

Pure shores

BA's new route from Gatwick to Aruba is set to entice more Brits to this Dutch Caribbean gem. **Estella Shardlow** reports

With its award-winning white-sand beaches, year-round sunshine, incredible scuba diving and plethora of soft adventure offerings, Aruba has all the hallmarks of a quintessential Caribbean escape.

Culturally it offers a refreshingly different flavour to bigger, better-known neighbours in the region. Despite lying just 18 miles off the coast of South America, it's part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, and layers of Dutch, Spanish and Latin American influence have imbued the island-nation with a fascinating fusion that plays out in everything from gastronomy to architecture.

This safe and small southern Caribbean gem has long been a favourite of American visitors. But British holidaymakers will soon be able to access Aruba's charms more easily, with the first-ever direct scheduled flight from the UK launching on March 26. The year-round British Airways service, which also

stops in Antigua, will depart Sundays and Thursdays from Gatwick. It joins Tui Airways' existing charter service, which runs from May to November, and daily flights via Amsterdam with KLM.

Ahead of the new route launching, Aruba Tourism Authority has secured a slew of tour operators, including Caribtours, Gold Medal, Major Travel and Classic Collection. So, what can you expect from the island? Here's our handy guide.

CHOOSE YOUR OWN ADVENTURE

Fly and flop or discover the great outdoors? "We've got both ends of the spectrum covered," says Sanju Luidens, chief marketing officer at Aruba Tourism Authority. "Beach huggers can just relax under a *palapa* (open-sided thatched structure) and disconnect from the stress of home. But there's plenty of soft adventure and nature to enjoy, too – including on our hiking and biking trails." Aruba's rugged interior and northwestern reaches present a dramatic contrast ➤



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Aruba offers crystal-clear waters; hiking in Arikok National Park; Baby Beach

PICTURES: David Troeger/Jetlag Creative Studio; Myles McGuinness; Jeremy Peters

to the manicured resort stretches of Eagle Beach and Palm Beach. Hotels, palm trees and boutiques give way to cacti-covered hills, abandoned gold mines and colourful, traditional *cunucu* (country) houses. Keen walkers can conquer Hooiberg, a 165-metre-high peak forged by ancient volcanoes, in the island's heartland. On a clear day, views extend all the way to Venezuela.

In Arikok National Park, which covers one-fifth of the island, you'll find secluded natural pools only accessible by foot, horse or 4x4, and wave-lashed limestone cliffs dramatically sculpted into natural bridges. Its caves contain 1,000-year-old artworks made by Caquetío Indians, the island's first settlers. Reaching Aruba's northernmost tip, a martian landscape of sand dunes awaits at Hudishibana.

Exploring all of this independently is a breeze, whether you're hopping on public transport or renting a car or ATV. "There's no need to feel confined to your hotel," Sanju says. "That's not only because of its size [just 21 miles long] and the modern infrastructure, but also because you feel safe. Arubans are so warm and hospitable – they'll happily give you directions."

LIFE'S A BEACH

Even by Caribbean standards, Aruba is blessed when it comes to beaches – three of which featured in the 2022 Tripadvisor Travellers' Choice Awards.

“Gourmands can hop between European, Asian and Caribbean flavours, thanks to the 90 nationalities who call this island home

Eagle Beach came in third, with the icing-sugar sands of Baby Beach and Arashi Beach making the top 25.

Crucially, it also enjoys perfect sunbathing weather year-round since the island sits outside the hurricane belt. "Even in the summer months, we have cooling trade winds, so it stays pleasant, whereas many other Caribbean destinations can get very humid," Sanju explains. "I wouldn't quite promise 365 days of sunshine, but let's say 360, to be on the safe side!"

Heading into the crystal-clear waters, scuba fans will be thrilled to find more than 10 wrecks to dive, from sunken freighters to aircraft.

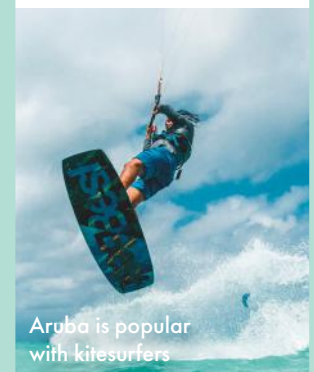
For those who prefer to stay on dry land, the island's big on beach tennis (think beach volleyball with paddles and an inflatable tennis ball) while reliable sea breezes create the ideal conditions for windsurfing and kiteboarding.

ASK THE expert



"The island's unique selling points are definitely the climate, white-sand beaches and its people, whose warm, welcoming smiles greet visitors at every turn. Hospitality remains a strongly ingrained tradition. Arubans gladly share their island and its unique culture, which is well displayed in folkloric festivals, art exhibitions and during a very joyous carnival season. Aruba is also a really great spot for sports and is one of the best places in the Caribbean for windsurfing or kiteboarding. Clients should visit Arikok National Park, which is home to cultural heritage sites, including caves, original Indian rock drawings and unusual land formations. Renaissance Private Island is home to Aruba's only private beaches, where flamingos roam freely. Guests get free access to the island when staying at Renaissance Wild Creek Resort."

Natalia Van Kirk, product manager, Caribtours



Aruba is popular with kitesurfers

DESTINATIONS

ARUBA | CARIBBEAN

SAMPLE PRODUCT

Major Travel has seven nights in Aruba from £2,275, with two nights at Renaissance Wind Creek Resort & Casino, and five nights at Manchebo Beach Resort & Spa. Price includes BA flights departing May 7 and private transfers. major.travel

Caribtours offers seven nights at Bucuti & Tara Beach Resort from £2,149, including breakfast, private transfers, BA flights and the use of an airport lounge on departure in the UK, for travel in September. caribtours.co.uk



FROM LEFT: Horseshooting in Arikok National Park; kayaking at Arashi Beach

CULINARY CULTURE

Aruba packs a punch when it comes to dining, both in sheer variety and quality. Besides the Caribbean beach bars and waterfront fish shacks – try Zeerover's for the freshest catch, served with plantain and pickles – fine-dining destinations include chef Urvin Croes' 18-seat open-kitchen concept Infini and Ocean Z, which topped Tripadvisor's Best Fine Dining Restaurants of the Caribbean list for 2022.

Gourmands can hop between European, Asian and Caribbean flavours, thanks to the 90 nationalities who call this island home. Inspired by its Latin American neighbours, there's an abundance of *arepas* (savoury corn cakes), *quesillo* (caramel flan) and *pastechi* (Aruban empanadas), plus a penchant for hot pepper sauces like the locally made *pika di papaya*. And don't miss the

national dish, *keshi yena* – gouda or edam cheese stuffed with spiced, slow-cooked meat, cashew nuts and capers.

WHERE TO STAY

Most of Aruba's resorts are along Eagle Beach and Palm Beach, where international names sit side-by-side with boutique hotels, so your clients have ample choice when deciding where to stay. There's a Ritz-Carlton, Hyatt Regency and Marriott as well as smaller options, such as Boardwalk, Ocean Z and Manchebo. Adult-only Bucuti & Tara Beach Resort is not only a honeymooners' favourite but has impressive sustainability credentials – the net-zero hotel won a UN Climate Action Award in 2020. The latest addition to the line-up is Embassy Suites by Hilton Aruba Resort, which opened this year, and St Regis is slated to debut on the island in 2024. **TW**

FUN | ADULTS ONLY | ALL INCLUSIVE | TOPLESS-OPTIONAL AREAS | PARTY ATMOSPHERE

TEMPTATION

MICHES RESORT

2023's THEME NIGHTS

Here is a look at what themes 2023 has in store
Let's play in **Miches, Dominican Republic!**

JUNGLE NIGHT MONDAY Dress code: animal print	PARTY CIRCUS TUESDAY Dress code: sexy circus attire	LACE, MASKS AND HEELS WEDNESDAY Dress code: women, lingerie & masks; men, casual attire & masks	GLITTERY FUN THURSDAY Dress code: glitter & shine
DOMINICAN WAY TO PLAY FRIDAY Dress code: sexy tropical attire	NEON WAVE SATURDAY Dress code: white & neon colors	BURNING LAND SUNDAY Dress code: sexy original creation	

LET'S PLAY Earn sexy rewards for every booking by registering and logging bookings on www.temptationrewards.com