

DESTINATIONS

Ultimate Travel

Love at first sight in Curaçao and France
By Jacquelin Carnegie

A SA TRAVEL WRITER for almost 20 years, I've been to a lot of countries, visited many places and stayed in all kinds of accommodations, from world-class hotels to family-run inns. But in all that time, I've only fallen in love twice—first, with the Kura'Hulanda in Curaçao and then with the Prieuré d'Orsan in France.

What is love? It's hard to define. But when it happens to you, you know it.

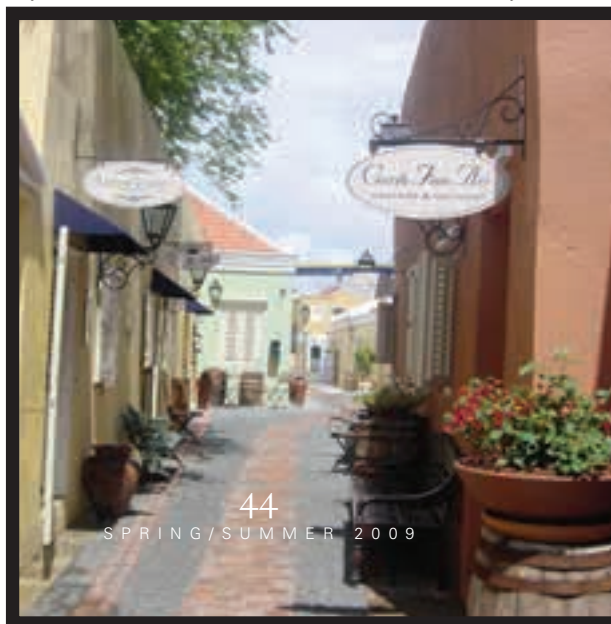
DUTCH TREAT

The Kura'Hulanda in the Netherlands Antilles is not a hotel in the traditional sense. There's no hotel "building." The property is an old section of town that has

been beautifully restored to resemble a European village. You don't stay in a hotel "room" but in your own little townhouse on a cobblestone street, right off the town square. Breakfast is served at café tables under the shady trees in the central courtyard. (Kura'Hulanda actually means "Dutch courtyard.") It's about as close to bliss as you can get.

This area was once a rundown section of Curaçao's capital, Willemstad. About 10 years ago, Dutch entrepreneur Jacob Gelt Dekker came here on a holiday, wandered around

Island Time
The Kura'Hulanda is a restored section of Willemstad, Curaçao. Beachfront accommodations at the Lodge & Beach Club are also available.



town and fell in love with this Dutch Caribbean island.

First, he bought and restored an old house. But what started as a lark soon turned into a passion, as Dekker purchased and oversaw the meticulous restoration of an eight-block section of Dutch colonial buildings from the 18th and 19th centuries in Willemstad's Otrobanda neighborhood.

Dekker believed that these glorious buildings should be restored following a historic use of color and architectural detailing, along with an element of creativity. He hired Dutch architect Leo Helms to design the project. The result is this magnificent walled village within a town.

As part of the restoration process, Dekker extensively researched the neighborhood's history, which resulted in a fascinating onsite anthropological museum. But those looking for relaxation needn't worry—there's also a spa, pools, restaurants and shops. And after all, this is the Caribbean; a beautiful beach is only minutes away.

From the Kura'Hulanda, a short walk across a little bridge will take you into downtown Willemstad. Stroll along the picturesque streets lined with high-end shops and art galleries. Right around the corner, there's a cathedral, Fort Church, Curaçao's oldest Protestant church, and Mikve Israel Emmanuel, one of the oldest synagogues in the Western Hemisphere. There's something for everyone in this dreamy Caribbean village.

MEDIEVAL MARVEL

At the center of the garden sits a fountain with four spouts, symbolizing the four rivers of Paradise. The Prieuré d'Orsan, a restored 12th-century monastery with a medieval garden is about as close as you'll come to Paradise on earth.

In 1107 in the Central Loire Valley of France, a priory was established. 900 years later, some of the monastery's structures were still standing, but the Prieuré Notre Dame d'Orsan had been abandoned since the French Revolution.

In the early 1990s, Parisian architects Patrice Taravella and Sonia Lesot were looking for an interesting site to restore. When they found the priory, they poured all their talent into the project—and the results are magical. Today, the remaining buildings have been lovingly restored. There are seven stunning guest rooms and the *pièce de résistance*: the garden.

With the expertise of master-gardener Gilles Guillot, they created an authentic medieval garden by studying illuminated manuscripts, tapestries and paintings.

The hedges, arbors and arches characteristic of monastery gardens have been faithfully recreated along with *jardins clos*,

enclosed "garden rooms." There's an herb garden containing species from Charlemagne's official plant list, a rose garden, organic kitchen gardens planted with vegetables in raised beds, an apple orchard, an alley of small fruit trees, a labyrinth and elaborate benches and chairs made using age-old wood braiding techniques. The garden is so enchanting, it may be your best chance to experience going "through the looking glass."

Patrice Taravella, owner and architect, is also the master chef. Everything you eat here is fresh from the garden and expertly prepared by Patrice. A stay at the Prieuré d'Orsan is pure heaven.

Being a travel writer, people often ask me, "What's your favorite place?" I always reply, "The next place. The place I haven't been to yet." I don't like to go back. I like to move on. But every day, I dream about returning to the Kura'Hulanda and the Prieuré d'Orsan.

Want to come along for the ride?

Editor's Note: Visit Kura'Hulanda, www.kurahulanda.com; Prieuré d'Orsan, www.prieuredorsan.com ♦



Medieval Nights: Staying in one of the Prieuré d'Orsan's seven guest rooms is a heavenly delight. People come from all over the world to visit the medieval gardens, below.

