

KICK BACK IN



Curacao

BY LISA ARCELLA

Most people head to the Caribbean to swim, lie on the beach and sip exotic colored drinks from tall glasses, to generally chill out. Curacao certainly has all of that—just 35 miles off the coast of Venezuela—the weather is perfect (outside of the hurricane belt), the beaches pristine, the water safe to drink and the streets next to the candy colored buildings of its main city Willemstad are safe and clean.

A former colony of the Netherlands, the island is now a multicultural mix of 50 nationalities that so peacefully coexist; the UN should be headquartered here. Venture out of your hotel and while everyone will certainly speak to you in English, locals easily switch between Papiamentu (the local language) Spanish, Creole, Dutch and Portuguese.

But aside from the warm breeze and relaxed style of island living, there is another attraction in Curacao that is especially attracting people of color from around the world.

In the west side of the Willemstad known as Otrabanda, on the property of a pretty hotel complex called Kura Hulanda is the Kura Hulanda Museum—dedicated to African history around the world, with a special emphasis on the impact of the slave trade.

In just 10 months, eccentric Dutch multimillionaire Jakob Gelt Dekker and his staff compiled an impressive array of artifacts including historic prints, art works, bones, fossils and a beautiful sculpture garden. There's a section dedicated to Marcus Garvey and even three of Emperor Haile Salasie's lion costumes—which have attracted a number of Rastafarian tourists.

But without a doubt, the most compelling part of the Museum Kura Hulanda is that unlike many parts of the Caribbean that have chosen

to down play their role in the history of slavery, the museum has acknowledged its' tragically long role. Arawak Indians were pressed into hard labor on European-run plantations of Curacao in the 1400s. By 1670, the island was the center of the Dutch slave trade, and tens of thousands of Africans were brought here under the direction of the Dutch West India Co.

Within view of where the museum now sits, slaves who survived the hellish high seas on such ships as the Amistad, Gift of God, Liberty pulled into port to train slaves to learn to work on the plantations before being shipped off again to North America or sugar plantations on other islands.

In one room of the museum are rusted wrist shackles and neck irons among slave-trade maps and journals, as well as a chilling recreation of a slave ship, which includes a wood-plank deck with nine steps descending into the dungeon-like cargo hold. It's easy to imagine the horror of what it was like for a slave to be bound and piled like cattle for the torturous ocean journey in this dark hole.

"Seeing that can be a very emotional experience, especially for black Americans," says museum curator Leo Helm.

"This place is not just about slavery—that would be too heavy. There's a good mix and is about all of our histories as human beings. I want to encourage people to come and see this as part of the island in addition to the other activities on the island. It's an eye-opener for black and white people alike." Helm adds.

The museum is also in process of working on DNA testing with universities in Holland to develop DNA testing so that one day down the line African Americans who visit will be able to discover exactly where in Africa their ancestors are from. In the meantime the museum is a great place to visit in between visits to the beach. **BE**

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An old fashioned courtyard in the center of the Kura Hulanda hotel is a great spot to rest, grab a cocktail and listen to music.



The sculpture of "Mama Africa" graces the courtyard of the Kura Hulanda museum.



One of the many African sculptures on display at the museum.

Curacao native Dinah Veeris is an expert on medicinal plants and herbs

WHERE TO STAY

Hotel Kura Hulanda
800-223-6800
www.kurahulanda.com

Avila Beach Hotel
800-747-8162
www.avilahotel.com

Curacao Marriott Beach Resort & Emerald Casino
800-223-6388
www.marriotthotels.com

Holiday Beach Hotel and Casino
800-444-5244,
www.hol-beach.com

WHERE TO EAT

This is the place where bright Blue Curacao cocktails originated (the liqueur also comes in other colors) and a popular local dish is a chicken and cheese stew Keshi Yena (as a former Dutch colony, there's lots of cheese here) Check out these popular restaurants:

Fort Nassau: Wonderful food and views of the city. www.curacao.com/fortnassau

Gouverneur 'De Rouville': Local tastes, close to town. www.de-gouverneur.com

Blues: A bar and restaurant right on the beach that often features live music. www.avilahotel.com.

Jaipur: Tandoori and Asian inspired food overlooking a beautiful eco-pool, near the museum. www.kurahulanda.com

Brasserie Passeniers Wineseller, Promenade Shopping Center: A lovely French restaurant that attracts locals

WHAT ELSE TO SEE

Diving—Curacao is a diving and snorkeling haven and there are plenty of organizations to accommodate you no matter what level you are at. Visit www.curacaotourism.com for a list of operators.

You might also want to check out one of the many colonial houses, the Curacao Ostrich Farm, The Sea Aquarium (where you can swim with sea lions), the Hato Caves, the historic Mikve Israel-Emmanuel Synagogue, The Octagon museum (dedicated to South American hero Simon Bolivar) and of course the many, many beautiful beaches.

A must not miss is a visit with Dinah Veeris and her Deb Paradera herb garden. Miss Veeris is a former teacher, who now dedicates her life to the healing powers of the islands plants—both medicinally and spiritually. Her wealth of knowledge is amazing and you'll wish you were one of her sick plants as she sings it a lullaby back to good health.