

Dancing with the Starfish

An **Aruba hotel** helps event attendees celebrate island culture with its own twist.



BY KRISTY ALPERT

THE NIGHT AIR WAS ALREADY FILLING UP WITH THE SOOTHING SOUNDS OF WAVES grazing the sandy shorelines and rhythmic refrains flowing effortlessly from the mallets of a local steel drum band. But the only sound that mattered to Simone Silooy, event manager for the Aruba Marriott Resort and Stellaris Casino, was the collective sigh of relief that came from each guest as they tossed aside loafers and briefcases to walk barefoot through the warm sands of the island.

Silooy and her team at the Aruba Marriott are experts when it comes to transforming business meetings and conferences into memorable experiences. Although this hotel's signature "Dancing with the Starfish" themed reception may be a new offering, it's al-

ready making waves among guests as it gives them the chance to get immersed in Aruban culture after days spent in the boardroom.

"With hotel events and meetings, the product usually remains the same," Silooy said. "You're in a hotel, so you have your product already. You either have a beach or you don't; you're in the city or you're not. It's all about the senses—what the people can see and taste. That's how you can make a difference in what you're offering. We have the beach, so we make sure to make use of that and create something unique by adding a little flavor to it because that's what they will take home. It's important to embrace the location and the culture you already have."

The staff's ability to embrace their

island's identity and provide guests with a true taste of the local flavor has helped them win numerous awards for their events throughout the years. When groups host their meetings, training seminars or other events at the Aruba Marriott, Silooy and her team bring out all the stops with a customizable program that offers ample time to work, mingle and relax...the Aruban way.

"On the day of arrival, because most of our guests come from a cooler location or they don't have a beach, we offer an outdoor reception with an open bar and some tropical music," Silooy said. "Then in the following days, they'll have meetings, training, etc. Then just before they leave, we have an awards night or a farewell evening,



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such as our ‘Dancing with the Starfish’ party, with dancing and a live band.”

For “Dancing with the Starfish,” Silooy and her team transform the resort’s 30,218-square-foot Tradewinds Beach into a sea-foam white and aqua-blue celebration in only a few short hours, with illuminated stars dangling overhead and starfish dancers performing to live music.

“The idea is that you are under the sea with this event,” said Silooy, who has been with the Aruba Marriott for more than three years since moving to the island from her home in Holland. “That’s the unique point of it. If you’re having a meeting all day and you’re sitting inside and there are no windows, and you have to concentrate on everything you’re doing, it’s really nice to be

out there on the beach at night to experience something totally different.”

Event festivities begin with a two-hour cocktail reception with a Caribbean seafood buffet and locally themed libations such as the Aloe Fantasy—made from one of the island’s most popular crops—the Aruba Ariba or the Aruban Rum Punch.

“There are basically two key things that make our event so locally focused,” Silooy said. “It’s the location first of all. Then we have the food, with local specialties from pastechis and empanadas to red snapper, which is the local fish, and lobster stations where we have grilled lobster and lobster bisque.”

Beyond food and location, Silooy and her team create an entire venue

outdoors that transports guests far beneath the stars into a world of dancing starfish and aquatic adventures.

“We can bring in a local steel band that’s really tropical, and that really makes them feel like they’re right here in Aruba,” she said. “Right behind our pool we have set up these glow-in-the-dark balls and stars, and it glows with a deep blue light so that when you have your event out there it really looks nice because you get this under-the-sea affect.”

To give the event a surreal touch, the resort hires dancers in starfish suits to act as living art throughout the evening. Although these dancers are a big hit at the event, the hotel is also known for tweaking each event to meet specific group’s needs and desires.

“We did an event in January for 200 people, and we had a really nice setting at our private beach area,” Silooy said. “We had all of these nice stations of food, but we didn’t do a buffet style, we did stations where people could walk through all the different food areas and interact with local artists and chefs. We had live cooking at a pasta station, then we had the Mandara Spa station giving massages on site, a cigar rolling station and a stage with a live band. It was a great event because they got to walk around, enjoy the open bar and interact with locals.” **one+**

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