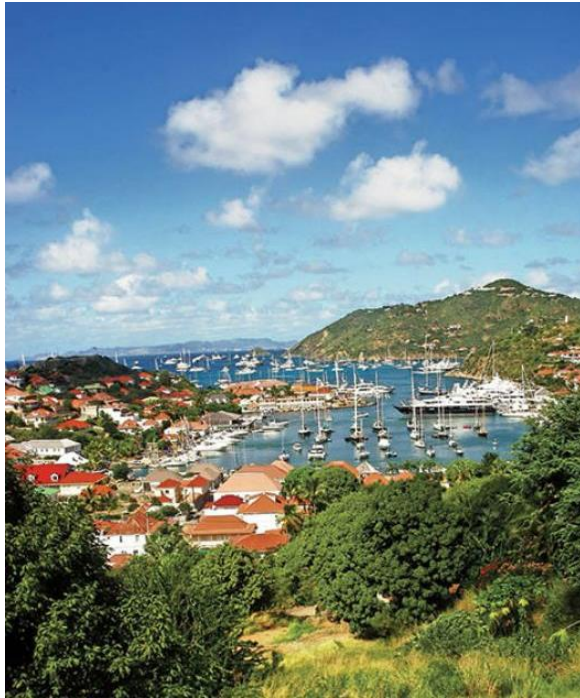


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## St. Barts serves up a taste of France closer to home



The horseshoe-shaped harbor of Gustavia has been an active port since the 18th century. Today, yachts of the rich and famous are more likely to dock here than schooners carrying provisions.  
(Photo: St. Barts Tourism Office)

A day in [St. Barts](#) begins like this: You wake up in the morning to the sounds of wild roosters crowing. You stretch a bit, get out of bed and decide you're in the mood for crêpes. So you hop in your MINI Cooper Convertible (which is what everyone drives) and head to [Gustavia](#), the capital of this small French [Caribbean island](#).

During your drive, you wind along two-lane mountain roads, trying not to close your eyes as locals pass you at full throttle.

Once you blessedly arrive in Gustavia, you park near the harbor. Yachts as big as houses shine in the early morning sun.

The crêperie is up the hill to your left, and to your right, a curiously large crowd has gathered by the water. You are drawn to the right and soon you find yourself in the island's fish market, where locals chat in [Creole](#) and French as they examine displays of red snapper, yellowfin tuna and mahimahi. While customers shop, fishermen throw scraps into the water for the waiting tarpon fish as seagulls flap and squawk overhead.



The jagged, rocky cliffs along the St. Barts coastline make for picture-perfect scenery. The highest point on the island is [Morne du Vitet](#), about 930 feet above sea level. (Photo: [St. Barts Tourism Office](#))

You mill around a bit, then head toward the crêperie. You trudge several blocks uphill, passing storefronts for [Louis Vuitton](#) and [Hermès](#). The sun is rising higher, and you start to perspire.

When you reach your destination, La Crêperie, you catch your breath and order an espresso and a crêpe filled with ham, Swiss cheese, mushrooms and fried potatoes. You sit at an outdoor table and smile as bronzed, [French-speaking](#) children in bathing suits and flip-flops walk past you.

And so the day begins. You're roughly 1,700 miles from the eastern United States, but you feel doubly far away: You could swear you're in the south of France. Just like [St. Tropez](#) and Monaco, St. Barts is lovely and uninhibited.

It's also expensive — arguably the priciest island in the Caribbean. Everyone here smokes. Ordering a bottle of champagne at lunch is no big deal. Kids eat dinner with their parents at 9 p.m. The hottest nightspot in town is a cabaret.



Built on arid, volcanic rock, St. Barts offers a variety of terrains in a small package. The island is only 8 square miles. (Photo: St. Barts Tourism Office)

It's hard to believe that a little more than 50 years ago, St. Barts was an isolated island with a struggling economy. Even though [Christopher Columbus](#) "discovered" it in 1493 (naming it [St. Barthélemy](#) after his brother, Bartolomeo), it took centuries for it to find its footing.

It passed between the Maltese, Swedish and French and endured wars and natural disasters. With hardly any rain on the island (save for the occasional hurricane), there was precious little to export.

But St. Barts was ultimately saved by its beauty. Home to a whopping 22 beaches — some with white sand, others with smooth stones — it sits amid turquoise waters that are a playground for neon fish and humpback whales.

It was this irresistible loveliness that compelled [David Rockefeller](#) to buy a home here in 1957, just a few years after the island got its own airport. Americans — especially New Yorkers — followed the banking tycoon's trail and a booming tourism economy was born.

Today, St. Barts is a popular vacation spot for many of the rich and famous, including [Leonardo DiCaprio](#), [Beyoncé](#) and the Kardashian clan.

Most visitors to St. Barts stay in a hotel or a villa. Hotel rooms range from small \$500-a-night pied-à-terres in downtown Gustavia to the \$2,000-per-night oceanfront suites. Villas share a similar price span: Some offer basic accommodations, while others are spacious and offer luxury amenities.



Conch fritters are an island specialty. Pair with a crisp Carib beer. (Photo: Thinkstock)

Lately, the island has become increasingly well known for its gastronomy, especially its French-inspired restaurants. The trendy [Bonito](#) serves French-Latin cuisine (think duck foie gras topped with sangria jelly) prepared by chef Laurent Cantineaux, protégé of acclaimed chef [Daniel Boulud](#).

L'Esprit de [Saline](#), situated in a side-of-the-road bungalow near Saline Beach, offers a surprisingly upscale menu filled with fresh seafood and inventive cocktails. And Maya's is a St. Barts institution, the place where celebrities go for calamari and carpaccio served in an unpretentious atmosphere.

Which brings us to how a day in St. Barts ends: A late dinner — perhaps a five-course one — on an outdoor patio. A bit of eavesdropping on the smoky table next to you as they decide what time to hit famed cabaret spot Les Ti. A post-dinner stroll on the beach, because you're too full and too tired for a cabaret. A good night's sleep in a soft bed before the island's wild roosters wake you in the morning.

But it's OK if they rouse you early: You might be ready for another crêpe.