

Curacao offers up a paradise of plenty

By Brian Irwin
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

W I L L E M - STAD, Cura-cao — As I w a l k e d across the Queen Emma Floating Bridge, it swayed under my feet. This bridge connects Punda (“the point”) and the Otrobanda (“the other side”) in downtown Willemstad. With the sound of a siren the entire bridge detached from one end and swung to the shoreline under the power of a motor. Firmly anchored against the shoreline, the gateway to the Santa Anna bay was open. A series of brightly colored boats carrying produce and dairy from Venezuela, only 40 miles away, entered so they could later anchor at the floating market. The gate to Curacao was open.

Curacao is an eclectic island, a colorful mix of cultures and religions. The territory changed hands many times before settling under the Dutch crown until 2010, when it was granted near-full independence. Curacao has picked up one of the most diverse set of denizens along the way. Dutch, Portuguese, English, and Spanish are all represented here, but the unofficial language is Papiamentu, a blend of the above in addition to Hebrew, according to locals.

I came to Curacao to dive and fish, to explore, and beach hop. An arid place, the island offers all that and much more. From a European-style waterfront with beer gardens and fine shopping, to delectable fusion cuisine and an energetic nightlife, Curacao offers something for everyone. Mountain biking and dune buggy riding are on the top of the list for land lovers. Beach bums find equal solace in the stunning coral reefs, waters teeming with fish, and some of the most idyllic pocket beaches, 35 in all, where local color collides with a sandy paradise fit for the most discerning sand critic.

My trip started with a lost camera bag that was gate checked against my will and went missing for a day. My diving opportunity slipped away, but when the bag of lenses showed up on my doorstep without warning, I struck out to angle and explore. We fished the Santa Anna Bay for a day, hooking two large tarpon on a fly rod. We then retired to fish

IF YOU GO . . .

Getting there: American airlines flies direct to Curacao from Miami. Flights from \$600 from Boston.
Lodging: Floris Suite Hotel and Spa is an adult-only resort that’s centrally located. A fusion of Caribbean and Dutch colonial architecture meets an open-air design and fine dining. Suites from \$199 a night.
Guides: If you want to fish, there are many options for off-shore angling. For inshore, contact Norman Chumaceiro at chuma6666@yahoo.com. Fishing from \$300 for a half day
Tours and more information: www.curacao.com

for barracuda in the home waters of my guide, Norman Chumaceiro, a 46-year-old native who was raised on the shores of the Spanish Water.

Chumaceiro is a kind man who grew up hand-lining for fish in the clover-shaped waters that were as clear as tap water, but tinted with a rich aquamarine hue. He took me around as we plucked barracuda from under the hulls of megayachts. These waters were quiet when he lived there, but the area has erupted into a home for the wealthy, where Dutch sunbathers soak up rays on their porches and where the rich come to play.

“Now it’s like a paradise of the most beautiful homes and water,” Chumaceiro exclaimed. “It’s different, but better. We even have a golf course whose grass drinks from the sea.”

Chumaceiro fishes with his best friend, Albert Macares, who’s wife, Mona, is Curacao’s air traffic controller. Macares insisted on a meal plan, a feast of calamari, shrimp, and chicken paella at his home aside his swim-up bar. “We have a real paradise here,” Macares said. “But the real gems are on the west coast. Go see it.”

I rested for a day of beach hopping, a grand tour that

Below: Curacao’s beaches offer a sandy paradise that is hard to match.

Bottom: Colorful buildings line the inlet to the Santa Anna Bay.

would take me up the west coast through dry hillsides covered in cactus and thronged with neon flamingos. As we drove, my guide Eugene Clements and I stopped at private and public beaches. Playa Knip, Playa Santa Cruz, Playa Jeremi — each beach had its own character. Some were half-moon bays, others bands of sand flanked by towering cliffs of coral.

We made our way up to Westpunt, the western point of the island, where we’d pull into a tiny restaurant, Jaanchie’s, where the owner of more than 60 years, Jaanchie himself, took our order. “There are no menus here. I’m the walking, talking menu. Tell me what you want and I’ll tell you if I can make it,” he stated.

Knowing that the local iguana population was not only good for photography, but purportedly good for eating, I requested some, in addition to my favorite fish, wahoo, which tastes like a white salmon. While I stuck mostly to the wahoo, I have to admit Jaanchie was right. Iguana tastes like chicken.

The last stop on my tour before I returned to the airport was Shete Boka National Park, an expansive plateau of coral benches that drop off into the ocean, where the sea pounds the cliffs and sloshes into tight inlets. The sea fills these channels before releasing pressure and allowing the inlet to violently spit the seawater back to the deep blue.

Clements shot me a smile as we watched the sea bludgeon the cliffs. “The ocean looks angry today. It’s usually calmer. Maybe it’s disappointed you’re leaving.”

That makes two of us.

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PHOTOS BY BRIAN IRWIN FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Shete Boka National park, where the island of Curacao meets the sea.

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