

TRAVEL

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Clockwise from left: chill at one of the beautiful beaches; check out the Mikve Israel-Emanuel Synagogue; taste some local treats at Marshe Bieu; or take a walk on the wild side in Westpunt.

PHOTOS: JUDITH RITTER



With its Dutch heritage and stunning beaches, Curaçao is a slice of Europe in the Caribbean. Judith Ritter tries some local fare and traditional medicine in paradise

PERFECT 10

Curaçao

1 Retro Europe

Explore Willemstad, the capital of Curaçao, a tiny Dutch island off Venezuela in the Caribbean Sea. Willemstad is lovely, graceful and confusing. Confusing because the town defies everything you think you know about the Caribbean. The rows of narrow, gabled buildings strung out along the edge of the harbour with their red clay roofs look as if they were built in 17th-century Amsterdam – except that they're awash with tropical pastels, azure blues, flamingo pinks and sunshine yellows ... and because, unlike in chilly Europe, for 320 days a year the sun beats down on this strange blend. Willemstad has been declared a Unesco World Heritage Site thanks to its unique architecture. Some buildings have been converted into cafés, from where it is delightful to sit and gaze at the deep harbour. At any moment, a giant ship might glide by, 50 metres away.

2 Local eats

Grab lunch with the residents. Everyone from lawyers to dockworkers heads for Marshe Bieu, the old market and the best place for local cuisine. The market, an open-air affair with a corrugated-metal roof slung over wooden trusses, is like a neighbour's kitchen – or dozens of neighbours' kitchens. Choose lunch from any of the family-owned kiosks, each with big steaming pots and crackling frying pans cooking island treats over charcoal fires. Handwritten menus announce the dish of the day, which might be goat stew (*cabrito*) or *kadushi* (cactus soup; no

thorns, just a smoky taste and okra-like texture). At Zus' Place, sparks fly and flames shoot out when Zus Boelijn, who has been cooking at the market for 42 years, serves her signature dish, *giambo*, a combination of pork, okra, fish and dried shrimp. Catch Boelijn and the other market chefs from 11.30am to 2.30pm every day except Sunday, behind the Willemstad Post Office on De Ruyterkade.

3 Museum of slavery

Step into the dark history of a sunny island at the Museum of Kura Hulanda. The museum pays homage to the worst period in Curaçao's history, when the



island was the largest transport centre for slaves arriving in the New World. Built on the site of an old slave yard, it houses a collection that documents pain. Visitors can try on a rusty set of shackles, feel the deadening weight of a slave collar and rattle the chains, hanging from a ceiling, used to punish anyone who tried to escape. A replica slave ship, with its dark, cramped hold, gives a sense of the terrible journey from Africa to Curaçao. Admission is \$45 for adults, half that for children (www.kurahulanda.com).

4 Mikve Israel-Emanuel Synagogue

Built in 1732, the Mikve Israel-Emanuel Synagogue is the oldest in continuous use in the western hemisphere. A layer of fine white sand on the floor serves as a reminder of the Jews' flight from Egypt and their wanderings in the desert, but it has added significance for the Jews of Curaçao. It's a reminder of their Iberian roots and their flight from the Spanish Inquisition to this island haven more than 350 years ago. During the Inquisition, Jews often placed sand on their floors to conceal evidence of clandestine prayer gatherings. The tiled courtyard of the graceful synagogue gives onto a breathtaking interior of whitewashed walls, vaulted ceiling, blue-stained glass and mahogany pews. The combination of sea breeze, sandy floor, distant voices and sunlight coming through the glass moves visitors to silence (www.snoa.com).

5 Sublime dive

Choose from more than 100 dive spots and slip into the turquoise Caribbean Sea. The reef that rings Curaçao is a few minutes' swim from shore and snorkellers and scuba-

divers can enjoy lush gardens of coral, the lazy flapping of manta rays and the antics of flamboyant parrot fish. The best-kept dive secret is Watamula. You won't find it on any map and no brochure sings its praises, but locals swim there through red and green coral with scorpion fish, eagle rays and giant leathery turtles. The dive shop on the beach at Playa Kalki (www.oceanencounters.com) will organise excursions.

6 Curaçao liqueur factory

Compared with other Caribbean destinations, Curaçao may be under the radar, but the liqueur that bears the island's name certainly isn't. The strange blue concoction is imbibed by people around the world who have never heard of the land where it's brewed. Housed in a 17th-century plantation house, the Senior Curaçao Liqueur factory (still owned by the founding family) makes the tippie from the same 19th-century recipe in the same old brass kettle, using the peel of a tiny bitter orange called the *laraha*. The secret recipe is stashed in a safe on the island. Free admission to the factory is available on weekdays, from 8am to noon and 1pm to 5pm (www.curaçao.com).

7 Bush medicine doctor

Find a cure for whatever ails you at Den Paradera, Curaçao's outstanding botanical garden. Step through the arched gates and follow dusty paths through the hundreds of medicinal plants and trees found on the island. The driving force behind this spectacular collection is Dinah Veeris, a healer or, in the language of the island, *curioso*. Veeris, creator of the garden, also brews potions in a small shop for everything from lowering cholesterol to improving hair vitality. Guided tours are available.

8 Westpunt

Banda'bou in the local Papiamentu dialect means "Get out of town". For locals, going *banda'bou* means heading for the wilds of the island. A morning drive to the northwest point of Curaçao is a favourite weekend jaunt. Just a few kilometres out of Willemstad, you begin to see the heart of the untamed land. On the drive up the island's spine, the little houses and patches of cornfields fall away and the terrain becomes sparse. Unlike the West Indies of imagination, Curaçao is desert like. With only 570mm of rain a year, it's no wonder that forests of tall, thorny cacti and wind-blown divi divi trees flourish. Wild goats and iguanas can be seen by the sides of the road, but nothing's more startling than the flocks of shocking pink flamingos standing silently on the salt flats.

9 Just chill

No Caribbean vacation is complete without taking to a beach hideaway with nothing to do but relax. The Kura Hulanda Lodge, in the most remote part of the island, has a superb beach, a Zen meditation garden, a prehistoric cave to explore and even a tree house if an ocean-view suite isn't enough. An architectural must-see is a soaring, eight-metre-high, thatched-roofed, open-air restaurant built by Colombian Indians flown in from the jungle (www.kurahulanda.com).

10 Sunset

Watch the sun sink into the Caribbean while eating the perfect island fare. The Seaside Terrace at Playa Marie Pompun is nothing more than an old corrugated-metal shack painted bright colours and open at the front, from where the friendly owner takes orders for the best barbecue you're likely to tuck into. Just call in.