

section

The Philadelphia Inquirer

travel

Sunday, October 30, 1983

# Curacao: Tossing out new lures to Americans

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*Special to The Inquirer*

As recently as six months ago, Curacao thrived as a bargain-hunter's paradise for South Americans.

Thousands of weekend tourists from Venezuela, just 35 miles south, descended on the tiny Dutch Antilles free port to scoop up Japanese stereos, Swiss watches and Italian clothes for what were still bargain-basement prices by American standards. The booty slid past Caracas customs, oiled by a bottle of superb Curacao liqueur or a case of locally brewed Amstel beer.

But within the last six months the continuous and gentle trade wind that keeps the Curacao temperature at 80 degrees every day has blown for naught. With the Venezuela bolivar recently devalued by 200 percent, South American buying power has plunged. Few Caracans go to Curacao.

The winds rattle the palms and blow empty through the tills of shops, which, in tall gingerbread style, line Santa Anna Bay in a pastel-pink-and-yellow replica of Amsterdam, the Netherlands. Shopkeepers stand in doorways listening to the salsa music piped, now poignantly, overhead.

Even the street vendors (large, red-kerchiefed Grenada women, who clamp cheroots in their toothless mouths) report difficulty hawking their inexpensive fresh nutmegs, homemade coconut candies and coveted packs of American cigarettes.

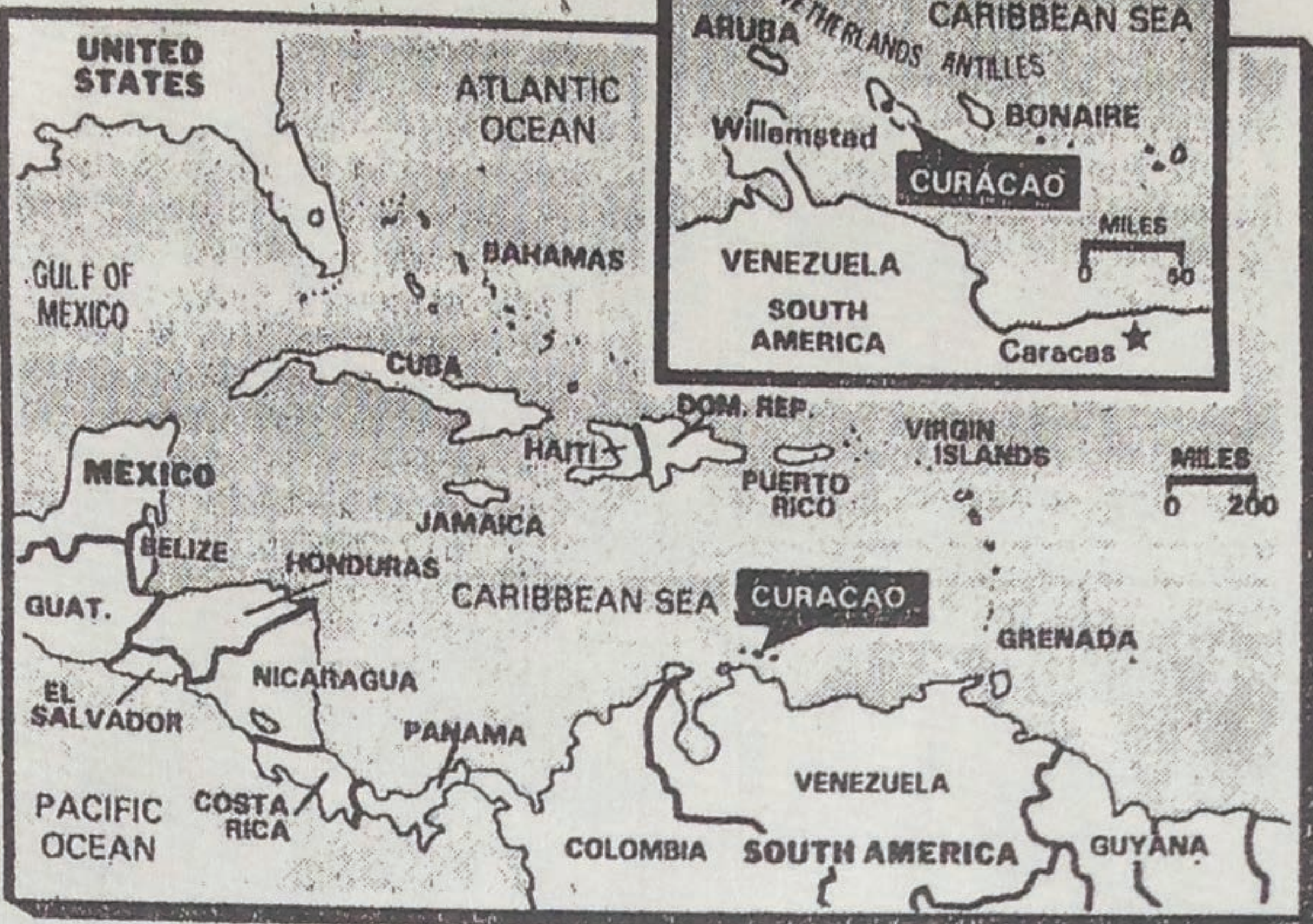
To make matters worse, just as Curacao had begun to look toward it as a new tourist market, neighboring Colombia slapped a stringent \$100 duty-free import limit on its home-ward-bound travelers.

So, to resuscitate its tourist industry from a crisis, Curacao has begun a mammoth effort to lure Americans back. As a result, from now through spring, you can fly a charter Antilles Airlines (ALM) DC-9 round-trip from Philadelphia to Curacao and spend eight days and seven nights in a first-class hotel — for \$309 to \$528. (Rates vary according to the hotel you choose.)

You also get Dutch cheese, Curacao liqueur, discounts on island tours, free cocktail parties, from \$5 to \$25 worth of casino chips, free T-shirts

(See CURACAO on 10-L)





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ried that the resultant population is a variety of skin shades.

In the 1600s, Jews escaping the Spanish Inquisition went to Curacao. Congregation Mikve Israel-Emanuel is the oldest synagogue in the Western hemisphere. You're welcome to worship or visit. Its white-sand floor symbolizes the search for the Promised Land. Ornate mahogany pews and hand-blown glass chandeliers glowing with candlelight and brass add Old World luster to a modern Sephardic service.

Rabbi Aaron Peller, who leads the

congregation, is a Philadelphian trained at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in Wyncote. He succeeded Rabbi Simeon J. Maslin, now spiritual leader of Keneseth Israel in Elkins Park.

There are seven major hotels in Curacao. The most deluxe is the Hilton International (\$85 to 100). It has a casino, private beach, star-shaped swimming pool, outdoor bars, "American" wall-socket outlets for hair dryers and razors, excellent room amenities and a tennis court. The hotel was scheduled to be taken over this

month by the Concorde group. Rates may change, but the Concorde will still be a part of the Antilles charter package.

Next door, the Las Palmas hotel, formerly the Arthur Frommer, has the friendliest staff, moderate amenities, a beach and pool across the street and an expensive restaurant with awful food. The room plugs are "Caribbean"; you'll need to buy a \$2 prong adapter at a local hardware store. The room rates are \$55 to \$79.

The Princess Beach Hotel is being rebuilt as a result of a fire; the Curacao Plaza Hotel is the only one on the Punda side of the island. It is undergoing major renovations and perhaps a change of ownership, has no beach, is mainly for serious shoppers who wish to be within walking distance of the stores. Check all rates before you go, since they fluctuate seasonally.

The best restaurants are La Bistrotelle, a beautiful French stucco-and-wrought-iron wine cave with excellent French food. Expensive.

There is also the Taverna Restaurant, where Jerry Wielinga, a handsome blond Dutchman, combines his loves of antiques and good food in an old plantation house. Fresh fish and a diverse salad bar make this a businessman's favorite. Moderate.

Playa Forti is at Westpunt Beach. Go in your shorts and bathing suit and enjoy such regional specialties as *ayaka*, a corn tamale stuffed with coconut-laced chicken, olives and spices. There are also goat or conch stew and *keshi yena*, a meat-stuffed baked cheese. Moderate.

The Pisces restaurant is inexpensive and great, with the best fish stew in town. Guitarists serenade you.

Curacao has clean, desalinated water and safe food, even from street vendors. Milk for coffee is usually condensed, for fresh milk is rare.

Travel tips: Transportation around Curacao is by taxi and quite expensive, with standard rates posted in the Curacao Holiday! magazine, which is present in all hotel lobbies. From the Hilton to the Punda, for example, it's \$5 if you're taken to the drawbridge, \$7 if you're driven to the other side.

For island handicrafts, stop at Obra di Man (literally, "made by hand"), Bargestraat No. 57. Telephone: 612431. You'll find a selection of batiked clothes, dolls in island dress, and leather goods ranging from \$2 to \$40.

The Curacao guilder is worth \$1.77, but if you check rates in commercial banks, you can get up to \$2.92.

On Tuesday nights, don't miss the Ban Topa street festival in the shopping streets of the Punda. It's a block party, light show, folkloric show and taste-atron at which you can encounter another culture safely and with great fun.

"Enjoy it," waiters say as they set food before you. In Curacao, that's not difficult to do.