

Forget Beach Parties. The Best Way to See St. Barths Is to Go on a Spectacular Hike.

By MARK ELLWOOD



At first, the path seems easy: almost a Sunday stroll rather than a hike. The only challenge, indeed, is the endless parade of turtles, ambling with determination across the gravel path. They're unbothered by passersby, unlike the goats that look on skittishly. A pair of kids seem torn between curiosity and fear: One darts back and forth while the other bleats, half warning, half pleading. Soon, though, the path changes, growing steeper, rockier, bolted onto the edge of a cliff, a place to pick carefully along the boulders. Far below, deep blue waters are frothing with noisy waves.

After a while, the path opens up again, this time facing a near-empty expanse of sandy scrubland, a few windswept shrubs the only shelter. From there it's a short, precipitous trek down to a private white-sand beach—and the ultimate prize. The only evidence of humans here is a hulking mansion, seemingly unoccupied; it was once the Caribbean hideaway of David Rockefeller. Still, the sands aren't fenced off for the mansion's occupants only; anyone can wander into the shallow waters. They're ideal for washing off the sweat from the hike, a chance to snorkel lazily through the shoals of fish.

This isn't a deserted, private island in an unknown corner of the region. Rather, it's Colombier Beach on the northwestern tip of the superyacht haven of St. Barthélemy, better known as St. Barts, an island whose appeal lies far beyond its boutiques, bottle service, and seven-hour brunches. It's renowned as the Caribbean's jet-set hub, of course, a shard of Mediterranean glamour chipped off from the South of France and wedged into waters barely 150 miles from the U.S. Virgin Islands. Pick a celebrity from any generation, from Beyoncé to Paul McCartney, and they've likely been spotted in one of St. Barts' restaurants, marinas, or hotels. The island attracts ardent shoppers and avid sailors in equal measure: There's no sales tax on luxury purchases here, and the calendar is brimming with endless regattas, the landscape studded with coves that only a charter can reach.



No wonder that the presence of nature, and the prominence of outdoor life among the locals, is something that only frequent visitors tend to notice, says Fabrice Moizan, who runs Eden Rock, the isle's splashiest, oldest hotel. "Seventy percent of the island is a green zone, which means it's non-buildable, so you have so many areas where you can be inspired by nature," he explains. It's Eden Rock's regular guests, those who stay perhaps three or four times each year, who are likeliest to head out on a hike before breakfast.

An outdoorsy, off-grid lifestyle has been part of the island's history from the outset. Its poor soils meant that St. Barthélemy never ended up subsumed by plantations, as was commonplace elsewhere in the Caribbean; the Swedes ceded it to the French without a thought as a trade-off in the late 18th century. (Hence the capital's name, Gustavia: a nod to the Nordic king.) The rocky island remained an afterthought in colonial times compared to prized gems like Jamaica and Barbados and was mostly undeveloped until a swashbuckling French pilot named Rémy de Haenen landed his plane here in 1945. De Haenen quickly constructed what's now the Eden Rock hotel as his residence—and St. Barts as we know it now was born.

The raffish de Haenen—who, despite several stints in prison for smuggling, won election as mayor of the island—gathered a glamorous pack of friends to come enjoy his hospitality here: Howard Hughes, Greta Garbo, and Lee Radziwill all arrived at his invitation. This was a hideaway where such A-listers could idle, in private, ambling along an empty beach or hiking up to a raw clifftop, the original barefoot luxury. Of course, their star power helped cement its glitzy reputation of today, but insiders and longtime visitors still relish what exists, half-hidden, behind the boutiques and beach clubs.



Hiking paths quilt the island, offering remarkably varied skill levels and vistas. Le Colombier is the clear standout: Instead of heading down to the beach, consider climbing up a little farther to reach a rocky platform where you can sit and contemplate the waters from both east and west. And since the beach is only accessible via this route, if you'd rather not retrace your steps, you can ask your hotel or villa to send a speedboat to pick you up after a few hours in the water.

Grand Fond, another coastal hike, is a cinch for even the laziest. The two-mile flower-lined trail along the island's northeastern coast has spectacular views of the surfers catching a wave or two in the rough seas; afterward, cool off at the natural pools before heading back. "It feels like you could be in Scotland—well, Scotland on a warm day," says hotelier Moizan with a laugh. "It's so rocky, and you can feel the wind from the Atlantic." On the island's more protected south side, the three-mile-long trail to Gouverneur Beach and back is more energetic; nonetheless, expect to need to do a little bushwhacking as you clamber down to the sands.

The most intense adventure is to tackle the almost-four-mile hike around the headland of Le Toiny via Petit Cul de Sac. Start down at the beach and walk up, winding through the plush greenery (expect to hear more goats bleating) before hitting a set of rock-built steps that connect to the peak. From there, reaching Le Petit Cul de Sac is very steep both up- and downhill but worth the effort, at least when the weather cooperates and keeps the waves at bay; there are natural pools along the route, too. It's a particular favorite of Meg Nolan van Reesema, who first started visiting the island almost 20 years ago and now edits Goodspeed, the local airline's magazine. "Seeing the waves crash into the rocks there almost feels like Hawaii," she says. (Consider hiring a guide like H  l  ne Bernier of St Barth Essentiel, who specializes in leading folks around the trickier hikes.)



Such assets position St. Barts well to increase its appeal to high-end globe-trotters, according to Cari Gray; she runs California-based Gray & Co, a travel agency focused on active luxury getaways, and is a frequent visitor to the island herself. It's not uncommon for her clients to travel with their trainers now, and they'll query upfront whether they can maintain their fitness in even the most indulgence-driven destination. "It's the ever-evolving definition of luxury, which integrates far more of the world around us," Gray notes. "People want to take their lifestyle on the road with them, rather than falling off the wagon—they work hard at home to be the way they are and want to maintain that, but in a local way. They're happy to get off the treadmill and into the mountains."

And any attempts to redevelop more of its green space face fierce opposition: Château Marmont owner André Balazs's plans to build a beachfront hotel were squashed a decade or so ago, and in December 2021, the local court canceled a building permit for Denise Dupré, wife of billionaire Mark Nunnelly, who planned a \$170 million renovation of land by Saint Jean beach on the island's north coast. The building site, with its multiple swimming pools, would be too disruptive to the ecosystem of that beach, the court concluded, even though the foundations had already been partially laid.

“For a small island, St. Barts is one of the most appealing outdoorsy destinations in the region—everybody is always exercising, moving around, interested in being outside,” says van Reesema. “You’ll see so much more of the island than if you just sat on the beach. And when the rosé never stops flowing, it’s nice to be able to get up in the morning and go outside, be in the sun, and sweat it out.”