

LEARNING OPPORTUNITY

SP heads to Curaçao, where luxury and history go hand-in-hand



The historic port capital of Willemstad in Curaçao, which, our guide said, was once the biggest slave market in the Caribbean.

APRIL BYRD



At the new Lodge Kurá Hulanda and Beach Club guests can enjoy sun, shade and snorkeling.

HOPE PHILBRICK



Hotel Kurá Hulanda village square

COURTESY OF HOTEL KURAHULANDA

BY HOPE S. PHILBRICK

I confess. All I really want from a vacation is rest, relaxation and remarkable culinary experiences. So when I find myself in Curaçao's (pronounced cure-a-sow) Museum Kurá Hulanda, I'm not initially what you might call thrilled about this "learning opportunity" on our itinerary. But it doesn't take long for the place to win me over. In fact, months later, it's what I remember most.

Because it's not easy to forget the feeling of standing in a full-size recreation of a slave ship's hold. The physical reality of such a space kicks you in the stomach.

Billed as "a museum of the history of mankind," the place makes its impact about midway through the guided tour, when the focus shifts from evolution to slavery. (A tour guide is beneficial; displays aren't labeled to facilitate read-as-you-go self-guided exploration.) The exhibit covers the transatlantic slave trade in its totality, from capture in Africa through transit to relocation in the Caribbean and Americas. The collection of documents, testimonials, restraining devices and other artifacts powerfully conveys the sheer horror of the slave trade without placing blame, so the gut-wrenching main course comes without the side of fresh guilt. The result is a must-see. The

museum is open daily, but Wednesday evenings also offer a chance to watch actors recreate slave sales, rebellions and struggles.

"Curaçao was the biggest slave market in the Caribbean," says our tour guide, Yflen, so it's fitting that such a museum is located at the city-center harbor of Willemstad, the capital of this Netherlands Antilles island. Located in the southwestern Caribbean just 35 miles north of Venezuela between Aruba and Bonaire, Curaçao is a mere 38 miles long and two to seven and a half miles wide. In that area, 130,000 residents from 55 different cultures live today in ethnic harmony.

After touring the Caribbean's largest collection of African artifacts, it's refreshing to linger at the modern Hotel Kurá Hulanda Spa & Casino. Located within an eight-block village complex, the 80-room hotel is composed of 65 restored 18th- and 19th-century Dutch colonial buildings that are reputed to have at one time housed drug addicts and prostitutes—and now stand as evidence that history can be remembered even while improved. Today, the refurbished rooms feature hand-carved mahogany and teak antiques, hand-woven linens and walls that have been hand-painted by local artists for unique results.

"All rooms are not the same here," says Shirley Geerman, director of sales, "but you

will get consistency in quality and service."

Expect conveniences like air conditioning, high-speed Internet access, cable television, in-room safe and more. Rates range from \$200 to \$800 a night, varying by season and room size.

Among the dining options on the property, the Astrolab Observatory Restaurant is the crown jewel, where Executive Chef Stephane Brallet, winner of the "Best Chef of the Island" competition for the past three years, prepares gourmet treats. "I try to get creativity and technique to balance in all of the dishes," he tells me. The result, like his asparagus soup with mushroom ravioli, is a memory upon which great vacations are built.

While the main hotel property is convenient to Willemstad and all that city has to offer, the new Lodge Kurá Hulanda and Beach Club is a 40-minute drive through scenic, arid countryside. This tranquil setting features 44 oceanfront rooms, 30 garden rooms and one tree house, with rates starting at \$100 a night. An all-inclusive option includes three meals a day that "are not the same, standard buffet every day," says Rolf Oversier, resident manager.

Try the "Best of Both Worlds" package for a six-day vacation that combines city and beach experiences with three nights in each. After all, relaxing doesn't necessarily mean doing nothing. **SP**

IF YOU GO

Getting There: American Airlines, Air Jamaica and KLM are among the airlines flying to Curaçao. From Atlanta, expect a stop at Miami, Newark or Charlotte.

Know Before You Go: To enter, U.S. citizens need a valid passport and a return ticket. Dutch is the official language, but most Curaçaoans also speak English or Spanish.

What To Do: The 38 beaches invite you to experience one of the top-rated diving destinations in the Caribbean. But you can also stay dry and explore the historic port capital, one of only six in the Caribbean listed on the UNESCO World Heritage site list. The pedestrian-friendly Willemstad features a harbor surrounded by outdoor cafés and markets. A key attraction is the floating market, which offers fresh arrivals from Venezuela, Columbia and other West Indian Islands each day, with an assortment ranging from fish to handicrafts. The city also houses the oldest operating synagogue (1732) in the Western Hemisphere.

More Information: Visit www.kurahulanda.com or www.curaçao.com.