

## Planning Your Trip to Aruba

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**S**o 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's 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 most travelers. With all the package tours available, they can be surprisingly affordable, too.

If you're a foodie, you may 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 besides eat. You can try your luck at one of the island's dozen casinos, take in a live Vegas-style

show, 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 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. Aruba has the highest repeat-visitor rate in the Caribbean; the highest hotel-occupancy figures, too. Honeymooners, 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. (70 sq. miles). It's the westernmost of the Dutch ABC islands—Aruba, Bonaire, and Curaçao—and less than 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. Much of the architecture combines Dutch gables and baroque ornamentation with such Caribbean colors as pistachio, ochre, pink, and aqua. The result is a sun-drenched

## **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.

**Pretend you're Neil Armstrong.** Alien boulders and stark terrain mark Aruba's northern coast. The roads are unpaved but easy to navigate in an all-terrain vehicle. You can stop at a lighthouse or an old chapel, but nature supplies the major attractions.

**Get dirty.** If you love the Discovery Channel, spend the better part of a day driving and hiking 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.

**Watch the sun rise.** Stroll along the beach as the sun rubs its eyes. You and your love will be pretty much by yourselves, except for a few other romantics and the breakfasting pelicans. For an equally serene morning, visit the 80-odd bird species at the Bubali Bird Sanctuary or fall under the trance of the hundreds of flutter-fluttering butterflies at the Butterfly Farm. They're early risers, too.

**Try your luck at a casino.** Gambling was once Aruba's major draw; now it's just another form of entertainment. Evenings are especially frenetic.

**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

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

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—perhaps even a little tipsy.

**Play Jacques Cousteau.** Aruba's sister island to the east, Bonaire, has better diving and snorkeling, but Aruba's no slouch. Dive sites include reefs, shipwrecks, and more than one sunken airplane. In fact, Aruba boasts the largest sunken vessel in the Caribbean and has some of the most haunting and easy-to-view sunken wrecks 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 semi-submersible boat.

**Get lost.** Rent a car or jeep, take your trusty guidebook along, and see the real Aruba. You can pass through teeny hamlets (don't blink), discover a new beach, stop for a roadside snack, and rove the aisles of a Chinese supermarket. Be forewarned, though: Because directional signs are practically nonexistent, expect to get lost. No sweat. The divi divi trees always point west.

**Get carried 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, surfboard, or three-person trimaran—as they say in the ads: *Get Out There!*

**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, and drink in the view while you drink up.

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 freestanding 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.

## 1 Visitor Information

For information about visiting Aruba, contact the **Aruba Tourism Authority** (☎ 800/TO-ARUBA; [www.aruba.com](http://www.aruba.com)).

You also can gather tons of information from other Internet sources. A couple of Aruba's greatest fans compile **Aruba Bound!** ([www.arubabound.com](http://www.arubabound.com)), an impressive, noncommercial collection of hard facts, informed opinions, and numerous links. **Visit Aruba** ([www.visitaruba.com](http://www.visitaruba.com)) has commercial links, practical information, news items, and a snappy gossip column—search for “Bati Bleki”—with the up-to-date scoop on what's happening on the island. For a lively exchange of information and opinion, visit **Aruba Bulletin Board** ([www.aruba-bb.com](http://www.aruba-bb.com)), where you can post questions to seasoned Aruba-vacation veterans and search for great timeshare rental deals.

Once you're on the island, go to the **Aruba Tourism Authority** at L. G. Smith Blvd. 172, Oranjestad (☎ 297/582-3777), or pick up the free local magazines *Destination Aruba*, *Island Temptations*, *Aruba Nights*, *Aruba Ta Hot!*, *Bon Bini*, and *Island Gourmet*. Two English-language dailies—*Aruba Today* and *The News*—provide entertainment listings, as does *K-Pasa*, a weekly brochure.

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### Tips Travel Agent Tip

Here's a great service courtesy of the Aruba Tourism Authority. Go to [www.aruba.com/acefind.html](http://www.aruba.com/acefind.html), type in your zip code, and in an instant, you'll have a list of travel agents in your neck of the woods who know the ins and outs of Aruba, and have a certificate to prove it.

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**TRAVEL AGENTS** Travel agents can save you time and money by uncovering the best package deals, airfare, and rental-car rates. Most are professional, but the occasional unscrupulous agent may push deals that bag the juiciest commissions, so shop around and ask hard questions. Arm yourself with the information in this book, and don't let anyone pressure you into a vacation that's not right for you.

If you enlist a travel agent, use a member of the **American Society of Travel Agents (ASTA)**, 1101 King St., Suite 200, Alexandria, VA 22314 (☎ 703/739-2782; www.astanet.com). Call ASTA or visit its website for a list of members in your area.

## 2 Entry Requirements

### PASSPORTS

U.S. and Canadian citizens need a valid passport. 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 3 months without a visa. If you plan to stay longer, get a visa application from the **Department of Foreign Affairs** in Aruba (☎ 297/583-4705; fax 297/583-8108) or at a Dutch embassy or consulate.

### MEDICAL REQUIREMENTS

There are no vaccinations required for entry. For more information see "Health" on p. 17.

### CUSTOMS

**U.S. Customs** regulations allow \$800 worth of duty-free imports per person every 30 days. The next \$1,000 worth of items is taxed at a rate of 3%. Members of a family traveling together can make joint Customs declarations, so if you're a couple with two children, you can bring back purchases worth up to \$3,200 without paying any duty.

You also can send packages home duty-free—up to \$200 worth per person for personal use—but the procedure is cumbersome.

Customs Form CBP 3299 (Declaration of Unaccompanied Articles) must accompany all packages sent to you at home. You can sometimes get this form from Aruban shopkeepers or at the post office; if you can't, you can write the contents of the package and the value (up to \$200) directly on the wrapper and write "personal purchases."

If you'd like to send friends or relatives back home a little something, mark the package "Unsolicited Gift." The limit is one package per addressee per day, and the value of the contents must not exceed \$100.

Returning U.S. citizens at least 21 years old are allowed to bring in 1 liter of alcohol duty-free. Regardless of age, you can bring back 200 cigarettes and 100 cigars (no Cubans).

Collect receipts for all purchases made abroad. You're also required to declare on your Customs form the nature and value of all gifts received during your stay abroad. It's prudent to carry proof that you purchased expensive cameras or jewelry in the U.S., if you did. If you purchased them during an earlier trip abroad, carry proof that you previously paid Customs duty on them.

If you use any medication that contains controlled substances or requires injection, carry the original prescription or a note from your doctor.

For more specifics, contact the **U.S. Customs and Border Protection** (the post-Homeland Security name for the old Customs Service), 1300 Pennsylvania Ave. NW, Washington, DC 20229 (☎ **202/354-1000**), and request the free pamphlet *Know Before You Go*. It's also available on the Web at [www.cbp.gov](http://www.cbp.gov) (click on "Publications").

**Canadian Customs** regulations allow C\$500 worth of duty-free imports if you've been out of the country for 7 days or more; the limit is C\$200 after a 2- to 6-day absence. A written declaration may be required. Anyone age 16 or older can bring back up to 200 cigarettes and 50 cigars. If you're old enough to possess alcohol in the province through which you reenter Canada, you may include up to 1.14 liters (39 oz.) of wine or liquor or 24 12-ounce containers of beer or ale. You can send an unlimited number of gifts valued at less than C\$60 back to Canada duty-free if you mark the packages "Unsolicited Gift—Value Under \$60." Not alcohol or tobacco, though.

For a summary of Canadian rules, contact the **Canada Customs and Revenue Agency** (☎ **800/461-9999**; [www.cra-arc.gc.ca](http://www.cra-arc.gc.ca)).

**United Kingdom** residents can receive detailed regulations by contacting **HM Customs & Revenue** (☎ **0845/010-9000**; [www.hmce.gov.uk](http://www.hmce.gov.uk)).

**Australians** should request the helpful brochure *Guide for Travelers—Know Before You Go*, available from the **Australian Customs Service** (☎ 1-300/363-263 from within Australia, or 61-2/6275-6666 from abroad; www.customs.gov.au).

For **New Zealand** customs information, contact the **Customs Service** (☎ 0800/4-CUSTOMS; www.customs.govt.nz).

**Aruba Customs** regulations allow incoming visitors to bring articles for personal use. Persons over age 18 can also bring in 2.25 liters of wine, 3 liters of beer, or 1 liter of liquor; and 200 cigarettes, 25 cigars, and 250 grams of tobacco.

### 3 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. In September, though, you'll wish they 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. 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 18 inches a year, with most precipitation falling from October through January. Even then rains tend to be erratic and brief; 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 gleefully ignore if you're vacationing in

Aruba. The island is miles and 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 weather on the island. 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, too.

Because the difference in high-season and low-season rates at most hotels is drastic, I've included both in chapter 3. See for yourself how much you can save if you wait a bit for your fun in the sun.

Since September 11, 2001, the travel industry worldwide suffered from political developments (such as the war in Iraq) and the reluctance of people to venture far from home. Aruba's tourist-based economy has at times been hit hard, and the Natalie Holloway incident didn't help. It may sound predatory, but in uncertain times, fearless, opportunistic travelers can find significant bargains.

## 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 (Birthday of Betico Croes, the father of Aruba's semi-independence); February 4, 2008, and February 23, 2009 (Carnival Monday); March 18 (National Anthem and Flag Day); March 21, 2008, and April 10, 2009 (Good Friday); March 24, 2008, and April 13, 2009 (Easter Monday); April 30 (Queen's Birthday); May 1 (Aruba's Labor Day); May 1, 2008, and May 21, 2009 (Ascension Day); December 25 (Christmas Day); 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; [www.aruba.com/calendar](http://www.aruba.com/calendar)).

### 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.

### February

**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). 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.

### March

**National Anthem and Flag Day.** In celebration of Aruba's flag, anthem, and autonomy, nationalistic exhibits, folkloric presentations, and fireworks displays take place island-wide. Children sing the national anthem—on the streets, television, and 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

**Soul Beach Music Festival.** This star-studded event ([www.soulbeach.net](http://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.

### 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.

**Aruba Jazz & Latin Music Festival.** International and local artists perform in a weekend celebration of two of the hemisphere's great musical traditions. Call ☎ 297/582-3777 for information. End of June.

**Hi-Winds World Challenge.** Windsurfers from 30 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. For information, call ☎ 297/582-3777. End of June through early July.

## July

**Heineken Music Festival**, Oranjestad. Bands from around the Caribbean perform in a free concert. Call ☎ 297/582-3777 for information. First week of July.

**Aruba Perrier Reef Care Project**. Joining forces to raise awareness of the marine environment, certified divers, snorkelers, and topsiders clean up beaches and underwater sites. For details, call ☎ 297/582-3777. First weekend in July.

## August

**Aruba Heineken Pro-Am Golf Tournament**. Professional and amateur golfers team up in this 2-day, 36-hole tournament that features prizes, special events, and parties. Call ☎ 297/582-3777 for details. Late August.

## October

**Festival de las Américas**. Musical groups from far and wide perform rhythms from around the Americas. Call ☎ 297/582-3777 for information. Early October.

**Fourth Annual Aruba Music Festival**. On Columbus Day weekend, this event features such heavyweights as Crosby, Stills, and Nash; Jackson Brown; John Mayer; and Chicago. For more information contact the ATA special events line at ☎ 297/582-3777.

**Deep Sea Fishing Tournament**. The Aruba Nautical Club hosts yachts from the United States, Venezuela, Puerto Rico, Curaçao, Bonaire, and Aruba. Call ☎ 297/585-3022 for information. End of October.

## November

**Aruba Super Nationals**, San Nicolas. This international drag-racing event takes place at International Raceway Palo Marga in San Nicolas and draws competitors from the U.S., Puerto Rico, Venezuela, Curaçao, Bonaire, and Sint Maarten. Early November.

**Aruba International Catamaran Regatta**. Catamarans from Europe and North and South America compete. For details, call ☎ 297/582-3777. Mid- to late 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.

## 4 Money & Costs

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

currencies. Traveler's checks and major credit cards are almost universally accepted.

The Aruban florin (Afl) 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 1.78 Afl to US\$1 (1 Afl is worth about U.S. 56¢). Hotels, restaurants, and stores accept dollars at rates of between 1.75 and 1.80 Afl; supermarkets and gas stations use a conversion rate of 1.75 Afl 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:** Prices are quoted in U.S. dollars throughout this book.

**ATMs** Aruba has plenty of cash machines—at the airport; in 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. 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** Does anyone travel without a credit card today? They're safer than cash, and you get a detailed record of your expenses. With most cards, you can also get cash advances from banks or ATMs. But you'll still need good old paper money for small purchases, cabs, and the occasional restaurant or small shop.

Major credit card companies have toll-free emergency numbers to call if your card is lost or stolen. Usually, the office will wire you a cash advance immediately, and deliver an emergency card in a day or two. **Visa's** U.S. emergency number is ☎ **800/336-8472**, or visit [www.visa.com](http://www.visa.com). **American Express** cardholders and traveler's check holders should call ☎ **800/221-7282**. **MasterCard** members should call ☎ **800/307-7309**. Both MasterCard and Visa cardholders can visit branches of **Aruba Bank** (☎ **800/325-3678**) or **Caribbean Mercantile Bank** (☎ **954/846-1585**) for cash advances or to report a lost or stolen card. In the U.S., **Discover** cardholders can get assistance by calling ☎ **800/DISCOVER**, or 801/902-3100 in Aruba ([www.discover.com](http://www.discover.com)).

If you lose your card, chances are slim that the police will find it. Notify them anyway: Lots of credit card companies and insurers require a police-report number.

**TRAVELER'S CHECKS** Traveler's checks are becoming a bit of a relic 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.

You can get **American Express** traveler's checks by calling ☎ **800/221-7282** or at [www.americanexpress.com](http://www.americanexpress.com). **Visa** offers traveler's checks at financial institutions nationwide; call ☎ **800/227-6811** to find a location near you. They also offer traveler's checks through **Thomas Cook Currency Services** (☎ **800/223-9920**).

**TAXES, SERVICE CHARGES & TIPPING** Aruba has recently introduced a sales tax, but it is undecided whether merchants will charge the tax or simply incorporate the additional fee into their prices or a combination of both. Hotels charge an 11% government tax on rooms, and most routinely add 5% to 7% for "service." A few resorts charge an energy surcharge of \$4 to \$8 per unit per night.

Most, 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%.

## 5 Travel Insurance

There are three kinds of travel insurance: trip-cancellation, medical, and lost-luggage coverage. Check your existing medical and homeowner's policies before you buy additional coverage.

Trip-cancellation insurance is a good idea if you've paid most of your vacation expenses upfront, say, by purchasing a package or a

cruise. It protects you if you have to cancel your trip because of sickness or a death in the family.

Medical contingencies may be covered by your existing health policy, but emergency evacuation sometimes isn't; and Medicare often doesn't cover all medical expenses overseas. If you need hospital treatment, most health-insurance plans cover out-of-country hospital visits and procedures to some extent. Most make you pay the bills upfront, however, and reimburse you only after all the paperwork's been processed.

The differences between travel assistance and insurance are often blurred, but the former generally offers on-the-spot assistance and 24-hour hot lines, while the latter reimburses you for travel problems after you've complied with the filing requirements.

On domestic flights, checked baggage is covered up to \$2,500 per ticketed passenger. On international flights (including U.S. portions of international trips), baggage coverage is limited to approximately \$9.07 per pound, up to approximately \$635 per checked bag.

Reputable issuers of travel insurance include **Access America** (☎ 866/807-3982; www.accessamerica.com), **Travel Guard International** (☎ 800/826-4919; www.travelguard.com), and **Travelex Insurance Services** (☎ 888/457-4602; www.travelex-insurance.com). For medical coverage, try **MEDEX International** (☎ 800/537-2029 or 410/453-6300; www.medexassist.com) or **Travel Assistance International** (Worldwide Assistance Services, Inc.; ☎ 800/821-2828 or 202/828-5894).

Scuba divers can obtain dive-accident insurance through the **Divers Alert Network** (☎ 800/446-2671; www.diversalertnetwork.org).

## 6 Health

### STAYING HEALTHY

Keep the following suggestions in mind:

- You can relax about water. Aruba's tap water is completely safe to drink and tastes fine.
- 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. If you get burned, stay out of the sun until you recover.
- 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. Be careful, though, about 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** (☎ 404/332-4559; [www.cdc.gov/travel](http://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 in generic, not brand-name form, and dispense all medications from their original labeled vials.

### WHAT TO DO IF YOU GET SICK

Finding a good doctor in Aruba is not a problem, and all speak 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](http://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**, Bernardstraat 10 (☎ 297/584-8833). Consulting hours are limited, but emergency assistance is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. The **Posada Clinic Aruba**, L. G. Smith Blvd. 14 (☎ 297/582-0840), has modern hemodialysis equipment, but reservations must be made 3 months in advance. **Labco Medical and Homecare Service NV**, Fergusonstraat 52, Ponton (☎ 297/582-6651), rents wheelchairs, walkers, crutches, bedpans, and other medical equipment. Service is available 24 hours a day, and delivery is free. If your emergency cannot be handled locally, **Air Ambulance** (☎ 297/993-0209) service is available to Curaçao, Venezuela, and all U.S. cities. The island's dental facilities are good; make appointments through your hotel.

If you worry about getting sick away from home, consider medical travel insurance (see the section on travel insurance, below). In most cases, though, your existing health plan will provide the coverage you need. Be sure to carry your identification card with you.

If you suffer from a chronic illness, consult your doctor before you depart. For conditions like epilepsy, diabetes, or heart problems, wear a **MedicAlert Identification Tag** (☎ 888/633-4298, or

209/668-3333 outside the U.S.; [www.medicalert.org](http://www.medicalert.org)), which immediately alerts doctors to your condition and gives them access to your records through MedicAlert's 24-hour hot line.

Contact the **International Association for Medical Assistance to Travelers** (☎ 716/754-4883 or 416/652-0137 in Canada; [www.iamat.org](http://www.iamat.org)) for tips on travel and health concerns in Aruba, as well as a list of local doctors.

## 7 Specialized Travel Resources

### TRAVELERS WITH DISABILITIES

Traveling with a disability is seldom a piece of cake, 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 the plane 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, Wyndham, Renaissance, Allegro, 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](http://www.labcomedical.com)) specializes in oxygen-delivery systems, but it also sells and rents medical and home health care products such as oxygen concentrators, tanks, commodes, scooters, crutches, wheelchairs, walkers, shower chairs, and lifts.

For more general information, a number of organizations and websites assist travelers with disabilities. **Moss Rehab ResourceNet** ([www.mossresourcenet.org](http://www.mossresourcenet.org)) has great information, tips, and resources about accessible travel, and travel agents who specialize in planning trips for travelers with disabilities. So does **Access-Able Travel Source** ([www.access-able.com](http://www.access-able.com)). Its user-friendly site lists relay and voice numbers for hotels, airlines, and car-rental companies, as well as links to accessible accommodations, attractions, transportation, tours, local medical resources, and equipment repairers.

When you become a member of the **Society for Accessible Travel & Hospitality**, 347 Fifth Ave., Suite 605, New York, NY 10016 (☎ 212/447-7284; [www.sath.org](http://www.sath.org)), you gain access to a vast

network of travel industry connections. The group provides destination information sheets and referrals to tour operators with a special expertise in travel for travelers with disabilities.

*Survival Strategies for Going Abroad*, a 225-plus-page resource book for travelers with disabilities, gives the lowdown on everything from biking trips to scuba outfitters. Available from **Mobility International USA** (☎ 541/343-1284 voice and TTY; www.miusa.org), the book costs \$18 (10% discount for members).

Vision-impaired travelers should contact the **American Foundation for the Blind**, 11 Penn Plaza, Suite 300, New York, NY 10001 (☎ 800/232-5463; www.afb.org), for information on traveling with Seeing Eye dogs.

## 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.

If you want help planning your trip, the **International Gay & Lesbian Travel Association** (☎ 800/448-8550 or 954/776-2626; www.iglta.org) can link you with gay-friendly tour specialists. **Out & About** (www.outandabout.com) offers a monthly newsletter packed with good information on the global gay and lesbian travel scene, with specific information about Aruba. The website also features links to gay and lesbian tour operators and other gay-themed travel links.

## 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 airlines and 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.

Members of **AARP**, 601 E St. NW, Washington, DC 20049 (☎ **888/OUR-AARP**; [www.aarp.org](http://www.aarp.org)), get discounts on hotels, airfares, and car rentals. **Grand Circle Travel** (☎ **800/959-0405**; [www.gct.com](http://www.gct.com)) is one of hundreds of travel agencies that specializes in vacations for seniors.

## FAMILY TRAVEL

Aruba remains one of the safest and most reliably storm-free Caribbean destinations out there. With the creation of one water park on DePalm Island and the pending completion of another 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 lessons in Lac Bay
- The Donkey Sanctuary
- The Blue Parrotfish water park on DePalm Island
- The Ostrich Farm
- The Butterfly Farm
- Miniature golf and paddle boats at Adventure Golf
- Atlantis Submarine
- Snorkeling and/or snuba on any catamaran sail
- Landsailing on the flats near Sourbon

**Family Travel Forum** ([www.familytravelforum.com](http://www.familytravelforum.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. Monthly fees range from \$3.95 to \$9.95 depending on the level of membership, so be sure to cancel the plan when your travel is concluded. Some good books on the market that address

specific concerns of traveling with kids are *Caribbean with Kids* (2000) by Paris Permenter and John Bigley or *The Everything Family Guide to the Caribbean: A Complete Guide to the Best Resorts, Beaches And Attractions—Island by Island!* (2005) by Jason Rich. Both are available online.

## 8 Sustainable Tourism/Ecotourism

Each time you take a flight or drive a car, carbon dioxide is released into the atmosphere. You can help neutralize this danger to our planet through “carbon offsetting”—paying someone to reduce your carbon dioxide emissions by the same amount you’ve added. Carbon offsets can be purchased in the U.S. from companies such as **Carbon fund.org** ([www.carbonfund.org](http://www.carbonfund.org)) and **TerraPass** ([www.terrapass.org](http://www.terrapass.org)), and from **Climate Care** ([www.climatecare.org](http://www.climatecare.org)) in the U.K.

**Responsible Travel** ([www.responsibletravel.com](http://www.responsibletravel.com)) is a great source of sustainable travel ideas run by a spokesperson for responsible tourism in the travel industry. **Sustainable Travel International** ([www.sustainabletravelinternational.org](http://www.sustainabletravelinternational.org)) promotes responsible tourism and issues a Green Gear & Gift Guide.

You can find eco-friendly travel tips, statistics, and touring companies and associations—listed by destination under “Travel Choice”—at the **TIES** website, [www.ecotourism.org](http://www.ecotourism.org). Also check out **Conservation International** ([www.conservation.org](http://www.conservation.org)), who, along with *National Geographic Traveler*, annually presents the **World Legacy Awards** to those travel tour operators, businesses, organizations, and places that have made a significant contribution to sustainable tourism. **Ecotravel.com** is part online magazine and part eco-directory that lets you search for touring companies in several categories (water-based, land-based, spiritually oriented, and so on).

In the U.K., **Tourism Concern** ([www.tourismconcern.org.uk](http://www.tourismconcern.org.uk)) works to reduce social and environmental problems connected to tourism and find ways of improving tourism practices so that local benefits are increased.

The **Association of British Travel Agents (ABTA)**; ([www.abtamembers.org](http://www.abtamembers.org)) acts as a focal point for the U.K. travel industry and is one of the leading groups spearheading responsible tourism.

The **Association of Independent Tour Operators (AITO)**; ([www.aito.co.uk](http://www.aito.co.uk)) is a group of interesting specialist operators leading the field in making holidays sustainable.

For information about the ethics of swimming with dolphins and other outdoor activities, visit the **Whale and Dolphin Conservation**

## **Frommers.com: The Complete Travel Resource**

It should go without saying, but we highly recommend **Frommers.com**, voted Best Travel Site by *PC Magazine*. We think you'll find our expert advice and tips; independent reviews of hotels, restaurants, attractions, and preferred shopping and nightlife venues; vacation giveaways; and an online booking tool indispensable before, during, and after your travels. We publish the complete contents of over 128 travel guides in our **Destinations** section covering nearly 3,600 places worldwide to help you plan your trip. Each weekday, we publish original articles reporting on **Deals and News** via our free **Frommers.com Newsletter** to help you save time and money and travel smarter. We're betting you'll find our new **Events** listings (<http://events.frommers.com>) an invaluable resource; it's an up-to-the-minute roster of what's happening in cities everywhere—including concerts, festivals, lectures and more. We've also added weekly **Podcasts, interactive maps**, and hundreds of new images across the site. Check out our **Travel Talk** area featuring **Message Boards** where you can join in conversations with thousands of fellow Frommer's travelers and post your trip report once you return.

**Society** ([www.wdcs.org](http://www.wdcs.org)) and **Tread Lightly** ([www.treadlightly.org](http://www.treadlightly.org)). If you choose to participate (and it's hard to resist the urge), take care to select only tour operators that demonstrate a concern for the animals and their protection as individuals and as a species. Some easy things to look out for are whether the animals are kept in enclosures sufficiently large for their needs, whether they look active and healthy, and whether signs, printouts, or well-trained guides provide information on the ecology, conservation status, and behavior of the species in question. If you suspect they are not doing a good job, let them know and take your business elsewhere.

## **9 Staying Connected**

### **TELEPHONES**

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. Better yet, send an e-mail from a cybercafe.

## CELLPHONES

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 Europe and dozens of other countries worldwide. In the U.S., T-Mobile, AT&T Wireless, and Cingular use this quasi-universal system; in Canada, Microcell and some Rogers customers are GSM, and all Europeans and most Australians use GSM. GSM phones function with a removable plastic SIM card, encoded with your phone number and account information. 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 across civilized areas around much of the globe. Just call your wireless operator and ask for "international roaming" to be activated on your account.

For many, **renting** a phone is a good idea. While you can rent a phone from any number of overseas sites, including kiosks at airports and at car-rental agencies, we suggest renting the phone before you leave home. North Americans can rent one before leaving home from **InTouch USA** (☎ 800/872-7626; [www.intouchglobal.com](http://www.intouchglobal.com)) or **Roadpost** (☎ 888/290-1606 or 905/272-5665; [www.roadpost.com](http://www.roadpost.com)). InTouch will also, for free, advise you on whether your existing phone will work overseas; simply call ☎ 703/222-7161 between 9am and 4pm EST, or go to [www.intouchglobal.com/travel.htm](http://www.intouchglobal.com/travel.htm). At the airport, there is a booth just before you exit the terminal where you can rent a phone for not too much money depending on how many calls you make.

**Buying** a phone 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.

## VOICE-OVER INTERNET PROTOCOL (VOIP)

If you have Web access while traveling, you might consider a broadband-based telephone service (in technical terms, **Voice over Internet Protocol**, or **VoIP**) such as Skype ([www.skype.com](http://www.skype.com)) or Vonage ([www.vonage.com](http://www.vonage.com)), which allows you to make free international

calls if you use their services from your laptop or in a cybercafe. The people you're calling must also use the service for it to work; check the sites for details.

## INTERNET/E-MAIL WITHOUT YOUR OWN COMPUTER

To find cybercafes in your destination, check [www.cybercaptive.com](http://www.cybercaptive.com) and [www.cybercafe.com](http://www.cybercafe.com).

Most major airports have **Internet kiosks** that provide basic Web access for a per-minute fee that's usually higher than cybercafe prices. Check out copy shops or Internet cafes, which offer computer stations with fully loaded software (as well as Wi-Fi).

## WITH YOUR OWN COMPUTER

More and more hotels, resorts, airports, cafes, and retailers are going **wireless**, becoming "hotspots" that offer free high-speed Wi-Fi (wireless fidelity) access or charge a small fee for usage. Most laptops sold today have built-in wireless capability. To find public Wi-Fi hotspots in Aruba, go to [www.jiwire.com](http://www.jiwire.com); its Hotspot Finder holds the world's largest directory of public wireless hotspots.

For dial-up access, most business-class hotels throughout the world offer dataports for laptop modems. Wherever you go, bring a **connection kit** of the right power and phone adapters, a spare phone cord, and a spare Ethernet network cable—or find out whether your hotel supplies them to guests.

## 10 Packages for the Independent Traveler

Packages can save you a ton of money, and most people vacationing in Aruba came on a package deal. You'll be on your own, but in most cases airfare, hotel, and transportation to and from the airport are included—and the whole kit and caboodle will cost you less than the hotel alone would if you booked it yourself. All of Aruba's hotels work closely with tour operators, and some packages even cover meals.

Start your search for a deal in the travel section of your local Sunday newspaper. Check the ads in national travel magazines such as *Arthur Frommer's Budget Travel*, *National Geographic Traveler*, and *Travel Holiday*, too.

Powerhouse travel agencies offer some of the best deals. **American Express Vacations** (☎ 800/297-2977; [www.americanexpress.com/travel](http://www.americanexpress.com/travel)) has offices nationwide. **Liberty Travel** (☎ 888/271-1584; [www.libertytravel.com](http://www.libertytravel.com)) is one of the biggest packagers in the Northeast and usually takes out full-page ads in Sunday papers.

The airlines themselves are another good resource. They often combine their flights with hotels at attractive prices. Try **American Airlines Vacations** (☎ 800/321-2121; [www.aavacations.com](http://www.aavacations.com)), **Continental Airlines Vacations** (☎ 800/301-3800; [www.continentalvacations.com](http://www.continentalvacations.com)), **Delta Vacations** (☎ 800/654-6559; [www.deltavacations.com](http://www.deltavacations.com)), **United Vacations** (☎ 888/854-3899; [www.unitedvacations.com](http://www.unitedvacations.com)), and **US Airways Vacations** (☎ 800/422-3861; [www.usairwaysvacations.com](http://www.usairwaysvacations.com)).

To save time comparing the prices and value of hotel packages, contact **TourScan, Inc.** (☎ 800/962-2080 or 203/655-8091; [www.tourscan.com](http://www.tourscan.com)). Every season, the company computerizes the contents of travel brochures that contain about 10,000 different vacations at 1,600 hotels in the Caribbean, including Aruba. TourScan selects the best-value vacation at each hotel.

Large tour operators serving Aruba include **Apple Vacations** ([www.applevacations.com](http://www.applevacations.com); must be booked through your travel agent); **Funjet Vacations** ([www.funjet.com](http://www.funjet.com); book online or through a travel agent listed on the Web page); **GOGO Worldwide Vacations** ([www.gogowww.com](http://www.gogowww.com); must be booked through your travel agent); **GWV International** ([www.gwvtravel.com](http://www.gwvtravel.com)); **Cheap Caribbean** (☎ 800/915-2322; [www.cheapcaribbean.com](http://www.cheapcaribbean.com)); **MCM Tours** (☎ 888/ARUBA-4-U; [www.aruba4u.com](http://www.aruba4u.com)); and **TNT Vacations** (☎ 800/262-0123 or 617/262-9200; [www.tntvacations.com](http://www.tntvacations.com)).

## 11 Getting There

Scheduled air service to Aruba from the United States expanded dramatically at the end of 2000. American Airlines once dominated the route, but Continental, Delta, United, and US Airways have joined the fray. There are no nonstop flights from Canada, but American, Continental, and Delta have connecting service. Although the number of flights generally increases during the high season, airlines may alter service depending on demand (and their own financial condition). Don't assume the flights mentioned below will be offered when you're ready to book.

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.

Before you book your airline tickets, read the section on “Packages for the Independent Traveler,” above—you can save yourself a bundle. Whether or not you choose a package, consider these rules of thumb:

- **When you fly makes a difference.** If you fly in spring, summer, or fall, you’re guaranteed substantially reduced airfares to Aruba. You can also ask if it’s cheaper to fly Monday through Thursday or to stay an extra day. Many airlines won’t volunteer this information, so ask questions and be persistent.
- **Keep an eye out for sales.** Check your newspaper for advertised discounts or call the airlines and ask if promotional rates or special fares are available. You’ll almost never see a sale during the peak winter vacation months of February and March, or during the Thanksgiving or Christmas seasons; but in periods of low-volume travel, discounted fares are common.
- **Check with consolidators.** Consolidators, or bucket shops, buy seats in bulk from the airlines and then sell them to the public at prices below the airlines’ discounted rates. Make sure you know the airlines’ current fares before buying from a consolidator. Before you pay, ask for a record locator number and confirm your seat with the airline itself. Also be aware that bucket-shop tickets are usually nonrefundable or rigged with stiff cancellation penalties, often as high as 50% to 75% of the ticket price.

Reliable consolidators offer great deals. Try **Cheap Tickets** (☎ 888/922-8849; [www.cheaptickets.com](http://www.cheaptickets.com)), **Cheap Seats** (☎ 800/243-2773; [www.cheapseats.com](http://www.cheapseats.com)), **Priceline.com** ([www.priceline.com](http://www.priceline.com)), and **1-800-FLY-CHEAP** ([www.flycheap.com](http://www.flycheap.com)). **STA Travel** (☎ 800/781-4040; [www.statravel.com](http://www.statravel.com)) specializes in young travelers, but its bargain-basement prices are available to folks of all ages. (*Note:* In 2002, STA bought competitors **Council Travel** and **USIT Campus** after they went bankrupt. It still operates some offices under the Council name.)

- **Search the Internet.** Check for deals online and compare your findings to the research of a dedicated travel agent, if you have one, especially if you’re booking more than just a flight. **Travelocity** ([www.travelocity.com](http://www.travelocity.com)) and **Expedia** ([www.expedia.com](http://www.expedia.com)) are a couple of the better virtual travel agents. **SmarterTravel.com** is a great source for last-minute deals.

**American Airlines** (☎ 800/433-7300; [www.aa.com](http://www.aa.com)) offers a daily nonstop flight from New York's JFK airport (flight time is about 4½ hr.), two daily nonstops from Miami (2½ hr.), and one daily nonstop from San Juan, Puerto Rico (1½ hr.). Flights from Boston leave five to six times a week. These nonstops take just under 5 hours.

**Continental Airlines** (☎ 800/231-0856; [www.continental.com](http://www.continental.com)) leaves daily from Newark (5 hr.) and on Tuesday and Saturday from Houston (4½ hr.). Service from both cities is nonstop.

**Delta Air Lines** (☎ 800/241-4141; [www.delta.com](http://www.delta.com)) offers daily nonstop service from Atlanta (4 hr.) and Saturday flights from New York's JFK (4½ hr.).

**JetBlue** (☎ 800/538-2583; [www.jetblue.com](http://www.jetblue.com)) has a daily nonstop flight out of JFK in the morning; on Saturdays two morning flights depart for Aruba.

**United** (☎ 800/241-6522; [www.united.com](http://www.united.com)) offers daily service from Miami via Curaçao that takes 3½ hours. Saturday nonstop service departs from Chicago's O'Hare Airport and arrives at Aruba's Queen Beatrix International Airport 5 hours and 10 minutes later.

**US Airways** (☎ 800/428-4322; [www.usairways.com](http://www.usairways.com)) nonstop service departs daily from Philadelphia (4½ hr.) and from Charlotte (3½ hr.).

Airlines with service from Canada include American, Continental, Delta, and US Airways. Each requires that you make connections in Miami, New York, or some other city in the U.S. **Air Canada** (☎ 888/247-2262 in the U.S and Canada; [www.aircanada.ca](http://www.aircanada.ca)) can get you as far as Miami, Bermuda, or the Bahamas, where you'll have to switch carriers.

If you're departing from Europe, **KLM** (☎ 800/374-7747; [www.klm.com](http://www.klm.com)) is your best bet. Flights from Amsterdam leave almost daily and take 10 hours.

## 12 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 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 yellow-fin tuna. A few restaurants will even cook and serve up your day's catch.

**GOLF** On the island's northern tip, Tierra del Sol 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. Club selection is often crucial. Near San Nicolas, the Aruba Golf Club has seen better days and is used primarily by locals. It has been trumped by the recently opened Divi Links, 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 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 DePalm

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 wetsuit-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, angelfish, damselfish, and parrotfish, divers regularly spot less-common species such as frogfish, seahorses, nudibranchs, black crinoids, basket stars, scorpionfish, and eels. Barracudas, 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 magnificent coral as well.

**SNUBA** Though not affording you the freedom and excitement of scuba, this technology allows you to breathe while descending up to 6.1m (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 DePalm Island, you can also try Sea Trek, where you don a diving helmet and weighted boots and explore the sea floor; though you won't see much coral, you will see a submerged bus and plane, and can sit for a photo-op at a submerged cafe table. For those who like toys, grab a motorized jet pack and try Power Snorkel; just hold on to your swimsuit with one hand, the jet pack with the other, and pray you don't wind up in Venezuela!

**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 & KITESURFING** 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, Rodgers Beach, and Boca Grandi are alternatives to the hotel area. To avoid collisions, kitesurfers and windsurfers take turns throughout the day.

## 13 Tips on Accommodations

**HOTELS & RESORTS** Some travelers assume they can't afford the big hotels and resorts. With all the packages (see "Packages for the Independent Traveler," earlier in this chapter) 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 your 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.

**ALL-INCLUSIVES** Presumably, everything's paid for upfront at an "all-inclusive" resort, even drinks and watersports. Unfortunately, some packages cover a room and three 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, and unlimited platters and chaffing dishes of food and endless drinks in plastic cups. Aruba's all-inclusives also 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). 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-inclusives 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 accommodation 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 websites have owner bulletin boards with a listing of rentals available. General bulletin boards, such as **Aruba Bulletin Board** ([www.aruba-bb.com](http://www.aruba-bb.com)), abound with timeshare rental opportunities.