

ST. BARTHELEMY

AVEC AMOUR



Le Sereno, located on a cove, features 37 suites and three villas.

onsitereview

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Lunching at **Tom Beach Hotel's** La Plage or Nikki Beach St Barth [sic], the sight of so many perfect bodies splashing in the surf between courses almost makes you ignore the artisanal pizza a stunning waitress has just served you. Welcome to St. Barthelemy—aka St. Barts, St. Barths, and St. Barth—where a disproportionate number of women are gorgeous and many of the men look either movie-star handsome or Wall Street rich. Or both.

Not everyone who visits St. Barts is a boldface name, but yes, the stars do shine here. And the astonishing thing is, while other destinations attract the glitterati for a year or two, after which the trend-setters move on to new horizons, St. Barts has been hot since Greta Garbo “vanted” to be alone at **Eden Rock** in the 1950s.

Remarkable, considering that this famous place is just 9.3 sq. miles of land. It feels much larger, to be sure, because its amoeba-like shape and steep hills make for narrow roads with hairpin turns that encourage (very) careful driving. Also, there's no denying that St. Barts has several beautiful beaches, such as picture-perfect Flamand and snorkelers haven Columbier in the Northwest, bustling St. Jean in the center, and Saline, accessible only by foot, in the south.

However, nearby Anguilla and St. Martin have some pretty swell beaches, too, so St. Barts has no monopoly in that department. Moreover, this is a destination whose largest hotel—

Guanahani, the closest thing to a traditional resort here—has fewer than 70 rooms, and there are only 500 hotel rooms and 800 villas on the entire island. No matter: Year after year, St. Barts attracts the likes of Derek Jeter, Daniel Craig, Ellen DeGeneres, Shakira, The Black Eyed Peas and Paul McCartney. And that's just a partial list from a single hotel, Eden Rock. So what makes St. Barts so everlastingly hot?

boutique hotels, yes; mass tourism, no

"First, St. Barts never got into mass tourism," explains Nils Dufau over dinner at Wall House Restaurant, which faces the yacht-filled harbor in historic Gustavia, the capital. The guy at the next table looks like he's somebody, but Dufau, president of **St. Barth Tourism Committee**, expertly avoids staring. "We didn't react to landing on hot lists by building big hotels and tourist traps," he says. *Au contraire*, St. Barts enacted restrictions on new construction and on speculators, discouraged stops by large cruise ships, and focused on luxury villas and boutique hotels—"quality, not quantity," as **Hotel Le Village St Barth** manager Catherine Charneau puts it.

This self-discipline has helped St. Barts maintain its status as "a beautiful island with unspoiled beaches, major shopping, the best dining, no poverty, no crimes, and so many celebrities that everyone wants to go there," says Pascale Gherardi, president of tour operator **Voyage by Pascale** and a French expat who has lived on St. Barts.

Instead of staying within the confines of large resorts, people who choose to visit St. Barts are independent types who rent cars and sample the island's scattered beaches, 100 restaurants, and *joie de vivre*. "The population is very young, tanned, and sexy," says Gherardi, risking understatement. "St. Barts is a bit like fantasy island." No wonder even Dagmar Lombard, general manager of the acclaimed—and secluded—**Hotel Le Toiny**, often sells the island first, and then her hotel.

french way of life

Sitting in Bonito St Barths' hillside terrace restaurant and looking down at the lights of Gustavia while a server places a dish of tuna tataki in front of him, Pierre Eric Houdant, manager of **Les Ilets de la Plage**, says the fact that St. Barts is populated by "French people who cultivate a French way of life—only it's France with Caribbean beaches and warmth" is also a major contributor in St. Barts' success.

Incidentally, the attentive reader will have noticed by now that on this island, important conversations and revelations occur over meals, or at least good wine. That reader may also wonder what the tuna tataki costs. It was \$47, and worth-the-trip...delicious.

St. Barts is right for some clients, wrong for others. The ones for whom it's right are "discerning, luxury clients [who] enjoy the immersion into a chic French culture."

Kimberly K. Daley, Vice President and Managing Director, Journese, luxury brand of Pleasant Holidays

Gherardi admits that prices on "Little France" are "through the roof," but, she points out, that helps keep the place exclusive. Most high-season visitors, she notes, are travelers who can afford \$2,000 a night. Sure enough, an observer watches a couple stroll through a wine store in Gustavia without flinching at the €1,328 magnum of Haut-Brion.

what's new

But although St. Barts' exclusivity, commitment to maintaining its culture and ambiance, and sheer buzz are constants, the details do change, especially as its stellar hotels continue to raise the bar. Two years ago **Le Sereno**, a 37-suite, Christian Liaigre-designed retreat, opened three sprawling 3 1/2-bedroom villas on a rise above the beach; sit down for one minute by one of the villa pools overlooking St. Barts' only lagoon, and you don't want to get up. Ever. Last year Le Sereno opened a new, 2,300-sq.-ft. indoor/outdoor spa featuring fine Ligne St Barth products and techniques.

In 2011 Hotel Le Village St Barth (aka Hotel Le Village St Jean), perched above St. Jean Beach, began replacing *Traditional Cottages* with *Superior Cottages* and installing windows in the showers (nicel). Stephane Caubel and Marielle Delaporte redesigned the hotel's 2-bedroom, private-pool *Villa Iguana*, and now the new *Villa Polaroid* is opening with a layout that features three bedrooms, Pop art, and a private pool and garden.

The two restaurants at Eden Rock, the celebrity magnet that invented St. Barts-style tourism, have a new (super) chef—Jean-Georges Vongerichten—resulting in black truffle pizzas, poisson with bok choy, crispy sushi, and desserts that are dangerous, but in a good way.

The other new star of this 34-unit hotel occupying a promontory and part of St. Jean Beach is the *Villa Rockstar*, a beach-front complex with four master bedrooms, eye-catching decor (e.g. a white-gold bathroom), butler service, a gym, a screening room, and a recording studio. The garage's toys include two cars and two motorcycles. You say your clients are inviting the Claptons? No problem: Combine *Villa Rockstar* with 2-bedroom *Villa Nina*.

In 2011 Le Toiny, the ultra-romantic, mountaintop hideaway, renovated the private pools and terraces at its 15 villa suites. ►►

Making St. Barts Easy

Like any other destination, St. Barts is right for some clients, wrong for others. The ones for whom it's right are "discerning, luxury clients [who] enjoy the immersion into a chic French culture," says Kimberly K. Daley, v.p. and managing director of **Journese**, the luxury brand of **Pleasant Holidays**. These sophisticated travelers appreciate the island's "superior service, fine dining, fashionable shops and spectacular beaches."

Journese's specialists have singled out three of St. Barts' best hotels—**Hotel Christopher**, **Hotel Saint Barth Isle de France**, and **Le Sereno**. Sample pricing: Journese can offer *Suite Terrasse* rooms in high season from \$4,982, five nights. "Our travel experts personally visit and handpick each property," says Daley. In addition, she explains, "Journese focuses on the complete journey, customizing vacations with flights and private transfers." That's critical, because many passengers transfer for the short hop to St. Barts at St. Maarten's Juliana Airport, where the customs/reboarding route can be confusing. "We can offer a complimentary VIP concierge in St. Maarten to assist with the connection," says Daley. "We make each journey easy... hence our name, 'Journese.'"

To reward agents and their clients, Journese secures exclusive promotions, specials and extra values. It also offers incentives for travel agents, including bonus commissions and complimentary vacations. "We award *TRIP* (Travel Reward Incentive Program) points to the agent on every booking, which agents use toward their own Journese vacations," notes Daley. "We provide *TRIP* bonus points incentive programs as part of our promotions as well."

Above all, she says, "by exceeding traveler expectations, we make the travel agent look like a hero."
(800) 762-7222; journese.com

This year its Michelin-starred **Le Gaiac** (the first **Relais & Chateaux** restaurant in the Caribbean to earn *Grand Chef* status) restaurant has been extensively renovated, as have the bar, library, and terrace pool. The views of lower-lying hills and the blue sea? They couldn't possibly be improved.

Hotel Saint Barth Isle de France, fronting beautiful Flamand Beach, has curb appeal in spades: A semi-circular staircase ascends to a white, plantation-style mansion with a portico and classical pillars. Its beachfront suites underwent a complete renovation last year, with an ingenious mix of traditional and modern furniture, plus white textiles. Surprise: A stone fountain in one suite turns out not to be a reproduction, as one might expect, but a museum-quality original from an English estate. This fall, the garden bungalows across the street also got a makeover.

jumping the five-star hurdle

The **Hotel Christopher**, a 41-unit hotel on the northeast promontory Pointe Milou with a gorgeous infinity pool, has just completed a €7 million renovation (more than \$9 million) that included remodeled restaurants and new *Junior Suites* with balconies, a *Panoramic Suite*, boutique and spa, among other improvements. The addition of the spa gained the Christopher a five-star rating, which it should have had even before that happened, but as mentioned, the bar is set high in St. Barts.

The **Hotel Carl Gustaf** re-opened a year ago with a remodeled restaurant, Victoria's by Akrame, that features new decor, dramatic views of Gustavia Harbor, a set menu (dishes like steamed stuffed sole filet, black truffle and fresh tagliatelles with spinach sprouts), and a special blind menu (recommended: the 3-course option for about \$84).

Is it possible to satisfy clients who want to experience St. Barts without paying quite so much for hotel rooms? You could advise them to visit the island off-season, when winter rates drop 50 percent or more. Or you could send them to the **Normandie Hotel**, a recently renovated, 8-room hideaway owned by two Californians, where a small but comfortable accommodation costs about \$257 in high season, a steal on this island.

Alternatively, suggest that they recruit two other couples and share a villa. For example, a 3-bedroom *Garden Villa* just uphill from St. Jean Beach at Les Ilets de la Plage costs €710 in high season; that translates to about \$350 per couple. Not cheap, but having kitchen facilities could make it affordable. **Baie des Angles**, a family-owned, three-star on Flamand Beach, is another (relatively) budget option.

Then again, saving money by cooking in your room is not the reason why culinary pioneer and author Craig Claiborne stayed at Hotel Le Village St Barth every chance he got. Yes, the price was fair, but Claiborne really loved the hotel's location, its stylish decor and ambiance, the cottages' outdoor kitchens, and the ingredients he found in stores for the meals he cooked in his cottage. Like so many other celebrities and other influencers, then and now, Craig Claiborne simply loved St. Barts. ●

Archived related articles (available on recommend.com): **Four World-Class Private Island Resorts** (October 2012)

contact information

Baie des Angles: hotel-baie-des-angles.com

Eden Rock: (855) 333-6762; edenrockhotel.com

Hotel Carl Gustaf: (866) 297-2153; hotelcarlgustaf.com

Hotel Christopher: hotelchristopher.fr

Hotel Guanahani & Spa: (800) 216-3774; leguanahani.com

Hotel Le Village St Barth: villagestjeanhotel.com

Hotel Le Toiny: letoiny.com

Hotel Saint Barth Isle de France: isle-de-france.com

Le Sereno: lesereno.com

Les Ilets de la Plage: lesilets.com

Normandie Hotel: normandiehotelstbarts.com

St. Barth Tourism Committee: saintbarth-tourisme.com/index_us.php

Voyage by Pascale: voyagebypascale.com/testimonials.html

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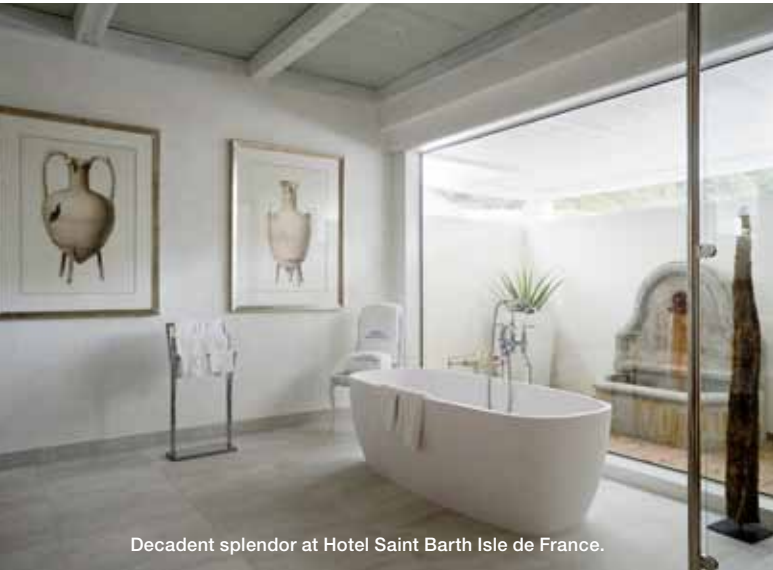
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Decadent splendor at Hotel Saint Barth Isle de France.

how to impress clients when booking st. barts

Saint Barthelemy is so unique (and expensive) that clients appreciate any good advice you can give them. Following are tips from professionals who really know the territory.

Getting There

"I encourage my clients to fly to St. Maarten, then take the 15-minute flight to St. Barts via **WinAir** or **St. Barth Commuter**," says Owen Gaddis, leisure, corporate, and adventure advisor at **SmartFlyer** travel agency. "This gives them the best chance of arriving with minimal delays."

"Just remember that St. Maarten's airport is one of the busiest in the Caribbean," says Douglas Fiorella, senior travel and lifestyle manager, **Fischer Travel Enterprises**. "There can be flight delays during high season, making Anguilla a great alternative." San Juan is another choice. However, notes James Daltrey of **Premium IV St Barts VIP Concierge Services**, "This is the more expensive option and more limited in terms of connecting flights."

What about taking a boat from St. Maarten to St. Barts? "I personally like the ferry," says Daltrey, "but a lot depends on the weather, and some people get seasick. Then again, some people



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don't like small planes." What do the celebrities do? "Many of them charter private boats. We have clients who will casually take three or four hours to get from St. Maarten to St. Barts, sipping cocktails, swimming and sunbathing."

Getting Around the Island

"You need a rental car with a little horsepower so it can handle the hills, which are steep, but you want to keep the car as small as possible," says travel consultant Becky Lamb, **Becky Lamb Travel**.

"Managing clients' expectations is a large part of our job," adds Daltrey. "Yes, we can rent you a villa for \$250,000 and fill it with champagne and caviar. No, you can not rent a Ferrari, because they are totally unsuitable for the island's roads."

Fiorella recommends a Mini Cooper, Daihatsu Terios or Jeep Wrangler. "I work with **Cool Rental**," he says. "If your car breaks down, they don't send a mechanic, they send a new car—day or night."

Gaddis advises first-timers to have the hotel pick them up at the airport, suggesting they take taxis for the first day or two so they can see the island before stepping behind the wheel—especially at night. "I don't mean to scare anyone, but it's pretty easy to get lost, and the roads and other drivers can cause a bit of anxiety. Every hotel can arrange for a car to be dropped off for their guests."

Dining

"Visitors should make dinner reservations during busy times (of course, we take care of this)," says Pascale Gherardi of luxury tour operator **Voyage by Pascale**. "You can pay everywhere in euros or in American dollars, but ask about the exchange rate first." Kimberly K. Daley, v.p. and managing director of **Journese**, the luxury brand of **Pleasant Holidays**, points out that "tipping is not necessary, since service fees are included."

Where to eat? Almost anywhere, but Gaddis singles out the Sunday brunch at Le Toiny as "the most impressive brunch I've ever had." On another day, he says, have lunch at Le Toiny's Le Gaic, and dinner at Bonito, in Gustavia. "It's known for seafood and tapas, but don't ignore the drink menu!"

Fiorella describes Le Ti St-Barth restaurant/bar/cabaret as "an institution.... This should not be missed if you are looking to party!"

Random Wisdom

"St. Barts has decent waves for surfing (and wind for kitesurfing)," says Fiorella. "The best spots are Anse de Toiny, Lorient, and Anse des Cayes."

Lamb urges visitors, "Explore! Get in your vehicle and visit different beaches, spend an afternoon in Gustavia shopping...eat in different restaurants." But visitors shouldn't try to do everything. "There's no need," says Daltrey, "because once people have come here, they will certainly come again." ●



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