

New horizons

Clare Vooght takes a first look at Sandals' debut resort outside the British Caribbean, on the island of Curaçao

Where's that?" is most people's response when you mention Curaçao – a name usually more closely associated with the sweet blue liquor than the holiday destination.

The tiny Dutch Caribbean island isn't a well-known spot for the UK market, but that's something Sandals is hoping to change with the opening of its 44-acre resort on the south coast.

The 351-room property – a seafront oasis with a double-decker infinity pool at its centre – comes complete with heart-shaped beach loungers and swim-up suites, as well as the brand's familiar blue and white beachy decor and all-inclusive offering.

It is the first Sandals resort to open outside the English-speaking Caribbean. And for Sandals' executive chairman, Adam Stewart, the location really matters: having visited Curaçao as a child, it was his family's dream to open a property here.

"Every time we come to Curaçao we fall more and more in love with this destination, because of all of those things coming together – the Dutch culture, the swag of the Caribbean, South America being just 40 miles away – all of which make it not a normal place, and an undiscovered place," said Stewart, at the resort's launch weekend in June.

"Sandals is going to change Curaçao for the better." ➤

Sandals Royal
Curaçao PICTURE: Corey
Hamilton/Sandals Resorts

CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT:
Melemele One Bedroom Butler
Walkout Suite, Sandals Royal
Curaçao; Willemstad; Nultwintig
restaurant **PICTURES:** Corey Hamilton;
Shutterstock/Birdiegal; Bronwyn Knight



A PLACE TO EXPLORE

While Curaçao is a favourite for the Dutch market (it's still part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands), it's little known as a tourist destination outside that. But by creating the resort, Stewart hopes to open up the destination more widely to tourism.

"I think he'll do it," says Ryan Speakman of Got 2 Go Travel, one of Sandals' top-selling UK travel agents. "He's done it before – they did it in Turks and Caicos." (Sandals opened a Beaches resort there in 2014.)

Sandals Royal Curaçao will appeal to a slightly different type of client, says Speakman – the type of client who wants to explore.

"When you go into the city you can walk around freely," he says. "There's so much you can do on your own – you don't necessarily need an organised trip, you can just get a taxi into town. This is a massive selling point. It breaks that mould where people think you go to the Caribbean and stay in your hotel."

The island has a similar feel to Barbados and Grenada,

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so Speakman recommends suggesting it to clients who visit those destinations regularly and are looking for something new.

Willemstad, Curaçao's capital, is known for its pastel-coloured colonial Dutch buildings, lining the waters of St Anna Bay, which splits the city into two parts: Punda and Otrobanda. While Punda is the more modern commercial side, Otrobanda is Willemstad's vibrant historic district. On our walk around this compact, friendly island capital, everyone seems to know each other, with the standard Papamientos greeting 'Kumba, dushi!' ('Hey, sweetie!') something you'll hear frequently on a visit.

Through doorways that sit between vibrant and at times quirky murals – from tropical flowers to beach-going flamingos – you'll

find colourful cafes and bustling restaurants, all part of a thriving dining scene. At Nultwintig, a restaurant in a Dutch building with a sea-facing garden, you'll find Curaçao cocktails as blue as the pool, best enjoyed while tucking into mountainous salads made with pea shoots, baby corn, fresh mango, and topped with the freshest ever-so-slightly pan-seared tuna steak.

Nultwintig is one of eight restaurants that form part of the resort's island-inclusive dining programme. Couples staying in a butler suite receive a \$250 voucher per seven-night stay to use in any of those restaurants on the island, encouraging people to get out and explore.

Encouraging tourists out of the resort and into local businesses ➤

SELLING TIPS

🌐 Because Curaçao is located farther south than many other Caribbean destinations – and outside the hurricane belt – there's no heavy rainy season. October to December are the wettest months but Curaçao generally experiences little rain.

✈️ While there's no direct flight from the UK, it's an easy connection to get to Curaçao from Amsterdam. Highlight to clients living in the north of England or Scotland that a connecting flight from Manchester or Edinburgh is an easy option that's not much different from travelling to London to fly long-haul.

🏠 Upsell to a butler suite, so clients can gain access to the resort's fullest all-inclusive package. This includes free use of a Mini Cooper to explore the island and vouchers to use in some of its best restaurants.

DESTINATIONS

CARIBBEAN | CURAÇAO

3
OF THE BEST
EXCURSIONS



Klein Curaçao Catamaran Cruise

Sail to Curaçao's little sister island Klein Curaçao (pictured) for a day to enjoy its white sand and ultra-clear waters. Spend the day snorkelling with sea turtles or explore the ruins of the island's 19th-century pink lighthouse. **From \$138**

Willemstad E-bike City Tour

Pedal around the Unesco-protected capital city to see its colourful Dutch architecture. The two-hour tour takes in the main square, the 17th-century Fort Amsterdam and pretty historic quarter Otrobanda with its pastel buildings and vibrant street art. **From \$87**

Curaçao National Park Jeep Safari

Spot some of Curaçao's best wildlife on this six-hour route around some of the island's most scenic spots, from flamingos (pictured) in the Salt Plains to white-tailed deer in Christoffel National Park, the country's most biodiverse park. **From \$128**



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Sandals Royal Curaçao; Willemstad; Kurason Island Suites, Sandals Royal Curaçao PICTURES: Bronwyn Knight; Shutterstock/elverkins, fokke baarssen, jdross75



is an important part of building a more sustainable future for tourism on the island – though Sandals still has work to do to back up its sustainability claims. While a partnership between the Sandals Foundation and local recycling centre Limpi creates a strong headline, plastic bottles are still a feature in the rooms. However, the resort is working hard to provide jobs for local people, with existing staff from Sandals hotels across the Caribbean coming to the island to train new Curaçaoan recruits.

'SANDALS 2.0'

Sandals Royal Curaçao – and its island-inclusive dining programme – is the first example of 'Sandals 2.0', as Stewart calls it, which involves reviewing every element of the experience and revamping the resort's all-inclusive offering. This includes new dining concepts, including beachside food trucks, while butler suite guests can borrow

“Sandals Royal Curaçao – and its island-inclusive dining programme – is the first example of 'Sandals 2.0', says Stewart

a Mini from the resort to drive around the island. Jamaica's upcoming Sandals Dunn's River will take the concept even further, Stewart promises. Sandals' all-inclusive offering remains one of its strongest selling points. The free minibars are well-stocked (and restocked) with full-sized bottles of spirits and soft drinks. And you're never far from a bar, whether you're after an Ibiza-style chillout drink on white beanbags in the sand, intimate cocktails in a heart-shaped cabana, a strawberry daiquiri at the swim-up bar or, indeed, a blue Curaçao cocktail on the beach at sunset. All of this creates the perfect base from which to explore the island – something that's made very easy for guests. So you can guarantee you'll leave this resort knowing much more about Curaçao than just its penchant for the blue liquor. **TW**

BOOK IT

Seven nights at **Sandals Royal Curaçao** in a Carisia Club Level Oceanview Room costs from £3,115 per person, based on two sharing. The price includes unlimited à la carte dining, drinks, including premium spirits, land and water sports, tips, and economy flights from Heathrow with KLM, via Amsterdam, and is based on a September 2023 departure. sellingsandals.co.uk