





SURPRISING **ST. BARTH**

Cultured, costly—and completely down to earth—this tiny French protectorate delivers well beyond expectations.

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AIN T BARTHÉLEMY—often shortened to St. Bart’s, or St. Barth – is often perceived as a snobbish little place that excludes all but A-list movie stars and billionaires. But while it certainly offers sophistication and a different experience from much of the rest of the Caribbean – still a protectorate of France, a visit here brings together all the best of that belle pays and puts it in the middle of a beautiful blue sea – the locals here are laid back, often even earthy, and usually offer a warm welcome to one and all, whether you’ve rolled in on a massive yacht or you’re a day-tripper over from St. Maarten.

Another surprise, which revealed itself on my first walk around the island’s capital, Gustavia: St. Barth was once a colony of Sweden. Descending the steep incline

from my villa at the Carl Gustaf Hotel into the town center, I noticed that all the streets are still sign-posted in both Swedish and French, despite the fact that it has been more than a century since Sweden ended their pleasant, hundred-year reign and handed things back to the French in 1878. (Gustavia is named after King Gustav, the first Swedish monarch to rule the island.) However, arriving at the main row of shops, I saw that many of these bore unmistakably French brand names, including: Cartier, Hermès and Louis Vuitton.

But Gustavia isn’t just Rodeo Drive writ large. After doing a little haute browsing, I stopped in for a drink at Le Select, a kitschy beer-and-burger joint right in the heart of town, complete with mismatched plastic chairs and twinkling Christmas lights. Looking around, I observed well-coiffed ladies sipping tall drinks alongside rambunctious, blue collar worker crews in matching t-shirts. (Le Select, it’s worthy to note, is the very place where Jimmy Buffett wrote *Cheeseburger in Paradise*.)

And I had my next drink at an equally unpretentious spot, La Route des Boucaniers, a little bar just steps from the harbor that looks like a simple rum shack but is in fact one of the best places in all of the Caribbean to enjoy authentic Creole cuisine – the proprietor, Francis Delage, has written five volumes on the subject. I chatted with the bartender, a man who said his name is Michel Proust, a transplanted Parisian who has been here for 20 years. “The local people, they don’t make a big deal about the celebrities,” he tells me. “Life here is good, easy, there’s always sun, sand, and a nice place to walk.”

Top: View of Gustavia harbor from the Carl Gustaf Hotel’s Royal Suite.

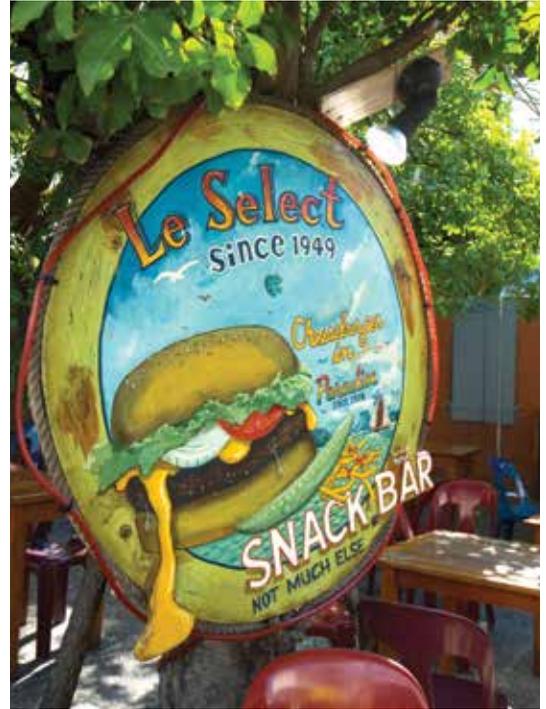
Below: Racing yachts in Gustavia harbor.

Facing page: Grand Cul de Sac Beach at the Hotel Guanahani.



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offers a live cabaret show, feathered chandeliers, blood-red velvet curtains and “flirtinis” on the menu.

On my last full day on the island, a Sunday, I participated in a hallowed St. Barth tradition, an event that residents and regulars attend with an almost religious fervor and fidelity: I had brunch at Le Gaiac. This lovely, open-air restaurant (part of the posh Le Toiny resort) overlooks a sheltered, secluded cove, and I was joined by Eric Houdan, a friend-of-a-friend who came here from France as a young man and is now a hotelier and impresario, organizing the island’s annual music festival. We discussed St. Barth’s flashy international image, and he laughed about it, noting that the celebs are here mostly during “the season” – two weeks over Christmas and New Years, and confiding that he secretly makes fun of the wealthy, high maintenance Wall Street types who visit, nicknaming them “the 212” (after Manhattan’s area code). He described a very different St. Barth, the one where he raised his daughter, now 17 – where kids stripped down and jumped into the surf every day after school, and everyone kept an eye out for their neighbor (“it’s such a small island – when your kid does something wrong, you hear about it in a second!”).

The next day, I boarded a tiny eight-seater plane and took off enroute back to St. Maarten and onward to Canada. As I looked down on the beach, the blue water, the mountains and the red roofs of Gustavia, I saw a very different St. Barth than the one I expected just a few days ago. In place of preening celebs and billionaires, I saw the place that I had visited—earthy, fun, unpretentious, and serving up some of the greatest cheeseburgers and brioche in the world. ♦

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THAT SOUNDED LIKE A PLAN, so I decided to take a walk around St. Jean, the only other town on the island. Here, just steps from some of the most beautiful beaches in the Caribbean, there was again an easy mix of high and low amongst the small shops—Karl Lagerfeld boutiques next to dive shops, that kind of thing. I wandered into a small bakery and chatted with the floppy-haired manager, Pierre-Olivier Avit, who hails from Lille, a city in northern France that served as my home abroad a few years back. He explained that the breads in the shop are all handmade, every day – the baker comes in at 1:30 in the morning – with a special flour imported from France. Having noted that brioche is their specialty, I left with a nice hunk of it, tearing off chunks as I walked along the beach. Maybe it was the bliss created by the combination of sun and the beauty of the place, but I swear that it was the best brioche I’ve ever tasted.

Plenty of other delicious meals and good times followed – a nice lunch featuring lobster salad at seaside Le Sereno, followed by a massage in one of their beach cabanas, open to the warm breezes and the sound of the waves lapping the shore nearby. A dinner at Bonito, which features a beautiful view over the twinkling lights of Gustavia and a full menu of fresh ceviche. And a late night at Le Ti, a sexy hilltop spot on the far side of the island that

Clockwise from top:
Lunch at Le Gaiac is a hallowed St. Barth tradition.

Le Select: home of Jimmy Buffet’s *Cheeseburger in Paradise*.

Seaside lunch at Le Sereno.