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BY BAZ DREISINGER

PHOTOGRAPHY BY AL ARGUETA

PEACFUL, EASY FEELING
Pull up a chaise on the honey-hued sands of Cas Abou Beach on Curaçao's western shore.



“Where am I?”

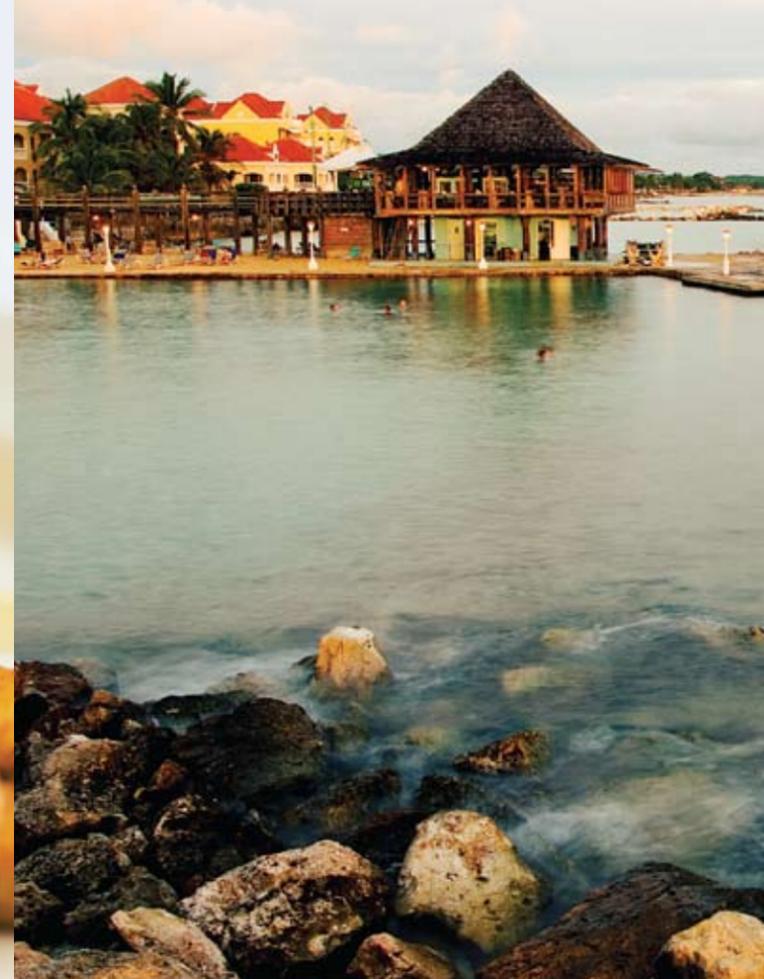
The question ricocheted around my brain as I surveyed Omundo, a sleek piano lounge just outside Willemstad packed with a diverse throng of revelers. Tall blonde men in slacks and women in sundresses puffed on cigarettes; black men in tailored European button-downs lounged; and curly-haired, brown-skinned women sipped martinis. Balmy air mingled with the air-conditioned chill while the soundtrack veered from live Cuban jazz to merengue to techno to throbbing *reggaeton*. Through the din, I could hardly discern the chatter by the bar — or even the languages, for that matter. Dutch? Spanish? Spanglish?

I'd been in Curaçao for five hours, and my disorientation was complete. It kicked in the moment I arrived and met my driver, Chernov, a portly Curaçao native with a name straight out of Dostoyevsky, features that could have been South American, West Indian or European, and an accent that might be taken for Puerto Rican. On the 40-minute ride to my hotel, I had caught a sunset glimpse of a landscape that was blatantly bewildering: cactuses and sand dunes that looked more like the American Southwest than the Caribbean. Choosing to get my beach fix for a couple of nights in “the country” (the island's rural west end, 35 minutes from the capital of Willemstad) before devoting the rest of my time to adventures in the historic city, I'd booked into Lodge Kura Hulanda, a beachfront resort with a pan-African aesthetic. I was checked in by a woman from Amsterdam and escorted to my room by Herbert, from Venezuela. Along the way, he called out to a bellman.

“That doesn't sound like Spanish,” I remarked.

“That's because it's Dutch,” he said.

Not that I hadn't expected Curaçao to be, as it advertises itself, “real different.” The 171-square-mile island that hugs Venezuela (the “C” in the Dutch “ABC Islands” chain, including Aruba and Bonaire) is known as a cosmopolitan cook-up: a multicultural mélange of the Netherlands, the Antilles and South America. Claimed by the Dutch West Indies



I felt as if I'd been thrust backwards into another, more civilized, century.

Company in 1634, Curaçao became a prosperous salt producer and bustling slave port. During the 17th century, Jews from Spain and Portugal took up residence there, and in the early 1900s a new oil refinery brought even more foreign nationals into the mix. Consequently, Curaçao natives speak four languages: Dutch, English, Spanish and Papiamentu, a Creole that fuses all of the above with African dialects and Portuguese.

While I knew the history and was drawn by Curaçao's reputation, nothing had prepared me to feel quite so dazed and confused. Drifting into dreamland after my first night out, I wondered if five days would be enough to situate myself in this pleasantly perplexing place.

The next morning I surveyed strange surroundings: On one side was a classic Caribbean vista of shimmering sea and white-sand beach, but on the other was a panorama straight out of the South African veldt. Having coffee with Delno Tromp, the hotel's charismatic general manager, began as many of my encounters here would.

"Where are you from?" I asked. Amid Curaçao's blur of accents and skin colors, categorization — both racial and geographical — I was confounded.

"Guess," came the reply.

"Venezuela?" I ventured. He shook his head.

"Holland?" Tromp's smirk grew.

"Germany?" Wrong again.

I tried the obvious. "Here?" I said, sheepishly.

"I'm from Bonaire," Tromp finally revealed. I was fast discovering that for most residents of Curaçao, "well-traveled" is an understatement. They milk their language skills, proximity to South America and European passports for all they're worth.

I'D HEARD THE BUZZ ABOUT THE ISLAND'S western beaches and soon spied them in droves: white-, black- and gold-sand specimens, some clogged with cruise-ship passengers, others deserted save for scattered fishermen hauling in the day's bounty. The surreal landscape would have thrilled Georgia O'Keeffe: Bright yellow houses punctuating flat, desert-like stretches; cactuses lining the dusty road, contorting themselves dramatically, like green pipe cleaners; iguanas scurrying to and fro, avoiding cars and people.

I whiled away the afternoon under a palapa at Cas About Beach, a popular hangout for tourists and locals, wading through water so translucent I could clearly see tiny fish darting out of

my way. Then I had my first-ever beachside massage. Luxuriating in a feast for the senses — the masseuse's expert touch on my back, the sound of waves lapping the shore, the lemon-lime scent of essential oils — I finally understood what all the fuss was about: Massages and beaches are indeed a marriage made in heaven.

I'd planned to take full advantage of my west-end stay by hiking in nearby Christoffel Park, home to 20 miles of trails, three former plantations (known as *landhuizen*) and Mount Christoffel, at 1,239 feet the island's highest point. But laziness prevailed, so I asked Chernov to drive me along an asphalt trail instead. We cruised beneath a green canopy and along a red clay road to a lookout that was ominous yet stunning. Waves crashed fiercely on a black-sand beach sheltered under a slate-gray sky. Limestone cliffs crowned the scene, and hawks circled above. Not a soul was in sight.

From there it was a short ride to the neighboring national park at Shete Boka (Papiamentu for "seven mouths" or inlets). Surveying the tablelands (limestone inlets that overlook the island's rugged north coast) I had yet another "where-am-I?" moment. Here was another vista unlike any I'd seen in the Caribbean, with red clay soil stretching flat-out for miles, sprinkled with green shrubbery and aloe plants. Chernov, not one for small talk, hit the nail on the head. "This is pure nature," he sighed.

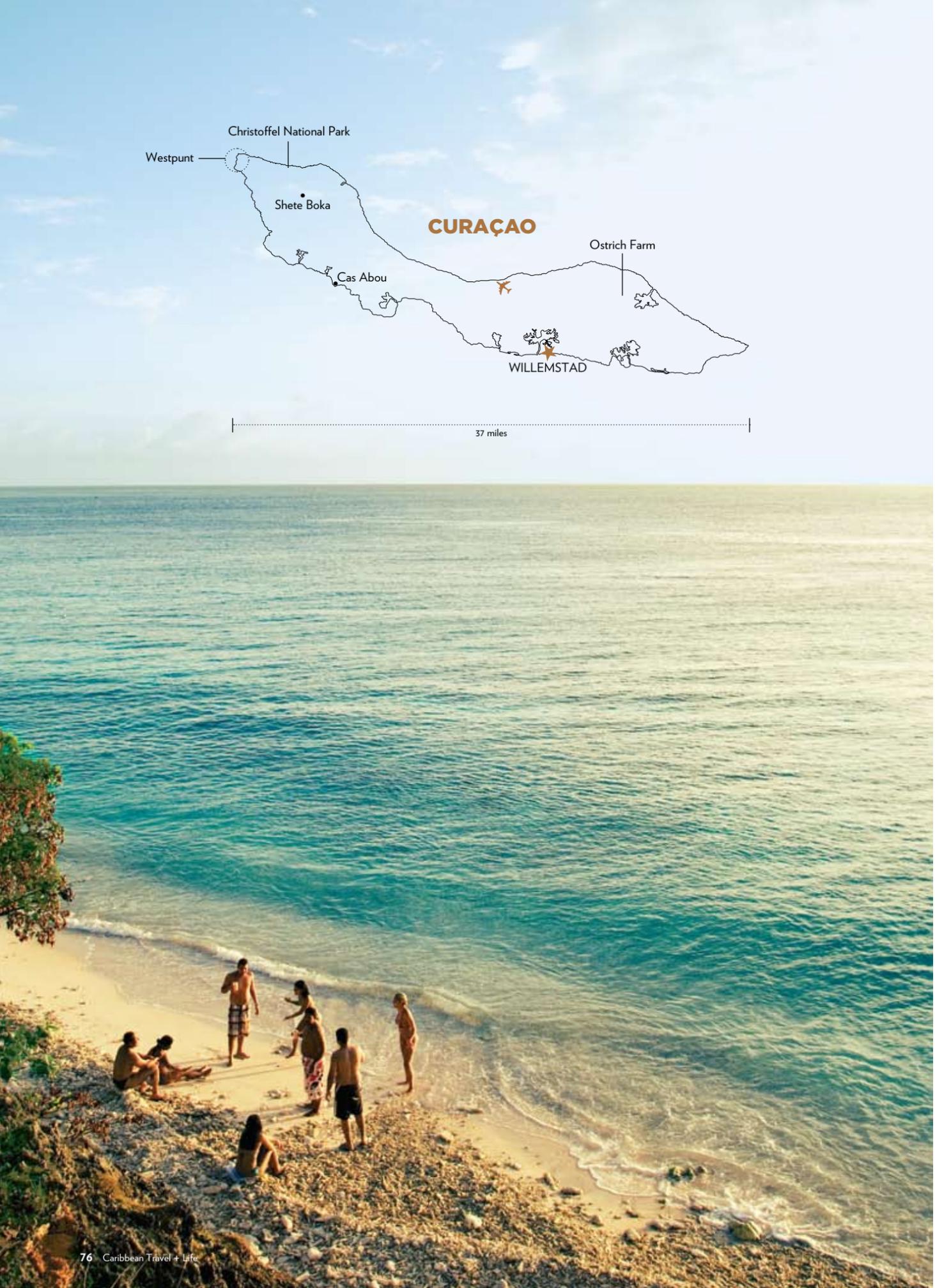
AND THIS, I THOUGHT HOURS LATER AS I scrutinized a parade of beauty queens from the judges' booth, is anything *but*. I'd landed here because Trevor Nisbeth, a scene maker who'd volunteered to be my night-life guide, had invited me along while he judged the Miss Curaçao pageant.

At the backstage after-party, I sipped wine and chatted with locals in whose presence I began to feel painfully provincial. A fashion designer told me he'd moved to Holland after living in Hong Kong; an investment banker had worked in several European countries; Trevor had traveled extensively and worked everywhere from China to Ecuador. Conversations started in one language, progressed into another and concluded in a third.

On the way back to the hotel, I got my first good look at Willemstad's famed waterfront, lit up at night. It looked like a movie set. Beautifully restored pink and yellow 18th-century buildings stood beside gray ones that showed their age, as if to testify, "Yes, there are real bones beneath the fancy facades." I asked Trevor to pull over so I could get out and take it all in. Had I been beamed up to Amsterdam?

The query persisted into the next morning, when I checked into Lodge Kura Hulanda's sister property, a hotel, spa and casino in the Otrabanda section of Willemstad, just across the river from Punda, the central historic district. Kura Hulanda ("Dutch Courtyard") is a sort of Hollywood Holland, an irresistibly charming recreation of a colonial Dutch village

THE WORLD ON A GRAIN OF SAND From left to right: A courtyard at Museum Kura Hulanda; traditional keshi yena at the Avila Hotel, and their club and live music venue, Blues; pages from the past at Museum Kura Hulanda.



complete with cobblestone streets, a town square and elegant, wood-paneled rooms with four-poster beds. The hotel, a major catalyst of the neighborhood's revitalization, is the brainchild of Dutch philanthropist Jacob Gelt Dekker, who in 1998 bought a rundown mansion in what was then a crime-ridden district. When he discovered that the property sat on the site of a former slave depot, Dekker decided to build Museum Kura Hulanda and made it the focal point of his urban resort.

I could have spent a whole day at the Caribbean's only slave museum, fascinated by its collection of documents, artifacts and African art and the chilling experience of descending wooden stairs into a re-creation of the claustrophobic "living" quarters on a slave ship. After the intensity of the tour, I needed an emotional and literal cool-down, so I headed for the hotel pool, nestled amid African-themed statues and leafy courtyards. Named the Bolivar Pool in honor of the South American freedom fighter who spent several years in Curaçao at the turn of the 19th century, it was further evidence of the island's rich, multinational history.

When I said as much to hotelier Tone Møller later over cocktails, she beamed. As an owner of Curaçao's legendary Avila, an 18th-century Dutch colonial mansion that's evolved into an über-chic hotel (home to Queen Beatrix of The Netherlands when she's in town), history is all in a day's work.

"Dushi!" she greeted Trevor when we arrived at the Avila, using the ubiquitous Papiamentu word for "sweetie" as she escorted us to a lounge for champagne and chitchat. "I loved New York," Tone reminisced. She spent years there, working for Leona Helmsley and relishing her *Sex and the City* lifestyle until she decided to move back home to help run the hotel her father had acquired in 1977.

"My friends said, 'Are you crazy, moving back to an island?' But they didn't realize how cosmopolitan *this* island was," Møller crowed. She and her father molded the Avila into a cultural mecca, with musicians who played Carnegie Hall performing in its restaurant and a café that has become a haunt for writers and artists. On the way out, I met Mr. Møller, who was excitedly hanging a poster advertising a writers' prize he'd inaugurated, named for Curaçao legend Boeli van Leeuwen, a novelist who passed away in 2007 and a former Avila habitué.

We dined at Blues, Avila's restaurant and live-music venue, set over the sea at the end of a pier. I feasted on grilled snapper and tuna tartare as the jazz band played, and Tone and I toasted to Curaçao's dynamic live-music scene, which Blues had had a leading role in creating.

Later I rejoined Trevor, night-life concierge extraordinaire, and we made our way through the throngs at De Heeren, a popular drink-and-dance spot where the crowd spilled into the street. A Cuban jazz band blared from the stage as couples sashayed across the floor.

"Geography definitely trumps history," I shouted to Trevor, over the horns.

"Why's that?" he asked.
 "Because the soul of this island isn't Dutch or West Indian; it's Latin, thanks to your neighbors."



Curacao's food is a tangy mélange of African, Dutch, Latin and Surinamese flavors.

"Don't be so sure," came Trevor's reply. Within minutes we were crossing a velvet rope into Europe.

At restaurant-cum-club Cinco, amid clouds of cigarette smoke and a riotous sound system, I drank Venezuelan Polar beer and watched what might as well have been the Dutch edition of *Girls Gone Wild*. As the music switched from "La Bamba" to Jennifer Lopez to European techno — easily the most bizarre musical mash-up I'd ever heard — blonde Dutch girls shook it with sheer abandon. But later that night, tiptoeing over cobblestones to my room at Kura Hulanda, I felt as if I'd suddenly been thrust backwards into another, more civilized, century.

"BON DIA!" TOUR GUIDE GIGI GREETED nearly everyone who crossed our path as she guided me through Punda, whose collection of pastel-colored historic buildings is the UNESCO World Heritage Site's claim to fame. We traversed the cobblestone interior of imposing Fort Amsterdam, erected in 1635 to defend Peter Stuyvesant's new Dutch colony, and continued to the temple at Mikve Israel-Emmanuel. Completed in 1732, it's the oldest synagogue still in use in the

Western Hemisphere. Then we visited the Penha building, a baroque yellow landmark that looked like a giant gingerbread confection and celebrated its 300th anniversary last year.

We browsed the floating market, where oblong boats from Venezuela are laden with wares ranging from banana leaves and avocado oil to fresh fish and tomatoes. Then we feasted on *kuminda Krioyo* (Creole cuisine) at one of the many public tables in the old market. Like everything else hereabouts, Curaçao's food is a hybrid — a tangy mélange of African, Dutch and Latin flavors — and the scent of Surinamese curries, chicken stews and seafood wafted from the stalls. I'd developed a minor addiction to *funchi* (polenta), so I ordered a side of it with my stewed fish, dousing them both in another staple, *pika*, a pepper-and-onion relish.

Ostrich is another local delicacy, but after looking one of the beastly birds in the eye the next day, I knew I'd never even give it a try. The Ostrich Farm on the east side of the island is a working ranch owned by a South African who relocated here and discovered that the climate and Dutch-influenced culture made him right feel at home. His farm, which also has black-bellied sheep, guinea fowl and pot-bellied pigs, is no shoestring venture; a single ostrich costs about \$8,000.

"God, they're ugly," I said — understatement of the year.

"And dumb," replied my guide. "But they taste very good."

That claim can be put to the test by those less squeamish than I at the farm's Zambezi Restaurant, where the décor is African Lodge and the menu is an homage to all things ostrich. Ostrich burger? Check. Ostrich croquettes? Check. Ostrich jerky and ostrich sausage? Check and check. I sipped an ostrich-free Coke while shaking my head at the rust-hued vista, a familiarly unfamiliar scene: I was once again back in that disorienting place — South Africa via Curaçao.

The next day I returned to someplace familiar: the beach. I'd spent so much time ogling Curaçao's colorful above-water world that I hadn't yet seen the one beneath it — a shame on an island renowned for its diving. So I spent the afternoon on a snorkel trip to Caracas Bay, where thousands of yellowtail snapper, blue parrotfish and thin tarpon darted around my legs; I'd never seen so many fish.

Later, a mojito and I sat by the beach at Lions Dive resort, watching the sunset. Nearby, a gaggle of girls chatted loudly in Dutch. Michael Jackson songs blared from nearby speakers, and I heard merengue in the distance. But now, the disjunction of it all felt perfectly natural. As the sun played on the water, I sunk my toes in the sand and felt at home. Yes, Curaçao was "real different," but this setting, with its palm trees, sand, sea and playful people, was hardly disorienting. It was a blissfully familiar scene — as classically Caribbean as it gets. **CTV**

For **THE ESSENTIALS** on Curaçao, turn to page 97.

MARCH 2009



SAFARI STYLE
Hotel Kura Hulanda's treehouse reflects the resort's surprising fascination with Africana. Opposite: A chick and its keeper at the Ostrich Farm.