

Great Escapes: Aruba's Luxury Renaissance

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Aruba's beaches have long been a draw, but new upscale offerings appeal to a different crowd. *GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO*

With upscale, uncrowded resorts and locally focused restaurants, Aruba is no longer just for suburban families seeking an all-inclusive respite. Luxury brands are turning their attention toward the island—the Ritz Carlton opened its doors five years ago and the St. Regis is reportedly on its way—and it's not hard to see why.

The Dutch colony is one of the Caribbean's most revisited destinations, with more than half of all visitors returning each year, thanks to its friendly locals—who speak Dutch, Papiamentu, and often English and Spanish—and its reliable weather and convenience. The island has been a hotspot for tourists visiting the Caribbean since the 1980s, but it has recently experienced a facelift, with the Aruban government investing over US\$1 billion into beautification efforts and expanding the airport.

A direct flight from New York takes less than five hours, and nonstop flights are available from many cities in the U.S., and even the Netherlands and the U.K. From Queen Beatrix Airport, hotels are just a quick drive away.

Part of the ABC islands just north of Venezuela (which also include Bonaire and Curacao), Aruba is out of the hurricane belt, with the least amount of rainfall out of the roughly 700 islands in the Caribbean, according to its tourism board. Temperatures average in the low 80s, but the strong trade winds cool down the island—they also help keep mosquitoes at bay. The desert island's arid climate means the landscape is filled with divi-divi trees, cacti, and aloe.

STAY

For a boutique option, the eco-friendly Bucuti & Tara Beach Resort, located on the lower-rise Eagle Beach, focuses on wellness. At this adults-only retreat, guests can take advantage of tailored itineraries by wellness specialists. The Bucuti offers personal training, meditation, pilates, and more. The restaurants here, Elements and Senses, offer vegan, vegetarian, gluten-free, and organic menus, and incorporate local, sustainable ingredients, like the invasive lionfish, which threaten coral reefs. The hotel is the Caribbean's first certified carbon-neutral resort, and has won several awards for its sustainable practices.

DINE

There are plenty of casual restaurants that serve tasty local seafood right on the beach, like Flying Fishbone and Barefoot, but for a more traditional Aruban experience, Papiamento—named after the local dialect—offers a fusion of Caribbean flavors in a historic setting. Guests can sit inside the 126-year-old Aruban “cunucu” house filled with Dutch antiques, or outside in the lush tropical garden, filled with plants and trees strung with lights, next to a pool. The menu offers traditional Aruban chowders, and



The government has invested over US\$1 billion into beautification efforts. *ARUBA TOURISM*

fusion dishes that incorporate ingredients like papaya and cactus.

Wine lovers and nappers alike will

enjoy the Screaming Eagle, where dinner is served in bed. Diners eat off wooden trays laid on spacious lounge beds at this clubby restaurant that boasts a lengthy and impressive wine list.

Hip restaurant White Modern uses foraged local produce and seaweed for its bright Aruban- and Asian-influenced cuisine. At the eco-conscious restaurant, jerked lamb and plantains are served alongside hoisin-glazed duck.

For those who want to wind down from the beach with cured meats and hearty carbs, the Ritz Carlton's Casa Nonna, which also has a location in New York, was the first restaurant on the island to offer handmade pastas like pappardelle and agnolotti. Order a cocktail and the bartender will come to you to make a tableside drink.

DRINK

Retro pharmacy-themed speakeasy Apotheek would not be out of place in New York or London. Pluck a prescription off the wall—perhaps a remedy or an elixir—for the cocktail of your choice, like the “Jamaican Aphrodisiac” with hibiscus and tequila, and hand it to the bartender.

For a more casual, al fresco vibe right in the thick of downtown, Craft goes from al fresco coffee shop to a cocktail bar at night, but it still holds on to some barista traditions. The cold brew martini is a great way to perk up before a night out.

EXPLORE

No trip to Aruba would be complete without plenty of time in the clear, warm water. Daredevils can try their hand at windsurfing or kitesurfing, with winds easily gusting past 20 miles per hour. Vela Watersports offers private lessons on Aruba's “blue highway” for those who want to learn. Paddle boarding in Aruba also offers an extra challenge due to the strong winds.

For a more relaxing water activity, De Palm Tours offers group or private snorkeling tours via catamaran, where you can spot schools of bright blue and yellow fish and a shipwreck. The tour company also offers group or private tours to Aruba's famed Natural Pool and Natural Bridge in Arikok National Park. Mangel Halto is off the beaten path, but the secluded beach is known for some of the best snorkeling and diving on the island.

Locals are very proud of San Nicolas, an area of the island that is filled with street art and murals, not unlike Miami's Wynwood Walls. Organizations like Art Rules Aruba and Aruba Art Fair have commissioned larger-than-life murals to take over abandoned or run-down buildings in the neighborhood.

Meanwhile, Arubians love to extol the healing powers of aloe vera. Aruba Aloe, founded in 1890, is the oldest aloe company in the world and was one once the world's largest producer of aloe in the early 20th century. The brand offers free tours of its museum and factory, but the farm itself is stunning, with vast stretches of aloe plants extending 150 acres.