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Gentle Spirit, the island of Curaçao

Curaçao's capital city of **Willemstad** rubbed its eyes and stretched, slowly awakening. An orange sun emerged from behind the low-lying hills that encircle the city, illuminating the famous harbor and igniting its vividly painted buildings into flaming jewels. Even at this early hour the harbor was abuzz. Pedestrians crossed Queen Emma floating pontoon bridge and streamed into the old district of Punda to enjoy alfresco coffee and pastries at harbor-front cafes as shopkeepers rolled out awnings and threw open store doors.

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Tunes from a hand-cranked calliope followed me as I wandered along the waterfront. Polite vendors nodded and smiled as they hawked tropical print sundresses and Ecuadorian fruit. A slap, slap, slapping sound lured me to the rear of the market, where taxi drivers slammed dominoes and bantered as they awaited their first fare of the day. They wouldn't have long to wait. A tiny tugboat chugged past, leading a monumental cruise ship into **St. Anna Bay**, one of two that had arrived overnight. Soon, thousands of day trippers would disembark and scramble to see as much of the island as possible during their brief time in port.



Thankfully, I was staying more than a few hours. It hadn't taken me long to realize that the easy smiles and gracious attitudes found on Curaçao were no facade, and I was determined to learn what makes this island paradise so special. Roland Martis, a bartender at the Curaçao Marriott Resort where I was staying, provided my first clue. "The most important thing about us is the way we are," he insisted. "It's something we have inside; it's the way we communicate. When I walk along the street or get on a bus, I greet everyone I meet. And on a Friday afternoon, we never say 'have a good weekend.' Instead, on a Sunday evening or Monday morning we say 'Bon simian' - we wish you a good week."

Curaçao's gentle spirit may be well defined, but its early history is not. Even the source of its name is in dispute. Some say it was named for the Caiquetios, Arawak Indians who were Curaçao's first inhabitants. The Caiquetios lived in remote limestone and coral caves along the southern coast that are now easily accessible, although few tourists venture out to see them.

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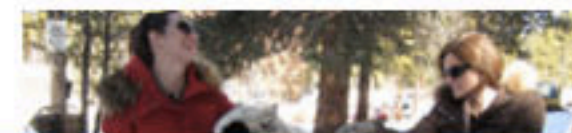


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Not long afterward, Spanish and Italian explorers discovered Curaçao. Some of the Italian sailors, too sick with scurvy to travel, were said to have been left behind on the island. Thanks to the abundance of fresh fruit, by the time their ship returned from South America the sailors had fully recovered, prompting the explorers to name the island after an archaic Portuguese word for "cure." Even more often repeated is the theory that Spaniards called the island Curazon, a slight corruption of "corazon," the Spanish word for heart, and mapmakers of the day converted the spelling to the Portuguese Curaçao.

This mingling of cultures is a hallmark of the present-day Caribbean island. As in the other five islands that comprise the Netherlands Antilles, residents speak Papiamentu, a Creole dialect that is a mixture of Dutch, English, Portuguese, various West African languages and indigenous Indian dialects. Yet Curaçaoans are equally comfortable speaking Dutch, and most are fluent in English and Spanish as well. Like the language, music and dance of Curaçao have evolved from a mingling of African rhythms with French quadrille, waltzes, and polkas.

The greatest mystery of all may be how its residents have forged a culture where more than 50 ethnic groups live together in peace and harmony. The secret may be in how they describe themselves in [Papiamentu](#): "yiu di Korsow," literally, "I am a child of Curaçao." Islanders claim that Curaçao is the only country in the world where residents refer to themselves as children of a nation.

Perhaps because the nation was forged from such disparate influences, Curaçaoans today have a strong folklore, aimed at perpetuating memories of life the way it was in the mid-1900's. I learned about this little-known cultural tradition during my final morning on the island. While soaking up sunshine by the pool I struck up a friendly conversation with Ersilia Martina, a native of Curaçao, who was treating her grandchildren to a weekend at the Marriott. She described what parties were like in the days when her mother was a young girl:

Mothers would walk their daughters to parties, all of which were held in private homes. They carried a length of cloth, inside of which was hidden a second dress for the daughter to change into mid-way through the party. Across her other shoulder, the mother draped a bath towel, which was used to clean the girl's face during the dance and placed across the daughter's shoulders upon leaving so she would not catch a cold. Once the music began, mothers interceded whenever a man was holding her daughter too tight on the dance floor.



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At one particular party, a gentleman asked my mother to dance and when she refused, he became very angry and stopped the music. Her mother explained to the owner of the house that the man was drunk and could not even stand on his feet. When she continued in her refusal, the man took off his hat and placed it on her lap, telling her that if she would not dance with him, she could not dance with anyone else until he removed his hat. So it was in those days; the men had a lot of power and a lady could not refuse to dance. Nowadays, this doesn't happen anymore. Nobody goes to a party with a hat.



To keep the tradition alive, and to show young people what things were like sixty years ago, Ersilia and her friends reenact the incident whenever they get together for parties today. The women dance with bath towels draped over their shoulders and one of them is "bound" to her chair by a gentleman's hat. It is a side of Curaçao that few visitors know about, much less get to experience. Although I regretted leaving, I had a plane to catch. But I may get to witness this tradition someday, for in true Curaçaoan fashion, after knowing me for all of an hour, Ersilia made me an offer: "You must come back and visit us again. And you can stay with me next time."



After years of working at jobs that paid the bills but brought no joy, **Barbara Weibel** walked away from corporate life in 2007 to pursue her true passions of writing, photography, and travel. She backpacked around the world solo for six months, blogging about her journey through Southeast Asia, Australia, New Zealand, Indonesia, Africa, and Europe. Currently, Weibel is midway through a four-month backpacking trip around Mexico and Central America, which will be followed by a five-month journey through Asia beginning in the fall of 2010. Read about Barbara's travel experiences on her blog, [Hole in the Donut](#).

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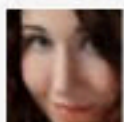
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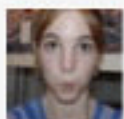
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