

and it's likely you'll be hooked for good

By JULIETTE FAIRLEY

The problem with taking a long weekend in Aruba is that after three or four days you won't want to leave. In fact, you'll cry at the airport and start planning a trip back on the flight home. That's because Aruba is the most pristine, orderly, intelligent and efficient island in the Caribbean. Blame it on the Dutch colonizers, who created a school system that requires the study of Dutch, English and Spanish.

You don't have to worry about tropical rainstorms in Aruba. The weather is sunny year-round because the island, off the coast of Venezuela, is below the hurricane belt. About the only worry are the iguanas and lizards that scamper at your feet, but they don't bite, instead offering an array of colors to marvel at, from brown and bright green to black stripes and snakeskin gray.

Major American hotel chains have a presence along the Druif Beach shoreline of white sand, palm trees, clear blue skies and warm turquoise water in Oranjestad, the capital city. Best Western's Manchebo Resort has an affordable nightly rate of \$129, but that doesn't include meals. The Divi Aruba Beach Resort offers an all-inclusive deal at \$145 per night with meals, snacks, all you can drink, and children under 17 free.

Clogs, windmills, and casinos are what set this island apart from other Caribbean destinations. There's the Divi Alhambra, Crystal Casino and the Copacabana Casino of the Hyatt Regency to name a few. (Rates subject to change.)

WATER WORLD

Aruba's charm has a lot to do with the fact that there's always something to do, whether you're a prince or a pauper. You can register at your hotel to take a three-hour Happy Hour Snorkel Sail on a catamaran for \$35 or a 30-minute sail on the Banana Boat for \$15. For singles, there's the Tattoo party boat that toots around the Caribbean Sea blasting hip hop and top 40 music. The more subdued Fantasy Sunset Dinner Cruise is \$55 and offers candlelight dinner and romantic music. For information and reservations, log on to www.arubaadventures.com or call (297) 586-2010.

For the traveler in search of history, there's much to uncover in a three- or four-day trip. The history behind the largest and most recent wreck, Antilla, for example, is that in 1940, the German cargo ship was surrounded by Dutch forces who demanded its surrender. The captain



IS EVERYBODY HAPPY? On the Snorkel Sail, the answer is yes.

instead sank his 400-foot, 4,400-ton ship. The ship's rudder sticks out of the water like an iceberg.

The 12 other shipwrecks along the coast dating back to the 17th century, visible via snorkeling or scuba-diving, make for interesting conversation and speculation. There are also plenty of caves, Indian drawings, abandoned gold mines, rock formations and sand dunes to explore.

Papiamento is the native language, developed in the neighboring island of Curaçao in the 1500s to enable African slaves to communicate with their Dutch oppressors. For people-watching, simply observe the locals, many of whom are a mix of Dutch, African and Indian ancestry.

The island is 19.5 miles long and only 6 miles wide, making transportation quick and easy. Taxis always seem to cost \$8 even if the ride is only 5 minutes. Airport cab rides are \$17, no matter the destination resort. One solution to high-priced taxis is a bicycle. There are miles of bike paths along the beach and the breeze cools down the effects of the sun.

Once you've been to Aruba, there's really no going back to anything less organized and secure, especially if you don't want to worry about hurricanes — or much of anything at all.

For more information, log on to the Aruba Tourist's Board Web site at www.aruba.com or call 1-800-TQ-ARUBA.

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