

SAINT BARTHÉLEMY

Cultural Close-up

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Surrounded by the shimmering waters of the eastern **Caribbean**, this tiny island – just 25 square kilometres of green, mountainous terrain – has become one of the most popular destinations for the global glitterati, especially over the two-week period around Christmas and New Year's known locally as 'the season.' Usually abbreviated and anglicized, the island's shorthand name takes various forms – usually **St. Bart's** or **Saint Barth** – but no matter what the spelling, this place is synonymous with one word: glamour. However, despite its flashy image, there's more to Saint Barth than preening celebs and super-wealthy CEOs flaunting their yachts. Discovered by Christopher Columbus way back in 1493 (and named after his brother, Bartolomeo), settled by the French, ceded to the Swedes for a little more than a century before it was sold back to the French in 1878, this island has a fascinating history and a great deal for visitors to discover.

The best place to start your visit is in **Gustavia**, the island's dramatic capital. Built around a sheltered blue harbour (which fills to the brim with giant yachts during the season), the steep hills that form a horseshoe-shaped bowl around the town hem most of its businesses into a tidy, central walkable core. While signs of a Swedish past are everywhere (quite literally – all streets are sign-posted with both French and Swedish names, and the town takes its name from King Gustav III, the first Swedish monarch to rule the island), the feel is unmistakably French. That extends to the shops – there's perhaps no better place outside Paris to pick up *haute* French fashion, from Hermès to Cartier to Louis Vuitton (plus plenty of fashionable non-French brands, including Bvlgari and Ralph Lauren). It's also a great town to grab a drink or a bite. While **La Route des Boucaniers** may look like a simple rum shack (set directly on the harbour, it's a great place for a late-night mojito or planter's

punch), the restaurant is actually one of the finest places in all of the Caribbean to dine on authentic Creole cuisine; the owner, Francis Delage, has written a five-volume tome on the subject. Up the hill, **Bonito** serves delicious South American-influenced fare, including an impressive ceviche menu, at a location that showcases the twinkling lights of Gustavia. And for a more down-to-earth option, stop by **Le Select**, right in the heart of town. A favourite of both celebs and mere mortals, this burger joint is the place where Jimmy Buffett wrote his slacker anthem "Cheeseburger in Paradise," and it oozes authenticity, right down to the classic rock on the radio and the mismatched plastic chairs. Fill up and then bed down for the night at the **Carl Gustaf**, a series of luxury bungalows splashed across a nearby hillside, within easy walking distance of town.

But Saint Barth is more than just Gustavia – some of its best spots are found along the winding, undulating roads that radiate from the capital and across the island. In **Saint Jean**, a small cluster of businesses that serves as Saint Barth's second city, little shops just steps from the stunning beaches along **Baie de Saint Jean** sell high-end beachwear (think bikinis by Karl Lagerfeld) and in the centre of town, **La Rotisserie** is famous for its brioche, made fresh every day by hand, with artisanal flour shipped from France. To the east, the spa at **Le Sereno**, set on the lovely aquamarine waters of the **Grand Cul-de-Sac**, brings the beach inside, offering hot shell massages in an open-air treatment room, and a little further down the road you will find one of Saint Barth's most hallowed traditions: Sunday brunch at **Hôtel Le Toiny**, which gathers all the best of Saint Barth cuisine (including great seafood and fluffy French pastries, washed down with Champagne) onto two buffet tables. And when the sun sets, head to sexy **Le Ti**, where a mixed young-old crowd keeps the fire burning long into the night, drinking Flirtinis under the feathered chandeliers and watching the bar's cabaret dancers strut their stuff.