

Double Dutch

Bonaire and Curacao are the unsung heroes of the Caribbean, writes Jo Cooke

Cast your eye over a map of the West Indies and you'll see Bonaire and Curacao hanging out, just off the north coast of Venezuela.

You may be more familiar with their sister island, Aruba, thanks to Tui's seasonal direct flights, but while it may take a little more effort to reach Bonaire and Curacao, just rewards await.

As well as delivering on sun, sea and sand, these twins have a unique character and landscape, are easy to explore, and certain to please those who love to tread the path less travelled.

▶ SELLING THE ISLANDS

Bonaire and Curacao lie outside the hurricane belt, which could be reassuring to clients after last year's devastating season. Temperatures average 30C year-round, and rainfall 20 inches, most of which falls between October and February.

While there are no direct flights, KLM flies to Bonaire and Curacao from Heathrow via Amsterdam, with two flights a day giving clients plenty of

flexibility. The outbound transfer is seamless, while inbound clients will need to pass through security on arrival at Schiphol airport. The flight time is about 13 hours.

A twin-centre holiday is easy to arrange, with multiple daily flights between the islands from Insel Air and a flight time of just 20 minutes.

The US dollar is the official currency of Bonaire. Curacao's

currency is the Netherlands Antillean guilder (NAF), with the US dollar universally accepted, although in remote spots, you'll be given your change in NAF.

Dutch is the official language, but English is widely spoken, as is Papiamentu, a creole of European and African languages. With must-sees dotted all over the place and the roads generally good, suggest clients rent a vehicle for part of their stay. In Bonaire, a few extra dollars per day upgrades them to a pick-up truck, which is essential for touring the national park. →

FAST FACT
Bonaire is a Netherlands municipality, while Curacao is part of the kingdom of the Netherlands

PICTURES: TOURISM CORPORATION BONAIRE, WE SHARE BONAIRE



LEFT: Washington Slagbaai National Park, Bonaire

RIGHT: Bonaire's salt pans



▶ BONJOUR, BONAIRE

See: Bigger than Aruba, but with a fraction of its population, Bonaire has a sleepy, desert island vibe, but there's still plenty to do. You can divvy the island up into two halves: the pancake-flat south and the undulating north.

The jewel of the north is Washington Slagbaai National Park. At the entrance, a museum gets you up to speed with Bonaire's political and social history, flora and fauna, before you buckle up for a roller-coaster drive on dirt roads through paradise.

Parakeets, yellow warblers and orange-breasted troupials dart across your path, and the flashes of colour continue with flocks of flamingo wading in the salt pans. Biking and hiking trails also appear, and a 45-minute climb takes you to the summit of the island's highest peak, Mount Brandaris, at 784 feet.

Afterwards, cool off at snorkelling spot Wayaka, where giant parrot fish gather.

Bonaire's west coast has more than 50 shore dives – one of its biggest selling points. Sign scuba fiends up for an accommodation package that includes tank and truck rental, and they can independently pick their dive sites and times without the need to book boat trips.

For windsurfing, there's the east coast. At Jibe City, a clapboard beach shack on a glorious arc of white sand, you can hire



Salt pans change hue with the light of the day from pink to violet, contrasting with the blue sky

equipment or sign up for lessons. It's ideal for beginners or children, as the water is waist deep and protected by an offshore reef.

In the south of the island, salt pans stretch for miles, changing hue with the light of the day from pink to violet, and making a striking contrast to the blue sky.

Life on Bonaire exudes ease and freedom even in the capital Kralendijk, where an oceanfront promenade leads past shops, restaurants and pavement cafes, where folk gather for sunset.

Stay: Until recently, self-catering apartments were the staple. The first brand-name hotel – a 140-room Courtyard by Marriott – opened in 2016, a short drive from the capital. For all-inclusive, the 126-room Divi Flamingo Beach Resort, a short walk from Kralendijk's promenade, will oblige. Another commissionable option is the neighbouring 50-room Harbour Village Beach Club, a Small Luxury Hotel of the World (see *Tried & Tested*, right).

▶ CURACAO TIME

See: Willemstad, the colourful, cosmopolitan capital of Curacao, is reason alone to visit. One of the most walkable and interesting cities in the Caribbean, time slips away here as you wander past the floating produce market, admire

the Dutch colonial architecture, and marvel at Queen Emma Bridge, which links the two sides of the city, Punda and Otrobanda.

To allow ships to pass through to the inner harbour, the pontoon bridge disconnects from one bank and rotates until parallel

✔ Tried & Tested

HARBOUR VILLAGE BEACH CLUB

Set on a quiet peninsula, the property's exquisite gardens frame Bonaire's only private beach – and what a beach: possibly the best on the island. A thicket of palms draped with double hammocks provides seclusion for romantics, and gently shelving sand makes it a relaxing choice for families, as do the beachfront two-bedroom suites.

While everyone wants an ocean-view room, their budget doesn't always allow. It's not a

problem here, as the marina-view rooms also overlook the blue.

The on-site dive shops offer a concierge service that preps and cleans clients' gear, while the coral conservation programme ensures the surrounding shallows are teeming with fish. You can even watch them as you dine at the over-water restaurant. Happy hour goes on for two hours, and a candlelit table on the sand comes as standard at the weekly beach barbecue.





PICTURE: RODOLFO BENITEZ



→ with the other. You can even stay on it while it's moving!

The Kura Hulanda Museum of African art and history, together with the Mikvé Israel-Emanuel Synagogue, the oldest in the western hemisphere, offer a cultural detour. Then stop for coffee along the St Anna Bay, and you could be forgiven for thinking you're canal-side in Amsterdam.



Everyone's vision of a Caribbean beach, they offer turquoise waters and soft sand, backed by cliffs and tropical foliage

Base clients in Willemstad and they can make day trips to the sizeable Sea Aquarium, Ostrich Farm, Aloe Vera Plantation or Curacao Liqueur Distillery, to see how the island's firewater is distilled in its many colours.

Dive sites and beaches line up along the west and south side of the island. For the best sandy spots, head towards Westpunt and you'll stumble across Playa Porto Mari, Cas Abao, and the more remote Kleine and Grote Knip. Everyone's vision of a Caribbean beach, they offer soft sand and turquoise waters, backed by cliffs and tropical foliage.

While you're up west, check out Christoffel National Park. It gives you the chance to nose around an old estate house, the Savonet Museum, which recounts plantation life. The park is also home to the island's highest point, the 1,220-foot Mount Christoffel, which can be climbed in about three hours. Driving trails lead to a wealth of viewing points, as well as hidden caves adorned with the primitive artwork of early settlers.

Stay: The 237-room Renaissance Curacao Resort and Casino edges the 19th-century Rif Fort in Willemstad, and is part of a complex with upmarket shops and a cinema that connects to the cruise ship dock.

Footsteps from Queen Emma Bridge is the 82-room Sonesta Kura Hulanda Village and Spa. Gardens shroud two swimming pools and rooms are fashioned from former colonial houses. The decor is a bit tired but the hotel has an irresistible charm. **TW**



Rooms at Harbour Village Beach Club with **Small Luxury Hotels of the World** start at \$295 per night including breakfast, based on two sharing. slh.com/harbourvillage

KLM operates a year-round service from Heathrow via Amsterdam, with return fares to Curacao from £661 and to Bonaire starting at £809. klm.com



TOP LEFT: Willemstad

TOP RIGHT: Grote Knip

LEFT: Christoffel National Park