

Looking For A Free Ride? Come to Curaçao

By Marcie Connelly-Lynn

After a couple of months in Bonaire, a visit to Curaçao was a welcome change. A quick 40-mile downwind sail and we were searching diligently for the entrance to Spanish Waters. We'd repeatedly been assured it was there along with a nude beach that stretched along the narrow entry channel. With Table Mountain properly situated and even with waypoints, the first-time entry required a leap of faith. Once negotiated, the path to the Sarifundy anchorage is somewhat circuitous, a bit of a trial for sailors who've been hanging on a mooring for two months instead of sailing. The re-learning process for us forgetful baby-boomers is always a challenge.



Looking from picturesque Bredestraat towards the "Swinging Lady"

Though the anchorage is not close to town, economical buses run on a convenient schedule every day and service most of the island. Sunday dawned warm and sunny and since the buses were running, we opted to make a foray into Willemstad, the main city on the island, about a 25-minute ride from the anchorage.

Willemstad is separated into two parts, Punda and Otrobanda, by the waters of St. Anna's Bay. The two parts are connected by the historic Queen Emma's Bridge, primarily used for foot traffic, and another larger vehicular traffic bridge further up the bay. The whole town is easily accessible by foot. Following the canal from the bus station on

the Punda side takes you past the "floating market", a delight to the eye as brightly colored Venezuelan boats line up along the wharf with open stalls of fresh produce and fish for sale.



The Venezuelan "Floating Market" is a feast for the eyes. Though sharing the Papiamentu language and much of the same heritage and history as Bonaire, Curaçao is much more cosmopolitan and thus very different in nature. The center of town is a maze of alleyways, nooks and crannies, all teeming with street vendors, little shops, restaurants and boutiques. A carillon mounted on one downtown building chimed on the half hour and could be heard blocks away, beckoning us to find it. We walked for hours, ate in quaint little outdoor cafés and generally appreciated the unique aspects of the largest island of the Netherlands Antilles.

Without a doubt, the waterfront street, Handelskade, on the Punda side, is the most memorable sight in Curaçao. Dutch Colonial architecture is prevalent in the bay side mansions originally owned by wealthy 18th and 19th century merchants. The area is well preserved and is now occupied by restaurants, shops, banks and other commercial properties. Legend has it that a popular governor some 200 years ago complained that he got a headache from waking up to all the white houses along the waterfront. In deference to his wishes, the islanders have painted their homes in bright pastels ever since.

Looking For A Free Ride? Come to Curaçao

By Marcie Connelly-Lynn

The Queen Emma Pontoon Bridge, affectionately called the “Swinging Lady” by locals, was built in 1888, to allow traffic to pass between the two parts of the city. There was originally a toll in place that was charged to only those who could afford shoes. The poor folk borrowed shoes so as not to be embarrassed and paid the toll. The rich, too stingy to pay, hid their shoes and crossed barefoot. The bridge is now free to cross as are the ferries that transport people across the 500’ wide bay. The bridge opens as many as 30 times a day to allow water traffic to pass and visitors line the walls watching the show. The bridge tender actually starts an engine and “drives” the pontoon bridge to an open position. The process takes about 30 minutes each time. Last minute pedestrians on the bridge scurry as the bridge begins to move regardless of their presence.

Though Willemstad offers several museums, with limited time we chose the Kura Hulanda, touted to have the best African collection in the Caribbean. This museum is dedicated to the history of slavery, slaves and the development of Curaçao through the centuries. It houses a tremendous number of artifacts including a full size replica of a ship’s slave hold. The second floor balcony of the museum affords a picturesque view of the orange-clay tiled roofs and dormered shutters of the surrounding city buildings, typical of Dutch Colonial period architecture. Opened in April 1999, there is also a large, very plush hotel attached to the museum that is rated as one of the top 100 small hotels in the world. Though we considered the rooms a bit pricey for an overnight, we enjoyed two-for-one happy hour pina coladas with friends in the pleasant courtyard.

While shopping for souvenirs, we ran into Sandra, owner of Curaçao Creations. Curaçao has extremely friendly people and Sandra was the epitome of hospitality. We chatted for quite awhile as she told us about life in Curaçao. While

discussing the ferry rides across the river, she shared a Papiamentu idiomatic expression with us: “kab’i boto”. Literally it means “head of the boat”, but figuratively in Papiamentu it has evolved into meaning “getting a free ride”. It seems in the olden days before the bridge, people paid a fare to take the ferry across the bay. If you sat up front in the boat, you got wet and didn’t have to pay the fare... hence, a free ride in Curaçao. Whether you sit up front or not, the ferry rides across the bay are now free.



Orange clay-tiled roofs fill the horizon as viewed from the balcony of Kura Hulanda Museum

Curaçao has lots more to offer which we didn’t get a chance to see. The bright blue liqueur, Curaçao, is made here exclusively at a distillery housed in Landhuis Chobolobo, an old country mansion. There are several other country houses to visit, an ostrich farm, an aquarium and caves to explore all accessible by bus or rental car. As for us, we were pleased to have had a few days here and like many cruisers we know, appreciated a free ride.