

8 Favorite Places for a Cruise Vacation

Travel

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50 & Beyond

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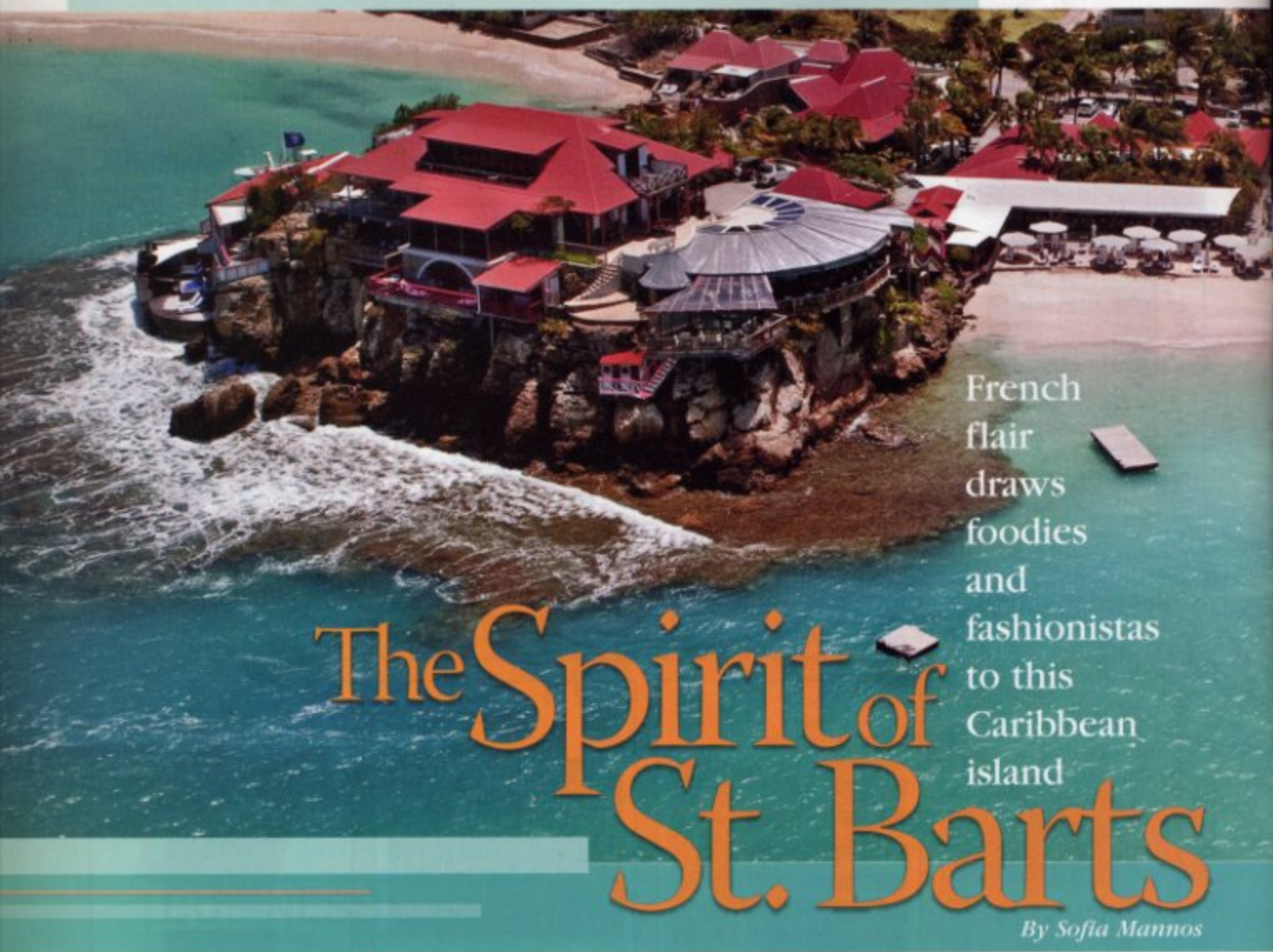
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Cultural Corners

The Spirit
Of St. Barts



US \$3.95/CAN \$4.95



French
flair
draws
foodies
and
fashionistas
to this
Caribbean
island

The Spirit of St. Barts

By Sofia Mamos



The Eden Rock hotel is ideally located in St. Barts, giving guests stunning views of St. Jean Bay and the ocean beyond while they take a dip in the pool, lounge in one of the suites or walk along the beach.

Wheels up at the island of St. Maarten and we skim across the waters of the French West Indies to St. Barthelemy — a tiny Caribbean jewel for Francophiles, foodies and fashionistas. The island is a haven for the chic and the hip. Cutoffs rarely meet the dress code, unless they're designed as such and complemented by a fabulously sexy top for men or women.

St. Barthelemy has a couple of pet names. Americans tend to say St. Barts, while the Francophiles declare the nickname is St. Barth, though still pronounced "bart." The capital is Gustavia, a port town resembling a Mediterranean village with stucco buildings and colorful decor. The world's top designer boutiques, including Hermes and Roberto Cavalli, line the streets along with a myriad of restaurants and cafes.

The second major community on this dot in the ocean is St. Jean, also a shopper's paradise with elegant hotels and inns on the beach, nestled in the mountains just above the commercial area. The language is French, the atmosphere is refined and laid-back, and the currency is the euro on this island that's far more European than it is Caribbean. Typically,

Gustavia, the capital city, is a favorite harbor among yacht owners. Many resorts also provide boating excursions around the island (below).

you fly to St. Barts via nearby St. Maarten, the Dutch side of an island that's shared with the French St. Martin.

For guests of the world-class Eden Rock hotel, servers will bring you ice buckets with your beverage of choice (usually Perrier and Evian) along with a petite brochette of pineapple, blueberry, watermelon and cantaloupe while you relax in your personal lounge chair at midday.

St. Barts feels unassuming and unpretentious despite its wealth. Shoppers who shyly ask whether an item is made in China are politely told that such merchandise is not found on St. Barts. Instead, the boutiques are filled with clothing and accessories that come mostly from France and Italy, though Portugal and Romania appear on labels from time to time.

In addition to the top designers, you'll find lesser known manufacturers that are still stylish in their lines and fabrics, including orange cobra and suede handbags by Claudio Merazzi, Loona Cantare cotton tank tops, Hartford Moroccan linen trousers and linen/cotton skirts by Interfashion Spa from Rimini, Italy. Even the beach towels are finished with a French Jacquard design.

St. Barts also has a cottage industry that produces fashion items that are trendy as well as practical for the island's uneven sidewalks. Flip-flops with bronze leather straps, decorated with turquoise, amber and gold stones, have rubber soles. Belts meant to be slung low on a skirt come in deep brown leathers, accented with tortoise



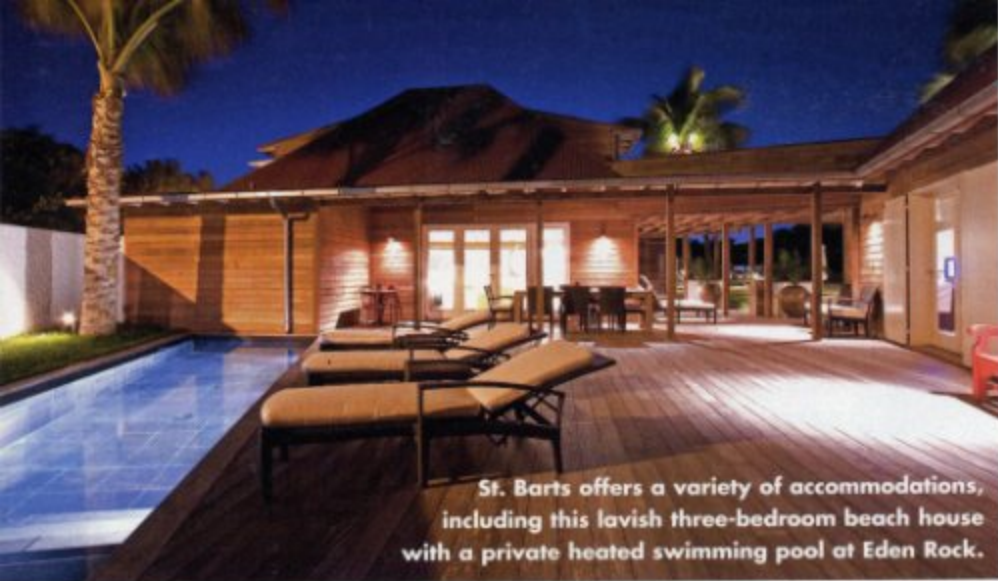
EDEN ROCK/ST. BARTHS

shell and gold beads.

Accommodations include the boutique Hotel le Village St. Jean, perched in the mountains of the town. Just below and on the beach is the exquisite Eden Rock, with Bulgari amenities, high-tech Euro decor and imported linens. Practically next door is the famous chain-brand Nikki Beach, whose trademark is a Euro rock lifestyle, where white outfits rule day and night.

St. Barts also is a great place to practice your French. Most people speak English as well but prefer French and are delighted to help visitors struggle through their explanations en français. Spanish also is spoken, but this really is a place for Francophiles in every sense of the word. Ethnic restaurants, whether Italian or Asian, have the distinctly French flair. You'll also find butcher shops with French cuts of meat, vegetable markets, pastry shops and grocery store shelves stocked with canned goods from France.

If you can tear yourself away from the beaches, restaurants and boutiques, take a stroll up some of the mountain-



St. Barts offers a variety of accommodations, including this lavish three-bedroom beach house with a private heated swimming pool at Eden Rock.

EDEN ROCK/ST. BARTHS

ous side streets. You'll see a goat here and there and hear roosters crowing throughout much of the day. A charreuse parrot also might approach you for a chat. Just say, "*Bonjour! Ca va?*" What you won't see is a sprawling golf course — not one. There is, however, an equestrian center, and there are excursions you can take by boat.

Hotels offer packages that often include a car. With driving on the right

side and roads generally in good shape, tooling around St. Barts is an uncomplicated diversion when you're shopped out and seeking new adventures. Grand hotels such as Le Toiny and Isle de France may be off the beaten path but are worth visiting. By the time you arrive, you'll want to cool off in the hotel pools, have a snack and a graciously served chilled drink. — AP

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Discover St. Barts

Getting there: Regular air service is offered to St. Barts from St. Maarten and a few other Caribbean airports. Ferries from St. Maarten are also available. For more information on travel options, visit www.st-barths.com.

Cruises: National travel discounter Vacations To Go offers deeply discounted rates on cruises that visit St. Barts. For more information, call (800) 338-4962 or visit www.VacationsToGo.com/stbarts.

Accommodations: Rates at the Eden Rock hotel begin at about \$1,000 from Jan. 4-April 11. For information, call (877) 563-7105 or visit www.edenrockhotel.com. Rates at the Hotel le Village St. Jean start around \$320 from Jan. 9-April 14. For information, visit www.villagestjeanhotel.com.

Information: The Tourism Committee of St. Barthelemy, www.cttsb.org. The Insiders' Guide to St. Barthelemy, www.sbhonline.com.