

Curacao

*The Island Better Known
as a Liqueur*



For a rainbow of birds, furnace-like temperatures, graffiti and piquant seafood, Curaçao delivers

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY JULES TORTI

Green parrots zigzagged across the indigo sky and disappeared into a ping pong paddle cacti fortress. Serpentine roads split through calabash trees and tiny Dijon and sunset-coloured houses, each with a sunning dog splayed in the driveway.

All of this within minutes of landing at Hato International in Willemstad, Curaçao.

Just 56 kilometres off the coast of Venezuela on the 12th parallel line, Curaçao is popular for its hurricane-shelter status — but probably more synonymous with the blue liqueur of the same name. The aromatic oils found in the peel of the bitter sweet Laraha oranges grown on the island are essential to the signature liqueur.

Blue Coo-rack-oo or Crack-oh or Cure-a-cow are just a few of the hiccupped pronunciations that islanders have to contend with on a daily basis. Proper pronunciation: Cure-a-sow.

A breezy part of the “ABC Islands” chain (Aruba, Bonaire, Curaçao), it’s like waking up in a well-fed Instagram account. It comes as no surprise that Curaçao stems from the Portuguese word for “the state of becoming cured.” Known as Ilha da Curaçao — “the island of healing” — scurvy-ridden sailors found an instant dose of Vitamin C-laden fruit here. For Canadians with winter-weary Nicole Kidman pallor, the effect is much the same.

Healing abounds in the blue cocktails and sea, with a serious dose of Vitamin D for



TOP: Colourful buildings along the water’s edge in Willemstad.

RIGHT: Crumbling heritage can also be found in Willemstad.

OPPOSITE PAGE: At Grote Knip beach, you can rent chairs and umbrellas and buy burgers and beer.

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good measure.

The trade winds here are much like riding around in a convertible for two weeks. But what a ride! Satiated by paperbacks, bird song and charbroiled afternoons, exploring Curaçao is as easy as taking shade under an overturned boat at the bushalte (bus stop). For \$2.20 (Netherlands Antillean Guilders or ANG) — about \$1.60 Cdn — you can hop on a Greyhound-style bus, with the air-conditioning cranked to Arctic, from Westpunt on the northern tip to Willemstad, 45 civilized and scenic minutes away. Although Dutch is the official language, English and Spanish abound, often peppered with Papiamentu, a mash-up of Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, French, English, African and Arawak. And the bus goes only one way or the other.

Willemstad is easily recognized for the trademark image that dominates its tourism campaign — the pastel colonial buildings along Handelskade on the Punda and the Queen Emma Bridge. Built in 1888, the bridge is often referred to as “our swinging old lady.” The floating pontoon bridge that crosses the Sint Annabaai (St. Anna Bay) channel connects the Punda to the Otrobanda.

It's quite a marvel to watch the genius of early engineers at work as the bridge opens to allow for the passage of ocean-bound vessels under the force of two diesel engines and propellers. A free ferry on either side allows for seamless pedestrian travel when the bridge is unhinged. In 1634, a visionary from the Dutch West India Company imagined a town adjacent to the natural harbour, bordered by water on three sides like a moat. Voila, this is Willemstad, and what a postcard it is.

Downtown Willemstad is a curious mix of crumbling heritage, cut-throat domino players, watermelon stands and two competing markets. One is designed for the cruise ship set (they are routinely parked here), so expect the usual stretch

and haggling for fridge magnets, Bon Bini (“welcome” in Papiamentu) licence plates and T-shirt inventory stacked 50 high. Rastafarians skirt the edges with offers to “join in” on ganja, three of them with dreads as long as I am tall — and I stand five feet nine inches.

Instead, we duck into the market with a more palpable local fee. Here we find simmering goat stew, medicinal plants, taro root the size of my forearm, avocado oil and local honey the colour of straw and Coke.

The Dutch influence is prevalent from street names to the terra cotta red saddle roofs to dozens of Gouda wheels in the local grocer. I had read about the graffiti of Pietersmaai straat and we beelined it there to avoid the T-shirt hawkers. Pietersmaai delivered with two blocks of street art and an urban beach (City Beach 88) pumping out Celine Dion, sandwiched between it all.

After savoury curry chicken arepas (a stuffed ground maize dough pocket popular in Venezuela) we rehydrated at the nearby Mundo Bizarro. Here we slipped into the surreal Gothic-like emporium with upholstered fainting couches, medieval lanterns, swinging bird cages, glass mosaics and a cigarette machine even. It was possibly the coolest place we've ever drank a beer, with the exception of a desert oasis in Egypt.

The floating market, near the Queen Wilhelmina Bridge, was a lunch bag letdown. The mini boat fleet from Venezuela that was to occupy the dock with fresh fish, fruit and veg is no more.

When we inquired, Perry Gumbs, the owner of the Malika Apartments vacation rental where we were staying, explained that Curaçao was imposing a clampdown in hopes of putting an end to human trafficking from Venezuela. Vendors and fisherman from Venezuela are currently not permitted to tie-up to the floating market.

At the apartments' pool we met a Saskatchewan couple and soon found ourselves celebrating our new friend's

milestone birthday at Shelter Bay, an eclectic restaurant/ranch with a greeter donkey in the parking lot. Here we had grilled lion fish (an invasive species, so an environmentally sound choice) with the owner's two pups — “Red” and “Blue” — curled at our feet. There was a motley crew of howling dogs here, kestrels atop the cacti, hammocks to swing in, moose antlers, a rather divine pasta with pumpkin and goat cheese and the quintessential San Pablo rum.

Though the island-made San Pablo is widely available from dawn onwards, the tap water in Curaçao is drinkable, thanks to the local desalination plant.

We spent most of our days dipping in and out of the wintergreen water (and green rum) at Playa Grandi, also known as Piskado or Fisherman's Beach. The inlet here is perfectly designed for picnics, existential conversations and drop-dead gorgeous sunsets as boats that have seen many seasons of paint bob about.

The signature scent here is creamy sunscreen, pilsner, sun-dried crabs and lighter fluid from locals tending to makeshift barbecues on the beach. Fishermen cast nets from the pier, netting sardines for bait to be used for the welterweight tunas.

When the boats motor in, two sinewy men with machetes make quick work of the fish bounty. Guts are tossed to a small army of green turtles (and their audience of snorkellers dodging the slippery innards). For those who don't snorkel — fear not. You can watch the dozen turtles mill about from the dock — the sea here is aquarium clear, and we spotted several needlefish and manta rays from a dry point of view.

Also in the area are Sol Food (owned by a dive-crazy American couple who seduce passersby with the savoury waft of their wood-fired pizzas), Playa Kalki (known for its coral inukshuks) and the Blue View restaurant (hello Happy Hour!).

Though we boomeranged to our preferred Playa Grandi on a daily basis, we did visit

the island's bull's eye, Grote Knip beach. It gets a lot of attention for good reason — you can rent chairs and umbrellas, buy burgers and beer, and the lagoon is a warm envelope of azure.

One night, after a restorative day at Grote Knip, we stopped in at Sol Food for grilled shrimp skewers. Sunshine, the owner (who is as bubbly as Prosecco), proved to be a great resource with not only paperbacks to trade but also a few local bird guides that she was willing to lend for the night.

I shortlisted all the birds we had seen in no time — the saffron finches that dot the grass like dandelion heads, the C-plus orange and black troupials (brave enough to nest in the cacti), yellow orioles (with a call like a rusty door hinge or caterwauling cats).

In Westpunt, it's birdwatching at its best. Magnificent frigate birds with forked tails — like “flying anchors,” as the bird guide describes — share the sky with yellow-winged parrots. The parrots are easy to identify as they fly in pairs, a species that blew in from Bonaire after a tropical storm in 1988.

Common ground doves create the constant Curaçao soundtrack with their familiar and ominous “oo-ooo.” We have a big laugh over our first sighting of the bare-eyed pigeon. The eyes of this bird are surrounded by bare, dark-coloured skin, making the pigeon appear like it is wearing over-sized spectacles.

It was unexpected bird nirvana. Each morning, before the sun became lava hot, we would walk out to the lighthouse or Watamula Hole (the famous sinkhole). There was very little traffic — maybe two cars. Instead, the road was the Autobahn for skittering lizards and iguanas that would belly flop out of the trees. The arms of the cacti along the Watamula route waved like six-metre-tall snakes.

The rocky cliffs and plateaus, with so many fossils David Attenborough would elect to camp out here for the rest of his days, kicked back the sea (hence the sinkhole) in

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TOP: We stayed at the Malika Apartments and quickly made friends around the pool.

ABOVE: Quality time with a pelican at Fisherman's Beach in Playa Grandi.

a fierce display of Mother Nature's force. If you want to watch people jump off similar 30-metre cliffs, you can do that too, at Playa Forti. Every day, there's a rather steady stream of jumpers with Red Bull coursing through their veins.

If you're not sold yet — here's the stuff that's not in the brochure: if you like to travel and have all the pleasures of home, you will be able to buy your staples at the big grocer chain, Centrum. From peanut butter to wasabi to Danish salami to the Dutch gallery of black licorice, you'll be satiated. Don't be alarmed by all the iguana curry advertised on blackboards. But be sure to try the local cookies as thick as pucks that are a beautiful blend of peanuts and evaporated milk. And the bocce ball-sized avocados demand an olé.

The average temperature in Curaçao is 27 C. A short drive (or bus ride) will transport you back to the 17th century as you pass by the plantation houses (landhuizen). Built from coral, the houses are a reminder of an island that was booming with exports: sugar cane, cotton, aloe, oranges, salt and corn. Indigo was a successful crop too, not just for the dye, but the special powers it possessed to keep evil away.

How could there be any evil on this perfect isle?

For a rainbow of birds, guaranteed furnace-like temperatures, graffiti and piquant seafood, Curaçao delivers. It's time to introduce yourself to the verdant island that has long been confused as just a hard-to-pronounce blue liqueur with a swizzle stick. 🍹

Where to Get It

A guide to some of the products and services featured in this issue.

Cover

- Luisa Cerano designer outfits available at **Biba Boutique**, 426 King St. E., Kitchener; 519-570-1421; bibaboutique.com

Style feature

Styling and Photography:

Alisha Townsend is with **Fresh Studios**, freshstudios.ca; 905-515-5259

Hair: Kevin Michael Beck is with **Elevate Hair Studio**, 373 Bridge St. W., Waterloo; elevatehairstudio.ca; 519-886-7723

Makeup: **Faces by Nadeen** can be reached at facesbynadeen.com

Models: Lynda Jager, Mandy Bujold and Mikaila Emrich

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