



Luxury ESCAPES by Theo

Editorial

Carpe Diem— Seize the Opportunity

This past Presidents' Day weekend I scheduled a four-night family trip to Curaçao, one of the three Caribbean islands that make up the Netherlands Antilles. The other two are Aruba and Bonaire—easy to remember since the three start with the letters A, B, and C.

I booked our flights 330 days in advance since I wanted to use frequent flyer miles, holding the outbound reservation for four days until the return seats entered the American Airlines computer system. (Note: Some airlines will not allow the passenger to hold a reservation unless seats for both outbound and return are

available—in such instances, I book a return for the following day and change it later when my desired date is loaded.)

We arrived at Los Angeles airport at about 5:30 a.m. on the Thursday before Presidents' Day for our 7:05 a.m. flight to Miami, where we anticipated a two-hour layover before connecting to Curaçao. As it turned out, our flight from Los Angeles to Miami was oversold, and the gate agents could not find volunteers willing to fly two hours later in return for vouchers worth \$300, then upped to \$400 toward future flights on American. I showed up at the gate after enduring the usual early



Road warrior and travel-holic
Theo Brandt-Sarif

morning line at Starbucks when the “volunteers to be bumped” offer escalated to \$500 per passenger and happily agreed to fly two hours later in return for \$2,000 in vouchers. (We gave up four seats: our older son was not traveling with us on this

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The Conrad hotel in downtown Miami offered modern décor and outstanding service.

trip). Traveling on that later flight meant we would miss our scheduled connection to Curaçao, necessitating an overnight stay in Miami. Since American was able to confirm seats on the first flight from Miami to Curaçao the following morning, and given the \$2,000 payout, I felt paying up to \$300 for accommodations—a fairly easy task in Miami—to be an extremely favorable trade.

Surprisingly, our baggage checked onto the earlier Los Angeles-Miami flight did go through to Curaçao as scheduled the same afternoon, meaning we did not have any baggage available to us in Miami. Not a problem, really, since we always carry impor-

tant items like medications with us in our carry-on bags rather than checking them through. And I had no problem getting a free night at the Conrad hotel in downtown Miami at a moment's notice using accrued

points in my Hilton loyalty account. Conrad is the upscale brand of Hilton hotels, and with its modern décor and outstanding service, this new hotel on Bricknell Avenue is a WOW! We immediately realized that this unexpected layover was going to be a fabulous experience...

At the hotel check-in desk we mentioned that our bags had gone through to Curaçao and asked for basic toiletries such as toothbrushes. Four colorful bags were delivered to our room, with toiletries that included toothbrush/toothpaste, deodorant, boxer shorts, and cotton T-shirt! I was floored, never before having been on the receiving end of such generous, proactive service.

We then ordered a room service dinner, including baked halibut, sea bass sushi and cream of asparagus soup. All were outstanding! A few minutes after our dinner arrived, we received a call from

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the room service manager apologizing that it took an hour from the time of order to delivery and asking what desserts we would like with the hotel's compliments. We accepted this gracious gesture and selected a chocolate fondue.

Finally we arrived in Curaçao the following afternoon. We bumped into travel publisher Johnny Jet (check out his Web site johnnyjet.com), who told us that our arrival coincided with Carnival weekend! Pretty exciting, right? We had only two full days in Curaçao and were determined to do nothing the first day but relax at our hotel. I had planned to spend our second day with a guide, driving to the northwest side where the best coastal drives and beaches are located. The problem with my tour idea was that drivers were near to impossible to find, since Sunday was a public holiday—and the entire local population was focused on Carnival...

So Saturday evening I found a taxi driver who had pulled up to the hotel and was willing to drive us around the following day for \$40 per hour. When we met him the next day at the assigned time, he was honest enough to warn us that many roads were closed. With the added complication of drunk drivers everywhere, he felt an island tour would be a poor choice. He suggested a drive to the Carnival parade, even though he would make

just a fraction of the fee, offering to take us to an observation spot that only taxis could access. What a windfall, as we enjoyed the unique joviality, spirit, floats,



A complimentary fondue dessert was a delicious end to a surprise stay in Miami.

and intriguing costumes few get to experience up close (see photos on page 6).

Bottom line: Travel presents an abundance of unexpected opportunities to look at the world in a different way. Where else can one get \$500 in return for tolerating a slight inconvenience? I am staggered that my 150 or so fellow passengers flying to Miami that morning did not rush to give up their seats for the promise of big savings on a future trip. Were they all high-powered executives whose time is worth more than \$250 per hour? I don't think so.

And who would have imagined that our unforeseen detour into Miami for a night would turn out to give us a fabulous and memorable experience in a gorgeous hotel?

Then there was the surprise treat of Carnival that provided a rare glimpse into another culture's festivities few get to experience in their lifetime.

We all know that unexpected events crop up when we travel. That's part of what gives travel its mystique, making it one of our favorite topics at any dinner party. It's our job to extract the lemonade from the lemon, to see the golden opportunity when we're faced with unanticipated inconvenience. And to step up and savor the challenges!

Until next month—
Theo ■



Destination Check **So What's With Curaçao?**

By now I assume you have read the editorial and have some background information on our adventure getting to Curaçao.

Let me start out by explaining our “Caribbean strategy.” When we lived in Boston from 1990 to 1995, the Caribbean was a place of respite from the freezing cold winters—easy to get to, mild temperatures in February, and each island with its own unique character. After moving our family back to California in 1995, we continued our pursuit of visiting new Caribbean islands every so often, seeking new experiences and on one occasion returning to an island we especially enjoyed, St. Thomas. Five years ago we experienced one of the three

islands in the Netherlands Antilles—Aruba. All three islands that make up the Netherlands Antilles—Aruba, Curacao and Bonaire—are very close to Venezuela and just 12° from the equator, meaning visitors should expect some intense heat, especially during the summer months.

General Impressions of Downtown Curaçao

Aruba has done an amazing publicity job, making it one of the most visited Caribbean destinations, even though in my opinion it is one of the most boring islands scenically, with little out of the ordinary to offer besides duty free shopping and gambling. We decided to check out Curaçao this past President’s Day weekend, which we found to have slightly

more scenic appeal than Aruba. For example, there are a few points of elevation on the island with some greenery, giving it a less desert-like feel than Aruba. Curaçao’s downtown area has a little more charm than that of Aruba, not least because of the famous multicolored buildings along the water inlet where ships dock. (See above photo.)

The problem is that the cafés among these buildings overlooking the inlet seem quite drab, and the somewhat run-down downtown area beyond the multicolored buildings is full of bland touristy stores set to attract hordes of day trippers whose ship has docked nearby. The main street downtown has several top-of-the-line duty free stores, including Little Switzerland, but noth-



These Marriott rooms are right on the beach, with just some dense foliage in between.



The Marriott pool is large, with enough deck chairs even when the hotel is full.



Marriott brought in sand recently to expand the beachfront. It's pretty, but don't expect it to be powdery-soft.

ing unique that would make me rush back for a future trip.

One highlight is the Queen Emma floating bridge, a pedestrian-only walkway over the water inlet that separates Punda and Ostrabanda, the two districts that make up the downtown area. Its brilliance comes from the way it swings open to allow giant ships and freighters to pass into and out of the harbor. Another attraction we intended to see was the synagogue Mikve Israel Emanuel, apparently the oldest active place of Jewish worship in the western hemisphere, established in 1651. Unfortunately, when we arrived the door was locked.

I had jogged to the downtown area from our hotel on two occasions. The initial half of the run followed a unique jogging/cycle track hugging the beach. A nice feature—except the beach and water are not even close to, say, Barbados in terms of beauty. The second half of the run as I approached the city took an inland turn past a power plant, where I breathed in the smell of sewage for about a quarter mile. Hardly something to stir the senses in any positive way!

What We Didn't See

Perhaps as important is what we did not see. Because of Carnival, we did not make it up to the northwest part of the island, which includes Knip Bay and hotels such as the Lodge at Kura Hulanda on the west side of the island. Another dimension we missed was the Kura Hulanda (meaning “Dutch Courtyard”) district close to the downtown district, which has now been included on the UNESCO World Heritage list of culturally significant areas. The transformation of this area by a philanthropist Jacob Gelt Dekker began in 1998, and it is now full of distinctively white-trimmed



Karnaval: an exercise in unity!



Costumes that stir the imagination.



My favorite float--Indian style.

colonial buildings clustered together along eight cobblestoned city blocks. The Hotel Kura Hulander—sister inn to the Lodge at Kura Hulanda mentioned earlier—is more of a boutique property, offering an urban experience.

Our Hotel—The Marriott Curaçao

The Marriott in Curaçao is widely considered the best hotel on the island, definitely a 3.5 or 4 star property. The hotel is large, with over 240 rooms, but relatively compact so that even the rooms furthest from the lobby do not require long walks to the center of action. The lobby is small and attractive, with its most notable feature being the view toward the central pool and ocean.

My first impression as I walked into our room was that it looked like a typical Marriott—tastefully furnished but nothing to excite the senses. It certainly did not have the “open spaces” feel a guest enjoys at the Hilton Barbados. (See my report in the December 2005 edition.)

In general the hotel staff was quite friendly, but the food service was far below par. The first evening we had room service—with food quality that was mediocre at best. On our second day, my wife ordered a takeout lunch from the pool restaurant, Sea Breeze, and waited almost an hour for the order to arrive. For our second night dinner we walked over to Hook’s Hut—about a 10-minute stroll from the hotel—but were advised that without a reservation the wait would be 45 minutes. Our mistake, given that it was Carnival weekend, but we did make a reservation for the following evening. Same problem with the restaurant at the Sjarlotte Hotel opposite the Marriott—completely full with a too-long wait. So we had dinner at the best-rated Marriott restaurant, Portofino. Again, it took one hour to



A tranquil spot to gather your thoughts or enjoy a picnic, along the running track between the Marriott and downtown.



Hook's Hut restaurant—tables right on the beach with excellent food at reasonable prices!



Another gorgeous Caribbean sunset—as seen from our Hook's Hut table on the beach.

be served our entrées. In fact—the Italian “cuisine” miraculously found its way out of the kitchen when we told them to cancel our order as we were done waiting! And the food was merely average.

On our final evening we returned to dine at Hook's Hut—and what a fabulous experience! Several Marriott Hotel reviews on the Web site Tripadvisor.com rave about this restaurant. For those with reservations, you get to dine on the beach! That alone makes the experience unique. But the food was excellent, too. Outstanding fresh fish entrées, tantalizing hors d'oeuvres. Our bill for four (without wine) came to \$120—about the same as the Marriott's Portofino.

Bottom line: Skip Curaçao. There are far more enticing Caribbean islands. My favorite, St. Thomas, is part of the US Virgin Islands, meaning no need for a passport and no immigration/customs formalities to deal with. St. John, also part of the US Virgin Islands, is a quick ferry ride from St. Thomas—and even more beautiful and less developed. Some may argue that the US Virgin Islands are somewhat bland and not all that dissimilar to the US. I agree with that sentiment, but the associated predictability can be a plus.

I loved St. Lucia, not least because it is scenically gorgeous. The two mountain peaks, known as “The Pitons,” in themselves make the trip worthwhile. We've also had enjoyable trips to St. Martin (and especially savored St. Bartholomew, which is an easy day trip away on a high-speed catamaran) as well as Jamaica, where we stayed at the Ritz Carlton. We also enjoyed our six days in St. Kitts, which is scenically pretty—especially if you include the half-day sugar plantation trip around the island. And Barbados is a worthwhile trip—spectacular beaches plus

astonishing food, albeit at very high prices. For those in search of Caribbean beauty at low prices, consider the Dominican Republic (DR). While I have not visited DR, I hear good reviews from those who have been there. And airfares to the island are cheap, with prices on hotels—especially all “inclusives”—very reasonable.

The three Caribbean islands that have been least impressive, based on my personal

experiences? Aruba and Curaçao, as I mentioned, and Grand Cayman, which left me wondering why it receives such high praise. No question, Grand Cayman may be great for diving—something that wouldn’t sway me as I am not a dive fanatic—but not much else I saw impressed me.

Finally, you might consider Puerto Rico (PR). Again, because it is part of the US, no passport is required—and

lots of flights are available at reasonable prices. But this island just does not do it for me. I suspect those in search of a mega-resort, where you stay put for a week, will love PR. And maybe that is something I shall do in the future.

Until next month,
Bon Voyage—

Theo ■

Notes

Short & Suite

Rewards Brochure

America Express card holders enrolled in Membership Miles just received their annual award guides, outlining ideas for which their points may be used. In general, the values are awful. Let’s first review the decent values, which are simply transferring miles into various airlines where the transfer ratio is 1:1. Participating airlines include Delta, Continental, Hawaiian, Virgin and Singapore. Just as notable are the airlines that are excluded—United, American, Northwest and British Airways. But all other awards pale by comparison. For example, a

one-night Marriott hotel stay for 30,000-60,000 points is terrible value. Shopping awards are even worse, with 10,000 points typically getting \$100 off items from a variety of retailers. In general, I can see no reason to recommend this American Express card. Rather, choose the American Express Starwood card—a vastly superior option. (See the June, 2005 issue of this newsletter.)

New Mileage Expiration Policies

US Airways started the process of expiring frequent flyer miles 18 months after an ac-

count has not registered any activity (usually meaning a mileage deposit but sometimes redemptions count as well). Other airlines are matching this egregious practice, trying to reduce their liability to those customers who have earned their miles whether by flying, credit card, or other means. This means you now have to monitor your frequent flyer accounts more closely and be sure to make a deposit (or a redemption if that meets your program’s rules) at least once before any miles expire.

Current Expiration Periods:

- **Aloha and Continental**

No expiration, but Continental reserves the right to cancel inactive accounts

- **American, Northwest, Alaska, Midwest, Hawaiian**
Three years
- **Delta, Southwest, Frontier**
Two years
- **US Airways and United**
Eighteen months (effective 31 December 2007)
- **Jet Blue and Air Tran**
One year

So what can you do to prevent expiring miles—other than flying?

- By far the easiest is to enroll for free at Points.com. You will receive get 25 free miles in most airline programs just for enrolling, and that is all you need!
- Get an airline affinity credit card—the bonus miles you receive once you are approved will suffice. If you already have such a card, a single charge is all you need to keep your miles active.
- Book a hotel stay and request frequent flyer miles.
- Book a car rental and request frequent flyer miles.
- Dining programs—enroll at your airline's Web site by clicking on "Frequent Flyer"

and scrolling down to find the dining program details. After you provide a credit card, miles are automatically accrued once you use that credit card at participating restaurants.

- Shop online using your airline's Web site as a portal.
- Supermarket shopping—enroll in the airline partner's mileage program. (Continental, American and United offer 125 miles for each \$250 you spend on groceries at affiliated supermarket chains.)
- Sign up with Netflix and you earn 1,500 miles with American, Northwest and Delta or 1,000 miles with United.

Travel in Luxury for Less While Helping a Charity

Global Traveler's annual silent auction is up and running at globaltravelerusa.com/auction. This auction benefits The Leukemia & Lymphoma Society. Final bids are due on 15 June 2007. Sample trips include several pairs of business class tickets currently going for under \$2,000 (South African Airways, Swissair), two- or three-night stays in deluxe hotels (currently valued at around \$250-\$450 a night).

And one other benefit just for bidding: All bidders are automatically entered in the grand finale drawing for two roundtrip business class tickets donated by British Airways. You do need to be a subscriber. Choices are: (a) free online access to all content for 30 days; (b) \$7.95 - online access to all content for one year; (c) \$41.95 - magazine and online access to all content for a year. I really enjoy the magazine and suggest you try it.

A similar auction is sponsored by Business Traveller magazine at businesstravellerusa.com. This auction benefits the Ronald McDonald House. Final bids are on due on 30 April 2007. All bidders are automatically entered in the grand finale drawing for two roundtrip business class tickets donated by British Airways. One feature of this auction is that you do not need to be a subscriber.

Both are annual auctions, typically starting during the first quarter. E-mail me at theo@travelexpert.com towards the close and I'll tell you which items I think are the standout values! This is a perfect opportunity to "get" while "giving". ■

Series

Hotel Savings: The Best for Less

The Ritz Barcelona is ideally located in the middle of downtown, near Las Ramblas, the bustling pedestrian arcade where locals and tourists alike come to eat, drink, relax and shop. I was attending a convention in the hotel, and my wife and two-year-old son had come along to enjoy this vibrant Spanish city.

As we approached the registration desk, the staff person greeted me. “Welcome, Dr. Brandt-Sarif.”

Amazed, I asked how he knew who I was. “Why, Doctor, you are the only guest checking in today with a young child.”

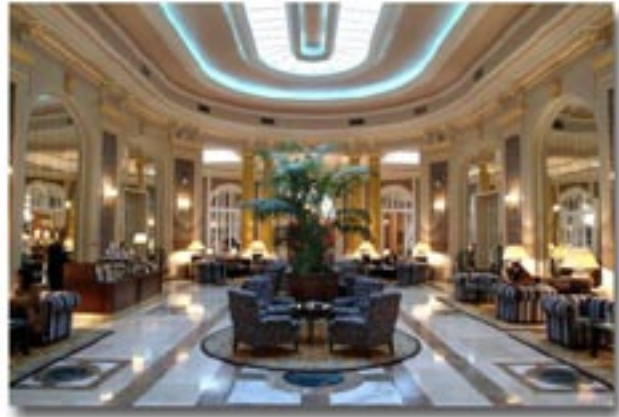
And it gets better...

The elevators, which sat three steps above lobby level, posed a bit of a challenge for my wife, who wheeled our son around in his stroller while I attended meetings. Yet, whenever she had to negotiate those stairs on her own, a Ritz staff person would magically emerge to help her lift the stroller up the steps.

Another nice touch: Each evening a clean, white mat was set bedside to protect our pampered feet from the magnificent wood floor.

The best is yet to come... I so liked the unique fragrance of complimentary bottle of men’s cologne that I took it home and reserved its use for only the most special occasions. Two years later, when the bottle had finally run dry, I wrote the hotel asking where I could purchase more. Four weeks later, a package arrived in the mail with not one, but ten bottles of my favorite fragrance... compliments of the general manager at the Ritz Barcelona!

You might say this sort of service is to be expected considering what the Ritz charges. However, I had snagged an excellent rate simply by faxing my standard rate-request letter to the hotel, even though



The Ritz Hotel Palace in Barcelona is a symbol of tradition, elegance, style and service.

my visit occurred during peak convention and tourist season in a traditionally expensive city. With my Entertainment Directory discount, the room cost just \$182 per night, far below posted rates—and we loved every last minute of opulent service.

What Travelers Need to Know To Get Deals as Hotel Prices Soar *Midscale and Extended Stay Hotel Chains*

As I discussed in the December 2006 issue of this newsletter, hotel chains are focused on developing midscale properties catering to the budget-conscious business traveler. Travelers can expect a clean room—sometimes even a larg-

er room or suite—in a smaller hotel that does not offer restaurants or conference rooms. A free continental breakfast is often included in the standard room rate. Discounts off “rack rates”—the published price for a specific room—will be much smaller at midscale hotels; you can expect 10% to 20% at best. But the published prices will often beat out the discounted rates at major upscale hotels. These no-frills midscale accommodations may be an appropriate choice for some price-sensitive vacationers and business travelers.

Extended stay hotels offer lower rates (typically \$80-130/night) by eliminating restaurants, bars and personnel (the front desk person serves to check customers in and out, answers phones, responds to “concierge” questions etc.). You are much more likely to find coin-operated laundry machines than valet service. They are almost always found in suburban locations to reduce real estate costs. Examples include Homewood Suites by Hilton, Residence Inn By Marriott, Hyatt Summerfield Suites, Sheraton’s Aloft, Sierra Suites, Staybridge Suites and Town-Place Suites.

Timing—What a Difference a Day (or Season) Makes

I once attended a seminar in glitzy Las Vegas that ran from Friday through Sunday. At the spectacular Aladdin Hotel, I captured a fabulously low rate of \$99 for the Thursday

Monday through Thursday nights will typically be more expensive in business-oriented cities, while they may be cheaper in hotels or resorts catering to weekend traffic.

night before the seminar. I loved my huge room with trimmings befitting royalty. However, for the Friday and Saturday nights, the rate soared to \$245 per night to take advantage of the gamblers pouring into the city. As a guerrilla traveler, I had to consider other alternatives. I found a brand new Hyatt resort about 20 miles off the strip offering me a \$99 introductory rate for the two weekend nights, so I moved hotels on the Friday morning and saved \$290 as “compensation” for the inconvenience. Yes, I did have to rent a car, which reduced my savings to \$210!

Bottom line—I took advantage of low rates on “the strip” midweek; and then relocated to take advantage of a much lower rate elsewhere.

Monday through Thursday nights will typically be

more expensive in business-oriented cities, while they may be cheaper in hotels or resorts catering to weekend traffic. Las Vegas is a perfect example. Business-oriented hotels offer considerably reduced rates over Friday, Saturday and Sunday nights, and sometimes on weekdays during the off-season (such as the July-August summer vacation period when business travel slows down). In Anaheim, CA—the home of Disneyland—hotels will be more expensive during summer vacation months and cheaper in the winter, especially while schools are in full swing. The opposite may be true in

greater Los Angeles or San Diego, as they host more travelers during the winter months.

Guerrilla rates are most difficult to capture during large conventions when rooms are scarce in major hotels. Keep this in mind when traveling to the most common cities for large conventions: In the US, these include Atlanta, Boston, Chicago, Denver, New York, Las Vegas, Los Angeles, Orlando, Philadelphia, San Diego, San Francisco and Washington D.C. In Canada, Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver are major convention cities. We'll discuss how to jump that hurdle in subsequent issues.

The Web Factor

Start with the Web to find a standard rate for a hotel or hotels in which you are interested, and then call or fax to see if you can beat that rate by asking for various discounts we shall review next month.

Web browsing may identify great values that eliminate the need for future efforts. There are a huge number of sites that provide information about hotels and they seem to increase daily. Start at TripAdvisor.com to peruse reviews of destinations and hotels, and

get prices from several web sites by inputting your destination and dates of travel once. Just inserting your destination at TripAdvisor.com will enable you to review hotels ranked using a proprietary algorithm based on input from reviewers, and to observe the average per night price of each hotel. Then click on "Check Rates" to see prices at several web sites simultaneously!

Next check the benchmark lowest price for a four-star property at Hotwire.com, which sells "distressed inventory" at a discount by offering you a price for the grade of hotel you have requested, but only revealing the name of the property after your credit card has been charged. Once this is done, you're locked in; no refunds or changes.

"Neutral" travel agent sites such as Orbitz.com, Expedia.com and Travelocity.com will also enable you to see hotel offerings and prices for your desired nights. Since travel agent sites will charge change or cancellation fees if your plans change, visit the hotel's proprietary web sites to make your reservation. Some major hotel chains such as Hilton, Marriott, Starwood and In-

tercontinental guarantee that they will beat the price of any web site other than their own, including hotel consolidators. Check online for details on how to implement the guarantee; it can be time-consuming.

Finally, some advice about Priceline.com. The process by which you "bid" for a hotel room follows the same model as that for airfares. You name your price and, if accepted, your credit card is charged and your purchase is nonrefundable and nonchangeable. You will not earn any hotel points and your room will likely reflect the price you paid—meaning it will be the worst room available.

The savvy traveler who applies the principles outlined in my newsletters should rarely have to turn to the option of last resort—Priceline.com. If a hotel is offering rooms through Priceline.com, it's a good bet it also has conventional discounts available to the determined traveler who simply calls the reservations department. For those who want to learn about the subtle nuances of booking hotels at Priceline.com, visit Biddingfortravel.com.

To be continued next month...