

PLANNING YOUR TRIP TO ARUBA

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So many islands, so little time. With all the tropical paradises you could visit, why would you pick Aruba for your Caribbean vacation?

Well, there's the reliably near-perfect weather. If you have only a week away from the job, why not guarantee yourself 7 days of ideal tanning conditions—unwaveringly sunny skies, warm temperatures, and cooling breezes. And because the island's more of a desert than a rainforest, the humidity's low and it hardly ever rains. Hurricanes? Schmurricanes. There's rarely one within hundreds of miles. Aruba is far south of the tropical-storm belt.

You like beaches? Aruba's got beaches, some of the best in the Caribbean. In the world, for that matter. The photos only look as if they've been doctored. What you see is what you get: miles of white, sugary sand; warm, gentle surf; turquoise and aqua seas; and plenty of space.

When you tire of lolling on the beach, there are scuba diving, snorkeling, great windsurfing, and all the other watersports you expect from a sun-and-sea vacation. On land, you can golf, ride a horse, hike, or drive an all-terrain vehicle over the island's wild-and-woolly outback. Away from the beach, Aruba is a desert island full of cacti, iguanas, and strange boulder formations. Contrasting sharply with the resort area's serene beaches, the north coast features craggy limestone cliffs, sand dunes, and crashing breakers.

And such nice places to stay: You can choose from luxury resorts, all-inclusives, cozy boutique hotels, and modest budget spots. They're all well-maintained and chock-full of bells and whistles to meet the whims of

Learning the Local Lingo

Although English is spoken throughout Aruba, Bonaire, and Curaçao, learning a few words of the native tongue, Papiamentu, can be fun.

Bon bini	bahn <i>bee-nee</i>	Welcome
Bon dia	bahn <i>dee-a</i>	Good morning
Bon tardi	bahn <i>tar-dee</i>	Good afternoon
Bon nochi	bahn <i>no-chee</i>	Good evening
Danki	<i>dahn-kee</i>	Thank you
Di nada	<i>di nada</i>	You're welcome
Na bo ordo	<i>nah bo or-doe</i>	You're welcome
Kon ta bai?	<i>kahn tah bye</i>	How are you?
Bon	<i>bahn</i>	Good/nice
Dushi	<i>doo-shee</i>	Sweet/sweetheart
Te otro biaha	<i>tay oh-tro bee-ah-ha</i>	Until next time

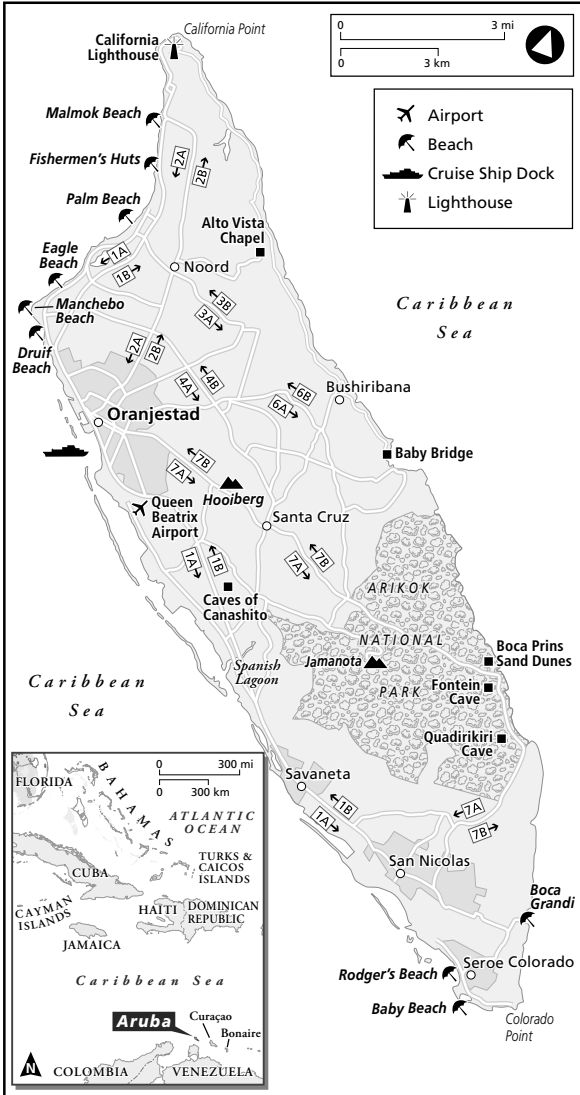
most travelers. With all the package tours available, they can be surprisingly affordable, too.

If you're a foodie, you will be surprised at how well you can eat in Aruba. Unlike the generally standard fare in most of the Caribbean, Aruba's culinary offerings are diverse, inventive, and often very good.

After the sun sets, there's plenty to do. You can try your luck at one of the island's dozen casinos, take in a movie, or listen to some amazing live music, including Latin jazz and Caribbean sounds such as the island's own tumba music. Bars, clubs, booze cruises, you name it—if you're looking for a party, you'll find it.

You'll find the overwhelming majority of Arubans to be genuinely friendly and welcoming. Sure, the island's almost totally dependent on tourism, but nobody learns to be this nice. With little history of racial or cultural conflicts, the island has no cause for animosity. As the license plates say, it's "One Happy Island." And, although Dutch is the official language, almost everyone speaks English. You'll also hear Spanish and Papiamentu, the local tongue (a mix of several European, African, and Native American languages), now recognized as an official language, along with Dutch.

While safety is always a concern, Aruba enjoys one of the region's lowest crime rates, fueled in part by high employment. Though it's not uncommon to see solo senior tourists as well as solo 20-something women, it's always safer—not to mention more fun—to travel with a friend.



Enough of the good points: What's the downside? Well, if you're looking to stay in an old, converted, family-run sugar mill or immerse yourself in rich colonial history or pre-Columbian culture, you could do better elsewhere. From day one, Aruba's been pretty much of a backwater. It's still part of the Netherlands, so there's a Dutch influence, which adds a slight European flavor. A few small museums highlight the island's past and some centuries-old indigenous rock glyphs and paintings, but nobody visits Aruba for culture or history.

The people who do visit, though, come back. With 60% of visitors coming back for more, Aruba has the highest repeat-visitor rate in the Caribbean; the highest hotel-occupancy figures, too. Honey-mooners, families, and couples of all ages and types fill the resorts during the winter high season and in the traditionally quieter summer months as well. More than 70% come from the United States, and a fair number hail from Canada. Others come from Holland and South America, especially nearby Venezuela and Colombia.

The bottom line? Aruba's determined to make sure you have a good time. It's a great place to unwind, and few islands work as hard to make you feel as special and pampered. You'll learn your first Papiamentu phrase when you arrive—*bon bini* (welcome!). The last words from your lips as you board your plane back home will probably be in the local dialect, too—*masha danki, Aruba* (thank you, Aruba).

Aruba is a tiny island. Only 32km (20 miles) long and 9.7km (6 miles) across at its widest point, it's slightly larger than Washington, D.C. (180 sq. km/70 sq. miles). It's the westernmost of the Dutch ABC islands—Aruba, Bonaire, and Curaçao—and less than 32km (20 miles) north of Venezuela.

In a place as small as Aruba, it's easy to get your bearings, especially since just about everything for tourists centers on the two biggest beaches. Remember Mercury, the messenger god from Roman mythology? Aruba's shaped like his winged foot: toes to the east, heel to the west. Aruba's capital and largest city, **Oranjestad** (pronounced "oh-rah-n-juh-stahd" or "oh-rah-n-yay-stahd"), is on the island's southern coast, pretty far to the west, where Mercury's heel would be. The island's hotels stretch along the back-to-back shores of **Eagle Beach** and **Palm Beach**, a couple of miles west of Oranjestad, or up the god's Achilles tendon. One of the island's landmarks, the **California Lighthouse**, stands at the wing on Mercury's foot, while **San Nicolas**, once Aruba's largest city and home of the island's oil refinery, steps on his toes. Between Oranjestad and San Nicolas on the south coast, Savaneta is Aruba's oldest town and major fishing center.

If you're like most visitors, you'll be staying in one of three areas: in Oranjestad, in the Low-Rise hotel area along Eagle Beach, or a

little farther from town in the High-Rise hotel area on Palm Beach. The three locations have distinct atmospheres, so where you stay will determine the tone of your vacation. Would you rather be in the city or at the seaside? Are casinos and nightclubs important, or do you prefer quiet strolls along the beach? Are you looking for a casual beach town or a glamorous resort strip?

Let's start in the thick of the action. **Oranjestad** is Aruba's only town of any size or sophistication. If you want an "urban" environment with a variety of restaurants, nightclubs, and casinos, this is the place for you. The entire island has fewer than 100,000 residents, but most seem to live or work around the capital. Its waterfront bustles with cruise ships, yachts, fishing boats, and cargo carriers. Fueled by the boutiques, restaurants, bars, and casinos radiating from the docks, vehicular and pedestrian traffic in town is heavy much of the day and night. Contributing to the congestion, Arubans cruise the main boulevard to see and be seen, giving the strip an *American Graffiti* flavor on weekend nights. Plans are afoot to eliminate all vehicular traffic from the main strip, opening the way for pedestrians only.

If you will miss those muscle machines, there is a professional race-car track, the Aruba International Raceway, on the island. This has resulted in the appearance of a surprisingly high number of hot rods and souped-up macho machines. For more information on upcoming races, to see pictures of past events, and for directions and ticket prices, fasten your seat belt and log on to www.arubaraceway.com.

Much of the architecture combines Dutch gables and baroque ornamentation with such Caribbean colors as pistachio, ocher, pink, and aqua. The result is a sun-drenched gingerbread confection with a touch of theme-park squeaky cleanliness. Walk 5 or 6 blocks away from the waterfront, though, and Oranjestad becomes a nondescript, workaday town with neighborhoods ranging from tony to shabby. Staying in town doesn't necessarily mean sacrificing beach time: The best beaches are only minutes away, and one hotel (the Renaissance) even has its own nearby island replete with private beaches, a restaurant and bar, a spa, and a tennis court.

In sharp contrast to Oranjestad, but only a 20-minute walk west, the **Low-Rise** hotel area feels like a laid-back summer beach town. This district stretches over several contiguous strands with such names as Bushiri, Druif, Manchebo, and Eagle, but it's hard to see where one ends and another begins, and most people refer to the entire area as Eagle Beach. As the Low-Rise name implies, the dozen or so complexes here seldom climb above three or four stories. Some are directly on the beach; others are located across a relatively sleepy road. The small boutique hotels, quiet timeshares,

and sprawling resorts (including several all-inclusives) attract a diverse group of people. A couple of the smaller hotels cater to couples, while the timeshares have a generally quieter, older clientele (with kids and grandkids appearing at certain times of the year). The all-inclusives and larger hotels boast all kinds of guests with an especially large number of families and children. Many apartment-style accommodations feature full kitchens, living rooms, and guest rooms, facilities attractive to families and groups of friends who want to save a bit by eating in from time to time (large supermarkets are a \$6 taxi ride or 15-min. walk away). But plenty of restaurants are in the area and a couple of large casinos too. Low Risers are quick to point out that Eagle Beach is wider, quieter, and less crowded than Palm Beach, and they prefer the comfortable, casual ambience.

On the flip side, the **High-Rise** area begins about a quarter of a mile after Eagle Beach ends. Stretching along Palm Beach, this strip of glitzy High-Rise resorts is Aruba's Waikiki. The dozen or so hotels here tend to be swanky, self-contained resorts that ramble over acres of lushly landscaped grounds. Most boast splashy casinos, numerous restaurants and bars, and endless amenities and services. Some hotels here are definitely upscale, and others are perfectly middle class: Whether you're a big cheese or small potato, there's a place here to suit your budget. These hotels, unlike the Low Risers, are full-fledged glamour destinations. And if you're totally focused on sun time, you'll appreciate that all but a couple of the resorts are directly on the beach (the others are just across the street). The area also offers more places to eat, drink, and gamble, and its piers are a hubbub of dive boats and motorized watersports. However, with the increased number of amenities and giant resorts, Palm Beach doesn't offer the Low-Rise area's beach-town simplicity, and it's comparatively crowded.

Aside from the big three, you have a couple of other options when deciding where to stay. Next to the island's championship golf course **Tierra del Sol**, condominiums and free-standing villas appeal to vacationers who prefer time on the links to hours on the beach. This complex looks and feels like a desert resort in Arizona, and short-term rentals are available.

For the serious budget option, a handful of **motels** can be found a 10- to 20-minute walk inland from the beaches. They lack the glamour of the larger resorts, but they make Aruba affordable for almost everyone.

Away from the hotels and the capital, Aruba features splendid, if modest, natural wonders, more great beaches, and a handful of authentically native towns. But more about exploring the island later in the book.

FROMMER'S FAVORITE aruba EXPERIENCES

Bake on the beach. This is why you came: powdery white sand, turquoise water, and soothingly monotonous waves. Whether basking at Palm, Eagle, Manchebo, or Druif Beach, close your eyes and feel the stress evaporate. You're a beach potato; use sunscreen or you'll be a fried potato.

Get dirty. If you love the rugged outdoors, spend the better part of a day hiking, biking, driving, horseback riding, or off-roading through expansive Arikok National Park to marvel at Aruba's diverse ecosystems and rural past. Ramble over hills strewn with boulders and cacti, visit old farms (known as *cunucus*), spelunk through caves in search of Indian rock glyphs, and slide down sand dunes. Along the way, you'll meet hummingbirds, hawks, iguanas, goats, and donkeys.

Chow down. Dining in Aruba is a daily ritual of indulgence and romance. Most restaurants have picturesque settings, with both indoor and outdoor seating, often on or overlooking the water. The service is consistently good and the food is among the best in the Caribbean. Whether you opt for a local favorite on the cheap, or a French classic that breaks the bank, you are guaranteed to stagger back to your hotel room sated and happy as a stuffed clam marinated in a dry martini.

Play Jacques Cousteau. Aruba has some of the best wreck dives in the Caribbean. In fact, Aruba boasts the largest sunken vessel in the Caribbean and has some of the most haunting and accessible sunken ships this side of the *Titanic*. If you'd rather not get wet, you can still descend 45m (148 ft.) below the surface to make friends with a variety of marine critters from the comfort of a tiptop submarine or semisubmersible boat.

Come sail away. The turquoise Caribbean water that surrounds Aruba is even more captivating when you are sailing across it. Whether you choose a sleek catamaran, teak schooner, teeny trimaran, or a windsurf board or kiteboard, as the saying goes: *Just do it!*

Toast the setting sun. Aruba's picture-perfect days almost invariably melt into picture-perfect sunsets. What better way to round off the day than with a tropical drink at sunset; so grab a front-row seat at one of the many stylish bars on the beach, or on the water, or overlooking the harbor and drink up while you drink in the view.

WHEN TO GO

The Weather

Almost invariably, the weather is wonderful—warm, sunny, dry, and breezy. There's no monsoon season and no threat of tropical storms—the island is far outside the hurricane belt. The average annual temperature is 82°F (28°C), and no month of the year has an average high temperature lower than 85°F (29°C) or higher than 89°F (32°C). Lows range from 76°F (24°C) to 80°F (27°C).

The sun can be hot, and its reflection off the white sandy beaches is blinding. Fortunately, the almost-constant trade winds make it easy to forget just how warm it is. Usually a godsend, these pleasant, gentle breezes can occasionally escalate to surprising gusts or sustained winds, so hold onto your hat. Better yet, buy one with a chin strap, and no they're not all dorky. With the right attitude, anyone can pull off a straw cowboy hat; these hats are readily available at most souvenir shops. In September, though, you'll wish the breezes were back. Tropical storms plaguing less-fortunate islands far to the north suck away the trade winds during that back-to-school month, making Aruba as hot as any other spot in the Caribbean. Unless you fancy relentless heat with no relieving breezes, avoid visiting in September.

The wind provides a collateral perk, too. It blows away annoying mosquitoes and other flying pests. That said, with the creation of so many new High-Rise hotels, the breezes aren't nearly as strong as they once were. So when the breezes wane, it's time to bring out the insect repellent. Aruba's dry, though, so you'll never encounter the number of bugs that infest more lush islands.

Rainfall averages about 46 centimeters (18 in.) a year, with most precipitation falling from October through January. Even then rains tend to be erratic and brief, and it's rare for the sun not to shine most of the day.

Another plus: The humidity is less oppressive in Aruba than in most of the Caribbean. Although not exactly Arizona, the island's more dusty than sultry.

HURRICANES The curse of much of the Caribbean, hurricanes are something you can pretty much ignore if you're vacationing in Aruba. The island is many miles from the storms that wreak havoc on much of the region from June to November. On rare occasions, storm activity far to the north is so violent that it causes wave action to ripple in Aruba. Some damage has occurred over the years, but it's relatively negligible.

The High Season & The Off Season

Because the weather is consistently nice year-round, Aruba's high and low seasons reflect climates in the United States and Canada rather than the weather on the island itself. When it's cold and wintry in North America, demand for Aruba's warmth and sunshine peaks. Roughly speaking, the island's high season runs from mid-December to mid-April. During this period, hotels charge their highest prices, and you'll need to reserve a room well in advance—months in advance if you want to bask on the beach over Christmas or in the depths of February. Guests during the high season tend to be older and wealthier, although there are plenty of families. The national mix weighs heavily toward Americans and Canadians.

The off season—roughly from mid-April to mid-December (although it varies from hotel to hotel)—is one big summer sale. All resorts routinely slash their room rates, which means you can get the same accommodations in the low season for 20% to 50% less than you would in darkest winter.

But if you think Aruba's a ghost town in the summer, think again. The deals are so attractive, and the season dovetails so nicely with Europe's traditional vacation time and South America's winter, that the island's resorts are still pretty full. The mix of visitors shifts in the summer toward families, Europeans (especially Dutch), South Americans, and the more budget conscious from everywhere. Americans still make up the largest national group.

Some activities and attractions scale back a bit in the summer, but not much. For example, instead of six excursions a day, a tour operator may offer only three; restaurants might close an hour earlier; and hotels may use the "downtime" for new construction or renovation (ask if work is scheduled; if it's potentially disturbing, request a room far away from the noise).

If you're single and want crowds, don't worry. Lots of potential playmates are around in the summer, as well.

Because the difference in high-season and low-season rates at most hotels is drastic, I've included both in chapter 2. That way you can compare how much you can save if you wait a bit for your fun in the sun.

Since the global economic downturn in early 2009, the travel industry worldwide has suffered, because people are more reluctant to indulge in a vacation. Aruba's tourist-based economy has at times been hit hard. But there is a silver lining; in uncertain times, fearless, opportunistic travelers can find significant bargains. For example, many restaurants are now offering early-bird specials, prix-fixe meals, and free appetizers or cocktails with a coupon.

Some even let children eat for free. The offerings change weekly. When times are lean, keep an eye out for these deals, which are advertised in tourism brochures and fliers and on websites.

Holidays

Most stores and restaurants close on official holidays. If you stay near the resort areas, however, you may not be affected at all. Here's a list of Aruba's holidays: January 1 (New Year's Day); January 25 (Betico Croes Day); February 20, 2012 (Carnival Monday); February 21, 2012 (Fat Tuesday); February 22, 2012 (Ash Wednesday); March 18 (National Anthem and Flag Day); April 6, 2012 (Good Friday); April 8, 2012 (Easter Sunday); April 30 (Queen's Birthday); May 1 (Aruba's Labor Day); May 17, 2012 (Ascension Day); December 25 (Christmas Day); and December 26 (Boxing Day).

Aruba Calendar of Events

For an updated list of events, and specific dates, times, and locations, contact the **Aruba Tourism Authority** (☎ **800/TO-ARUBA** [862-7822]; www.aruba.com/ourpeopleplaces/events.aspx) or check <http://events.frommers.com>, where you'll find a searchable, up-to-the-minute roster of what's happening in cities all over the world.

JANUARY

Dande. For almost 200 years, roaming troubadours have marked the end of the old year and the beginning of the new in Aruba. As the clock strikes midnight, groups of musicians go from house to house serenading each family with good wishes for the coming year. If the *dande* group misses your home, you'll have nothing but bad luck in the coming year. Some families set off fireworks after they've been serenaded, and the mother of the house often sweeps out the "old spirit." January 1.

Betico Croes Day. G. F. "Betico" Croes, Aruba's seminal political leader, was instrumental in the island's fight for "*Status Aparte*"—semi-independence from Holland and autonomy from the other Dutch islands in the Caribbean. Low-key patriotic observances mark the holiday. January 25.

Carnival. Highlights of Aruba's version of pre-Lenten revelry include the Children's Parade (toddlers, dwarfed by their elaborate costumes, dance down the street) and the Grand Carnival parades in Oranjestad and San Nicolas (calypso, marching, and drumming contests accompanied by monstrous sound systems). During the Tivoli Lighting Parade, thousands of miniature lights blanket the costumes and floats. Representatives of the island's various districts vie for the title of carnival queen, and unsuspecting tourists, whisked off their planes, help decide the winner. The parties, dancing, and music begin in January, culminating on the weekend before Ash Wednesday. Early January to late February.

MARCH

National Anthem and Flag Day. In celebration of Aruba's flag, anthem, and autonomy, nationalistic exhibits, folkloric presentations, and fireworks displays take place islandwide. Children sing the national anthem—on the streets, on television, and on the radio—*ad infinitum* and off-key. March 18.

APRIL

Queen's Birthday. To celebrate the birthday of Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands, kite contests, sporting events, and cultural programs are held around the island. April 30.

MAY

Aruba Food & Wine Festival. The annual food and wine tasting event features a pastry extravaganza with famous chefs showcasing their talents. This 3-day culinary event concludes with a concert highlighting the celebration of a renowned international musical band or artist. Late May/early June.

Soul Beach Music Festival. This star-studded event (www.soulbeach.net) takes place over Memorial Day weekend. Performers in the past have included Wyclef Jean, Sean Paul, Chaka Khan, and other renowned rhythm and blues performers. Held at the Havana Beach Club, this festival also includes comedy, beach parties, and plenty of nightclub action. Memorial Day weekend.

JUNE

Dera Gai (St. John's Day). Centuries ago, after harvesting crops, the island's indigenous people built bonfires, and then challenged one another to jump over them. Storytelling, music, dancing, and food and drink fueled the merriment. Later a rooster was buried up to its neck and covered with a calabash gourd. Blindfolded men with sticks had three chances to "find" the rooster; the winner kept the fowl for dinner. Today a dummy rooster is used, but the music and dancing persist. Crop remnants and other disposable items are buried in a symbolic soul cleansing. June 24.

International Triathlon. Competitors from around the world participate in a triathlon including a 1.5K swim, 40K bike race, and a 10K run. More than 100 athletes usually participate in the event, hosted by the Aruba Triathlon Association. Late June/early July.

JULY

Hi-Winds World Challenge. Windsurfers and kiteboarders from multiple countries gather at Hadicurari, or Fishermen's Huts, just north of the High-Rise hotels, for one of the most popular competitions in the Caribbean (www.aruba-hiwinds.org). Late June or early July.

Aruba Music Festival, Oranjestad. Bands from around the Caribbean perform in a free concert. First week of July.

Aruba Reef Care Project. Joining forces to raise awareness of the marine environment, certified divers, snorkelers, and topsiders clean up beaches and underwater sites. First weekend in July.

AUGUST

Aruba International Pro-Am Golf Tournament. Professional and amateur golfers team up in this 2-day, 36-hole tournament that features prizes, special events, and parties. Late August.

SEPTEMBER

Caribbean Sea Jazz Festival. This outdoor festival features international and local musicians at Cas di Cultura (www.caribbeanseajazz.com). Early September.

OCTOBER

Annual Aruba Music Festival. This annual event features musical heavyweights—past performers include Crosby, Stills & Nash; Jackson Brown; John Mayer; and Chicago. Columbus Day weekend.

NOVEMBER

Aruba Heineken Catamaran Regatta. This international catamaran regatta decorates Aruba's waters with the colorful sails of catamarans from Europe. The event represents a great opportunity for experienced yacht racers as well as recreational sailors. For more information visit www.arubaregatta.com. Early November.

Aruba Beach Tennis International Championship. Aruba is one of the first countries to host an international tournament in the new sport of beach tennis (www.arubabeachtennis.com). International beach tennis pros come down to play, and a large number of amateurs participate as well. Competitions are held at Moomba Beach. Mid-November.

DECEMBER

Sint Nicolaas Day, Oranjestad. Sint Nicolaas arrives at Paardenbaai Harbor in Oranjestad to greet Aruba's children and reward them with gifts for their good behavior during the year. December 5.

ENTRY REQUIREMENTS

Passports

U.S. and Canadian citizens need a valid passport (with at least 6 months before it expires) to enter Aruba. Citizens of a member country of the European Union need a passport and an E.U. Travel Card. A valid passport is required of all other nationalities. When you arrive in Aruba, be prepared to show an onward or return ticket or proof of sufficient funds for your stay.

Before leaving home, make two copies of your passport, driver's license, airline ticket, and hotel vouchers. Leave one copy with someone at home; carry the other with you separately from your passport. If you lose your papers, you'll be glad you took the trouble.

Visas

Americans, Canadians, Australians, New Zealanders, and E.U. nationals can stay in Aruba for up to 1 month without a visa. Timeshare and home owners are allowed to stay on island up to

180 days. If you plan to stay longer, get a visa application from DIMAS (The Department of Immigration; ☎ 297/522-1500; www.dimasaruba.com) or at a Dutch embassy or consulate.

For information on obtaining a visa, please see “Fast Facts,” on p. 198.

Customs

Aruba Customs regulations allow incoming visitors to bring articles for personal use. Persons 19 and over can also bring in 2.25 liters of wine, 3 liters of beer, or 1 liter of liquor and 200 cigarettes, 50 cigars, and or 250 grams of tobacco.

For information on what you're allowed to take home, contact one of the following agencies:

U.S. Citizens: U.S. Customs & Border Protection (CBP), 1300 Pennsylvania Ave., NW, Washington, DC 20229 (☎ 877/287-8667; www.cbp.gov).

Canadian Citizens: Canada Border Services Agency (☎ 800/461-9999 in Canada, or 204/983-3500; www.cbsa-asfc.gc.ca).

U.K. Citizens: HM Customs & Excise (☎ 0845/010-9000; or 020/8929-0152 from outside the U.K.; www.hmce.gov.uk).

Australian Citizens: Australian Customs Service (☎ 1300/363-263; www.customs.gov.au).

New Zealand Citizens: New Zealand Customs, the Customhouse, 17–21 Whitmore St., P.O. Box 2218, Wellington (☎ 04/473-6099 or 0800/428-786; www.customs.govt.nz).

Medical Requirements

There are no vaccinations required for entry to Aruba, Bonaire, or Curaçao. For more information see “Health” on p. 21.

GETTING THERE & GETTING AROUND

Getting To Aruba

BY PLANE

Aruba's airport, **Queen Beatrix International Airport** (airport code AUA; www.airportaruba.com) is clean, modern, and organized. Unless your flight arrives with several others (it may on weekends), the lines through Immigration and Customs move rapidly. Luggage won't make it to the conveyer belts as fast as you'd like, but once it arrives there are plenty of free luggage carts available. The terminal has a bank and an ATM, a cellphone kiosk, and tourism desk. Most stores are in the departing passenger lounges,



Hassle-Free Return to the States

Because U.S. Customs and Immigration agents are stationed at Aruba's airport, formalities for reentry to the United States are taken care of before you board your plane back to the U.S. Though that means no long lines to wait in when you get back to the United States, it can mean a considerable wait before you board, so be sure to arrive at the Aruba airport **3 hours** before your plane is scheduled to depart.

but in the courtyard to your left as you leave the U.S. arrivals building, a handful of small shops sells books, souvenirs, and snacks.

As of 2011, there are seven airlines that make regularly scheduled nonstop flights to Aruba from the U.S. and Europe. American Airlines once dominated the route, but Continental, Delta, United, and US Airways have joined the fray. There are even nonstop flights from Canada via Air Canada. Although the number of flights generally increases during the high season, airlines may alter service depending on demand (and their own financial condition). There are also chartered flights from the U.S., U.K., and Australia, so ask your travel agent if you can get in on one of those.

Charter flights offer an alternative for both Canadians and Americans. If you've booked a package through a large tour operator, your flight might be a charter anyway. Charters serve Atlanta, Baltimore, Boston, Charlotte, Chicago, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Dallas, Detroit, Hartford, Louisville, Memphis, Milwaukee, Minneapolis, Nashville, New York, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, St. Louis, and Toronto.

To find out which airlines travel to Aruba, please see "Airline, Hotel & Car-Rental Websites," p. 199.

Getting into Town from the Airport

In the interest of protecting cabdrivers' livelihood, Aruban law precludes hotels from picking up guests at the airport. If you've come on a package tour, your ground transportation voucher gives you a seat on one of the privately operated, air-conditioned buses that take arriving passengers to the hotels. Otherwise, you can take a cab. Fixed, regulated fares are \$13 to Oranjestad, \$17 to the Low-Rise hotels, \$20 to the High Rises, and \$25 or so to Tierra del Sol. Taxis line up outside the terminal and can accommodate up to five passengers. If you want to get behind the wheel of your own car, 20 or so car-rental kiosks await you on the other side of the taxis (see "Airline, Hotel & Car-Rental Websites," p. 199). The

drive from the airport to the hotels is usually 10 to 30 minutes, depending on traffic and the time of day.

BY CRUISE SHIP

In 2011, 314 cruise ships brought 600,000 visitors to Aruba. Royal Caribbean and Princess ships begin itineraries in Aruba, and Celebrity, Crystal, Holland America, Fred Olsen, Norwegian, P&O Cruises, Princess, and Royal Caribbean all have ships that make port calls here.

Cruisers arrive at the **Aruba Ports Authority** (www.arubaports.com), a modern terminal with a tourist information booth, ATMs, and plenty of shops. From the pier, it's a 5-minute walk to the immediately evident shopping districts of downtown Oranjestad. If you're not taking a shore excursion, you can make your way around on your own, allowing some time for the beach (just a 5- to 10-min. taxi ride away), lunch, and shopping. Taxis line up to take cruisers to the beach; if you want to save money, the bus terminal is practically as close as the cabs: After you've walked to the main harborfront road, look for the large pastel bus shelter to your right. Most buses serve the resort areas, but before boarding, ask your driver if he's headed your way. The trip to the Low-Rise area takes about 15 minutes; to the High-Rise area, add another 5 to 10 minutes. Same-day round-trip fare between the beach hotels and the Oranjestad station is \$4; a one-way ride is \$2.25. Make sure you have exact change or at least small bills.

Still a large cargo port, Oranjestad is separating its cruise and cargo facilities and beefing up passenger terminal services. For more information, contact the **Cruise Tourism Authority**, Royal Plaza Mall, Ste. 230, L.G. Smith Blvd. 94, Oranjestad (☎ 297/583-3648; www.arubabycruise.com).

Getting Around

BY RENTAL CAR It's easy to rent a car in Aruba. Decent roads connect major tourist attractions, and all the major rental companies honor valid U.S., British, Australian, and Canadian driver's licenses, provided you are at least 23 and have had a valid license for at least 3 years. Most major U.S. car-rental companies and a variety of reputable local operators maintain offices at the airport and at major hotels; others have free delivery and pickup service. There's no tax on car rentals, but even if you purchase a collision-damage waiver, you're responsible for the first \$300 to \$500 worth of damage. Rental rates for cars, usually Suzukis, Toyotas, Kias, Hyundais, or Jeeps, vary from season to season and from dealer to dealer. Gas is expensive compared to North America. All service stations charge the same price, and there's no discount for self-service.

Is it necessary to rent a car? It depends. If you want to explore the island, go ahead and get one for a day or two or three; many of the local agencies have 3-day specials. If you don't plan to leave your resort except to dine, gamble, and shop, it's cheaper to take cabs or the reliable buses. Or you can book a half-day Jeep, ATV, or dune buggy excursion that will allow you to explore the island as part of an off-road caravan, where you get to see the wild side of Aruba but not worry about getting lost.

To rent a car, try **Avis** at the cruise terminal, Simeon Antonio (☎ 800/331-1212 in the U.S., or 297/582-5496 in Aruba; www.avis.com); **Budget** at the airport (☎ 800/472-3325 in the U.S., or 297/582-8600 in Aruba; www.budget.com); **Dollar** at the airport (☎ 800/800-3665 in the U.S. or 297/583-0101 in Aruba; www.dollar.com); **Hertz** has multiple locations, including the airport and Oranjestad (☎ 800/654-3001 in the U.S., or 297/588-7570 in Aruba; www.hertz.com); **National** at the airport (☎ 800/227-3876 in the U.S., or 297/582-5451 in Aruba; www.nationalcar.com); or **Thrifty Car Rental** at the airport (☎ 800/THRIFTY [847-4389], or 297/583-5335 in Aruba; www.thrifty.com). During the high season, expect to pay \$60 to \$65 per day for a compact car, \$90 per day for a four-wheel-drive vehicle. During the low season, rates drop to \$40 to \$45 for a compact, \$60 to \$85 for a Jeep.

For a better deal, try one of the reputable local agencies, such as **Economy Car Rental**, Bushiri 27 (☎ 866/978-5780 or 297/583-0200; www.economyaruba.com); or **Amigo Rent-a-Car**, Schotlandstraat 56 (☎ 297/583-8833; www.amigocar.com). You can make reservations online; look for online specials.



Rules of the Road

As in the U.S. and Canada, driving is on the right side of the road. Traffic signs use international symbols; most are self-explanatory, but some aren't. Ask your car-rental agency for a sheet of the symbols, and take a few minutes to familiarize yourself with them. There are no right turns on red. Car speedometers are in kilometers and mph. The speed limit in urban areas is 40kmph (25 mph) and out of town it's 80kmph (50 mph), unless otherwise posted. Much of Oranjestad's traffic is one-way; at intersections where there are no road signs, traffic from your right has the right of way. An increase in the number of cars on the islands means traffic can become congested just before 9am and just after 5pm on weekdays. Saturday night in Oranjestad can rival traffic in Times Square.



Driving Hazards

Most of Aruba's roads are pretty good, but the traffic signs leave much to be desired. Few streets outside of Oranjestad are marked, and signs to major tourist attractions look as if they were made by neighborhood kids decades ago. Try to keep your eye on the road, though, because iguanas and goats pose unusual traffic hazards. Arubans are considerate, cautious drivers for the most part, although they seem to drive either too fast or too slow. For a small town, Oranjestad has big-city traffic much of the day. Seat-belt laws exist but are often ignored, as are drunk-driving laws. Headgear is required by law for all two-wheel vehicles, but be warned; some rental helmets bear the following caveat: THIS HELMET IS A NOVELTY ITEM; AND IS NOT INTENDED FOR USE AS PROTECTIVE HEADGEAR.

For more information on car-rental companies in Aruba, please see "Airline, Hotel & Car-Rental Websites," p. 199.

BY BUS Aruba has an excellent public bus system, with regular, reliable service. Buses run roughly every 20 minutes from 8am to 6pm and every hour from 6pm to midnight, Monday through Saturday. On Sunday and holidays, service is less frequent: every half-hour between 6am and 6pm and every 2 hours between 8pm and midnight. A same-day one-way ride is about AWG 2.25, or AWG 4 round-trip. It's best to have exact change. Schedules are available at the **Arubus** office (☎ 297/588-2300 or 588-0617 after 4pm; www.arubus.com) at the central terminal on Zoutmanstraat in Oranjestad, but your hotel's reception desk will know when buses pass by. You'll seldom wait more than 20 minutes for the next coach but while you are waiting for the regular bus, you may be able to hop onto a cramped minibus favored by the locals. The trip into town takes 10 to 20 minutes. There's a stop in front of most hotels.

BY TAXI Taxis are nonmetered but rates are fixed, and every cab has a copy of the official rate schedule. Tell the driver where you're going and ask the fare before you get in. Hailing a taxi on the street is difficult, but you'll find plenty of cabs at hotels. To return to your resort from dinner, have the restaurant call for a car. The **dispatch office** is inland from the Low Rises on Pos Abou, behind the Eagle Bowling Palace on the Sasaki Highway (☎ 297/582-2116). Tip 10% to 15%. Because it's next to impossible to find a taxi in remoter parts of the island, ask the driver who dropped you off to return for you at a certain time. Most drivers speak good English and are willing, even eager, to give you a tour of the island.

Expect to pay \$45 per hour for a maximum of five passengers. Following are rates for the most common routes:

- From High-Rise hotels: \$11 to Low-Rise hotels; \$13 to Noord restaurants and Oranjestad; \$23 to the airport
- From Low-Rise hotels: \$11 to High-Rise hotels; \$13 to Noord restaurants and Oranjestad; \$20 to the airport
- From Oranjestad hotels: \$11 to Low-Rise hotels; \$13 to Noord restaurants and High-Rise hotels; \$16 to the airport

A surcharge of \$3 is added on Sunday, holidays, and after midnight. The minimum fare is \$5. Waiting time is \$3 per 5 minutes. A surcharge of \$2 is also levied for additional pieces of luggage over one per person. Shirtless, wet, or damp passengers are not allowed, and you're charged \$50 for seat damage from wet clothing or sharp objects.

BY MOTORCYCLE & SCOOTER Because Aruba's roads are good and the terrain is flat, mopeds and motorcycles are another transit option. They're available at **George's Cycle Center**, L.G. Smith Blvd. 124 (☎ 297/993-2202). Scooters rent for \$40 per day, motorcycles for \$70 to \$120. For \$150 a day or \$95 for 4 hours during the high season (\$100 or \$85 in the off season), you can go hog-wild and rent a Harley (HOG members get a \$10 discount during the high season). **Big Twin Aruba**, L.G. Smith Blvd. 124A (☎ 297/582-8660; www.harleydavidson-aruba.com) offers half-day tours for \$130 and full-day tours for \$163. If you long for the open road but lack the license or the gumption, you can opt for **Trikes Plan B** (☎ 297/738-7453; www.trikes-aruba.com). These three-wheeled motorcycles seat three passengers and can be piloted by a hired guide while you and your companion sit comfortably side by side with the wind in your hair.

MONEY & COSTS

Let's face it, Aruba ain't cheap. Well known for its glitzy hotels, exclusive boutique resorts, and over-the-top restaurants, Aruba has few bargains to offer. Keep in mind, everything has to be flown in and almost no food is produced on the island. For this reason, and because it's marketed to an upscale audience, prices are easily on par with those in similarly ranked restaurants in New York or London. Bank machines are readily available in shopping malls, and in addition to a couple of bucks for fees, you will likely pay a currency conversion fee. Banks may have slightly better prices, but since U.S. dollars are widely accepted, if you have these, you are better off using them and asking for dollars back when you are given change.

Aruba is not a bargain shopper's paradise compared to cheaper Caribbean destinations such as Mexico or the Dominican Republic. The upside is that the standard of living among Arubans is fairly high, and the island lacks grim scenes of abject poverty or hopelessness. There are also some easy ways to save cash. While a taxi to the airport or into town will cost you \$15 or \$20 dollars, you can ride the clean local buses for about AWG 2.25. A cup of coffee may cost you the usual \$3 but most hotels have beverage makers and you don't need to use bottled water since the island has some of the cleanest water in the world. While a three-course dinner at even a moderate restaurant (sans alcohol) can set you back \$75, the portions are so enormous that you can easily share one appetizer, main course, and dessert between two people and be sated. Most hotel rooms will run you about \$150 a night and (way) up, but if you opt for a small inn catering to locals that is a short walk or bus ride to the beach, you can probably find a deal for around \$100 a night.

CASH/CURRENCY The U.S. dollar is as widely accepted as the **Aruban florin (AWG)**, and most items and services are priced in both currencies.

The AWG is divided into 100¢. Silver coins come in denominations of 5¢, 10¢, 25¢, and 50¢ as well as 1, 2½, and 5 florins. The 50¢ piece, the square *yotin*, is Aruba's best-known coin. Paper currency comes in denominations of 5, 10, 25, 50, and 100 florins. At press time, the (fairly stable) exchange rate was 1.79 AWG to \$1 (1 AWG is worth about US56¢). Hotels, restaurants, and stores accept dollars at rates of between 1.75 and 1.80 AWG; supermarkets and gas stations use a conversion rate of 1.75 AWG to the dollar.

The currency used in the neighboring Dutch islands of Curaçao and Bonaire, the Netherlands Antillean florin (NAf), is not accepted in Aruba.

Note: Since U.S. dollars are accepted almost everywhere in Aruba, prices are quoted in U.S. dollars throughout this book. (In the chart below, C\$ is the Canadian dollar, A\$ is the Australian dollar, and NZ\$ is the New Zealand dollar.)

THE VALUE OF THE ARUBAN FLORIN (AWG) VS. OTHER POPULAR CURRENCIES

AWG	US\$	C\$	UK£	Euro€	A\$	NZ\$
1.00	0.56	0.55	0.34	0.38	0.52	0.68

ATMS Aruba has plenty of cash machines—you'll find them at the airport; and there are also locations throughout Oranjestad in Noord, at the Allegro, Holiday Inn, Hyatt, Marriott Playa Linda, and Radisson in the High-Rise area; and at La Cabana in the Low-Rise area. Your hotel can steer you in the right direction, and an ATM is never far away. Most dispense both florins and dollars. Since you can expect to pay a fee of about \$3 per transaction, take out as much as you estimate you'll really need rather than taking out a small amount and planning to go back later.

CREDIT CARDS Major credit cards are almost universally accepted in Aruba. Visa and MasterCard seem to dominate the landscape, with Discover making a comeback and American Express being at times shunned due to the alleged fees it charges. Diners Club is rarely accepted. In any case, you'll still need cash for small purchases, cabs, and the occasional restaurant or small shop. U.S. dollars are often accepted and you can request them when getting change as well.

If your credit card is lost or stolen, contact your credit card company immediately. In Aruba, both **MasterCard** and **Visa** cardholders can visit branches of **Aruba Bank** (☎ 800/325-3678) or **Caribbean Mercantile Bank** (☎297/586-0202) for cash advances or to report a lost or stolen card. **Discover** cardholders can get assistance by calling ☎ 800/DISCOVER [347-2683], or 801/902-3100 in Aruba (www.discover.com). **American Express** cardholders and traveler's check holders should call ☎ 800/221-7282 for assistance.

TRAVELER'S CHECKS Traveler's checks are becoming relics now that ATMs make cash accessible 24/7. If you want to avoid ATM service charges, though, or if you just want the security of knowing you can get a refund if your wallet's stolen, go ahead and get traveler's checks. You'll have to show identification every time you cash one. Most banks sell them, and most Aruban businesses accept them. Be sure to keep a record of the serial numbers (separate from the checks, of course). You'll need the numbers to get a refund if your checks are lost or stolen.



Arm Yourself with Small Bills

Bring a bundle of small bills (if your currency is American dollars) to make for easy tipping and small purchases. There's no need to bring large sums of cash, unless you're planning to make big purchases and prefer not to use a credit card.

You can get **American Express** traveler's checks by calling ☎ **800/221-7282** or visiting www.americanexpress.com. Traveler's checks are also offered through **Thomas Cook Currency Services** (☎ **800/223-9920**).

TAXES, SERVICE CHARGES & TIPPING Aruba has a 3% sales tax, but it is unclear whether merchants will charge that when you make a purchase or simply incorporate it into their prices, so it's best to ask before you buy. Hotels charge an 11% government tax on rooms, and most routinely add 5% to 7% for "service." A few resorts may also charge an energy surcharge of \$7 to \$10 per unit per night.

Some, but not all, restaurants charge 10% to 15% for service, but not all of this goes to the service staff. Some restaurants keep a percentage for overhead, while the rest is distributed among all restaurant personnel; so you are generally expected to leave a little extra cash on the table (say 10%). If no charge is included in your tab, leave 15%, or 20% if the service was excellent.

Taxi drivers expect 10% to 15%, and porters should get about \$2 per bag. Some of the hotel service charge should trickle down to the chambermaids, but if you're staying in a nice place, leave \$2 per day for the housekeeper anyway. For spa treatments, if a service charge is not included, leave 15%.

HEALTH

Staying Healthy

Keep the following suggestions in mind when traveling in Aruba:

- *Do* drink the water: Aruba's tap water is completely safe to drink and tastes fine. In fact, it's among the best in the world.
- Aruba's sun can be brutal. Wear sunglasses and a hat (with a strap—remember the wind) and use high SPF sunscreen liberally. The best sunscreens contain zinc oxide, titanium dioxide, or avobenzone (check "active ingredients" on the label). Limit your time on the beach in the first day or two, or wear a coverup. If you get burned, stay out of the sun until you recover and get some locally made aloe gel.
- The wind is usually strong enough to blow mosquitoes away, but the pests can sometimes be a nuisance anyway. Malaria's not a concern, but bring insect repellent for your own comfort.
- Food is generally safe in Aruba. Be careful if you encounter street vendors. Make sure that what you get is hot and that it hasn't been sitting out for any length of time.

- The **United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)**; ☎ **800/CDC-INFO** [232-4636]; www.cdc.gov/travel) provides up-to-date information on necessary vaccines and health hazards by region or country. Unfortunately, its information on Aruba is lumped with the other Caribbean islands, most of which lack Aruba's generally modern and sanitary conditions.
- Pack prescription medications in your carry-on luggage. Carry written prescriptions with generic names, not brand names, and dispense all medications from their originally labeled vials.

What to Do If You Get Sick

Finding a good doctor in Aruba is not a problem, and all speak good English. Hotels have physicians on call, and the modern **Horacio Oduber Hospital**, L.G. Smith Boulevard, near Eagle Beach (☎ **297/587-4300**, also the number to call in case of a medical emergency; www.arubahospital.com), has excellent medical facilities, including a new recompression chamber. If you have an emergency while you're on the eastern end of the island, San Nicolas has a medical center, the **Centro Médico**, Avicenastraat 16 (☎ **297/588-5548**). Consulting hours are limited, but emergency assistance is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. **Labco Medical and Homecare Service**, Fergusonstraat 52, P.O. Box 1147 (☎ **297/582-6651**), rents wheelchairs, walkers, crutches, bedpans, and other medical equipment. If your emergency cannot be handled locally, **Air Ambulance** (☎ **297/582-9197**) service is available to Curaçao, Venezuela, and all U.S. cities. The island's dental facilities are good; make appointments through your hotel.

SAFETY

Aruba is one of the Caribbean's safest destinations. Don't leave your valuables unattended on the beach or in an unlocked car, though. All hotels have safes, most of which will fit a laptop. Place electronics as well as airline tickets, jewelry, and passports inside.

Since the drinking age is 18 in Aruba, parents with teenage children should lay down clear ground rules about drinking before the trip. Young women are at times encouraged to drink too much, particularly on booze cruises or other venues where the alcohol is included, so it's recommended that such outings be enjoyed by groups of three or more, with the understanding that no one leaves the group, even if that hunky bartender is absolutely irresistible.

Full-moon parties and other rave-like beach bashes are increasingly common, and while they are mostly harmless fun, keep in mind that a density of people plied with alcohol and subjected to

deafening music is a perfect venue for pickpockets, pickup lines, and the occasional drunken hookup.

There are few scammers or petty criminals, although drinking and driving is fairly common, so take care when driving on unfamiliar roads late at night. That said, in some remote areas, you are more likely to encounter a donkey or a ditch than an oncoming vehicle, but these can be just as treacherous, so proceed with caution.

SPECIALIZED TRAVEL RESOURCES

In addition to the destination-specific resources listed below, please visit Frommers.com for additional specialized travel resources.

Gay & Lesbian Travelers

Arubans seem genuinely confounded when asked about homophobia on the island. People here pride themselves on Aruba's diversity, and most are gentle and remarkably nonjudgmental, certainly of tourists, but also of their gay and lesbian neighbors. Compared to notoriously homophobic Jamaica and Grand Cayman Island, Aruba is truly gay friendly. Homosexuality is a nonissue here.

Some Arubans are out, especially those under age 40; others aren't. Those who are live pretty much like their straight friends and family. Gay visibility, especially in the hotel, restaurant, and entertainment industries, is undeniable. The influx of no-apologies gay Latinos over the past few years has increased gay visibility significantly. And if it's any indication, the island's top show for almost a decade was a drag-queen extravaganza.

Hyatt, Renaissance, and Bucuti Beach are all approved as gay-friendly lodgings by the Travel Alternative's Group or TAG. For additional information on traveling and staying at gay-friendly destinations, log on to www.tagapproved.com.

Travelers With Disabilities

Traveling with a disability can be problematic, and like most places, Aruba could do more to welcome vacationers with disabilities. Queen Beatrix International Airport was renovated in 2000, yet facilities compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) weren't part of the overhaul. Instead, the facility has a truck to transfer wheelchair passengers from planes to the terminal using a special ramp and door.

Many resorts boast ADA-compliant facilities, including the Marriott, Holiday Inn, Hyatt Regency, Marriott's Aruba Ocean Club, Radisson, and Divi Phoenix. The Costa Linda even has a

beach wheelchair. Many other hotels are equipped for wheelchairs, including the Aruba Grand, Renaissance, Costa Linda, and Tamarijn.

If you need special equipment while you're on the island, **Labco Medical and Home Healthcare Services** (☎ 297/582-6651; fax 297/582-6567; www.labcomedical.com) specializes in oxygen-delivery systems, but it also sells and rents medical and home healthcare products, such as oxygen concentrators, tanks, commodes, scooters, crutches, wheelchairs, walkers, shower chairs, and lifts.

Family Travel

Aruba remains one of the safest and most reliably storm-free Caribbean destinations. With the creation of one water park on De Palm Island and another new park close to Oranjestad, Aruba is even more kid friendly than ever. Most hotels and resorts have well-run children's programs as well as special activities for young guests that include introductions to snorkeling and underwater exploration and supervised participation in other outdoor watersports and games.

To locate accommodations, restaurants, and attractions that are particularly kid friendly, refer to the "Kids" icon throughout this guide. Some top kid pleasers include:

- Windsurfing or kitesurfing lessons in Lac Bay (best for kids over 10)
- The Donkey Sanctuary
- The Blue Parrotfish Water Park on De Palm Island (best for tots)
- Parasailing
- The Ostrich Farm
- The Butterfly Farm
- Banana boat rides
- Atlantis Submarine
- Snorkeling on any catamaran sail
- Land sailing on the flats near Sourbon

Family Travel Forum (www.myfamilytravels.com) regularly prints articles about destinations including Aruba, Bonaire, and Curaçao and also offers discounts, deals, and trip-planning consultants to guide parents to appropriate vacation destinations for the entire family.

Senior Travel

Aruba's a great place for wise and seasoned travelers. In fact, a hefty portion of the island's guests, especially during the high season, are people over 50. If you're looking for a quiet environment

with a more mature clientele, think about renting a unit in a timeshare. Most large hotels have plenty of seniors, too. If you're revolted by the idea of being segregated from the youngsters, fear not: No resort, hotel, or timeshare caters to one type of person only. Most feature a nice mix of families and couples of all ages.

Mention your age when you begin planning your trip; many hotels and most cruise lines offer senior discounts. And don't hesitate to ask for discounts after you're on the island. Just be sure to have some kind of ID, such as a driver's license, especially if no one believes you're a day over 45.

SUSTAINABLE TOURISM

Aruba has a few pluses and minuses in its sustainability record. A growing number of hotels participate in the **Green Globe Initiative**, started by Amsterdam Manor and soon followed by the Bucuti Beach Resort, both of which remain the island's leaders in sustainable tourism and environmental conservation. They not only reduce their energy output and waste, but also promote awareness and sponsor activities such as beach and reef cleanups.

Other hotels are less conservation oriented, particularly those targeting the American market where amenities such as air-conditioning and bottled water are assumed. This is in stark contrast to even the most upscale hotels that target Dutch or other European guests, where air-conditioning is rarely on in rooms and where bottled water and disposable travel-size toiletries are just as often absent. Water conservation is a big issue on the island since it is wildly expensive to desalinate seawater, but you wouldn't know it based on the lush poolside gardens in most big resorts.

Most tour operators seem woefully unaware of conservation issues, or at best they merely pay lip service to the topic. They are equally willing to offer high-speed rides on banana boats and jet skis as they are to take you kayaking in the mangroves or off-roading in an ATV. Unfortunately, many tour operators do not promote low-impact activities, like horseback riding, biking, or hiking. One ecofriendly tour operator is **Aruba Nature Sensitive Hiking and Jeep Tours** (p. 97; ☎ 297/594-5017; www.sensitivehikers.com), which offers easy or challenging hikes in Arikok National Park, various caves, old gold mines, or sand dunes.

When inside **Arikok National Park** (p. 105), there is a clear mandate that the park and its species are to be protected—this job is taken seriously. However, when park rangers are asked by tourists to show them the bats or other delicate species that reside in protected areas, there is a tendency to oblige the request, despite

resources FOR GREEN TRAVEL

In addition to the resources for Aruba listed above, the following websites provide valuable wide-ranging information on sustainable travel. For a list of even more sustainable resources, as well as tips and explanations on how to travel greener, visit www.frommers.com/planning.

- **Responsible Travel** (www.responsibletravel.com) is a great source of sustainable travel ideas; the site is run by a spokesperson for ethical tourism in the travel industry.
- Sustainable Travel International** (www.sustainabletravelinternational.org) promotes ethical tourism practices, and manages an extensive directory of sustainable properties and tour operators around the world.
- In the U.K., **Tourism Concern** (www.tourismconcern.org.uk) works to reduce social and environmental problems connected to tourism. The **Association of Independent Tour Operators (AITO)**; (www.aito.co.uk) is a group of specialist operators leading the field in making holidays sustainable.
- In Canada, **www.greenlivingonline.com** offers extensive content on how to travel sustainably, including a travel and transport section and profiles of the best green shops and services in Toronto, Vancouver, and Calgary.
- In Australia, the national body that sets guidelines and standards for ecotourism is **Ecotourism Australia** (www.ecotourism.org.au). The **Green Directory** (www.thegreendirectory.com.au), **Green Pages** (www.thegreenpages.com.au), and **Eco Directory** (www.ecodirectory.com.au) offer sustainable travel tips and directories of green businesses.

the potentially harmful impact these visits may have on the species or the habitat.

The bottom line is the tourist dictates what the tour operators offer. You can set an example by asking for low-impact activities or requesting that the boat operator not handle or capture marine life to entertain passengers. You can even mention when you tip them that you wish to leave the island as beautiful as it was upon your arrival and thank them for preserving it intact for when you return.

Voluntourism Opportunities

Do-gooders rejoice. Now you can merrily merge your desire to frolic in the Caribbean surf with your inclination to make the world a better place. *Voluntourism* is the fastest-growing segment of the

- **Carbonfund** (www.carbonfund.org), **TerraPass** (www.terrapass.org), and **Carbon Neutral** (www.carbonneutral.org) provide info on “carbon offsetting,” or offsetting the greenhouse gas emitted during flights.
- **Greenhotels** (www.greenhotels.com) recommends green-rated member hotels around the world that fulfill the company’s stringent environmental requirements.
Environmentally Friendly Hotels (www.environmentallyfriendlyhotels.com) offers more green accommodations ratings. The **Hotel Association of Canada** (www.hacgreenhotels.com) has a Green Key Eco-Rating Program, which audits the environmental performance of Canadian hotels, motels, and resorts.
- **Sustain Lane** (www.sustainlane.com) lists sustainable eating and drinking choices around the U.S.; also visit **www.eatwellguide.org** for tips on eating sustainably in the U.S. and Canada.
- For information on animal-friendly issues throughout the world, visit **Tread Lightly** (www.treadlightly.org). For information about the ethics of swimming with dolphins, visit the **Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society** (www.wdcs.org).
- **Volunteer International** (www.volunteerinternational.org) has a list of questions to help you determine the intentions and the nature of a volunteer program. For general info on volunteer travel, visit **www.volunteerabroad.org**.

world’s travel industry, and Aruba is keeping pace with demand by offering a spectrum of volunteer opportunities to accommodate everyone from the ecoseeker to the critter cuddler. The possibilities range from reef and beach cleanups to pitching in at the Donkey Sanctuary. Here is a sampling of the opportunities available in Aruba:

- **Annual Aruba Reef Care Project:** This annual cleanup of the island’s beaches is Aruba’s largest volunteer environmental initiative. Hundreds of participants snorkel, scuba dive, or comb the beaches grabbing and bagging litter. This event usually occurs in July; call ☎ **297/582-3777** for more information.
- **Sponsor-A-Mile:** The Eagle Beach Area Coalition for Aruba’s Sustainable Tourism sponsors a monthly drive to keep the

beaches clean by letting visitors “adopt” a mile of beach and keep it clear of debris during their stay. Participating resorts include the Divi Phoenix, Amsterdam Manor, Costa Linda, Bucuti Beach, Manchebo Beach, the Mill, Aruba Marriott, and the Renaissance; contact any of these resorts for more information.

- “*Salba Nos Buriconan*” (Save Our Donkeys) Foundation: Animal lovers can volunteer at the Donkey Sanctuary to help feed, care for, and teach visitors about the island’s donkeys.
- Dive for Earth Week: In support of Earth Day, Aruba encourages volunteers to help clear the shorelines and surf of garbage and debris. Sponsors provide transportation, tools, and refreshments. Contact the Aruba Tourism Authority at ☎ 297/582-3777.

OUTDOOR PURSUITS

BIRDING In the High-Rise area, the **Bubali Bird Sanctuary** attracts more than 80 ornithological species to its nutrient-rich ponds and wetlands. How many brown pelicans, black olivaceous cormorants, herons, and egrets can you spot? Farther afield, **Arikok National Park** (☎ 297/585-1234) features several diverse ecosystems in a compact area. Birds here include hummingbirds (common emerald and ruby-topaz), rufous-collared sparrows, tropical mockingbirds, ospreys, yellow orioles, American kestrels, black-faced grassquit, yellow warblers, Caribbean parakeets, long-tongued bats, common ground doves, troupials, crested caracaras, and Aruban burrowing owls. The Wyndham, Radisson, Hyatt, and Renaissance offer close encounters with a variety of showy tropical species such as toucans, cockatoos, and macaws.

FISHING Local fishermen use simple hand lines (fishing line, hooks, and lead weights) to bring up red snapper and dolphin fish. Most activity takes place along the southwest coast, although some anglers occasionally venture to the north coast, where the rough seas trap fish in small pools carved out of the limestone bluffs. To try your hand at deep-sea fishing, charter one of the many skippered boats. Typical catches include barracuda, amberjack, sailfish, wahoo, blue and white marlin, kingfish, bonito, and black- and yellowfin tuna. A few restaurants will even cook and serve up your day’s catch.

GOLF On the island’s northern tip, **Tierra del Sol** (www.tierradelsol.com) is one of the Caribbean’s best golf courses. The championship 18-hole, par-71 course was designed by Robert Trent Jones II and features stupendous views of the ocean and the California Lighthouse. Bunkers, cacti, and coral rock come into play throughout the course, while water hazards are confined to holes 13, 14, and 15. Gusting to speeds of 64kmph (40 mph), the

wind is the real challenge, though. The only competition is from the **Links at Divi Aruba** (www.divigolf.com), near Druif Beach, a picturesque 9-hole course surrounded by landscaped water traps, lakes, and lagoons, and boasting a camera that captures your final shot so you can review the tape over drinks in the clubhouse that overlooks the greens.

HIKING The sun is hot, and the scant foliage offers little respite, but if you bring water and a wide-brimmed hat, traversing Aruba's hills and coastline is worth the effort. **Arikok National Park** (☎ 297/585-1234) has the best trails. Climb the island's highest hills, explore abandoned gold mines, poke around plantation ruins, trek through caves, and comb limestone cliffs for coral and small-animal bones (leave everything where you found it, please). The network of trails is clearly marked. Hiking boots are nice, but sneakers will do.

HORSEBACK RIDING Aruba's coastline and outback are just as dramatic when viewed from the saddle. Several ranches offer early-morning and midday excursions, or you can ride off into the sunset. As you wend your way through cacti and random boulders in the outback, watch for iguanas and skittish cottontails. Stop at Alto Vista Chapel and California Lighthouse, and then ride along the shore. Or start at the crashing waves and sand dunes of the northern coast before heading for the Natural Pool. Keep your eyes open for bickering parakeets and hovering hummingbirds. That ominous bird circling over your head? Not to worry: It only looks like a vulture.

JET SKIING Harleys of the sea—just as fast, just as noisy. Put on your black leather swimming trunks and head for Palm Beach, where several vendors have one and two seaters.

KAYAKING The leeward (south) coast's calm waters are ideal for kayaking. Starting near the old fishing village of Savaneta, guided tours hug the coastal mangrove forests before crossing a lagoon to a small island, where you can have a bite to eat and snorkel.

LAND SAILING This relatively new activity, which was developed in Australia, harnesses wind power to propel a lightweight go-kart frame across the flat dunes. Bonaire already has a large track built for this easy-to-learn and completely safe sport. Aruba still uses open dunes, which are sometimes too muddy after it rains. With luck, a track will be created to ensure good sailing conditions year-round.

OFF-ROADING All-terrain vehicles that look like a cross between a dune buggy and a tractor mower let you play road warrior,

and can be rented by the hour or the day. For those who want the thrill of the ride without the fear of getting lost, guided tours embark from several tour agencies.

PARASAILING Aruba looks even better from 180m (591 ft.) in the air. Flight time is only 10 minutes, but secure in your boat-towed parachute, you're on top of the world. Several watersports centers along Palm Beach will be happy to put wind in your sails. Take a waterproof camera along to show your friends back home that you've been there, done that.

SAILING Sailing adventures are available day and night. Some include watersports, while others feature drinks, snacks, or a full gourmet dinner. For night owls, dance-and-booze cruises include a midnight dip in the sea. If you have something special to celebrate, charter a private yacht. Catamarans, trimarans, and ketches are available. The calm waters along the southern coast are also ideal for extra-buoyant individual sailboats such as Sunfish. At De Palm Island, the trimaran Windriders come complete with a captain to navigate the waters or give you a crash course in sailing.

SCUBA DIVING Aruba offers enough coral reefs, marine life, and wreck diving to keep most wet suit-wearing folks happy. The water temperature averages 80°F (27°C), but during winter it can dip into the mid-70s. Due to currents and plankton, visibility varies, but at the leeward dive sites it usually ranges from 18 to 36m (59–118 ft.). The bountiful plankton nourishes a dense coral population, especially brain, sheet, finger, and mountainous star coral. Freshwater runoff is minimal. Sunken airplane fuselages and shipwrecks (including the largest in the Caribbean) are among the most popular destinations. In addition to snappers, grunts, angel-fish, damselfish, and parrotfish, divers regularly spot less-common species such as frogfish, sea horses, nudibranchs, black crinoids, basket stars, scorpionfish, and eels. Barracuda, tarpons, and jacks also call Aruba's waters home.

SNORKELING Good visibility, several shallow reefs, and a couple of wrecks give snorkelers an array of options. All sites are on the southern, or leeward, coast. Slightly north of Palm Beach, Catalina Bay and Arashi Reef feature brain and star coral, sea fans, parrotfish, angelfish, and an occasional octopus; the 122m (400-ft.) *Antilla* shipwreck is impossible to miss. De Palm Slope, off De Palm Island, features some impressive coral as well.

SNUBA Though not affording you the freedom and excitement of scuba, this technology allows you to breathe while descending up to 6m (20 ft.) by way of a regulator tethered to a floating tank of compressed air. No experience is necessary; most of the catamaran tours allow passengers the option either before or during the

trip to sign up and give it a whirl. On De Palm Island, you can also try **Sea Trek**, where you don a diving helmet and weighted boots and explore the seafloor; though you won't see much coral, you will see a lot of fish swimming around a submerged bus and two planes, and can sit for a photo op at a submerged cafe table.

UNDERWATER TOURING Another way to experience life at the bottom of the sea is aboard a submarine, where you can descend 45m (148 ft.) to observe coral, shipwrecks, and some very curious fish. If you'd rather not have your vessel submerge completely, hop on a glass-bottom boat. The viewing deck is only 1.5m (5 ft.) below the surface, but a scuttled German freighter, encrusted with coral and teeming with other marine life, is just feet away. The sub leaves from a pier in front of the Crystal Casino in Oranjestad; the glass-bottom boat departs from Pelican Pier on Palm Beach.

WINDSURFING & KITEBOARDING Aruba's high-wind season is the longest in the Caribbean. Wind speeds are best in May, June, and July, when they average 20 to 25 knots. From December through April, they slow to 15 to 20 knots, and from September through November they range from 10 to 20 knots. Most launches are on the leeward side of the island, near the hotels and major beaches. The most popular site is off the northwest tip of the island on Malmok Beach, an area known as Fishermen's Huts. Near San Nicolas, both Rodgers Beach and Boca Grandi are alternatives to the hotel area. To avoid collisions, kiteboarders and windsurfers take turns throughout the day.

STAYING CONNECTED

While making local calls from your hotel can be outrageously expensive, and even receiving incoming calls is costly to you, long-distance calls are flat-out ridiculous. If you have to make a call, purchase a phone card from a convenience store and use a pay phone. If you need to stay in touch, you can rent a cellphone for a week at the airport. Better yet, send an e-mail from your hotel lobby or a cybercafe. If you brought your own phone, be sure to turn off the data plan, since the phone will try to log on to the network while searching for routine software updates. If you bring your laptop, you can stay in touch with loved ones via **Skype**.

To call Aruba from the U.S., dial **011** (the international access code), then **297** (Aruba's country code), then **58** (the area code) and the five-digit local number. When in Aruba, dial only the five-digit local number.

For more information on telephones in Aruba, see "Telephones," p. 197.

Cellphones

Cellphone coverage and reception in Aruba is pretty good if a tad pricey. Because Aruba is a small and relatively manageable island, I recommend foregoing the cellphone altogether unless you are part of a scattered group that requires ongoing logistic coordination. Communications with home are cheaper via e-mail, and many hotel lobbies have Wi-Fi and small Internet cafes.

The three letters that define much of the world's wireless capabilities are **GSM** (Global System for Mobile Communications), a big, seamless network that makes for easy cross-border cellphone use throughout dozens of countries worldwide. If your cellphone is on a GSM system and you have a world-capable multiband phone, such as many Sony Ericsson, Motorola, or Samsung models, you can make and receive calls in Aruba. Just call your wireless operator and ask for "international roaming" to be activated on your account.

Most cellphones will work in Aruba, but call your carrier first to be sure. Rates are usually on the order of \$4 per minute, even if you're dialing an 800 number.

For many, **renting** a phone is a good idea. At the airport, there is a booth just before you exit the terminal where you can rent a phone for a fair price, depending on how many calls you make. The rental agencies seem to be a bit of a moving target since they are still figuring out how to prevent forgetful tourists from accidentally taking the phones home with them! One company that seems solvent is **Fast Phone** (www.arubafastphones.com), with a booth at the airport and another at Paseo Herencia Mall. For \$50 you can rent a phone for a week with 84 minutes included. The two main carriers are **Digicel** (☎ 297/522-2222; www.digicelaruba.com) and **SETAR** (☎ 297/583-4000; www.setar.aw). Rates with these carriers are \$8 per day for the first 5 days and \$5 for each subsequent day. Additional charges for outgoing and incoming calls apply, and a deposit is usually required.

Buying a phone on the island can also be economically attractive, as many nations have cheap prepaid phone systems. Once you arrive at your destination, stop by a local cellphone shop or booth at the airport and get the cheapest package; you'll probably pay less than \$100 for a phone and a starter calling card. Local calls may be as low as 10¢ per minute, and in many countries incoming calls are free.

Internet & E-Mail

Most hotels and resorts in Aruba have Internet access, and many places are becoming wireless "hot spots" that offer Wi-Fi access

either for free or for a small charge. Some hotels, such as the Radisson Aruba Resort, Casino, and Spa, offer free Wi-Fi for guests, while other hotels may charge a daily fee for Internet access. Some resorts may also offer free Wi-Fi access only in the lobby or public spaces. Daily rates can be \$10 to \$15 per day, so be sure to ask before you start using minutes. There are a number of Internet cafes on the island with rates that are fairly reasonable, with fees averaging about \$3 for every 15 minutes.

TIPS ON ACCOMMODATIONS

HOTELS & RESORTS Some travelers assume they can't afford the big hotels and resorts. With all the packages and sales, though, this isn't always true. The rates included in this book are "rack rates"—the officially posted rates you'd be given if you walked in off the street. Hardly anyone actually pays these prices. Save yourself a bundle by asking a travel agent or the hotel's reservations agent about packages or discounts.

Some hotels are flexible about rates, and many offer discounts and upgrades whenever they have a big block of rooms to fill and few reservations. Smaller hotels are less likely to be generous with discounts, much less upgrades.

The best deals can be had during off-peak periods, which doesn't always mean from mid-April to mid-December only. Discounts are also available during certain slow periods, called "windows," most often after the New Year's holiday. If you want a winter vacation, choose January rather than February or the Christmas holidays, when prices are at their all-year high.

Several hotels, such as the Divi properties and Renaissance, allow you to access facilities at two or more of their locations on the island at no additional fee. This means you can take advantage of the amenities, such as beaches, water toys, activities, and events at other locations as part of your all-inclusive package. Be sure to ask before you book, since this is not always the case. For example, the Renaissance has an adult-only policy for certain locations, such as their lobby bar and infinity pool, which means that teens and children are not allowed. This can be a problem for families traveling with children, but it can also be a plus for honeymoon couples or seniors who prefer to steer clear of too much youthful exuberance.

ALL-INCLUSIVES Presumably, everything's paid for upfront at an "all-inclusive" resort, even drinks and watersports. Unfortunately, some packages cover a room and two meals a day only—drinks, sports, and whatever else are extra. Before you book, ask exactly what's included.

Generally speaking, the all-inclusive market is geared to the active traveler who likes lots of organized entertainment and activities,

unlimited platters of food, and endless drinks in plastic cups. Some of Aruba's all-inclusive properties, such as the **Holiday Inn Sun-Spree Aruba Resort & Casino** (p. 44) and the **Renaissance Ocean Suites** (p. 38), appeal to families (there's so much going on, the kids will never get bored) and young adults (plenty of fun times and other young adults). Other properties such as the **Westin Resort & Casino, Aruba** (p. 43) and the **Renaissance Marina Hotel** (p. 38), are geared more toward the adult couples who want over-the-top luxury, plenty of dining options, and nightlife that includes a casino or show lounge. For the ecoconscious traveler, the **Manchebo Beach Resort & Spa** (p. 51) is Green Globe certified and offers all-inclusive packages. On the other hand, if you want to get out, see the island, and eat at some of the amazing restaurants, or if you're not particularly interested in nonstop organized events, all-inclusive hotels probably aren't for you.

TIMESHARES Renting an apartment can be one of the least expensive ways to vacation in Aruba. It also offers privacy, independence, and, in most cases, peace and quiet. All of Aruba's timeshare accommodations come with a kitchen, and most have a living room, a dining room, and a guest room or two. Because many tour operators work directly with timeshares that have rentals available, your travel agent may present a suite in a timeshare property as just another accommodations option. In addition, most individual timeshare resorts assist owners in renting their units, so call a property that interests you or visit its website. Some of these include Playa Linda Beach Resort and the Marriott Ocean Club. Some websites have owner bulletin boards with a listing of rentals available. General bulletin boards, such as **Aruba Bulletin Board** (www.aruba-bb.com), abound with timeshare-rental opportunities.

What Happened to the Netherland Antilles?

While officially, the Netherland Antilles no longer exists, the ABC islands continue to be politically and socially linked to one another as well as to the Netherlands. Curacao along with St. Maarten now joins Aruba in its financially autonomous status while the sleepy island of Bonaire now ironically has official status as a "city or special municipality" within the Netherlands. Like siblings fighting over who the motherland loves the most, the islands have decided to strike out financially on their own, and give up their economic dependence on the homeland. While murmurs of independent currencies are floating around, for now, the money as well as the exchange rate remains status quo. In fact, from the perspective of the vacationing visitor, there are no practical changes as a result of the shift in political status.