

MIKE AND AUDREY'S WINTER GETAWAY
DESTINATION ARUBA JAN 10-20: HYATT REGENCY RESORT

Aruba, officially the country of Aruba is a constituent country of the Kingdom of the Netherlands physically located in the mid-south of the Caribbean Sea, north of the Venezuela peninsula, northwest of Curaçao. We stayed at the Hyatt Regency Resort on the 9th floor with Ocean View. I loved walking up in the morning and while lying in my bed I could see Palm Beach, the boats and the Hyatt resort places of fun in the sun. The first couple of days we got settled in. We first night we had dinner at the Hyatt's Runas del Mar (a taste of the sea) built around the concept of the Bushiribana Gold Mill Ruins that we visited later in the trip. Ruinas del Mar offered an unparalleled ambiance featuring a koi lagoon, waterfalls, and rooftop bougainvillea garden. Iguanas, locally known as Yuwana, were resting on the rocks and a beautiful black swan was in the lagoon. The next day we lounged by one of the pools catching sights of the pretty active bananaquits that sometimes would land on your glass of juice and take a drink. We had lunch at the Palms Beach Bar and later after walking the beach went to check out the strip near our hotel with many restaurants and shops.

On the 12th we rented a 4 wheel drive jeep and went exploring the island. The jeep was delivered to the Hyatt in the afternoon so we didn't have a lot of time until sunset. We headed for the Sasariwichi Dunes and the California Lighthouse. One of Aruba's most famous landmarks, the California lighthouse is known for its spectacular views of the island. It's now open to the public to climb up to the highest look out point and enjoy panoramic 360 views of Aruba's most northern point. The wind at the top was strong, the views amazing. We had a workout of walking up the spiraling stairs, and a tight squeeze when other people were going up or down the stairs. We got back before sunset and walked the beach for sunset then went into town for dinner at the 'Chicken and Lobster'. The lobster was delicious and the bartender knew how to make good drinks.

Destination Aruba Jan 10-20: On the 13th we had a full day with the jeep to explore more of the island. Alto Vista Chapel is a small Catholic chapel that stands on the hills above the north shore of the sea and to the northeast of the town of Noord. The chapel was built in 1952 on the site of the original, and first, Catholic church built in Aruba in 1750 by a Spanish missionary, Domingo Antonio Silvestre. The bright yellow chapel is reached by a winding road lined with white crosses marking the stations of the cross. Behind the chapel was the peace labyrinth. The labyrinth is built based on the Chartres Labyrinth located in northwestern France. We saw the labyrinth at the Cathedral at Chartres when in Chartres, France one year.

Busy day as we headed along the coast to see the 'Natural Bridge', a geological formation where years of erosion from the sea has carved its way through coral rock forming a 100 foot bridge. The bridge collapsed on the 2nd of September 2005. Next to the collapsed bridge is now the 'Baby Natural Bridge'. We left and stopped occasionally to view the rugged shoreline watching and listening to the furious waves along the northwest coast. Next stop 'Ayo Rock Formations' that served Aruba's early inhabitants as a dwelling and religious site. The reddish-brown Arawak petroglyphs on the

monolithic rock boulders were protected by a gate. The boulders are located amidst cacti, and lizards are commonly encountered here. This place was amazing and we loved walking and climbing among the stacked boulders with a nice cross breeze.

Our last stop was Arikok Natural Park. We paid and got a map at the visitors center. Our designation was to visit the Fontein and Guadirikiri caves. Fontein is a small limestone cave easily accessible with pictographs created by Arawak people & graffiti left by early Europeans. The Guadirikiri cave is a long cave illuminated by holes in the cave ceiling, while the third chamber is damp and dark, filled with bat guano. We didn't see any bats. We tried to drive to the Conchi Natural Pool but the rugged terrain road was treacherous and for hiking it was too hot so we turned around and left the park for the day.

Destination Aruba Jan 10-20: On the 13th visit to San Nicolas a quiet coastal town of located twelve miles southeast of Oranjestad. Known as the island's 'Sunrise Side', San Nicolas was once a bustling company town, when Lago Oil and Transport Company opened its oil refinery in 1924 until 1985 when Exxon Corporation closed it and began to dismantle the facility as well as the Colony. A section of San Nicolas' main street has been converted to a picturesque promenade with shops and local snacks. There are over 50 hand-painted murals in San Nicolas. The murals and tiled benches were fantastic. We went to the tourist information center to get a map of the murals. We sure didn't see all of them before heading back to the Hyatt Resort for sunset and dinner at Amore Mio for the best wood fired Neapolitan pizza.

Destination Aruba Jan 10-20: The 14th plans were to go snorkeling. We had brought our own equipment and had a jeep so we went to Arashi Beach located on the northern coast of the island. The snorkeling here was excellent. Lots of fish without going out far. Saw many schools of fish that would surround us. Lots of small colorful fish and we loved watching the trunkfish swim by. Lots of fish and my favorite the angelfish. We then went to snorkel at Boca Catalina with its large sandy cove. Lots of different schools of fish and larger sized fish. After changing into dry clothes we watched some birds pecking at the fruit knobs on the cactus. Once the bird has its fill it flies away and disperses the seeds of the cactus fruit. Stopped for a photo shot at the historic windmill & landmark that now houses a casual restaurant. Drove to the butterfly farm for a visit. It is a nature sanctuary home to hundreds of butterflies in a rainforest-like enclosure.

We stopped at the Renaissance Marketplace for lunch at The Dutch Pancake House and afterwards went inside an interesting store called Mopa Mopa (Barniz De Pasto). Barniz De Pasto is an art form that has been passed down between generations for many centuries, dating back to the Inca civilization. The craft has been carried out by the people of Pasto, Colombia for many centuries. The leaf bud of the Mopa Mopa tree is harvested. The resin from the buds are extracted by boiling the buds to produce raw lacquer. It is then dyed using mineral powders. The hot resin is stretched to thin sheets. The artist carves out a design and uses the dyed resin to create a one of a kind boxes, vases, figures and other objects. I purchased a beautiful box with a hummingbird design.

Back to the Hyatt it time for another beautiful sunset and then dinner at Azia Restaurant & Lounge for Chinese food.

Destination Aruba Jan 10-20: The 15th we had arranged a nature and birding excursion with Michiel "Mike" Oversteegen an expert on birding and his knowledge of the island. He knew where to go and when to go to find the birds. We loved walking around in beautiful landscapes looking for birds and wild life. On the trip we even shared a moment with some donkeys that all wanted to court a female. Near the female was her young colt. We were able to take some good photos of the burrowing Owl: The Shoco, Venezuelan troupial and my favorites the Ruby-topaz hummingbird and the Blue-tailed Emerald hummingbird. Mike estimate more than 50 different species crossed our path. Mike took us to a special spot that locals have beach huts set up for themselves. We were happy to see the Green Turtles swimming close to the beach. He showed us on a map the route he took us on. Dinner tonight was at Gianni's Italian Restaurant. We ordered seafood dinners. Their signature dish is Italian Spaghetti al Formaggio Parmigiano. They bring out a large wheel of Parmesan cheese, shave out some cheese, pour whiskey on it, light it on fire and when the flames die down they put in the cooked spaghetti and roll it around completely covering the spaghetti with the cheese.

Destination Aruba Jan 10-20: The 16th & 17th We decided to hang out at the beach and reserved a palapa for the day. I had my new white bathing suit, sun hat, zebra sarong, beach bag (given to me by a wonderful friend), duck beach towels (a carry with you beach towel combo I sewed together years ago), my book (The Devil and the Dark Water) and plenty of snacks. We order some lunch from the café and ate it at our palapa. Watched the birds taking dust baths in the sand others scavenging around for bits of food. I took at break to walk the beach and listen to my Amy Winehouse music and before you knew it, sunset time once again.

Destination Aruba Jan 10-20: The 18th we made reservations with the Atlantis submarine. We saw several shipwrecks and all sorts of marine life. It holds 48 passengers but everyone gets a porthole as the views are switched with both sides of the submarine so everyone gets the same views. Can't say the experience is one I would go one again in Aruba. We saw fish and coral much better on our own snorkeling trips. Some were disappointed that we did not see any turtles. After we got back to the dock we took off for lunch in Oranjestad. On the way we walked through the linear waterfront Queen Wilhelmina Park on L. G. Smith Blvd. It featured a statue of Queen Wilhelmina, the leader of the Netherlands during the first half of the twentieth century. She reigned for nearly 58 years, longer than any other Dutch monarch. Her reign saw World War I, the Dutch economic crisis of 1933 and World War II. Also was the statue of Dutch young author and holocaust victim Anne Frank. Frank is barefoot and wearing a knee length dress, her hands are bound in front of her and her head is leaning back, looking towards the sky. Each of the four sides of the base contains the quote from her diary in a different language - Papiamentu, English, Dutch and Spanish. We walked to where we were having lunch at The West Deck Island Grill & Beach Bar located at the Governor's Bay on the Beach. We ordered several Caribbean Appetizers and a bread basket with

Johnny cakes, Pan Bati and dinner rolls. We got back in time (you guessed it) for another beautiful sunset.

Destination Aruba Jan 10-20: The 19th We got coffee, a croissant and banana bread at the café. After a leisurely morning walk going both ways on the beach I had made reservations for a palapa on the beach and a reservation at the 'Trankilo Pool' an adult-only pool with pretty water features. All sizes of iguanas were walking around to entertain you. Pretty funny to watch them jump into the pool to resurface in another area. To ensure a peaceful space, the pool was set at the edge of the property, a good distance away from the busy pool in the central courtyard. It was comfortable and provided good shade with the umbrellas. Some music did filter in from a neighboring Greek beach restaurant 'Kouzina' but it was better music than what was playing on the speakers at the beach. Took a break for lunch at Kouzina Greek restaurant. Lots to pack to get ready to for our flight home. Checked out and went to say goodbye to Rocky and Nikki the two yellow-crowned Amazon Parrots and other birds in the cages on the resort. Had lots of fun in the sun and loved exploring Aruba 'The Happy Island'.

Review for Nature and Birdwatching tour with Michiel "Mike" Oversteegen

Michiel "Mike" Oversteegen was an amazing guide that took us on a nature, bird watching tour on Aruba. I must say it was the best thing we experienced on the island. We have been on bird watching tours all over the world and found this private tour with Michiel one of the best. He knew where to go and when to go to find the birds. We loved walking around in beautiful landscapes looking for birds and wild life. On the trip we even shared a moment with some donkeys that all wanted to court a female. Near the female was her young colt. We were able to take some good photos of the burrowing Owl: The Shoco, ducks, Bare-eyed pigeon, rails, American oystercatchers, lapwings, sandpipers, caspian terns, American kestrels, brown pelicans, herons, osprey, hawks, caracaras, Venezuelan troupial and my favorites the Ruby-topaz hummingbird and the Blue-tailed Emerald hummingbird. Michiel estimate more than 50 different species crossed our path. He showed us on a map the route he took us on pointing out some of the best snorkeling beaches on the island as we told him we like to go snorkeling to see colorful interesting fish just like to see birds in their natural habitat. Thank you Michael for the best time spent with you on Aruba.