Sol complex on the northwest coast.