

Travel Tales

Islands As Easy as ABC Part 2

by

Lew Toulmin

Last month I described the famous Holland America Line (HAL) ship *Noordam* and our experiences on board. This month I cover the ship's itinerary through the ABC (Aruba, Bonaire and Curacao) and other Caribbean islands.

An unusual attraction of the *Noordam*'s route was the opportunity to sail through two of the most important passages in the Caribbean. Headed south to the ABC islands we passed through the famous Mona Passage, between Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic. On the way north, we passed through the equally famous Windward Passage, between Haiti and Cuba. It was a terrific thrill to sail through these strategic passages known to Columbus, buccaneers, pirates, Lord Nelson and his original "band of brothers," Hemingway and many others, and get to see the rugged coastlines of all the Greater Antilles.

Highlights of our island visits included the following in sequential order; each visit was usually 6 to 10 hours long.

On Half Moon Key, HAL's private island in the Bahamas, we tendered ashore and explored the exclusive resort. This 2x5 mile islet has a small manmade port that can accommodate tenders from three HAL ships at once, walking trail 6/10 of a mile long, wide beach with glorious white sand, horse stable, jet-ski rental, pet-the-stingrays attraction, island chapel, bar in the form of a wrecked pirate ship, large BBQ area, and beautiful sea-oats, orchids and bougainvillea. I asked one of the local HAL staffers how many islanders lived on the Key, and she said with a smile, "only 38, so we know each other very well!"

On Grand Turk island, part of the Turks and Caicos (a British Crown Colony), we searched for and found over two pounds of beautiful sea glass. This was on the beach just south of the Osprey Hotel, three miles north of the cruise ship terminal. This location yielded the common light green, brown and blue glass, and some rare black and blackish-green pieces. The taxi fare from the ship to the Osprey was a modest \$5.

Back at the cruise port, at the Dizzy Donkey shop, we ran into Diane Page, a jewelry designer who got us started looking for sea glass years ago. Diane took our finds and in just five minutes, using silver wire, created matching green earrings for Susan. (See

www.dianepage.com and www.internationalseaglassmuseum.com for information on this unusual ocean-related pastime.)



Cheerful musician welcomes visitors at Samana, Dominican Republic.

At Samana in the Dominican Republic we took the ship's tour (\$54 each) of the whale museum and the Taino museum. The former was quite small and had few exhibits with just some simple placards. But the latter was well worth visiting, with over 30 life-sized dioramas presenting Taino history before and after contact with Columbus. The Tainos were a branch of the Arawak Indians, and had a peaceful, agricultural life on the islands before 1492. The new museum, which opened in late 2011, had excellent Apple iPod Nano listening devices in English that allowed the viewer to proceed at his own pace through the shaded dioramas.

Bonaire surprised us and was our favorite island of the trip, mainly because it was so unpopulated, rural and quiet. Our three hour "Island Journey" tour (\$66 each) was led by an excellent guide, Marielle, who showed us iguanas, flamingos, parakeets, parrots, orioles, turk's head cacti, and other flora and fauna. The island was dry and wind-swept, as are all the ABC Dutch islands, and the main "industry" was scuba diving.



Cactus makes an effective fence on dry Bonaire.

At the city market in Kralendijk near the ship we bought some delightful Indonesian grilled chicken, noodles and rice with a soft drink at an open air stand, for only \$8 for a two person portion. (All the islands we visited take US dollars as either the official or as an unofficial currency.) The GIO shop on the main street to the left of the cruise terminal offered terrific gelato for a reasonable price.



Author Toulmin and Noordam moored at Bonaire.

Curaçao was much more industrial, with port operations and oil refining playing a more important role in the island's economy than tourism. We took a ship's tour (\$44 each) to the Hato Cave, and found it to be rather small and humid after the large caves we have toured in other countries. But the walk around downtown Willemstad was worthwhile, with our guide pointing out shops certified by the HAL shopping quality-control program. Many of these featured tanzanite, a beautiful lavender stone which is produced in only one mine in the world. These were tempting, but at \$850 per carat asking price and a possible \$500 per carat "final price," we took a pass.

Other highlights of Willemstad were the excellent nautical museum and the amazing "Old Swinging Lady" bridge. This bridge, built in 1888, has its own marine engines and propellers and drives itself back and forth like a swinging gate, to let ships through the narrow harbor entrance.

On Aruba we independently rented a 4x4 pickup from Amigo car rental (which we do not recommend, due to their many errors). The 2007 Nissan Frontier was beat up and dusty, and cost \$82 per day plus \$5 per gallon for gas. So a typical ship's tour at about \$45 each would have been easier to organize and about the same price or cheaper for the two of us. But we thought it was worthwhile to get out and tour the island at our own pace.

We stopped at a kite-boarding center and admired the instructors zipping along at 25 knots in the very strong breeze, and pitied the students, falling over and over, going nowhere.



A kite-boarder off Aruba takes off in the high winds.

We found the beautiful “California” lighthouse at the windswept north end of the island, named after a ship by that name that sunk nearby in 1908. We were surprised to learn that our 4x4 rental car was allowed in the dunes and on the sandy beach road that traverses the north coast of the island, but we chickened out when we saw the soft sand and potholes ahead. Instead we looped around to the south using the paved roads, and discovered the cute little Alto Vista Chapel, built in 1952 on the site of the original 1750 missionary chapel. Beside the chapel we found a spiral meditation maze, and got in some spiritual development by walking the half mile trail squeezed inside the 100-foot-wide labyrinth.



The “California” lighthouse on Aruba was named after a nearby 1908 shipwreck.

Next we drove through the well preserved Arikok National Park at the southeastern end of Aruba. At 7900 acres, the dramatic park covers almost a fifth of the island and looks like a hilly part of Arizona, with lots of cacti and rocks and even Indian petroglyphs. The divi-divi trees, which always point downwind, show that you’re not in Arizona any more.

The paved road through the northwest part of the park is very slow going, due to the numerous and deep water channels that cross the road, which must be traversed at about two miles per hour. These are so deep that I would not recommend this road be used in a typical small rental car, with only 4-5 inches of ground clearance. Oddly, the southern part of the park, with a dramatic coastline and huge wind turbines, features a dirt and gravel road that is much faster and very flat. Allow at least two hours to drive through the park and stop at one or two sights, even though it is only six miles long. This is your last island, and you don’t want to miss your ship home.

Aboard Holland America Line’s *Noordam*, we found that visiting all the ABC islands is just as interesting and easy as, well, ABC!

Holland America Line can be reached at 877-932-4259, or at 300 Elliot Avenue West, Seattle, WA 98119, or at www.hollandamerica.com.

* * *

Lew Toulmin has traveled to 139 countries and lives in Silver Spring.

#end#