

Sun, sea and a synagogue – exploring Curacao

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Special to The CJN

Curacao, a speck of rock 63 kilometres off the coast of Venezuela surrounded by crystal blue waters and famous for an aromatic liqueur, is not your average Caribbean destination. What really makes this Netherlands Antilles island special, though, is its deep Jewish heritage.

Mikve Israel-Emanuel Synagogue, built in 1732 and located in the capital city of Willemstad, is the oldest synagogue in continuous use in the Western Hemisphere. Enter and you might be surprised by what's underfoot. The floor is carpeted in soft, white sand.

"Some say the synagogue is patterned after the Tabernacle which our forefathers used in the Sinai desert during their 40 years of wandering there," explains Emlyn Peters, a Curacao tour guide and member of the congregation.

"Others say that during the Inquisition the 'Conversos' or Jews who took the Catholic faith to hide their belief, placed sand on the floors of their secret rooms to muffle the sound of their worship services."

The last explanation is the one Peters likes best.

"God commanded Abraham, 'Go forth and multiply like the

grains in the sand and the stars in the sky.'"

This sand is not trucked in from a nearby beach. It is imported from the riverbeds of Suriname and Guyana and at one time even came from Israel. Why not use the stuff on Curacao's shores? Sea sand contains salt that would eat into the synagogue's lovely mahogany furniture. Curacao has no fresh water rivers. In fact, its drinking water is desalinated sea water.

Mikve Israel-Emanuel Synagogue's congregation was Sephardic Orthodox until 1964, when there was a merger with Temple Emanuel (Reform). Now Sephardic Reconstructionist, the congregation of 190 is led by American Hazzan Avery Tracht.

"In the old days my great aunts and grandmother would never sit together with the men," recalled Peters, adding, "men and women all sit together now."

Although Curacao's Jewish population is only 350 (a fraction of the island's 150,000 inhabitants), the number of visitors to Mikve Israel-Emanuel Synagogue is huge. Last year 22,000 people arrived, many coming from the docking cruise ships.

Visitors approaching the synagogue will first see a scalloped-roofed, lemon-yellow



Mikve Israel-Emanuel Synagogue. Although Curacao's Jewish population is only 350, the number of visitors to the synagogue is huge. [Maureen Littlejohn photo]

façade. Made of coral and limestone, the walls are filled with sea sand and plastered with lime mortar. Inside, the atmosphere is ancient, almost timeless. Light filters softly through blue windows and between four pillars representing the matriarchs (Sarah, Rivkah, Rachel and Leah) hang four 24-arm chandeliers molded in the Dutch porpoise pattern. They are lit on special occasions such as Kol Nidrei. It takes several hours to install the candles and three men to

carry the heavy brass centre section for cleaning and polishing afterwards.

Adjacent to the synagogue is the Jewish Cultural Historical Museum.

"We still use items you see in the glass cases," explains Myrna Moreno, the museum's welcoming curator. "For Chanukah we use a silver menorah from Amsterdam that dates from 1716. The cups are filled with olive oil and lit with a wick by one of the youngsters in our congregation."

Other prized possessions include the 350-year-old silver tray that is used for smashing goblets at wedding ceremonies, and a Sephardic Torah written in 1320, smuggled out of Spain before the Inquisition. Pictures of the Dutch royal family hang on one wall.

"The Netherlands was the first country to give us freedom of religion. Every rabbi here does a prayer in Portuguese to thank them," says Moreno. Nodding at a wooden Chair of Elijah in the corner, she notes, "That is 150 years old and people still ask to borrow it for the brit milah, circumcision ceremony."

How did Jews first come to Curacao? The island was settled by the Spanish in 1527 and taken over by the Dutch in 1634. (Britain and France owned it for small stints as well). Samuel Cohen was the first Jewish person to step foot on the island in 1634 when he accompanied Dutch explorers there as an interpreter. Twelve Jewish colonizing families arrived from Amsterdam in 1651. They were later joined by Jews fleeing Brazil after capture by the Portuguese. The Jewish settlers were involved with the Dutch West India Company and played a major role in shipping, importing supplies from Europe and

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Best wishes to our clients
and friends for a happy
and healthy Chanukah.



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