

Viva Aruba!



THERE'S one travel rule I've found pretty reliable. If the Americans like it, there's good reason. Yes, we may laugh at their 'if it's Tuesday, it must be Rome' mentality.

But, unlike we British who, even these days, will make the most of it when the rooms are small and the food lousy, Americans demand quality and value.

Hotels must be comfortable and clean, the food good and pleasantly served. Beaches have to be immaculate, the water safe, and streets secure. Fail, and the dollar goes somewhere else.

Thus, I've long been intrigued by a favourite American destination that is barely a blip on the British holiday radar. Mention Aruba, even to quite well travelled Britons, and there will be a furrowing of brows.

Say Aruba to an American, and you hit the travellers' G-spot. The Americans love Aruba.

There's the weather: Even the best hotspots have periods when a broly is more use than sun lotion. The Mediterranean summer is highly unreliable. Or else southern Europe gets furnace hot, with Greece and Turkey hitting 105f plus.

The Caribbean in our summer gets hurricanes. So does Florida. The Maldives are wet and humid. So are Thailand and Kenya.

In winter, you have to go a long way south to guarantee good weather. Nowhere in Europe is certain to be fine, and even the medium-distance resorts such as the Canaries or Florida are tricky.

But there is a place where the weather, at any time of year, is guaranteed perfect; 90f during the day, 75f at night, reasonable humidity, and brisk but benign breezes; virtually no rain, no hurricanes, and non-stop sunshine. All year. Aruba.

Like us, the Dutch had an empire. Fragments remain, with three bits on the southern fringes of the Caribbean, just north of Venezuela. Aruba, Bonaire

Aruba has beautiful beaches and prices that are reasonable by Caribbean standards. But up to now it's been a pain to get to. **Laurie Margolis reports...**

and Curacao - the ABC islands - remain closely tied to Holland, though Aruba is now largely independent.

The island is safe -unusually so for the sometimes troublesome Caribbean. Our Trinidadian waitress, Aneela, said she hadn't locked her door in the nine years she'd lived on Aruba. 'I wanted to bring my children up here: she said, 'because it's safe.' Quite a compliment from one islander to another island, in a region of fierce rivalries.

So far, Aruba has been for the lucky Americans. But come next spring, it will be easy to fly there from Britain.

For now, getting to Aruba means a flight to Amsterdam and then a ten-hour direct service on Dutch carrier KLM. It's the best part of 14 hours by the time you allow for the flight to Holland and the transfer.

Next May, however, Air 2000 begins fortnightly charters from Manchester and Gatwick. First Choice and Eclipse are packaging these flights with hotels on Aruba.

The island, in truth, is not startlingly beautiful, and certainly not in the same league as more familiar Caribbean destinations such as Grenada or St. Lucia.

The landscape is dry, hilly in part and covered with cactus. In the interior, it looks a bit like the scrubby back regions of southern Spain or Arizona. There's a moderately dramatic northern coastline.

But there is one glory that is the making of Aruba. The beaches along

the south-western coast are fantastic. The sand is glistening white and immaculately kept. The sea deepens gently, and is safe and refreshing.

As we arrived, I looked at the stunning, palm-covered beach before us, sloping down to a sea apparently coloured by a child's crayon, such was the blue. The beach looks great, I thought, but in this sun we'll be jumping around on that like grasshoppers.

Don't ask me how, but Aruban sand doesn't get hot. The strong, though never unbearable, sun beats down hour after hour, but the sand remains comfortable to walk on.

There are two principal beaches. My wife Jacky and I were on Eagle Beach, two miles from the capital, Oranjestad. The hotels here are low-rise and smallish.

WE STAYED at the excellent Bucuti Beach Resort, offered by Kuoni, which is fronted by 14 acres of that fabulous sand, and shaded by palms and little Pacific island shelters. You are given a flag to plant in the sand when drinks are required.

The Bucuti was laid-back but carefully run, with comfortable American-style rooms with fridge, grill and coffee maker. There's a fine restaurant on a beachside deck, a gym, friendly, efficient service and little additions such as a computer room offering free internet access.

A mile or so further west is the main tourist area, Palm Beach, also known as

the high-rise hotel district. Here are the major U.S. chains, together with some good-quality timeshares, linked by a pretty path along the top of the beach.

Everything touristy is of the highest quality. Every restaurant in which we ate was, at worst, good, and at best, superb, with classy European and international-cuisine. Le Dome and Madame Janette's, both Belgian-owned and run, are of a high order. There are many others. The most we paid for a meal for two was £70 including wine and the stiff 15 per cent service charge, but usually much less. Every mouthful, apart from superb local fish, is imported, but the quality is high.

Aruba is duty-free and a major cruise destination, which means the capital, Oranjestad, is full of designer label shops. The U.S. dollar is accepted everywhere (we hardly saw the local currency, the Aruba florin). English is one of three national languages.

For the active, there's anything wet - diving, snorkelling, jet skiing. There's horse riding and hiking in the Arikok National Park, a hilly cactus-filled nature reserve with a certain spiky appeal. Luxury yachts offer sunset dinner cruises.

But Aruba is, essentially, a world-class beach fringing a calm, warm, clean, blue sea, backed by good hotels, fuelled by excellent restaurants and posh shopping. A quality American resort, in fact; which explains why they like it so much. And why we Brits should, too.