

Sea and be Seen

IT'S A SECRET SLICE OF FRENCH PARADISE THAT EFFORTLESSLY ALLURES THE WORLD'S MOST RICH AND FAMOUS. CARRIE BUCKLE SAYS SALUT TO THE TRÈS-CHIC ISLE OF **ST BARTS** – WHERE EVERYONE IS A STAR



AS MY SIX-SEATER PLANE GLIDES through the sapphire-blue sky and then ducks through a gap between two wooded hills, I look down and spot the tiny island of Saint-Barthélemy. It's a patchwork of rugged forest-green terrain dotted with coral-red rooftops and bordered by dazzling turquoise sea with white yachts glinting in the sun. The plane makes a sharp drop towards the teeniest runway I've ever seen. I feel the clunk of the wheels hitting the ground beneath me and, just when I think we are going to plunge straight into the brilliant aqua waters ahead, we come to a standstill and the roaring engine stops. I take a deep breath, release my fierce grip on the seat ahead and clamber out of the hot plane onto one of the most exclusive – and glitterati-frequented – islands in the world.

LIMELIGHT ABOVE The 34-room Eden Rock hotel has played host to celebrities such as Mick Jagger

Fly into the 20-square-kilometre Caribbean island of St Barts and your adrenalin will be pumping from the amusement park ride of an arrival. Unless you get there by sea, the only option is a small plane. It is precisely this seclusion that makes it so alluring to the slew of celebrities and millionaires who flock to the famous pristine white-sand beaches fringed by swaying coconut palms.

Within minutes of arriving in St Barts and driving along the steep, winding roads that offer phenomenal views of the jagged coastline, with the warm sun on your skin and the occasional waft of wild jasmine lingering on the light tropical breeze, you instantly slip down a gear. The best way to get around is by car, and I opt for a nippy Mini Cooper convertible, although bear in mind that the roads can be pretty hairy. The island is deliciously French and you may well be lured by the smell of freshly baked bread as you pass one of

its numerous boulangeries. Many stores also sell imported gourmet products such as French cheese and wine, ideal for picnics if you go rambling in the wild, unspoiled hills.

While the island is ultra-laid-back, fusing Caribbean cool with French *je ne sais quoi*, there is of course the glamour factor. The night-life is legendary; during the high season from November to April, you'll find the moneyed set quaffing champagne and nibbling on caviar canapés on multimillion-dollar superyachts with helipads, or living it up at one of the palatial private villas owned by power players such as art dealer Larry Gagosian. One of the newest residents is Russian billionaire Roman Abramovich, who threw a lavish New Year's Eve party at his \$90 million estate, with guests including Orlando Bloom and Miranda Kerr, and performances by Beyoncé and Gwen Stefani.

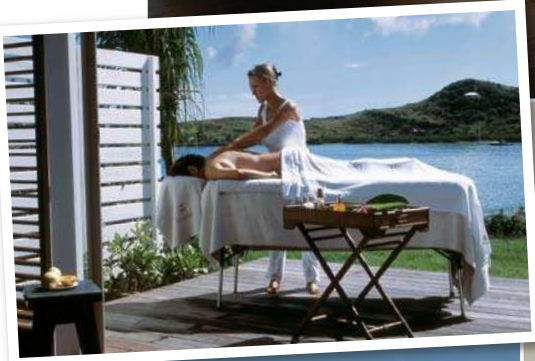
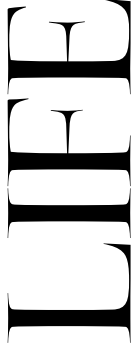
It's difficult to believe that up until the 1970s, this glam oasis was an extremely poor backwater



TRAVEL
Great
Escapes

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LIFE'S A BEACH
FROM TOP St Barts has 17 beaches; Eden Rock's private boat; arrival at St Barts is by six-seater plane; relaxing at Le Sereno



UNDER THE SUN
CLOCKWISE FROM TOP Enjoy the sea breeze while dining at Le Restaurant des Pêcheurs at Le Sereno; minimalist chic at Le Sereno; a spa treatment at LeSereno

– not helped by the arid, mountainous landscape. It was “discovered” by Christopher Columbus in 1493 and after an interlude of Swedish rule, it was bought back by France in 1878. It wasn’t until a century later that it was reinvented, when the jetset crowd stumbled upon the off-the-beaten-track destination and started injecting money and cachet. Ever since, it’s been an A-list magnet while deliberately conserving its Gallic charm and exclusivity. The island’s leaders have resisted mass tourism – there are upscale boutique resorts, but no hotel chains.

For those who adore minimal chic, the coolest place to stay is Le Sereno at the idyllic Grand Cul de Sac beach. The work by Parisian designer Christian Liaigre (who has also created houses for the likes of Karl Lagerfeld), the 37-room resort lives up to its name: with its palm-lined shore and clusters of magenta-pink oleander flowers at every turn, it’s a haven of tranquility. I stayed in a Grand Suite Plage and loved the understated contemporary decor of whitewashed walls and sleek, dark-wood furnishings. Sipping chilled champagne on my terrace on a balmy evening while spotting stars (of the celestial variety) over a cobalt ocean was blissful. It’s easy to see why this peaceful resort has proved a hit with A-listers including Uma Thurman, Beyoncé and Michael Kors.

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What’s more, Le Sereno recently unveiled three swish four-bedroom villas, nestled on a hill overlooking the resort, that each boast more than 6,500 square feet of indoor and outdoor space – perfect for families or groups who want a private pool and a full kitchen, as well as access to the hotel amenities. You get a 24-hour butler and, if you’re too weary to cook after all that chilling on the beach, there’s a personal chef on hand.

At the opposite end of the hotel spectrum – in terms of style, but not of luxury – is Eden Rock at Baie de St Jean. Oozing with quirky ooh-la-la, the colourful 34-room resort is for those who prefer the flashy rock-star experience to a discreet hideaway. The main building is perched on a rocky outcrop and feels like a private members’ club, with previous visitors including the likes of Mariah Carey and Mick Jagger. There’s even a Villa Rockstar that – wait for it – comes with its own

WATER WORLD
Keep your cool at one of the new Le Sereno villas



ON THE ROCKS
FROM TOP The main building of Eden Rock is perched on a rocky outcrop; the big beach house at Eden Rock

recording studio. The four-suite property also has a bubble-shaped bathroom tiled in white gold, two pools with bars, a 20-seat screening room, and even a croquet lawn. Venture onto the nearby beach, the place for the bronzed and the beautiful to see and be seen, and you may well spot some real rock stars.

As well as St Jean and Grand Cul de Sac, there are 15 other beaches worth wriggling into your head-turning bikini for. Anse des Flamands is the most postcard-perfect, Grande Saline is for sun worshippers (actor Daniel Craig has been spotted here) and Anse du Grande Colombier is highly secluded and only accessible by boat or a precarious 30-minute hike. Anse du Gouverneur is at the end of a hair-raising drive down a steep hill



(the only thing that stifled my yelps was looking out for Roman Abramovich's 30-hectare estate), but the pretty beach is well worth it.

With its majestic megayachts in the harbour, the capital Gustavia is much less easy to miss. The main street has been dubbed the Rodeo Drive of the Caribbean, and features luxe outposts including Hermès, Cartier, Louis Vuitton and Chanel. So if you get a last-minute invitation to a yacht party hosted by Microsoft mogul Paul Allen, you can always grab a suitably glam evening dress from, say, the Roberto Cavalli boutique.

If you've worked up an appetite after all that sun, sea, sand and shopping, head to Do Brazil for a relaxed lunch overlooking the pretty Shell Beach. With its calm surf and international vibe, it's perfect for people watching. Havianas aren't compulsory but with the Brazilian-inspired menu and the samba beats, they might help you fit in. I'm drawn to the grouper with ginger mango sauce and sweet potato purée, a medley of lush flavours. For dessert, don't miss the to-die-for coconut ice cream. Afterwards, I can't resist kicking off my flip-flops and ambling barefoot along the blush-pink-hued beach, collecting shells along the way and wiggling my toes in the warm water.

For dinner, make sure you check out Maya's, a perennial St Barts fave. With outdoor tables on the water's edge at Anse de Public, this open-air bistro has a rustic feel, but it's the food and

friendly ambience that keep the locals coming back. Run by Maya Gurlley, from Guadeloupe, and her American husband Randy, it serves excellent Creole cuisine, and I'm delighted with my melt-in-the-mouth lemon sole.

The perfect place for a sunset mojito is Le Restaurant des Pêcheurs at Le Sereno. With a palette of charcoal and ivory as the backdrop, you'll have a front-row seat to watch the tangerine sun slip into the ocean while listening to the waves gently crashing onto the sand. The restaurant serves fresh seafood, with local fisherman dropping off their daily catch at the resort by boat. I opt for the delicious blini with smoked salmon, caviar and sour cream.

If an evening of decadent partying is whispering your name, head to The Strand Champagne Bar in Gustavia where your head will spin at the array of bubbly and caviar on offer. The white decor instantly makes you feel like a star – just like at the slick Nikki Beach at St Jean, which has the same owners. Afterwards, for some late-night dancing in your Jimmy Choos, drop by Le Yacht Club at the harbour. The waterfront hotspot, which is open until the early hours, is one of the top places to party and is popular with the likes of *Sex and the City* star Kim Cattrall. Whoever you end up rubbing shoulders with on your St Barts sojourn, you can be sure that just by making it there, you've joined the jetset. ■

LIVING THE LIFE
CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE
One of the four suites at Villa Rockstar in Eden Rock; fine food at Maya's; treat yourself to a cocktail



WHERE TO STAY

LE SERENO Grand Cul de Sac
A cool, minimalist boutique resort that's popular with the celebrity set.
www.lesereno.com

EDEN ROCK HOTEL
Baie de Saint Jean
A bucket-load of ostentation makes this stylish resort the ultimate rock 'n' roll getaway.
www.edenrockhotel.com

WHERE TO EAT

MAYA'S Anse de Public
Choice Creole cuisine meets super-friendly service and a relaxed, open-air vibe.
www.st-barths.com/mayas

DO BRAZIL Shell Beach, Gustavia
Hip eatery boasting Brazilian beats, an eclectic crowd and a Latin-tinged menu.
www.dobrazil.com

LE RESTAURANT DES PÊCHEURS
Le Sereno, Grand Cul de Sac
Sample the freshest seafood amid stylish decor on the seafloor.
www.lesereno.com

WHERE TO PLAY

THE STRAND Gustavia
Champagne bar and restaurant that gets increasingly lively as the night goes on.
www.nikkibeach.com/stbarths

LE YACHT CLUB
Rue Jeanne d'Arc, Gustavia
The glammest place to party in St Barts – unless you can get onto one of the yachts, that is.
www.caroleplaces.com