



A TWISTED TALE
On Eagle Beach, one of the island's fofoti trees, a popular photo backdrop, spends a rare moment in isolation.

ARUBA'S NEW GLOW

PAUL RUBIO DISCOVERS THE
LONGTIME CARIBBEAN FAVORITE
SPARKLING WITH FRESH APPEAL

When this tropical slice of Dutch exotica hit the tourist map in the 1980s, its downy beaches were dotted with a large helping of high-rise resorts and glitzy casinos. But glamour? Not so much. Things have changed, and the Aruba I know and love today boasts a wealth of posh shops, world-class restaurants and snazzy lounges. You'll still find the joie de vivre that drew travelers here in the first place, as well as weather that's fine year-round thanks to a sheltered location off the tip of South America, outside of the hurricane belt. The posh new bells and whistles are the cherry on the cake. Here's how to spend an idyllic Aruba weekend.

Sunset Spirits

Sunset is more than a time of day in Aruba — it's an experience. From their west coast vantage, the island's most popular sands, Palm and Eagle beaches, dole out front-row seats to the sun's descent. I like to start my weekend in style

on the panoramic deck of the Divi Bar & Lounge at The Ritz-Carlton, Aruba (L.G. Smith Blvd., 107, Palm-Eagle Beach), site of a daily sunset ritual that commences with the sounds of wind chimes and the delivery of a complimentary Bahada di Solo cocktail, an intoxicating mix of fresh aloe juice, tamarind purée, lime juice, vodka and peach schnapps.

Old-School Supper

Book ahead for dinner at Papiamento (Washington 61, Noord), a seafood restaurant situated in the lush gardens of a family home adjacent to a 126-year-old *cumucu* (farmhouse). A favorite for more than three decades, its courtyard projects a fairy-tale ambience, with illumination by tiny lights braided into towering trees. Opt for the exceptional bouillabaisse, swimming with locally sourced spices and Madame Jeanette hot peppers, or the West Indies Shrimp, simmered in a coconut curry broth and served alongside okra from the family farm.

Rolling into Midnight

Gaming is big business on Aruba. Most of the large hotels have casinos, but if blackjack's not your bag, seek out live music at The Sopranos Piano Bar (L.G. Smith Blvd., 370), an intimate, open-air venue in Palm Beach's pulsing nightlife district. You can roll in anytime — it's open until 4 a.m. on weekends.

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Untamed Aruba

Saturday morning, I try to get up early to rent a 4WD and cross the island to Arikok National Park on the rugged, undeveloped north coast. Rangers offer guided hikes on the paved nature trails that wild donkeys and the island's burrowing owls call home. Following the informational trek, traverse the park's dirt roads, winding past dramatic coastline views, herds of wild goats, rocky caves and the occasional windmill.

Proud to Be a Tourist

There are several spots that first-timers to Aruba shouldn't miss. Start by striking a pose at the picturesque, stone-hewn California Lighthouse, which casts a shadow over the sand dunes and cacti on the island's western tip. Then become the social media envy of your friends with a selfie atop the Ayo Rock Formation, a see-it-to-believe-it tower of Flintstone-esque boulders. Finally, take in the quaint quiet of the Alto Vista Chapel, a small, simple structure built on the site where the Spanish founded a Catholic church in 1750.

Local Flavors

At lunchtime, I waver between two favorites: Zeerovers, a no-frills outdoor fishermen's bar in the town of Savaneta



BLUE HORIZONS

Clockwise from top: The small Chapel of Alto Vista is a red-roofed beacon in the north. Aruba's steady winds make kite-surfing a challenging thrill. It doesn't get more casual than Zeerover, where the fish is fresh and the beer is cold.



(Savaneta 270), where you can watch your meal come off the boat and then wash it down with Balashi beer. Or I head to West Deck in Oranjestad (L.G. Smith Boulevard), a charming beach shack where great food, killer drinks and awesome views are all on the menu. Chow down on fried *funchi* (polenta) with Dutch cheese, Balashi-battered coconut shrimp, and *keeshi yena* (shredded chicken, prunes, peppers and cashews wrapped in Gouda cheese and topped with a tomato sauce).

Retail Therapy

Without a cruise ship in sight on Saturday, this is the time to peruse the boutiques along L.G. Smith Boulevard in the capital city of Oranjestad. Begin at the Renaissance Marketplace for original handicrafts from Mopa Mopa, a shop that has revived an ancient form of wood painting from the Amazon. Then hit neighboring Renaissance Mall, where Gucci, Carolina Herrera, Louis Vuitton and Chopard are among the high-end stores. Don't miss the mall's more singular offerings: Aruba Aloe, which sells lotions and creams derived from aloe plants cultivated on-island. Nearby, Gemani Jewelers, a family operation for nearly a half-century, showcases fine watches and jewelry from brands like Mikimoto, Dior and Raymond Weil.

Next, pop into the Royal Plaza Mall to browse the bling at legendary Little Switzerland and Shiva's Gold and Gems, Aruba's largest diamond retailer. Shiva's carries the gamut of high-end pieces, including showstoppers by Harry Winston.

Across the boulevard, drool over the timekeeping toys and gems at Little Europe, specializing in complex watches from

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COLOR FORMS

Clockwise from right: Lionfish ceviche makes a cool lunch on a hot afternoon. The Dutch-Colonial buildings in Oranjestad house an empire's worth of jewels. Fishing boats form a tidy line off Surfside Beach.



Franck Muller and Ulysse Nardin, and one-of-a-kind rings, bracelets and necklaces. Then on to Diamonds International for a cavalcade of carats as well as Caribbean charms that make delightful souvenirs for girls of all ages.

On the Beach

If I haven't spent the morning on the beach, I carve out a few hours for swimming and sunning. At tranquil Baby Beach, you can rent snorkel masks and fins and scout for parrotfish. At Fisherman's Huts, you can watch windsurfers race across the waves. And on Palm Beach, kicking back with a cocktail is a time-honored pursuit. Waiters at The Ritz-Carlton, Aruba zip around on sand-sturdy Segways, minimizing time between ordering and receiving your piña colada.

Sail Away

The only sunset spot that's better than a seat by the beach is a seat on the water. Red Sail Sports will take you on a catamaran sail for two hours along Aruba's western coastline as drinks flow, music plays and the sea gradually swallows the sun. If you want a longer or quieter experience — these cruises can get pretty lively — Red Sail also offers half-day snorkel trips, as well as private charters.

BREATHTAKING BEACHES

We asked Chantal Croes, guest relations coordinator at The Ritz-Carlton, Aruba, where she heads when the Caribbean calls.

BABY BEACH

On the southernmost tip of the island, about 45 minutes from our resort, the water at Baby Beach is so calm it's safe for even very small children. The snorkeling at this location is great for the uninitiated. Marine life in the lagoon includes barracuda, squid, parrotfish, blowfish, angelfish and eels. You'll find snack stands — as well as snorkeling gear, chairs and umbrellas for rent.

CATALINA BAY

I love Catalina Bay in Malmok, a five-minute drive from The Ritz-Carlton, on the northwestern shore. The beach is small, and there are no watersports concessions, which makes it perfect for snorkeling. Bring your own mask and fins to enjoy the beautiful fish and corals. If you're lucky, you might even spot a turtle.

EAGLE BEACH

Eagle Beach is perfect for sunset pictures next to the famous divi divi trees. It's a 10-minute drive south of the resort, and if you're feeling a little adventurous, there are fun watersports, including banana boat and tube rides, personal watercraft and parasailing.

Surf or Turf

Saturday night dinner depends on whether I'm in the mood for surf or turf. If it's the former, I'll ask for a table on the terrace at Les Crustaces, The Ritz-Carlton's French-inspired restaurant. Start by sharing a platter from the raw bar, then try chorizo crusted snapper with scallion relish, or grilled swordfish in bell pepper emulsion. If I'm opting for turf, I'll venture into Oranjestad for carnes a la parilla (grilled meats) at El Gaucho Argentine Grill, which has been satisfying carnivores for over 35 years.

Funday

Minimize the trauma of returning to the real world with brunch and bottomless mimosas at Windows on Aruba, a waterfront eatery atop the Divi Village Golf clubhouse. Its five-page menu (tuna with mango, seafood in puff pastry) is an elegant alternative to a buffet.

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