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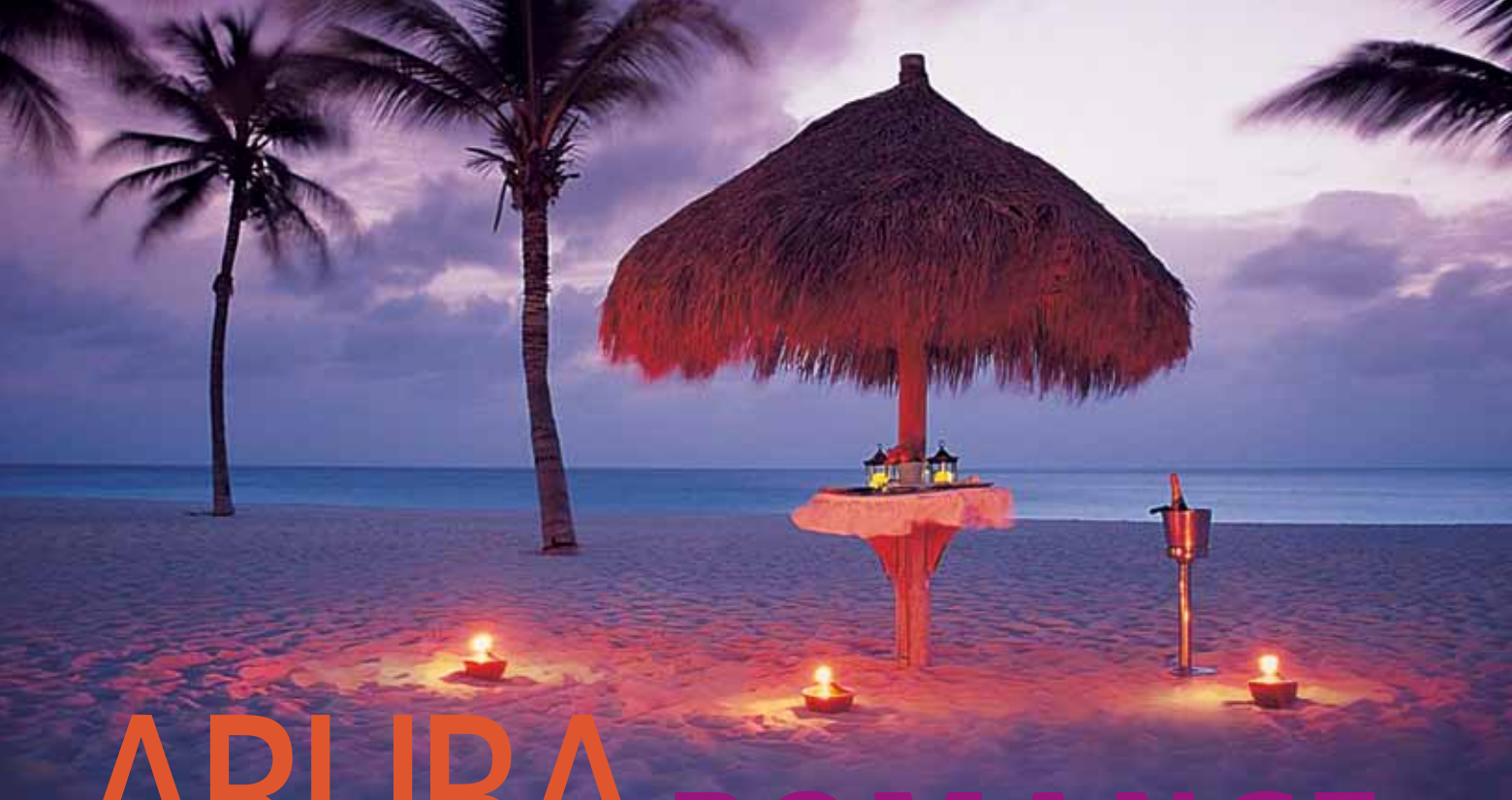
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ARUBA ROMANCE

Where Wanderers Come to Stay

By **Stephanie Malloch**

On the morning of our departure, I awoke to the sound of water pinging off of my window-mounted air conditioner. Never a deep-sleeper when I know an early rise is in store, I was momentarily able to convince myself that this annoying sound of water skipping on aluminum was the result of my upstairs neighbor's own rude unit spitting condensation down seven stories to the street below. Struggling out of bed just before the alarm went off, I pulled back the blinds to find a New York sky far too dark for 5:45 in July. It was raining.

Reassured by our early departure time, Rodrigo and I jumped in a cab and headed for the airport. After a panicked delay due to a flooded highway on-ramp, we were soon comfortably seated on our direct flight from JFK to Aruba. Feeling a bit smug due to our rapid check-in time and our ability to snag two seats together despite our last-minute reservations, I pulled out my book, a pencil, and my earphones and acquainted myself with Rodrigo's ample shoulder for my ritualistic, pre-take-off nap. Usually awakened by the sound of the beverage cart, on this morning, I awoke to the sound of the captain announcing a technical difficulty with one of the plane's computers. Forty-five minutes of taxiing time had passed, and we were still on the ground, heading back to the gate.

Blessedly, we touched down in Aruba six hours later. After surviving a customs line that tried my limited patience more than most, Rodrigo and I made our way through the innards of the small, tropical airport and were soon on the receiving end of a



gorgeously full, genuinely pleased smile. The bright blue-eyed man holding a sign with our names on it was perhaps more relieved to see us than we were him. With this bright grin, Rodrigo and I first tasted Aruban hospitality - delicious.

Despite having had his car towed while waiting, Philippe's smiling face was the picture of Aruba: a migrant who had found what he was looking for here in the Caribbean sea, seventeen miles north of Venezuela. Aruba has a vibrant history of comers and goers from oceans away. Even the local language, *Papiamentu*, a mix of Spanish and Portuguese, with a dash of Dutch and English thrown in, does not discriminate - everyone seems to get a word.

Philippe boarded us into a taxi while he went off to recover his vehicle, and we were off. When Rodrigo asked the taxi driver how far the resort was from the airport, she replied, "Oh, about ten minutes." Twenty-five minutes later, Bucuti Beach Resort lay peacefully before us; with fifteen minutes happily lost to the wonders of "island time," we were out of New York and squarely in Aruba. Memories of rain, traffic and airplane complications were quickly fading.

Our greeting at the resort was prompt, warm, and genuine with smiles abounding from both the lovely staff and the happy guests. Uniquely Aruban, each detail at Bucuti projected calm comfort with a remarkable dedication to the beauty and bounty of the desert island. In addition to being a pioneer in both conservation of resources and preservation of the island's nature and culture, Bucuti seems to maximize the gift's the land has given them.

Our room, one of the resort's spacious Terra Suites, featured massive windows that spilled onto the beach and swiftly to the ocean. We thanked our unusually tall, crisply blue-eyed host, took a swift swig of celebratory champagne, and momentarily rejoiced that we were in such a beautiful setting. Not wanting to waste a moment of it, Rodrigo and I flung on our swim suits and rushed downstairs to the beach. My running screechingly slowed as I first offered my toes to the enticing water. Despite what our more-than-hospitable hosts had told us, I found the water's temperature to be a bit more than "refreshing." I looked to Rodrigo for encouragement, but he was already knee-deep, headed out to sea. Emboldened by the strong European presence of the island, as well as the absence of my mother and father (who had been present on our most recent swim-related trips) Rodrigo donned a miniature suit that proudly displayed his shockingly white upper-thighs. Not sad to see them disappear into the deep blue of the Caribbean Sea, I drew in a deep breath and ran to catch him.

The ocean, at once shades of deep navy and electric light blue, was ever-changing from the speed with which the wind shoved the clouds across the sky. The beach at Bucuti stretched out towards the water with a width that happily accommodated all guests who wished to pay homage to the spectacular sight, without ever feeling crowded. Having fallen victim to the deafening beauty of the view from our terrace, Rodrigo and I had failed to hear our host's instructions about the necessity of our towel cards; perpetually towel-less, we dried ourselves in a hedonistic combination of sun and sand.



The intensity of the color and coolness of the water left Rodrigo and me wanting more. I found myself rising eagerly at seven o'clock our first morning there, a feat almost unheard of at home where the mental bargaining that marks my daily rising struggle requires more time than the rest of my shower and dressing routine. But this day, I had more than a 95 degree subway commute to look forward to - today, Rodrigo and I were going snorkeling. Aruba is home to plenty of cool snorkel spots, like Renaissance Island where two sunken drug running planes form an artificial reef, or *Pedernales*, a sunken American oil tanker torpedoed by a German submarine in 1942.

Rodrigo and I, pressed for time and hungry for action, did not even have to step foot in a boat in order to see incredible marine life, some of which I had never seen in my many years of snorkeling and diving. Our fins and masks thrown into the back of the car, we trekked just a few miles up the beach from Bucuti to a rocky-ledged, calm bay. We swam for over an hour with the increasingly intense sun warming our backs, and in addition to an incredible array of plucky fish of all shapes, sizes and colors (including one with a cube-shaped exoskeleton that looked more like a tiny box than a fish), we saw octopuses, eels, lobsters, shrimp, and crab through the silent, clear water. We headed



back down the road to the beach, salty and wet, grateful for the water that had welcomed us so lovingly. Back on dry land, it was time for our much anticipated spa time. Initially, I found it curious that our scheduled massages would take place in a small hut on the beach. Modesty has never been a big issue of mine, however, the idea of someone's oily hands touching me in 90 degree weather left me wondering. I could not have been more wrong; the fading afternoon sun once again gave way to the intensity of the wind which cooled our covered hut with incredible ease and efficiency.

The small waves creeping up the white sand and the soft beach sounds of other guests provided a soundtrack that would shame any spa CD. Enjoying a wonderful massage while not feeling guilty about wasting time indoors was an incredible treat.

While I was eager to get back on the water for which so many people travel so far, I was admittedly skeptical of the "sunset cruise" included in our itinerary. Being from a somewhat touristy Florida town, I knew well the type of boat that scoops up 100 passengers, stocks the bar with cheap liquor, and leads the guests out to sea to watch the sunset from the comfort of the air-conditioned cabin. Running perpetually five minutes late, we sped down the dusty streets tucked behind the airport, nervous that we would miss the departure, but on some level, not overly disappointed. Pulling up to the tiny marina, Rodrigo and I were greeted by the lovely Katrin (another European transplant), who led us down a series of docks towards her boat, the Morning Star. We were soon off, delighted with the offerings of appetizers and the recently discovered, deliciously sweet Balashi, a locally brewed beer.

Cold beers in hand, Rodrigo and I settled in for our two-hour cruise over the west side of the island. From this vantage point, Aruba, delicately nestled in the sea, was a remarkable sight. The sunset itself lacked the intensity and color that I had anticipated, but there was something remarkable about how the



ocean opened up to swallow the sun with one, big gulp. Once set, there was no sign that the sun had recently flooded the sky, and the moon, already standing tall, betrayed its very existence. The mysticism of the sinking sun, the warm yet intense breeze, and the smell of the ocean combined to make this Aruban sunset one of the most moving I have ever experienced. Maybe I should give a little credit to Rodrigo on this one, too.

Dining was another pleasant surprise of the island. Food offers a relationship with culture and people that I find unmatched while traveling. I was not expecting much from Aruba in the dining arena. From what I read of the island, the dry, arid climate yields few crops apart from aloe, however, this time I was happy to forgo fresh fruit and stormy summers for blue skies and a bright sun. Our first night at Bucuti, Rodrigo and I had the good fortune of participating in a cooking demonstration by the resort's new head chef, Chef Mike. Originally from upstate New York, Chef Mike was another transplant who seemed utterly at home in Aruba.

I was a bit disappointed to hear that our lesson would be about *arepas*, as my only experience with the dish had been in a charming East Village of New York hole-in-the wall where I found the Venezuelan specialty to bare a shocking resemblance to an English muffin...minus the butter. The words dry, flavorless, and chewy ran through my mind, but almost immediately, Chef Matt was slicing yellow corn straight from the cob, and throwing into a mixing bowl an unmeasured and wonderfully haphazard array of fresh ingredients - whatever seemed to strike our mutual fancy. With a quick, deafening whirl of a blender, a slap on a griddle, and a smother of *crème fraîche*, Rodrigo and I were greedily consuming the decadently moist, incredibly flavorful creation. No where to be found were the nooks and crannies of my first arepas; in their place was something more closely resembling a corn and cilantro pancake-hovering somewhere between sweet and salty-topped with a creamy combination of avocado and the tangy French cream.

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Our dinner at the beautifully open-aired and secluded Marandi offered another example of the ways in which Aruban cuisine can shine: seafood. Cradled in a bed of thriving mangroves, the delicately lit restaurant offered the warm breeze and clear Aruban sky to each of its diners. Dishes that highlighted the natural beauty and flavor of the ingredients were a perfect complement to the

open setting. The combination of delicate white-fleshed fish, large, pink shrimp, and buttery scallops would have been delicious alone, but laced with a creamy, slightly garlicky sauce, the components became a unified dish. Perhaps most surprising and pleasing were the pieces of cauliflower, potato, and a few other choice vegetables I generally associate with the cold north, that I discovered after devouring my first piece of grouper. The gently cooked and utterly delicious white, winter vegetables were another pleasant reminder of the incredible mix of people, language, history, and culture that defines this tiny island.

Upon our unfortunate departure, Rodrigo and I had the good fortune to be driven to the airport by the impressive owner of Bucuti Beach Resort, Mr. Ewald Biemans. Mr. Biemans, a much accoladed environmental innovator, is clearly in love with the island. When I expressed my regret at not having had enough time to explore the great hiking on the inner island, his face lit as he went on to describe the varied and beautiful terrain.

During our short stay, perhaps nothing was more apparent than the love and enthusiasm Arubans have for their island. While most of those we met had been born somewhere else, the island seems to have an intense pull; allowing so many to discover on its shores whatever it was they were looking for. The pull is also what keeps tourists coming back year after year, and why the tourism industry has grown so significantly in the past ten years. With a little care taken in planning, an open mind, and a sense of adventure, it is easy to escape the crowds that love Aruba, and to ensure that the only reminder of the world beyond this small island lies in the unexpected beauty of oil tankers occasionally dotting the horizon line.

④ Stephanie Malloch