I had always wanted to visit Suriname, a former Dutch colony in South America. To get there from Arizona, I traveled (via Atlanta) to the Caribbean island of Aruba with Delta Airlines and then to the island of Curaçao with Insel Air (with a long layover and six-hour delay) and to Suriname. Because both Aruba and Curaçao had been colonialized by the Dutch as well, Dutch is still spoken in all of these areas and that made it possible for me to read and watch local media and to ask people questions, e.g. ethnic Dutch living on Aruba, (mainly) Papiamento speakers on Aruba and Curacao, and various Surinamers (Hindi, Afro etc as self-identified backgrounds). Getting into Aruba from the US was fast because they had passport machines; getting back into it via Curacao (which is part of the same Kingdom!) took over an hour; and the bureaucracy in Suriname is tedious and lengthy.

The Islands of Aruba and Curacao
The current political status of the islands is a little confusing. As mentioned, like Suriname, they had been Dutch colonies, together with Bonaire and three smaller islands in this area. That history goes back to the time of the 80 years war (1586-1648) against Spain when the Netherlands conquered these (then Spanish) islands in the Caribbean. All six islands had been part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands as the “Netherlands (Dutch) Antilles”, but now Aruba and Curacao are two of the separate countries that form that Kingdom (together with St Maarten and the actual Netherlands). Aruba had wanted a break-up from Curacao because the latter was seen as the dominating force. The break-up from the Netherlands meant that the local elites remained but with more power to appoint relatives and friends and award contracts to businesses who supported them, or their political parties, financially (see e.g. Hessels 2011).

The main languages on the two islands are Papiamento (native to most), Dutch, and English. On the left, *Hopi* is ‘much’ from Dutch *hoop* ‘pile’ (I think) and the other words are English and Spanish.

The currency is complex as well: on (Bonaire and) Curacao, there is the NAF (Netherlands Antilles Florin) and, on Aruba, it is the AFL (Aruba Florin). The US dollar is the more frequent for bigger amounts.
Aruba is known for its luxury hotels, e.g. along Palm Beach, and the beautiful sandy beaches and even temperatures. I went more for its history and slept in two guest houses in downtown Oranjestad. I had Madi as a tour guide and explored some of the island, which is far from flat as some guidebooks had said. There are many huge rocks, e.g. Casibari Rocks and Ayo Rock, a Natural Bridge by Andicuri Bay, a National Park, and the Bushiribana and Balashi Goldmines, the latter with great graffiti; see Appendix. I had wanted to walk in Arikok but that was hard to arrange, unfortunately.

The beach on the North side is strewn with cairns that people build to wish for something. A huge desalinization plant has been on the South side since the 1930s to provide this arid island with fresh water. The same is true, by the way, on Curacao.

Venezuela is only 18 miles across the sea from here and Aruba’s first inhabitants may have been Arawak (Caquetio) from Venezuela escaping Carib attacks. According to Madi, some current burial practices may go back to that (digging up bones and consolidating them). Since Spain was the first to come to the island, it brought its Catholic missionaries and there are still many Catholic churches, e.g. the one below. Most of these churches have a school attached and a cemetery, making people joke about the cycle of
life concentrated in one area. There are Protestant, Methodist, Jewish, Evangelical, and Baha’I among the population of 100,000 or so. As I mentioned, the majority of the population speaks Papiamento, as it does in Curacao, but Dutch is still taught in schools.

I was surprised by some of the bad infrastructure on Aruba, a lot of potholes, broken sidewalks, and many traffic jams. I was there when it rained a lot and roads turned into rivers. Dogs and cats are frequent companions on the sidewalks. Minimal ‘Dutch’ architecture is still present.
Right in the middle of Oranje stad there is a street art project going on (see Appendix) but nothing about it in the bookstores. There is a Bruna with some Dutch books and DeWit with some bools in Papiamento.

**Curacao**

I had quite a layover in Curacao (and a further 6 hour delay) and had the good fortune to find a great taxi driver, whose name I’ll leave anonymous as X, who loved the beauty of the island, hated the fat cat Dutch that have big houses and live there a few months of the time and the corruption that lets some people live tax-free and do the same things I mentioned politicians do in Aruba. In October, there had been elections and MAN (Movementu Antia Nobo) had won, which was initially seen as a good thing but they turned around on many issues. What else is new! X works 7am to 7pm every day of the week
except holidays. He built a house for himself working two jobs before and was an incredibly well-informed man and very anti-Dutch government. Here, one of the leaders of independence, Hermin Wiels, didn’t die in an accident but was murdered in 2013.

Curacao is very green or it was, when I was there, after the rainy months. There are no wild animals on the island (except a few harmless snakes) but there are stories of tigers and monkeys that are supposed to have arrived on Venezuelan boats. There is a huge contrast between the green countryside, colorful Willemstad, the upscale suburbs, and the scattered houses in the countryside. The population is about 150,000 though it seemed more.

X showed me both sides of the Bay that Willemstad stradles, various upscale housing developments, some for Venezuelans who voted with their feet but mostly for Europeans. The roads are wonderful compared to those in Aruba and the traffic went smoothly but it was a Sunday. The government built low-income housing in the past, but that is not enough because lots of people are on a wait list. The political troubles in Venezuela disrupt the oil coming to be refined on Curacao and the supply of fish and fresh fruit, which one can see 40 miles across the ocean on a clear day.

All bridges have names of Dutch queens (a daily reminder of the ties with the Netherlands) and the last one that was added is named after Amalia, the crown princess of the Netherlands. The one connecting both sides is the Koningin Juliana Brug which allows huge ships into the St Ana Bay. There have been a few times when the water came into the lower parts of the island but they have been lucky so far.
This was/is my favorite place on this trip. I arrived at 5am, in the dark. The road to and from the airport, referred to as Zanderij, is not a highway and passing gets dangerous; one is rewarded by thriving markets with loads of colorful wares out on the streets, the bustle of people, and especially the very interesting mixes of architecture and religions. There are many types of Protestant churches (e.g. Lutheran, Reformed, Pentecostal, Moravian), many mosques, two synagogues, and many Catholic churches. Some of the more colorful ones are shown in pictures below.

When I was there, a big protest against gay-marriage and transgender people was discussed in the papers and the churches were the leading forces.
Suriname has remains of stone-age (10,000 BP) people in the shape of arrowheads, tools, and petroglyphs (which are in places really far away so I didn’t get to see them). Like the islands mentioned before, it had early Arawak settlers fleeing the Caribs before the Spanish and then the Dutch invaded. Slaves from Africa were imported to grow sugar and abused in horrible ways, people from India and Indonesia joined the mix (some indentured), as did the Chinese - and here too they are now running supermarkets. As a result of this history, some of the languages are (Surinamese) Dutch, Sranan (a creole), Surinamese Hindi (aka Sarnami), Javanese, and Chinese. The Maroons were slaves who escaped (though the term Maroon is debated) and their languages are Sa(r)amaka, Paramakan, Ndyuka, Kwinti, and Matawai. Amerindian languages are spoken in the south and include Carib and Arawak.

After independence in 1975, Suriname had a tumultous history. The current president committed a coup in 1980 and is implicated in the 1982 “December murders” of 15 opposition leaders (see below plaque in Fort Zeelandia where the murders took place) and a massacre of maroons in Moiwana in 1986. For a while, that non-democratic way of governing meant no foreign aid. But there is money to be made!

![Plaque commemorating the 1982 murders](image)

This president has a way to convince his critics to accept jobs in the government and to become silenced. As in Aruba, this results in many people on the government payroll who do very little (and whose job satisfaction must be minimal). What should happen is to get some more enterpreneurship: grow some products that won’t have to be imported, improve tourism, etc. Not much is stimulated in this political climate and the country is large and gets a lot of rain, so could be productive! Instead, commissions are set up to plan bridges and other infrastructure that will never be built.

On a personal note, it would be nice if the only place to post mail (the main post office) remained open after 2:30 pm. I have some postcards all stamped that nobody wanted to mail (even my hotel). I love the bookstores that are there with some local information though not much on languages. Walking in downtown Paramaribo, I noticed that the Ministry of Justice and Police is being rebuilt: good for them! On the surface, the Ministry of Housing needs it too, but that one is behind the sign.
Suriname is almost proud of ‘not being a tourist destination’. As a result, entry into the country is primitive (all hand-written visa-forms), signs are haphazard (e.g. to major sights but also street signs), and hotels are minimally helpful. Guides and tours make up for that, as I’ll mention later, and there was one good art gallery (the actual art museum in Paramaribo was closed). I also went to the (only) zoo because it was there anyway. I was expecting a caiman, anaconda, peccary, but didn’t see these. Poor birds were in abundance (‘poor’ because of the cages); monkeys were on the happier side of the spectrum.

Brownsberg/Brokopondo trip
On one of the three days that I was in Suriname, I took a trip to Brownsberg with some hiking and great views over the Brokopondo Lake. The guide on that trip was super knowledgeable.

The Brokopondo Reservoir is one of the largest in the world (according to wiki) and was constructed to generate power for the production of local bauxite into aluminum in the 1960s. It involved the relocation of 5000 (less privileged) people and many more animals. The people were opposed to the project but, in the 1960s, these people could do little except to agree to be relocated. They were never compensated as they had been promised. A second relocation was to Nieuw Koffiekamp because of the construction of a Canadian goldmine. These people had lived off the forest so seeing the forest
disappear was terrible and they worship ancestors which becomes very hard if that terrain is submerged. The lake is only used for power not for fish or anything else.

The new villages

Brokopondo Lake from the side with a huge open gold mine that is not visible well

The actual hikes to the Irene and Leo Falls were wonderful, a bit slippery due to the rains. According to various sources, there are 1450 species of plants and 350 of birds. I was with a guide and four other people and we heard and then saw howler red monkeys (bru lapen), ... The park had been threatened by illegal gold mining and that still goes on but on a smaller scale in the park. Outside, legal gold mining is huge (as mentioned, by foreign companies).
Thousands of trees/plants

And a beautifully colorful road!

There are tree concessions and (in principle) the loggers have to take only the trees along the road they construct and they aren’t supposed to be selective, but it all depends on who checks! It would be great if the roads could be used for hiking as well.

In short, Suriname was amazing in its natural wilderness and variety of cultures. The other islands are gems in their own right. I hope to return some time. I haven’t mentioned Colombians, Venezuelans, Ghanians, etc a lot. Coming back from Brokopondo, we were stopped by the police to see if Brazilians or someone else was trying to ‘sneak’ in. `Walls” everywhere!
Appendix

Aruba’s Emma/Ranchostraat Street Art Project
This is a very run-down area where there’s been art work on the wall. It goes by various names on the internet. Inquiring with locals didn’t get me far until now. There is information at “Adopt an alley” http://www.diario.aw/2016/08/apertura-hanchi-kalki/ and at http://www.stichtingrancho.org/pelicula-den-aire-liber-den-hanchi-kalki. As in other areas, the sidewalks are being resurfaced.

Focal area is the kiln

To the left of >

To the right of <
Balashi Goldmine graffiti, Aruba
This is a remote site and has a free-ish feel to it. There is no graffiti on the building where it faces the road but it is concentrated inside and on the other walls.
Behind the Aruba Trade Building, Oranjestad

**Suriname street art**
I didn’t see a lot. The below is from the North of the Domineestraat.
Lovely dog eyes!

References