

CARIBBEAN

The underrated island about to become the Caribbean's next big thing

New direct flights will make captivating Aruba, with its clear seas and unexpected wildlife, a hit with sunseekers



Palm Beach, Aruba
ALAMY

Claire Dodd | Tuesday February 14 2023, 12:00am GMT, The Times

I'm off on an easy adventure. All that's required is to pop my flip-flops off, grab a mask, and try not to freak out. I love the sea — I really do — and being in it. But an abject fear of the deep, and all the tentacles and sharp teeth that thrive within it, means I've never undertaken any serious adventurous underwater exploration.

Yet here I am, drifting away from Aruba aboard a catamaran, leaving the seaside chatter of tinny music, excited conversation, and the rev of jet skis behind. The neon white hotel towers that rise from the flat coastline like teeth are slowly disappearing.

Parasailers glide above the sea like confused jellyfish, running laps parallel to the shore, and a gangly pelican follows us as we aim for the next bay. I'm on a sailing and snorkelling tour around the island's northwest coast, with Pelican Adventures, and feel slightly out of my comfort zone (from £49; pelican-aruba.com).



Aruba has lots of cactus-strewn landscapes
ULTIMA GAINA/GETTY IMAGES

We pause in Malmok Bay, a few miles north, and I dunk my head beneath the surface to peer down at the wreck of the SS Antilla, a 400ft German cargo ship scuttled at the outbreak of the Second World War. It's vast and, lying 60ft beneath the waves, it looks like a movie prop, its bow, mast and wheelhouse carefully lit by rippling sunbeams. I paddle with the current, watching a rainbow of fish peep in and out of its portholes.

These impeccably clear waters are about to become much easier to reach for British travellers. There has never been a direct scheduled year-round flight from the UK — pre-pandemic, Tui ran a summer-only direct service — so Aruba has remained largely off the radar, even for frequent visitors to the [Caribbean](#). But from next month, British Airways will fly twice weekly to the island from Gatwick.

Eighteen miles off the coast of Venezuela, and part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, Aruba is blessed with all the powder-soft white sand beaches (about 40, in fact), glittering translucent seas and swaying palms you could want. Culturally and physically, it sits apart from the region's other destinations. Papiamentu — a creole language unique to Aruba and its neighbours, Bonaire and Curaçao, that blends African, Spanish and Portuguese influences with elements of English and Dutch — is the official language alongside Dutch. And the landscape is more arid than tropical; towering cacti are everywhere, from the wilder bits of the desert to the front yards of buildings decked out in the pastel hues of the colonial era.

It lies outside the hurricane belt, and year-round the temperature hovers at a comfortable 31C. It is compact, at just 69 sq m, but that doesn't mean it lacks variety — from the calm beaches and limestone coves of the western coast, where coral shelves drop from beside the mangroves to form calm lagoons, to the abandoned gold mines and thrashing waves of the wilder, less developed east.



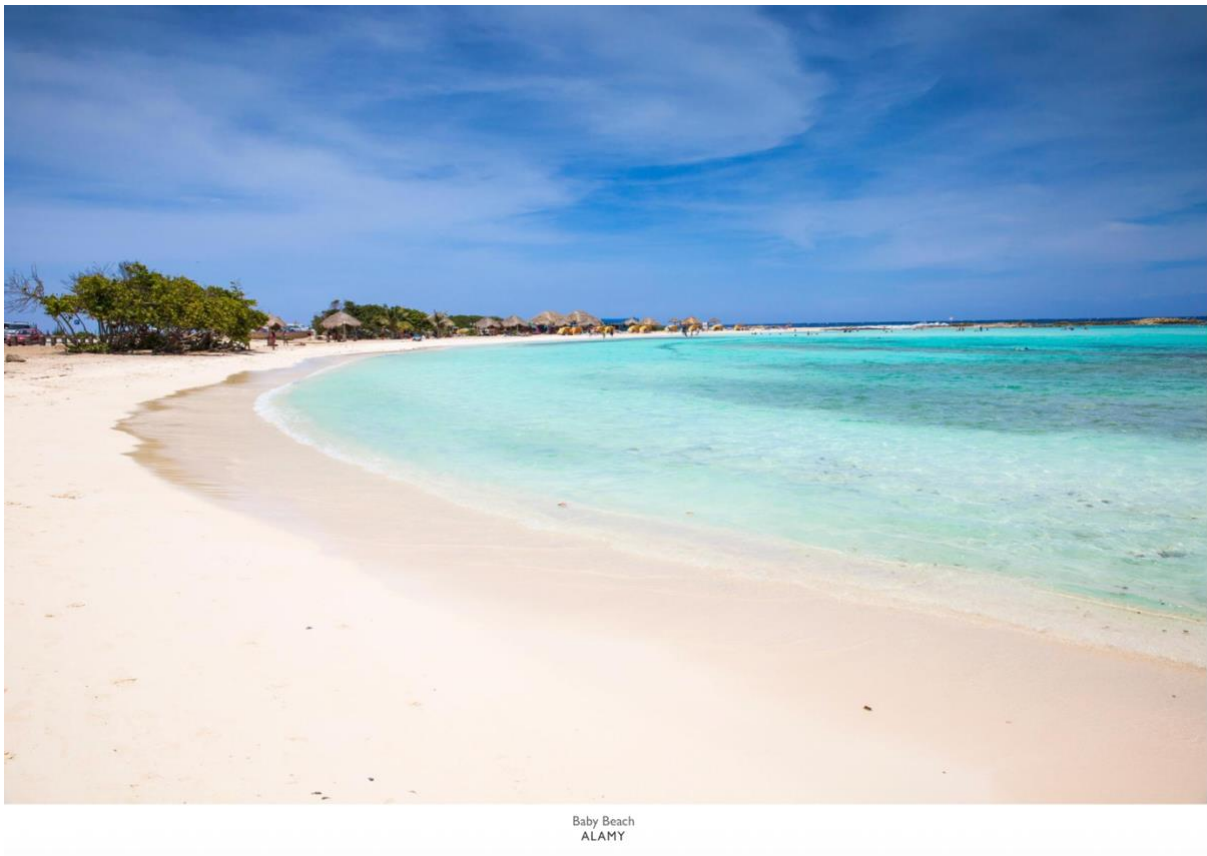
Oranjestad, Aruba's capital
ALAMY

Aruba has long been popular with Dutch and American visitors, and its tourism offer is a well-oiled machine. Palm Beach, with its casinos, bars, restaurants, watersports centres and malls, is the hub; fronting its two-mile beach are resorts from Riu, Hyatt, Hilton, Ritz-Carlton and Marriott. The Embassy Suites by Hilton opened this month, and a new St Regis will open in 2024 to complete the big brand line-up at the island's northwest tip, marked by the towering baton of the California Lighthouse. Meanwhile, at the other end of the island, a new 600-room hotel will bring tourism to Baby Beach.

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For a quieter spot, the Airbnbs, smaller guesthouses and boutique hotels fronting Mangel Halto beach in Pos Chiquito make a good base. The mangrove-covered dunes and shallow blue waters have created a favourite swimming spot with locals. Head to Zeerover restaurant to eat catch of the day on on the pier, or the Flying Fishbone next door, with tables in the sand.

I'm staying on a quieter stretch of coast, just beyond Eagle Beach. Here the Tamarijn Aruba All Inclusive Resort has simple rooms in low-slung orange blocks spread along the beach, providing a tranquil retreat after a day of activity. It's somewhere to relax and do little, with five restaurants set around the beachfront pool and bars. While sipping my morning coffee, I take to watching the ships — a steady flow of cruise liners; a tall ship that looks as if it has escaped from a glass bottle — drift by on their way to the genteel capital, Oranjestad, a blend of designer boutiques, old forts, churches and neat 19th-century merchants' houses that would look at home on the banks of an Amsterdam canal were it not for the sunshine pastel paint job.



San Nicolas, Aruba's second city, has a different feel; more edgy, post-industrial. It was hit hard by the closure of the oil refinery in 1985, but its vibrant arts scene is injecting new life into its streets.

“This is the most important place on Aruba,” says Tito Bolivar, the founder of the ArtisA gallery and events centre (artisaruba.com), which showcases the work of local artists, and a director of the Aruba Art Fair, held each November. “Or we used to be. We had the second biggest oil refinery in the world and were processing more crude oil than anywhere; that’s how good we had it. Everything that’s cultural or traditional comes from San Nicolas. The history of Aruba is actually the history of this city.”

The refinery, built in 1928 to process crude oil from the vast Venezuelan oil fields, brought great prosperity to Aruba, and drew labourers from all over the region, shaping the island’s culture. That is seen most clearly during the annual carnival; a fiesta of feathers, dancing, rum and parties on the streets of San Nicolas every February.

Those streets and their many abandoned buildings have become Bolivar’s canvas. During the art fair, artists from around the world are invited to paint murals depicting local social issues, politics, history, culture, landscapes and people. There are street parties too, and live music. There are now more than 50 bold, provocative and beautiful works, and ArtisA is the starting point for Aruba Mural Tours (from £12; arubamuraltours.com). In 2019 the city was named street art capital of the Caribbean by Forbes magazine — “which was sexy,” says Bolivar. He hands me some 3D glasses and I gaze at one mural, seeing the x-rayed outlines of a man and a woman trying but failing to touch hands.



I stop for a drink at Charlie's Bar, an Aruban institution since 1941, where banknotes pinned haphazardly to the walls crinkle in the breeze. The sun is scorching beyond its open doors, while inside a handful of patrons sit under a ceiling of dangling number plates, fishing floats and life buoys.

Refreshed, I drive to Arikok National Park, following the aroma of roadside oil-drum grills. Food trucks are a staple across the island, selling everything from seafood to steak, Mexican to local dishes such as pastechi (deep-fried pastry pockets with fillings including cheese or chicken), but around here, where the refinery attracted people from across the Caribbean islands, you'll also find jerk cooking.

The rugged landscape of the east coast, where inky waves and foaming surf claw violently at coral cliffs and spiked volcanic crags, is a favourite for Jeep and buggy tours (from £72; abc-aruba.com). Stops include a natural pool where rocks protect a turquoise swimming hole from the open sea, or cliff jumps into collapsed sea caves.

Later, I head back to the tranquil waters of the west coast for a languid soak. The pina colodas at Tamarijn's thatched Bunker Bar, which sits above a Second World War bunker, can wait a little longer. Instead, at Malmok Beach, I step from a limestone terrace into chest-height waters that lift me up and down with a gaggle of curious bright blue fish. Four bobbing bottoms 50m from shore tell me I'm in the right place for some good snorkelling. The swimmers have not looked up for ten minutes, so I guess there's something there worth the effort of joining them. I arrive just in time to see three turtles rise slowly to the surface. And just like that, the creatures of the deep don't seem so scary any more.



Bucuti & Tara Beach Resort

Four more hotels in Aruba

1. **Bucuti & Tara Beach Resort, Eagle Beach**

This classic hotel, which opened in 1987 but has been revamped many times since, sits upon one of the largest expanses of sand on the island. Still independently owned, and adults-only, it attracts a loyal customer base for its boutique style and personalised service. From a beachside restaurant, to yoga on the beach and a biweekly movie under the stars, the focus is on relaxation. Rooms are breezy and neutral, using locally made toiletries as part of its eco-push. In 2018, it became the Caribbean's first certified carbon-neutral hotel.

Details [B&B doubles from £380](https://www.bucuti.com) (bucuti.com)



Boardwalk Boutique Hotel

2. Boardwalk Boutique Hotel, Noord

Built on the site of a former coconut plantation, the Boardwalk's 46 self-contained casitas are set beside two lagoon-like pools, and among lush tropical gardens and swaying palms. Each is unique, in pastel tones of pinks, blues and soft yellows, with raffia and rattan furniture, and all have their own kitchenettes, barbecues, and hammocks. Located just a few minutes' walk from Palm Beach, the hotel keeps beach huts and sunbeds aside for guest use.

Details [Room-only doubles from £310](https://boardwalkaruba.com) (boardwalkaruba.com)



Courtyard Aruba Resort

3. Courtyard Aruba Resort, Palm Beach

Just steps from Palm Beach, the rooms are arranged in two-storey whitewashed buildings around two large pools, and have a beachy vibe in seafoam tones. Families will appreciate the playground and kids' club/crèche, while a hotel shuttle runs the length of Palm Beach, dropping guests at restaurants, shopping malls, casinos and bars.

Details [B&B doubles from £505](#) (marriott.co.uk)



Renaissance Wind Creek Aruba Resort

4. Renaissance Wind Creek Aruba Resort, Oranjestad

In a central location overlooking the harbour, the Renaissance offers guests special access to . . . flamingos, as found on the property's 40-acre private island, a ten-minute boat ride away. Among beach bars, restaurants, spa, watersports, and private cabanas, you'll find resident flamingos paddling in the surf and strutting down the boardwalks. This substantial hotel of more than 550 rooms offers two different options in two different buildings along the harbour: Ocean Suites for families, and the adults-only Marina Hotel.

Details [Room-only doubles from £277](https://www.marriott.co.uk) (marriott.co.uk)