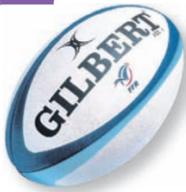


LIVING

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The Franco-expat sports teams playing for fun and integration

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The man who looks after one of France's key nature reserves

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Why have a chlorine-saturated pool when you can swim in clean, clear, soft water instead...



FRENCH CHIC in the Caribbean



Room with a view: the Admiral Suite at the Le Guanahani hotel.
PHOTO: LAURENT BENOÎT

Glittering water, pristine beaches and buildings no higher than a palm tree. If a slice of French life in a place that's sun-kissed year round and which boasts some of the world's best food sounds appealing, then St Barts, a Francophone piece of the Caribbean, should be number one on your to-visit list says **Kimberley Lovato**

The plane landings on St. Barthélemy, the chic and très French island in the Caribbean Sea, are notorious. Tell anyone you are going to St. Barts (St Barths in French) as it's usually known, and it's the first thing they mention. 'Don't look down,' they advise. As well as, 'have some wine!'

Commercial airlines take passengers as far as neighbouring St. Martin, Guadeloupe or Puerto Rico. From there visitors have a choice between a ferry ride across choppy seas or a small commuter plane. Mid-way through my 90-minute flight from San Juan in an eight-seater mosquito-sized plane, the co-pilot turns around and asks if this is my first landing at the airport. I bob my head, yes. Already alarmed at the age of the pilot - he was born in 1984, the year I started secondary school! - the co-pilot's question also startles me.

'Well, a landing here is a little steeper than normal,' he explains, watching

sympathetically as I knock back the last of my glass of Pinot Grigio - obviously, I took the advice about drinking wine!

The reason for the steepness is that the plane must stay high enough to get over the hills, but then drop immediately to the runway allowing enough time to stop before plunging into the sea at the other end. Lovely.

I sit tight as the plane threads its way between two peaks and comes within six metres of the road below, before pitching towards a stunted runway that's just 650m long. Or short, depending on how you see it - I could run that distance without getting winded. To put it into perspective, Charles de Gaulle's shortest runway is four times longer at 2,700m. I had stressed over this moment for weeks. I had even searched YouTube videos of previous landings (what can I say, I'm a masochist). So when the plane comes to its final halt between mountain and sea, I breathe out a heavy sigh. It really

wasn't all that bad! The low scare-factor of the landing was the first pleasant surprise of my visit to St Barts - but as I discovered during my stay, uncovering a pleasant surprise is the activity *du jour* here.

While this cosmopolitan speck of an island has a reputation for drawing tycoons and celebrities, it's also decisively family-oriented and non-stereotypically Caribbean - there's nary a steel pan band or Rastafarian t-shirt in sight. But amid the sandy beaches, swaying palm trees and turquoise coves beats the heart of a village, and a 100 per cent French one at that. From the language (French) to the local currency (euro), from the chocolate croissants in the bakeries to the free flowing rosé wine, St. Barts is the Caribbean - with just a soupçon more.

The pitted two-lane road from the airport to my hotel writhes and dips, clinging occasionally to cliffs and stretching below green hills dotted

with the red-roofed villas typical of the island. Unlike other vacation destinations in the Caribbean with their supersized generic resorts, St. Barts strictly controls the scale and style of buildings. As a result, not a single building on the island is taller than a palm tree and the largest hotel has fewer than 100 rooms. Which means that the views of the surrounding countryside are always uninterrupted and breath-taking. Each rise and descent of my drive reveals a dreamy *pas de deux* of white sand and shades of blue and turquoise.

St. Barts floats in the French West Indies, but it quite different to the other islands of Martinique, Guadeloupe and Saint-Martin. The island was discovered by Christopher Columbus and named after his brother, Bartholomew. However, its lack of fresh water or arable land - and importantly gold - meant Columbus was not interested in colonizing the island.

The harsh conditions also meant the island has never had coffee plantations or sugar cane fields planted and consequently, there have never been any Afro-Caribbean settlers. Eventually, Norman and Breton Huguenots arrived in 1673 and France annexed the island in 1674.

Even today much of the population can trace their origins back to fisherfolk in Brittany and Normandy and the patois on the leeward side of the island is close to that spoken in Normandy three hundred years ago.

In need of a war chest, Louis XVI sold St Barts to Sweden on 1785. The Swedes declared the capital Gustavia a free port, making St. Barts a smugglers' paradise and an oasis for wealthy merchants who built large villas on the island, this last tradition continuing today. Sweden eventually sold the island

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The quiet of Lorient Beach (this picture) is in contrast to the glam scene at Nikki Beach (below).



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back to France in 1878. Somewhere between then and now, the island shrewdly recreated itself as a chic and exclusive Caribbean hideaway.

The population is roughly 8,000 people and the pace of life is definitely laid-back. It's a place, I'm told, where everyone knows one another and people help one another. And I do see car doors left wide open, the keys in the ignition. 'We are a big family here,' says Sabine Maseglia, the marketing director of the top-class Le Guanahani hotel. 'Our children grow up together, barefoot, and have no worries. You can't say that anywhere else and that's worth a million.'

St. Bart's reputation as a playground for the rich and famous is very apparent, from the villas that would make the glossy pages of *Architectural Digest* magazine to the sun-faded streets of Gustavia scattered with shops bearing labels such as Armani, Bvlgari, Cartier, Hermès and Dior. The town's three-sided wrap-around harbour is lined with brightly coloured, sun-weathered wooden buildings, many with balconies,

and is reminiscent of the French Quarter in New Orleans. The waters are crammed with mega yachts – it was here that the multi-billionaire owner of Chelsea football club, Roman Abramovich, threw a €60 million party on his cruiser (as you do...)

However, the real epicenter for the jetset and glitterati is St. Jean Beach and the legendary Eden Roc, St. Bart's first hotel, which buzzes with couples and singles, models and moguls. Eden Roc is also a magnet for the celebrity crowd and certain rooms, such as the Greta Garbo Suite and the Howard Hughes Loft, reveal the legendary Hollywood history of this A-list hotspot. The Eden Roc reigns from a regal perch above Nikki Beach, the Caribbean's version of the famed St. Tropez beach club, with its super-glam style that was once a favourite of Brigitte Bardot.

Hoping to spot Johnny Depp, but content with a bottle of rosé, I settle in at a table just above the sand to watch the beautiful people at play. If turquoise is not the colour of St. Barts, then rosé certainly is. Litres of the pink elixir flow (and are poured) into the mouths of Nikki Beach patrons. Music pounds from large speakers and one



The palm tree studded beach at Le Guanahani

young woman in an ankle-length, body-skimming white dress and skyscraper heels feels the urge to hop up onto a wooden table and start gyrating as she sings out loud to Pink's hit 'Raise Your Glass', which I find appropriate.

Later, at the Le Yacht Club, a night-spot in Gustavia, a young English-

man, no more than 25 years old, sits down next to me. He works as a chef on one of the yachts anchored in the harbour but he won't tell me the name of the yacht, or the nationality of the owner. He'll have to kill me if he does, he jokes. I ask why he does it and he replies, 'Well the money of course; and when am I ever going to live on a yacht in St Barts again?' A good point.

But despite the very visible badges of wealth, St Barts also has a less bling-bling charm about it. It has artfully mastered the mix of Caribbean life and French *joie de vivre* - when I see a teenage boy zip by on a scooter, wearing nothing but a bathing suit and flip flops, and carrying both a boogie board and a baguette, I know that just below the surface of St. Barts there is a side of the island mere mortals can attain.

It costs nothing to soak up the beauty of the island. Hiring a car I was able to see its quieter parts. Amazingly, on an island of only five square kilometres, it's still possible to find large swathes of land still untouched. Along the beaches of Toiny and Grand Fond there is not another person in sight and the coastline remains untamed, the sand as white and soft as all purpose flour. The pristine Colombier Beach is a snorkelers and swimmers paradise and worth the effort for those willing to take on the 20-minute hike it takes to get there.

The other beauty of this Caribbean scene is that there are no tourist t-shirts being sold on the beaches. No kids running up to you with bottles of Coca Cola. No one selling you tacky shell necklaces while you are reading. The beach clubs and hotels have

sun loungers, but the island's other beaches, such as Colombier or Saline beach, Lorient or Gouverneur, are left unstained by commercialism. Only the footprints of those who walked there previously are left when the day is done.

A favourite St. Barts moment is Sunday morning spent in the small town of Lorient, where the morning I visit clusters of men are huddled over tiny cups of espresso in cafes.

Above the town, a church sits with its shutter style doors in white and Provencal blue, wide open. It's empty but the smell of candle wax tells me there were people recently gathered here. On the way to the beach I stop at a cemetery filled with flowers in every colour. At closer glance I realize they are all fake and I ask a passer by if he knows why people don't put real flowers on the grave sites. 'This way, they bloom all year long,' is his cheerful reply.

Lorient is the antithesis of the scene at Nikki Beach, and I lean against a colourful surf shack, closed because it's Sunday. The beach is filled with parents and their children and I feel as if I'm intruding on a family picnic. Three tow-headed boys, the oldest one no more than seven, rush passed me, plop their surfboards in the blue sea and paddle out to the waves. I guess when you live on a tiny island with over a dozen beaches, you learn to surf and swim before you learn to ride a bike.

But St Barts is not just a sun-lover's paradise – it's also where foodies find themselves in gourmet heaven. There are more than 80 restaurants

ST BARTS THE DETAILS

WHEN TO GO

High-season at St Barts is mid-December to mid-April - at this time expect high prices and loads of paparazzi. It is far more affordable to visit the island during the low-season of April 15 - December 15. The sun still shines and temperatures are warm. But avoid September and October - it's the hurricane season.

WHERE TO EAT

Bête à Z'aïles (Baz Bar) Live music and sushi are hallmarks of this friendly waterside bar on Gustavia Harbour. €35 per person; tel 05 90 29 74 09; www.bazbar.com

Le Select Hamburgers in paradise. Rue du Roi Oscar II, Gustavia.

The Hideaway (Chez Andy's) Advertising 'warm beer and a view of the car park' this St. Jean eatery is a local favourite. €25 per person. Vaval Shopping Center, St Jean. 05 90 27 63 62

Bonito Splurge at this beautiful spot perched high above Gustavia Harbour, with killer views and food to match. €55 per person. Rue Lubin Brin, Gustavia; tel 05 90 27 96 96; www.ilovebonito.com

L'isola A Caribbean cucina with Italian

specialties from the owner of Los Angeles eaterie Via Veneto. €35 per person; rue du Roi Oscar II, Gustavia; tel 05 90 51 00 05; www.lisolastbarths.com

WHERE TO STAY

I stayed at **Le Guanahani** which huddles harmoniously into the landscape of its 16-acre peninsula. It has two beaches, one on the seaside and the other facing a languid lagoon. Painted in a wash of colour - yellow with white shutters, indigo blue against lilac, the hotel is an enclave of 68 bungalows (among them private villas with pools) lazily around lush landscaping and palm trees. Tucked in between are a couple of tennis courts, the new Zen-like spa, and flowerbeds bursting with hibiscus. In my well-appointed room there were personal touches including chilled wine, a bathroom counter full of sun protection products and a crisp white bathrobe adorned with fresh flowers. The large private terrace overlooked the lagoon and was furnished with couches, chairs and tables. It was the perfect place to host a small cocktail party - if I knew anyone to invite! Prices from €643; www.leguanahani.com

Hotel les Mouettes Basic but comfy

bungalows right on Lorient Beach with pool, breakfast, and free wifi included. From €110; www.st-barths.com/hotel-les-mouettes

Salines Garden Cottage Guests stay in one of five traditional cazes (Creole houses) nestled amid flowering trees and steps from Salines, one of the island's loveliest beaches. Breakfast and airport transfer included. From €90; www.salinesgarden.com

Eden Roc Hotel The legendary hotel that put St. Barts on the map for moguls but also mere mortals. From €490; www.edenrock-hotel.com

HOW TO GET THERE

Air France (www.airfrance.fr) and KLM (www.klm.com) fly to St Martin, and Air France to Puerto Rico. From there transfer onto Winair (www.fly-winair.com) or Air Caraïbes (www.aircaraibes.com). Private charters include www.tradewindaviation.com. Corsair (www.corsairfly.com) and Air Caraïbes offer flights from Paris to St Barts, with connections included (from €750 return). See also travel companies such as www.directours.com. A travel agent will also organise all-inclusive holiday packages. UK package tour operators may be cheaper.



One of the island's many beautiful beaches that are accessible to everyone

— a considerable feat when you consider everything has to be flown in, much of it coming from Paris so the island's diners can enjoy real Marennes Oléron oysters and mesclun salad. 'St. Barts is known for its gastronomy and it's the only island in the Caribbean to serve such a high quality cuisine outside France,' says Philippe Massegia, head chef at Le Barto, the restaurant at the Le Guanahani hotel.

Each year, in November, the hotel holds a food festival and chefs from some of the world's most chi-chi restaurants are invited to wow diners with recreations of their most famous dishes. A few years ago, Sylvain Humbert from Château de Valmer in Provence arrived with a suitcase packed not with shorts and sandals but frozen fennel soup with truffles and olive-stuffed rabbits. This year's star is yet to be announced but you can bet your Michelin star, he's sure to be suitably *gastronomique*.

Throughout my stay at St Barts I dine superbly. My final lunch is at Le Guanahani's beachside Indigo restaurant. Here my cod is of a tasty Mediterranean tradition but with a Caribbean twist that has the fish mixed with peppers and jalapenos and then deep fried. I pop them into my mouth like gum balls. Delicious.

My coffee comes with canalés and I am genuinely surprised to find my favorite rum and vanilla infused mini cakes, typical of the Bordeaux region, here on the island, and I 'ooh' and 'ahh' over every bite.

The waiter brings me another plate of four and places them in front of me. 'To keep you smiling,' he says. And that I certainly do! **TFP**



The relaxed vibe of Gustavia, the capital of St Barts



Down on the marina

FABULOUS FOOD

Philippe Massegia is head chef at Le Barto at the Le Guanahani hotel. He and his wife Sabine who also works for the hotel are both originally from Vence in Provence. Childhood sweethearts, they have lived in St Barts for almost 20 years. 'I think it surprises people that given we are such a small island, there is such high quality here,' says Philippe. 'You can't imagine what the process involved is in delivering our menus to diners... The fact that all ingredients on St. Barts have to be ordered in advance and are shipped in (once a week) from outside pushes you to be as creative as you can.' Here are three recipes from the restaurants at Le Guanahani hotel. The Asian ingredients can be found at most large supermarkets or speciality eastern stores. All three recipes are easy to make although the dessert needs a little time.



LOBSTER AND COD FRITTERS

MAKES 12-15

- 80g red pepper, shredded
- 80g yellow pepper, shredded
- 90g onion, finely chopped
- 1kg flour
- 50g cooked lobster meat
- 500g desalted salt cod or fresh cod, cooked
- 4 eggs - 3 yolks, 1 whole
- 50g baking powder
- 40g jalapenos, diced
- 500ml milk
- Juice of half a lime
- 2 bunches of chives, finely chopped
- Salt

Dice the cod and the lobster and mix them in a bowl with the flour and baking powder. Add all the vegetables, then mix in the milk, lime juice and eggs. Season if necessary. Scoop a tablespoon of the mixture and form into a ball with your fingers. Repeat, then deep-fry both in hot oil. Wait 2-3 minutes and remove when they are golden and crispy. Repeat until all the mixture is used up. Serve with mayonnaise or a sweet chilli sauce.



THAI CHICKEN SALAD WITH SWEET CHILLI VINAIGRETTE

SERVES 4

- CHICKEN:**
- 600g chicken breast
- 1 garlic clove, crushed
- 10g freshly grated ginger
- 100ml sesame oil
- 5ml Worcestershire Sauce
- 20ml tomato sauce
- 20ml Kimchee base (a Korean and Japanese sauce, called Kimchi in France) or any hot pickle sauce
- Juice of one lime
- 20ml oyster sauce
- 5ml fish sauce
- A drop of Tabasco
- 1 tablespoon powdered ginger
- 20g cornflour

- SWEET CHILLI VINAIGRETTE:**
- 100ml sweet chilli sauce
- 30ml fish sauce
- 120ml water
- 20ml liquid cane sugar (*sirop de canne liquide* - available in large supermarkets)
- ¼ bunch mint, finely chopped

- SALAD**
- 360g of shredded green cabbage, Chinese cabbage and carrots.
- 360g soybean noodles
- 80g romaine lettuce, finely chopped
- A little chopped mint and fresh

- coriander leaves
- A few grilled sesame seeds
- 20g chopped peanuts

Start with the chicken. Dice it and then mix in with the cornflour. In a large bowl, mix all the other ingredients together. Add the chicken and leave to marinate for several hours. Then, using a little sesame oil, sear the marinated chicken in the pan until cooked, using any extra marinade as glaze. Keep warm.

To make the vinaigrette: mix all the leaves and vegetables, adding the mint and coriander at the end. Toss with 25ml of the sweet chilli vinaigrette.

To serve: divide into four plates or bowls. Place the chicken on top of the salad, then sprinkle with the peanuts, sesame seeds and garnish with more mint and coriander.



RASPBERRY MOUSSE WITH A RASPBERRY HEART

SERVES 4

- RASPBERRY MOUSSE:**
- 125ml raspberry purée
- 125ml heavy whipping cream
- 75ml egg whites
- 75g sugar
- 7g gelatin sheet, soaked in cold water

- RASPBERRY HEART:**
- 125ml raspberry pulp
- 25ml glucose
- 25g confectionery sugar

- RASPBERRY TILE:**
- 150g mashed raspberry
- 30ml egg white
- 15g sugar
- 15g glucose
- 4 cylindrical moulds, about 7cm x 10cm;
- 4 rings, a little smaller

To make the mousse: heat the raspberry puree and add the gelatin sheet. Separately, whip the cream until you get a nice whipped cream consistency and place in the refrigerator. Beat the egg whites and sugar until a good solid meringue forms. Then, using a spatula, gently fold the raspberry puree into the meringue, and then fold in the whipped cream.

To make the heart: place all ingredients in a saucepan, bring to a boil and cook for one minute. Pour the mix into the four ring moulds. Place in the freezer until mixture is hard.

To make the tile: Mix all the ingredients together, and beat for five minutes or so, until you have a light, airy texture. Then let stand for a few hours. Spread finely on a baking mat or parchment and place in the oven at 90°C, until it crisps.

Assembling the dessert: Using a cylindrical mould, spoon in some of the raspberry mousse until you are almost half-way up the mould. Add a raspberry heart to the middle, and then cover with more mousse. Flatten the surface with a spatula and place in the freezer for two hours.

To serve: remove from the cylinder an hour before needed. Place the mousse on a plate. Break the tiles into pieces and use to decorate the top, along with fresh red fruit. Repeat three more times.