



The cliffside restaurant at Greta Garbo's favourite St Barts hotspot, the Eden Rock hotel, dishes up the best views and people-watching



# Bart nouveau

YOU DON'T NEED TO SCHMOOZE WITH RICHARD BRANSON TO SET FOOT ON THIS ELITE CARIBBEAN ISLAND. A BIRKIN-FREE AARON PEASLEY HITS ST BARTS

**P**ARTIES, playboys and profligacy – the island of St Barts certainly has an outsized reputation for a destination of just 21 sq km. If you believe all the hype, this seductively ritzy piece of France, adrift in the Caribbean, is the black American Express card of resorts.

Just weeks ago, designer Marc Jacobs caused a paparazzi frenzy by sunbathing with his buff-bodied beau Lorenzo Martone – and a Hermès Birkin. There are very few places in the world where a Hermès bag would seem the natural choice for a day at the beach...but St Barts happens to be one of them.

Unfortunately for the stargazers in our group, we're visiting right before the annual celebrity tsunami is to crash ashore. But it's a magnificent evening and we're at On The Rocks, the Eden Rock hotel's glamorous restaurant, which clings to a reef-ringed promontory above the turquoise waters of Baie de St Jean. It's the same legendary bolthole where recluse-about-town Greta Garbo once stayed. The Swedish movie star was part of the original jet set who established Saint Barthelemy as a haven of exclusivity.

As we devour a platter of fruits de mer and a bottle of champagne, our local hosts, who have perfected the tightrope act of being French and completely bereft of attitude, explain that St Barts leads a double life: a tranquil Caribbean oasis that is transformed into a celebrity Shangri-la for holiday season.

Over the years, many generations of the rich and famous have followed Garbo's path to this Caribbean gem, opting for a suite in one of almost two dozen idiosyncratic hotels or hiring a tricked-out villa.

Luckily my deluxe digs, one of the new villas designed by Parisian interiors icon Christian Liaigre, □



Luxurious Le Sereno has lagoon views from the rooms (above)



Colourful buildings in Gustavia, the island's main town (below) wrap around a harbour lined with superyachts



is the best of both worlds: a self-contained beach pad attached to Le Sereno hotel, a masterful union of Gallic gloss and breezy beach chic.

One is tempted to pass the days lying by the infinity pool overlooking the beaches of Grand Cul-de-Sac cove, but evenings in St Barts were not designed for dropping off the radar.

One night after a feast at Do Brazil, we're talked into visiting the most frenetic spot on the island, Le Ti St-Barth. Hidden away on a rocky hilltop at Pointe Milou, the club is a champagne-swilling refuge for those of us denied an invitation to the visiting floating gin palaces, like that of Microsoft co-founder Paul Allen.

The next day it only seems right to hit the beach. St Barts claims some of the best in the region; an abundance

of palm-fringed bays hidden behind volcanic peaks and with technical pools stretching to the horizon.

Hangovers softened, we pile into our mini jeep and weave a path along the ribbon-thin roads and jagged hilltops (driving in St Barts can be a harrowing affair) and make our way into Gustavia, the island's town centre. Named after one-time owner King Gustav III of Sweden, who foolishly traded St Barts back to France in the late 1800s, the town overflows with high-end stores. It's a rollcall of luxury labels including Dior, Louis Vuitton, Hermès and Cartier.

But we put the beach Birkin on the backburner for now. Our perfect day ends at Le Select, a rough-and-tumble St Barts stalwart that's been around for 60 years. Shaded by towering

trees, the dive bar offers reassurance that not everything here has to be aggressively glamorous – or expensive. Dinner is a low-key affair of burgers washed down with icy Carib beer.

As the sun rapidly retreats behind the monstrous moored watercraft and we contemplate the drive back to chez Liaigre, we see the notice on the bar wall: No Credit Cards Accepted. Not even a black American Express. □

#### TRAVEL NOTES

The easiest way to get to the island is to make your way to New York, then take the four-and-a-half-hour flight to St Barts, via St Martin. Splash out on a room at Le Sereno (from \$750/night) or the Eden Rock hotel (from \$765). [www.lesereno.com](http://www.lesereno.com)  
[www.edenrockhotel.com](http://www.edenrockhotel.com)

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