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# THE ART OF BEING AN ISLAND



Yves de Contades went to the ultimate luxury Caribbean island of St Barths to discover paradise and sample the finest cuisine and hotels with a little light sailing in between

St Barths is an international fusion of French, English, Swedish, American and Caribbean, taking the very best from each nationality, with residents exhibiting great pride and passion in making it near perfect. St Barths is named after Bartholomew, the brother of Christopher Columbus who discovered the island in 1493. A former French colony, since 2007 the island has been part of the Collectivité d'Outre-Mer, and from 2012 will become even more independent, with

speaks English too, think of it as Paris meets Manhattan in an azure sea and you will get an idea of the international ambiance, certainly the best dressed island in the Caribbean. The port of Gustavia, named after the Swedish king, is immaculate and the place where everyone congregates. Replete with vast yachts, towering catamarans and first-rate restaurants, bars and high end fashion shops stocking Versace and Valentino, such as Stephane & Bernard's. These chaps used

and put them up at The Carl Gustaf hotel. They filmed one of their music videos on the roof and apparently had a rocking time. The Hotel Carl Gustaf overlooks the Port of Gustavia, serves wonderful food and is highly prized as the place to stay.

August is my favourite time to visit as it is less crowded and you really get the island to yourself without the celebrity Christmas crowd; however if you want to mix with the rich and famous then December is the time to go. Hotel rates do multiply fourfold

THINK OF IT AS PARIS MEETS MANHATTAN IN AN AZURE SEA AND YOU WILL GET AN IDEA OF THE INTERNATIONAL AMBIANCE... THE BEST DRESSED ISLAND IN THE CARIBBEAN

freedom to trade with any country without interference from Paris. Bruno Magras is the president and also owns the airline St Barth Commuter. The locals are mostly descendants of fishermen from Normandy and Brittany and still speak a patois native to those regions in the 17th Century.

Minis and quad bikes are the preferred method of travel on the island as the roads are in decent condition but very narrow. In the rainy season though a four-wheel-drive is highly recommended for some of the steeper inclines.

You fly to St Martin first and then take a puddle jumper on to the island; it is a wonderful, scenic journey and the landing is wildly exciting as the runway is somewhat short and the pilots must possess a special license to land there. The airstrip is charmingly pictorial, winding down a verdant hill straight to St Jean beach. This is one airport everyone wants to live next to.

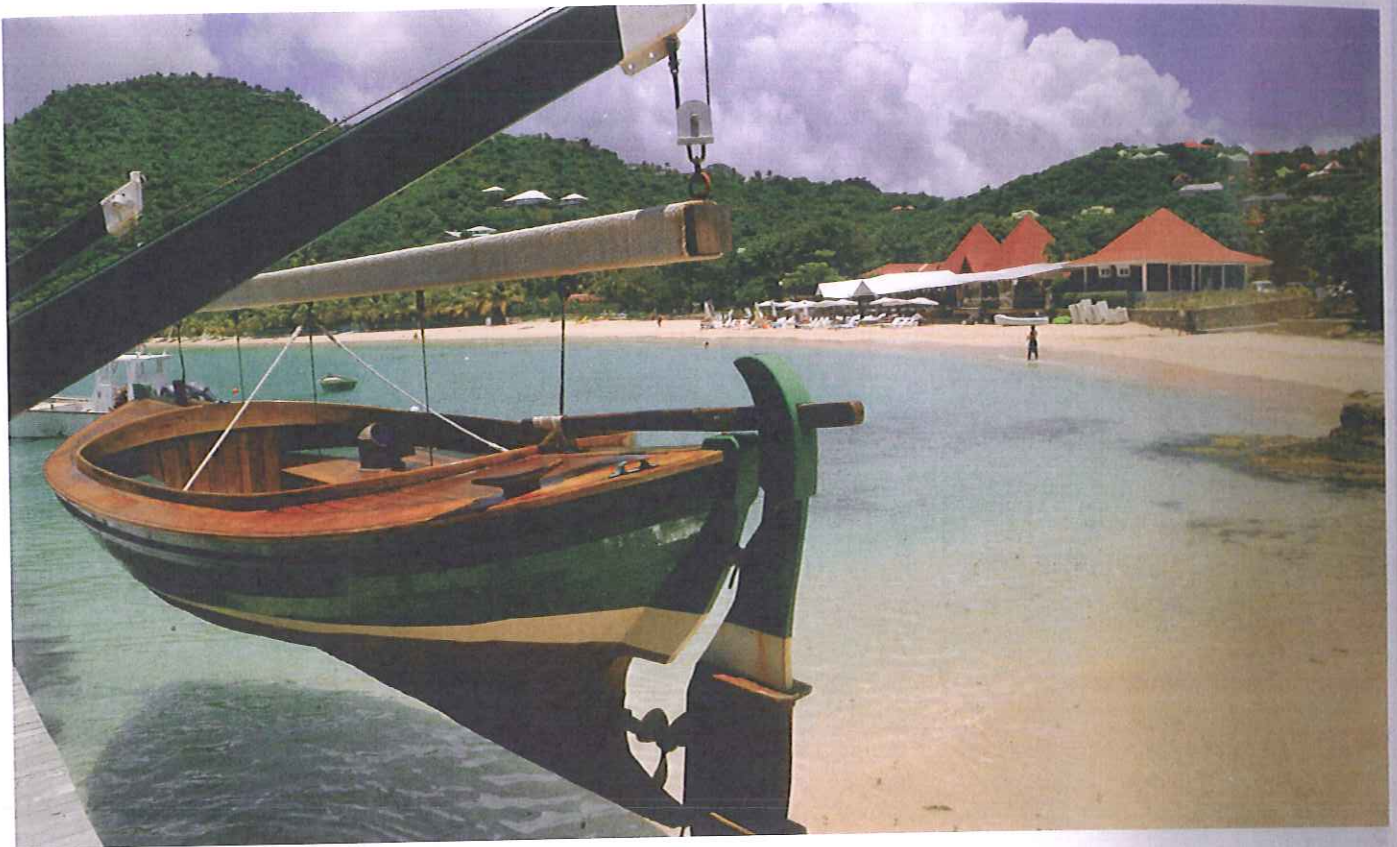
French is the first language but everyone

to run a top modelling agency in Paris, discovered Marie Helvin and Jerry Hall amongst others, and are both utterly charming.

Christmas and New Year are the high points in the calendar and St Barths is frequented by some of the wealthiest, most powerful and famous names in the world. Reading like a who's who list, everyone from Steve Martin, David Letterman, Gwen Stefani, Prince, Sean 'P Diddy' Combs and Beyoncé to the Revlon Chairman Ronald Perelman, movie legend Harvey Weinstein, Salma Hayek, Microsoft co-founder Paul Allen and the billionaire Warren Buffett has stayed on the island. The latest resident is Roman Abramovich, who paid £59 million for his pad on Gouverneur beach, and his party is the one to attend at Christmas (despite competing with a host of other lavish affairs). For his £3 million party last year he flew in the Black Eyed Peas for a private performance

in the peak period. Avoid September to October as that is the rainy season and the whole island shuts for maintenance, improving the decor and repairing the roads, which is why things are always in such pristine condition.

The place to stay for those looking for luxury and privacy is Le Toiny. A member of Relais Château, Le Toiny is situated in the area of the island referred to as the Côte Sauvage. The 15 pastel-coloured bungalows, called Villa Suites, are set on a gentle slope overlooking the bay of Toiny and Caribbean Sea. Condé Nast Traveller's Gold List ranked Hôtel Le Toiny's restaurant Le Gaïac third in the Americas for food, giving a rating of 96.3 in 2009; the food and wine are exquisite, down, in no small part, to the chef Stéphane Mazieres. I particularly recommend the carpaccio of sea scallops with beetroot sorbet, best enjoyed on the terrace by the pool, overlooking the bay. >>

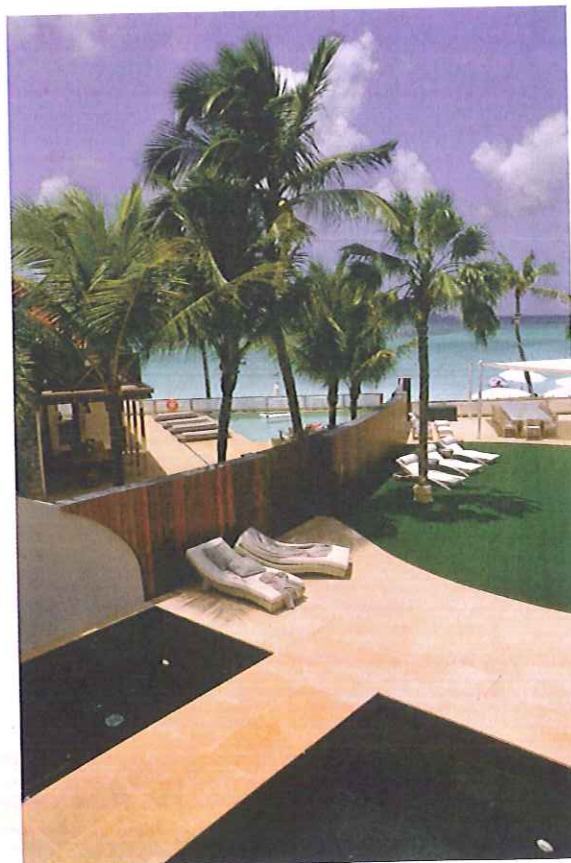


>> You have to go to the Le Ti St Barths, run by Carole Gruson and her husband Thomas. He is a dead ringer for Johnny Depp, and both are brilliant hosts. They have fine food for a club, run a splendid cabaret with highly talented dancers and dress guests up as pirates to really get the party going. The third night I was there Johnny Halliday had a birthday party and it was a flamboyant, glittering evening. The Regines of St Barths.

The Eden Rock is the best-known hotel on the island, Greta Garbo and Howard Hughes used to sashay to music in the restaurant during the fun loving fifties. It is owned by David Mathews (father of Spencer Mathews of "Made in Chelsea" fame) who is himself every inch the charming, debonair, English gentleman, albeit with a strong preference for his birthday suit. The hotel is perched on a rocky outcrop overlooking the beach, the Baie de St Jean. It boasts two new villas, which can interconnect, known as the Rock Star and the Nina, and both come with their own butler, cars, Harley motorbikes, Glen Affric whiskey bar, art gallery, gym, and pool on the beach. The Rock Star even has its own state of the art recording studio, with the mixing

console used by John Lennon to record Imagine, and a movie screening room. This place could charm even the most exacting of ladies.

Here are some more fabulous places to stay: the Hotel Guanahani & Spa which



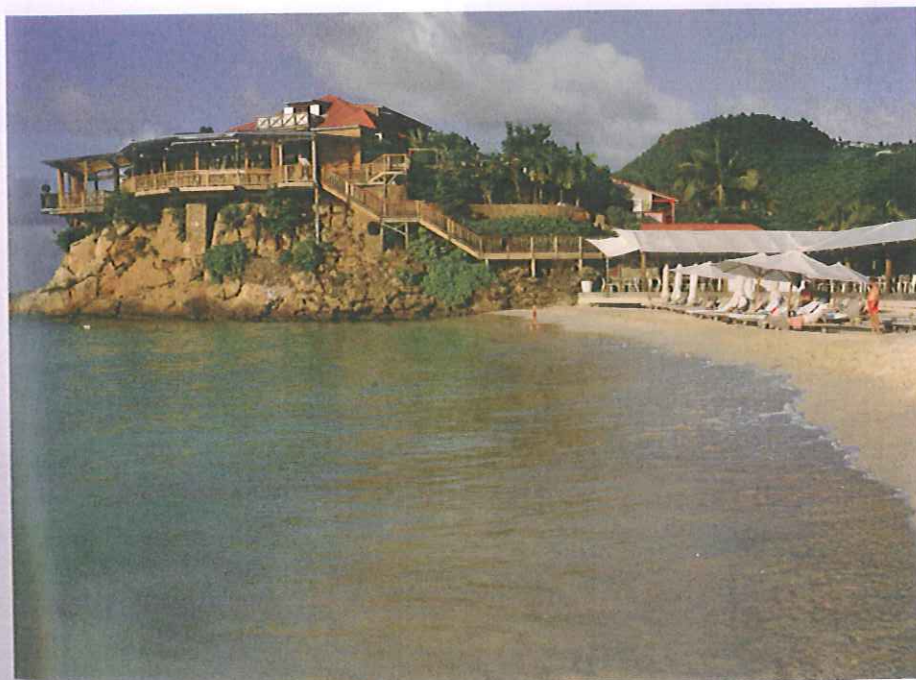
is sensational, with restaurant and pool overlooking the sea, and another more relaxed bar restaurant on the strip of beach that tapers off with crystal clear water on both sides. The Hotel Christopher, a little gem with a titanic infinity pool, run by a striking couple who exemplify the style of service in St Barths, between them they have run many of the finest hotels in the world, growing up and living in almost every corner of the globe. Stay or simply go for lunch or dinner, you will be well looked after. Les Ilets de la Plage, offers wonderful little bungalows on the beach just next to the airport and great value. The manager Eric Houdan knows everyone on the island and can recommend all the best places to go. Hotel St Barth, Isle de France in Flamands Bay is another magnificent hotel and restaurant on the beach with palatial decor and a great place to have lunch. Look out for the stupendous giant lizards- over three feet long and very friendly. If you love sailing take a catamaran 42ft 'Ouanalao', to Colombier's Beach where David Rockefeller used to own a resplendent property, and dive for turtles. The champagne lunch is wonderful. You can also rent your own sumptuous villas with

infinity pools, chefs, gyms and anything else you could possibly want from Sibart villa rentals. A restaurant I can particularly recommend for its romantic setting and ambiance is the Isola in Gustavia, which boasts the finest Italian cuisine, a barman shaking the most exquisite cocktails, fantastic service and great atmosphere.

Two fun bars where both locals and travellers consort is Le Boucanier and l'Oubli in Gustavia. Explore the side streets too for great little venues, each with their own conviviality.

Claude Questel is the perfect guy to drive you around or to act as a guide. His grandparents lived on the island and he comes from the little hamlet Corossol, he knows the island history and can recommend the best festivals, of which there are many in each village with music, food and dancing.

St Barths is so wonderful you really don't want to leave. It is a little like being cast out of Paradise, only at least you can go back next year. It is obvious on arrival why so many of the wealthiest and the most knowledgeable travellers go year after year, in fact many people book again for next year on departure. The island is unspoilt by development and the islanders are set on keeping it that way; it is maintained to the highest standard, the service is impeccable and the food comparable to the best in Paris, while each stunning beach has its own uniqueness. St Barths is heaven on Earth, and the angels there like to have fun.



p39: St Barths Rockstar villa. left hand page (top): St Barths, St Jean beach. left hand page (bottom): St Barths Rockstar villa. this page (top): St Barths Sibarth Villa rental (middle): St Barths Gustavia Port. (bottom): St Barths Eden Rock

For more information go to  
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