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St. Barths

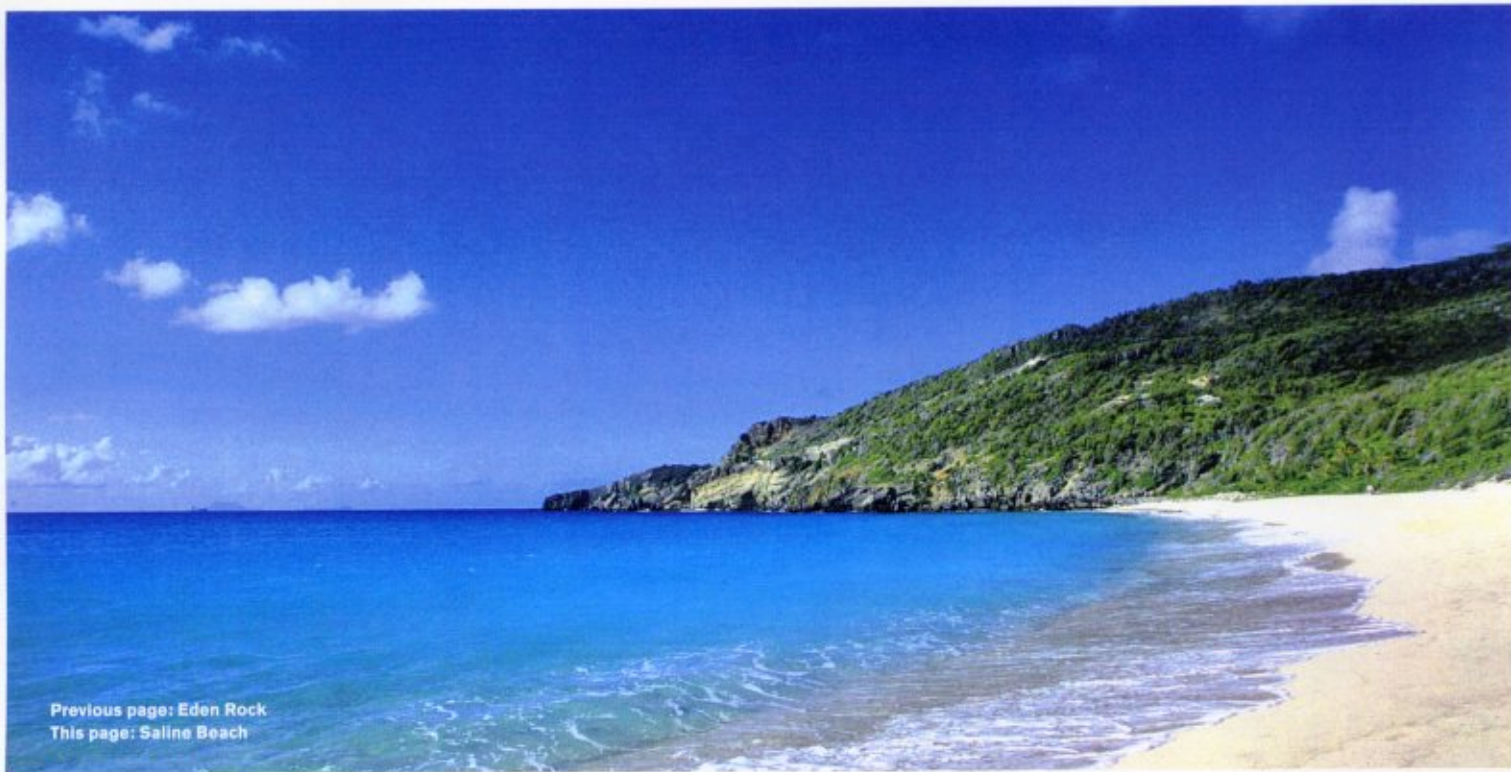
Paradise for the Connoisseur

Revered for its serenity, glamorized for its bevy of privileged visitors, and appreciated by anyone who unravels its true mystique. St. Barthélemy is not just an island—it's a playground for all of your senses.

By Eve Gurevich

Forging a proximate alliance with the Leeward Islands, St. Barths' aura of subtle sophistication is first evidenced by its lack of massive cruise liners, ubiquitous on other islands. An impressive gastronomic selection, world-renowned resorts, and a stream of luxury boutiques compliment its welcoming discretion. A barren version of St. Barths greeted Greta Garbo and Howard Hughes in the '50s; Garbo supposedly mocked her host for buying the useless land. By the '60s the island had gained interest from the Rothschilds and Rockefellers, who purchased strategic plots to prevent major development. By the late '70s, Aristotle Onassis had moored the first megayacht on St. Barths—the 325-foot *Christina O.*

Today, Gustavia's Quai Général De Gaulle is no stranger to megayachts. Paul Allen's 488-foot *Octopus*, Larry Ellison's 453-foot *Rising Sun*, and Ron Perelman's 188-foot *Ultima III*—a staple of the harbor during the winter



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months—are as common here as neon Gallardos are on South Beach. Recently, the 282-foot *Ecstasea*, one of many yachts belonging to Russian oligarch Roman Abramovich, anchored in Gustavia while the 42-year old billionaire checked out local real estate. A work in progress, the 525-foot *Eclipse*, will soon join Abramovich's fleet. The \$300-million vessel comes equipped with two helicopter pads, three tenders, and a submarine—for a quick getaway. March and December are epic months for many of these sea-trophies. St. Barths' Bucket and New Year's Eve Regatta epitomize the island's healthy economy as an impressive armada competes around its harbor.

Private navigation undoubtedly saves time, but if deciding on a commercial route, a connecting flight awaits you at St. Martin's Juliana airport. The flight to St. Barths' miniature airport, which cannot accommodate commercial planes, takes about 10 minutes. The last connecting flight to St. Barths is at 5pm. Miss it and you will be humbled by the ferry experience, which leaves Marigot or Oyster Bay, depending on the day of the week. The choppy voyage takes over an hour and robs you of a bird's eye-view of Baie de St. Jean—a popular beach on the island. Aside from the visual experience, flying into SBH is simply more convenient than inching into Gustavia while eight seasick passengers push their way to the dock.

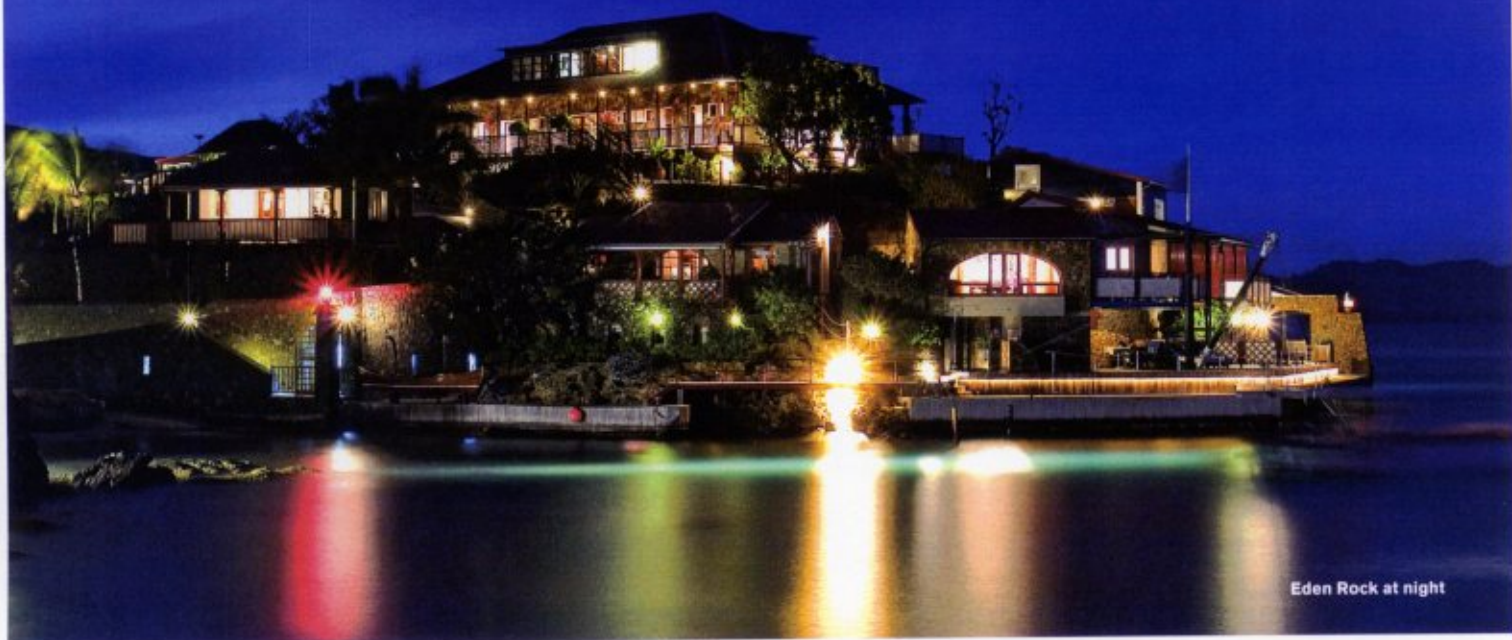
Regardless of how you get to the island, where you stay once you're here is what matters most. St. Barths' real estate is best compared to a well-heeled socialite. Veiled in muted tones, without a hint of ostentation, her simple gray turtleneck is in fact Hermès. And so an unassuming one-bedroom villa, with little space but plenty of room for imagination, costs about \$1 million. Its location doesn't provide the best views, but for \$5 million you can have a three-bedroom with an infinity-edged pool overlooking the ocean. You may feel like you have arrived until you happen to catch a glimpse of the villa down the road, Gitana Bay. In 2005, the 7.4-acre Marigot estate sold for \$21.4 million, setting a precedent for

the island. The property, which included a four-bedroom villa, three-bedroom guesthouse, and a caretaker's cottage, was previously home to Baron Benjamin de Rothschild. An industrious fellow, Rothschild kept himself busy by renting out one of the properties as a luxury hotel. The \$50,000-per-week rental was promptly booked for every holiday season. Today there are several properties that carry a similar price tag to Gitana Bay, but you must be pre-qualified to even see a photo of the unpublished listings.

If buying another home isn't on your immediate agenda, there are many less binding options. However, as of January 1, a five percent tax now applies to all rentals—which will more than likely elude a majority of the island's visitors. But if any rental is worth a few extra dollars, it's Eden Rock, a landmark hotel unparalleled by its view and location. A vision of Rémy de Hanaen, father of St. Barths' tourism and its former mayor, the hotel was purchased as a private residence in 1995. Today it is part of the Relais & Châteaux group, which admits only the most luxurious properties, most of them holding historical significance.

Boldly situated on a promontory overlooking the turquoise lagoon of Baie de St. Jean, Eden Rock's glamorized façade is an exception to St. Barths' whitewashed refinement. Featuring 33 properties, Eden's Rock's latest addition is Villa Nina. The six-star luxe accommodation includes a private art gallery, two swimming pools, and a home-theater. A butler is readily available to ensure that your stay is flawless. Some, however, may already expect perfection when paying \$100,000 per week. Don't worry, that's only during the holiday season; rates start at \$70,000 during the slower months. The hotel also offers fractional ownership through the Eden Rock Owner's Society, which guarantees four to five weeks per year for a total of 75 years.

One of Eden Rock's restaurants, On-the-Rocks, blends exemplary cuisine



Eden Rock at night



Howard Hughes Suite at
Eden Rock



On the Rocks restaurant at Eden Rock

with scenic beauty and an atmosphere of relaxed, tanned diners enjoying complimentary samples sent from French Chef Jean-Claude Dufour. Paying homage to the island's Caribbean culture, Dufour's spicy duck bouillon is the tastiest item on the menu. However, if bouillon is much too dainty, the Kobe beef or seared tuna will surely satisfy any palate. Right next-door to Eden Rock is Nikki Beach, a trendy spot to have lunch and people watch. Casa Nikki, its nighttime counterpart, is located in Gustavia. The latter provides the perfect ending to a lazy day on the beach. If you're still in the mood to party, the Yacht Club is not far and is considered *the* club on the island. Do save a night for Le Ti St. Barth on Point Milou. After dinner the tables are used as a dance floor, which is hard to imagine when you first encounter the restaurant's docile vibe.

Fine dining on St. Barths is not hard to find but many agree that Françoise Plantation on Colombier is the best place for dinner. Chef Jean-Denis Le Bra's specialties of fresh seafood and a large selection of organic wine keep this restaurant a favorite amongst locals and visitors alike.

Françoise Plantation also offers 11 private, no-frills villas with views of Flamands and Point Milou. The hotel's tree-lined entrance and antiquated stone fence capture the mood of Provence, and for a moment you forget that you are in the Caribbean. Its low-key vibe and sea-salt smell is the antithesis of trendier restaurants like Le Strand or the newly added O'Corner. Both situated on Gustavia's Rue Fahiberg, they are lively, modern lounges. Le Strand offers a vibe reminiscent of summer in the Hamptons, while O'Corner has a sportier feel. If you're not a heavy drinker you must make an exception to try the island's specialty—Vanilla Rum. A shot is all you need to experience why everyone raves about this delicious concoction.

An eventful night brings many to unwind on Saline beach. Just as popular as St. Jean, but unlike the sleepy lagoon, Saline's ocean current makes its water more turbulent. The beach offers a picturesque descent from its rocky path onto the

sand littered with semi-nude sunbathers. Most of the beaches on St. Barths uphold the European standard, but Saline just happens to attract the majority of the tan-line-hating population. It is not uncommon to spot part-time resident Jimmy Buffet sunbathing fully nude, surrounded by a fishing net and casual stares, which are mostly directed at the naked man hiding behind a fishing net rather than Jimmy Buffet the musician. More social once clothed, Buffet has surprised many with impromptu performances at La Bête à Z'aïles, also known as Baz Bar, on Gustavia's harbor. Le Select, a popular bar nearby, even named its outdoor restaurant "Cheeseburger[s] in Paradise" after Buffet's hit song.

A short drive from Saline beach is Hotel St. Barths Isle de France. More secluded than Eden Rock, it's a favorite amongst celebrities. Recent guests have included Christina Aguilera, Arnold Schwarzenegger, and Sylvester Stallone. The white veneered villas of Isle de France envelop 10 acres on Baie des Flamands and are directly on the beach. The hotel's Molton Brown Spa features the signature Shiatsu massage, which you can enjoy on the Garden Pavilion. To the delight of its childless patrons, Isle de France provides a sanctuary with its strict "No Children Under 8" rule. Like Eden Rock, the villas of Isle de France are available for purchase through the Folio Collection. The private residence club specializes in part-time ownership of the most sought after properties around the world.

Regardless of whether this is your first visit or if you have been coming here for years, St. Barths is truly unlike any other island in the Caribbean. The familiar image of a cobalt sea and red rooftops is just a glimpse of the island's charm. It's a destination that is mildly hard to reach, but once you're there, anything is possible. Champagne lounges are minutes away from bar counters and haute cuisine is close to several local hangouts like Andy's Hideaway, Santa Fe, and Do Brazil. The island's spas and boutiques are also a perk, but why come here to shop for beachwear when you can sunbathe au naturel? ☺