

A Trip to Curaçao and Aruba

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After our recent 20 days trip to the A and C of the ABC Islands, several collectors asked about our experience. We did not go to the B island (Bonaire), because a place where they tell you not to pick up shells from the beach is not for us. The following is a report on our observations on the marine fauna, and we will give a brief comparison of the two islands from our personal perspective. The moderately short duration of our stay did not allow our visiting all of the sites that we had heard of, but we nevertheless, were determined to take a tour with the famous submarine “Curasub”.

Curaçao

In Curaçao, we stayed in the Kura Hulanda Resort (Arrow 1 on the map in Figure 1) at the northwestern tip of the island. We had been warned by the consistently negative ratings on TripAdvisor. Indeed we had the pleasure of experiencing the mediocre quality of food and service, the lousy maintenance of the resort, and an endless number of other shortcomings that guests before us had described. The resort is in deep financial trouble and basically lacks a manager and funding. Nevertheless, we thoroughly enjoyed the lovely scenery and the easy diving on the house reef in the front of the resort. The gentle underwater slope is beautiful: covered in sponges and coral, a few gorgonians, and dropping to 120 feet. Unfortunately, there is a remarkable absence of larger fish and the invertebrate diversity is the lowest that we have seen anywhere in the world.

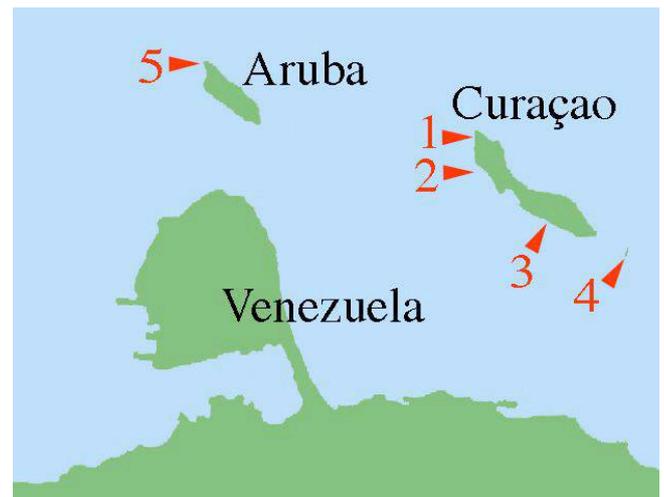


Figure 1. Map of the “ABC islands.”

Finding dead shells of any species was hard; from the very shallow parts close to the beach down to 100 feet, there was basically nothing. Normally we do not turn over anything and do not take live shells when Scuba diving. The rocks and coral slabs we did check were on silty sand, very little growth, and basically no other marine life under them. This was observed in the shallow area in the bay in front of the resort, and also in the deeper areas beyond the drop-off. Dive sites further north had fantastic reefs (e.g. "Watamula"), and further south, the diversity of corals and sponges was greater ("Mushroom Forest"). However, all places visited on Curaçao were basically devoid of shells. On a total of 18 dives (which means one and a half days under water between the two of us) we found three fresh dead *Tenorioconus aurantius* (Figure 2) at 15 to 40 feet shown in the picture below.



Figure 2. *Tenorioconus auratinus* (Kura Hulanda House Reef, Curaçao), largest shell is 57 mm.

There are numerous diving schools, and tank fills (including Nitrox) are rather inexpensive. On Curaçao, you can rent tanks to take with you, which is what many divers do. The slopes or drop offs to deeper water are usually close to the shore and road signs point to suitable dive sites. We encountered either non-existent or very little current, and the visibility was great once you got past the shallows, and a wetsuit was not required.

The only beaches on Curaçao that produced a few shells were the strip at Playa Grande just south of Kura Hulanda, a tourist hot spot for watching sea turtles attracted by fishermen cleaning their catch. The second place shells had washed ashore was on a rubble beach west of Santa Martha (Arrow 2 on the map in Figure 1). When arriving at the beach, you have to swim from the abandoned building across a narrow channel. The beach on the opposite side stretches for about one mile and yields rather acceptable *Atlanticonus granulatus*, *T. aurantius*, *Voluta musica*, and *Cypraeassis testiculus*, but make sure you arrive at low tide. Interestingly, while diving in Curaçao we saw only one living, adult Queen Conch, *Lobatus gigas*, but many fresh dead "rollers" of approximately 5". Something seems to have killed an entire generation of the young Strombidae.

We also took the dayboat to Klein Curaçao, a small sandy island one hour offshore to the east (Arrow 4 on the map in Figure 1). This was a nice touristy trip with an excellent BBQ, and yet again, no shells among the garbage on the beaches away from where they dump the tourists.

Next, we moved to Jan Thiel in the south of Curaçao, straight across from the Aquarium and the Substation (Arrow 3 on the map in Figure 1). Together with

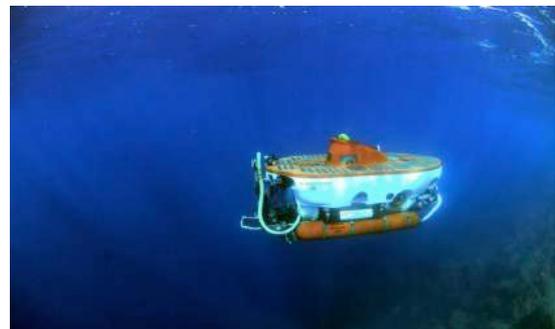


Figure 3. Curasub submarine at Curaçao.

Barbara and Bruce, who operated the submarine venture (Figure 3), we soon found ourselves at 600 to 900 ft., soundlessly gliding along rocky drop-offs and rubble fields inhabited by bizarre sponges, crinoids, crabs, and fish that we had never seen before. There were some crabbed cones and quite a few *Onustus caribaeus*. Yes, and a few slit shells sitting on ledges or in crevices of the rocks.

We had permission to collect a few samples for the Molluscan Science Foundation, Inc., and came up with a few *Dauciconus sorenseni* (Figure 14), *D. perprotractus* (Figure 14), *Isara antillensis*, *Perotrochus sunderlandorum* (Figure 4), *Entemnotrochus adansonianus* (Figure 4), *Sconsia clarkii*, and a *Dentalium* inhabited by a hermit crab modified to close the aperture of the tusk (Figure 19). On our second dive, the pump sucking in samples did not work, so we scooped up grit from 900 feet with the net at the front of the submarine. Apart from a few interesting bits, this exercise turned out fairly poor results. In any case, the submarine dives were an expensive, yet unforgettable, experience.

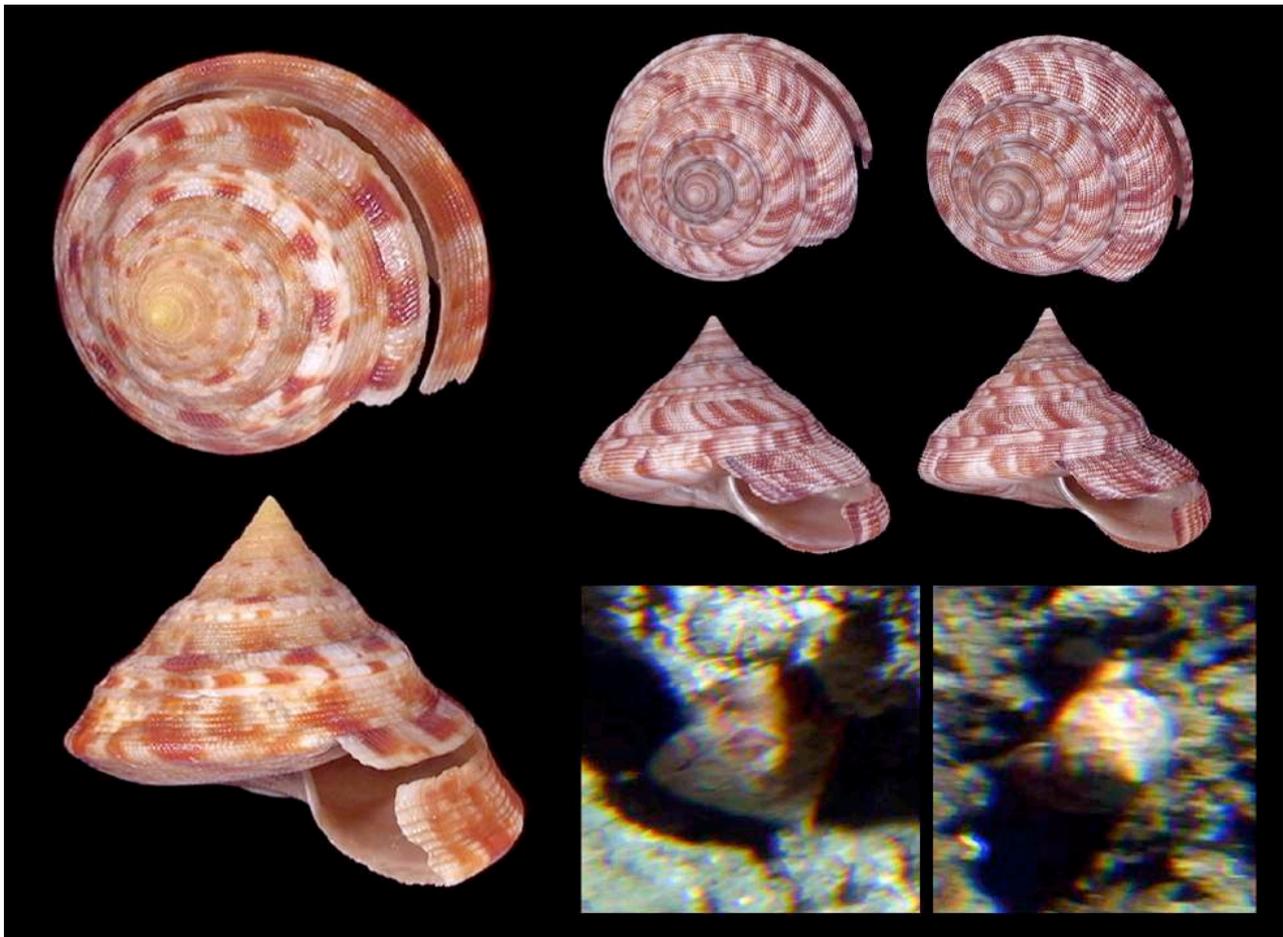


Figure 4. Left: *Entemnotrochus adansonianus* (Curaçao, at 600 ft, 64 mm; middle and right: *Perotrochus sunderlandorum* (Curaçao, at 800-900 ft, 44 and 46 mm). Other shells found in Curaçao are shown in Figures 9-11, 15 and 19.

Aruba

As a preparation for Aruba, we tried to make contact with those local collectors we knew. Some did not even respond to our e-mails, others gave a friendly hint that they were not prepared to share any information. Our policy is that anybody willing to travel far and put an effort into responsibly collecting shells should be welcome to go where they want; to experience how hard or easy collecting is at travel destinations. So, we will tell you exactly where we found shells on Aruba. Our place was a cozy beach house north of the big hotels of Malmok (Arrow 5 on the map in Figure 1). Felix had read the name "Hadicurari Beach" on a 1970s label that came with a bag of worn *Tenorioconus curassaviensis*. We were so delighted that right in the front of our accommodation, we could pick up fairly nice specimens of this pretty cone up from the beach (Figure 6). The area where fresh shells are cast ashore is single strip of beach spanning approximately one mile between the Casino and Boca Catalina Beach, along the L.G. Smith Boulevard. There are a few patches with nice microshells and marginellids that can be found further north. Every morning of our six-day stay at Aruba, Felix walked up and down that beach, shoving away those godless barbarians traipsing straight through the fresh beachgrit. Terrible ignorants. They are everywhere!



Figure 5. Marginelliform species. Scale: 10 mm; 1, 2: *Persicula calculus* (Aruba); 3: *Persicula muralis* (Aruba); 4: *Gibberula pulcherrima* (Curaçao); 5: *Gibberula catenata* (Curaçao); 6: *Persicula* sp. (Curacao); 7: *Volvarina* sp. (Aruba); 8: *Persicula chrysomelina* (Aruba); 9: *Persicula* sp. (Curaçao).

As nobody was kind enough to tell us that we could legally collect shells, we had to find out by ourselves and to finally pick up a few nice *Arubaconus hieroglyphus* (Figure 7) and several other species. The best place to snorkel is in the front and to both sides of a rusty wreck that is visible from the road along Hadicurari Beach. It is easy to access from the shore, and there are numerous different shallow water habitats to investigate. In contradistinction to Curaçao, the invertebrates found in Aruba are rich, and every small rock you turn has brittle stars, crabs, sponges, small and large bivalves, and sometimes, hundreds of tiny hermit crabs carrying a great variety of microshells. There

are also more fish and turtles as soon as you snorkle out half a mile. Even close to shore, every second rock pool has a *Voluta musica*, if you have the patience to fan the sand all the way down and wait another three minutes for the dust to settle. We found mainly subadult ones and those that were adult had an eroded top, so finally we left them all behind. Generally, snorkling in the shallow water along Hadicurari Beach will produce a variety of cones, usually crabbed but well-preserved, including *Jaspidiconus arawak* (Figure 8), *J. bootii*, *Perplexiconus columba* (Figure 8), *Tenorioconus curassaviensis* (Figure 6), and some others.



Figure 6. *Tenorioconus curassaviensis* (Hadicurari Beach, Aruba), largest shell is 31 mm.



Figure 7. *Arubaconus hieroglyphus* (Aruba) Largest shell: 21 mm.

As for cowries, *Luria cinerea* can be observed, mostly in pairs, under larger coral slabs in the shallow water, and a few *Naria acicularis*, in deeper areas. Adult *Lobatus gigas* are quite common as soon as you snorkel out a bit, while rollers are abundant in the muddy areas just along the shoreline.

There are other places on Aruba where snorkeling can produce some nice material, e.g. the south coast along Barcadere and Mangel Halto, but if the wind is too strong and coming from the sea, the water gets milky, which was the case the day we visited these places. Another interesting place for shells is at the opposite end of the island around a small bay called Baby Beach. East of that touristy place (avoid the "Big Mama Grill"), there is an animal cemetery and a really productive beach.

Scuba diving from the beach is not possible in most places in Aruba, as the drop off is too far out. Therefore, we refrained from wasting a whole day getting onto a boat, doing two dives, and heading all the way back to shore. As the diving on Curaçao became boring very quickly, we probably did not miss much by not diving on Aruba anyway. Other shells found in Aruba are shown in Figures 5, 12, 13, and 15.

In conclusion, Aruba was much richer in shallow water marine fauna and shells, while Curaçao apparently has seen better days, reflected by a lot of dead coral in the shallow water, and lots of subfossils, but hardly any fresh shells. Both islands have a wonderful, laid-back, and welcoming population. However, where is the wealth supposedly taken into these small nations by all the city-sized cruise ships that come and go every day? The ferry terminals are lined with luxurious shops, jewelry stores, fancy restaurants, as well as all of the big names and franchises, but as soon as you move three roads inland, you will find run-down homes, bad roads, a dilapidated infrastructure, and abandoned office buildings.



Figure 8. Conidae from Aruba. 1: *Perplexiconus columba* (21 mm); 2, 3: *Jaspidiconus arawak* (16 and 17 mm); 4, 5: *J. bootii* (19 and 22 mm), all from Hadicurari Beach, Aruba.

Entering and leaving the countries is fast and efficient. Only the “Rent A Car” facility at Curaçao made it hard by taking nearly two hours to give us our rental. We noticed a difference from other tropical places, as people on A and C are attentive and considerate drivers. Caribbean flair and beautiful, seemingly untouched areas could be found on both islands, but the rocky shore at the lighthouse of northern Aruba stuck out. As everywhere on this planet these days, exposed beaches not frequented by tourists are full of plastic waste. The stories we heard about holdups, cars being broken into, stuff being stolen from hotel rooms, *etc.* did not turn out to be true for us. This is especially true for Curaçao, which has taken measures against its bad reputation, *e.g.* by placing security personnel in parking lots along the beaches. For the accommodation, the rates given locally are sometimes twice as high as rates given over the internet on the same day. In both places, you need a rental car or motorbike to get around. The stores offer a surprising range of food and drinks, and on both islands you can pay with U.S. dollars. The water from the tap is of excellent drinking quality, so no need to buy plastic bottles with water. There are no conch fritters served anywhere on Aruba or Curaçao. To fuel up, you need cash, but most other places accept credit cards. You definitely need mosquito repellent and lots of it.



Figure 9. *Columbella mercatoria* (1st and 2nd row: Curaçao, 3rd row: Aruba), largest shell is 14 mm.



Figure 10. *Isara antillensis* (Curaçao, at 750 ft, 40 and 75 mm).



Figure 11. *Spondylus americanus* (Playa Grandi, Curaçao) with pearl attachments (58 mm).



Figure 12. Turrinids and similar. Scale: 10 mm. 1: *Mitromorpha dormitor* (Mitromorphidae); 2: *Splendrillia vinki* (Drilliidae); 3: *Tenaturris inepta* (Mangeliidae); 4: *Tritonoharpa* sp. (Cancelariidae). All from Aruba.



Figure 13. *Oliva fulgurator bulla* (Hadicurari Beach, Aruba), largest shell is 42 mm.