

A U S T R A L I A N

GOURMET

TRAVELLER

Summer treats

Laid-back entertaining: fruit-fresh desserts & cool snacks

Super-sexy sandwiches (fried chicken, porchetta & more)

Ripe peach recipes & glamorous Arabian feasting

Golden pavlova with
mango yoghurt and
tropical fruits



HOT DESTINATIONS

VIEWS WITH A ROOM: AUSTRALIA'S BEST BEACH HOUSES
BLING & BIKINIS IN ST-BARTHS THE MAGIC OF RÉUNION ISLAND

Carpe diem

Emma Sloley is seduced by St-Barths, the tiny island in the French West Indies that's every bit as gorgeous and hedonistic as the beautiful people who flock there.

Photography **Andrew Rowat**



Down by the water
St-Jean's yacht-
speckled bay.
Opposite: sun-
worshippers enjoy a
patch of exclusive real
estate on St-Jean Bay.



My island home
Even travelling to and from St-Barths is picturesque: Gustavia harbour (above) and St-Barths airport (opposite, bottom right). At Hotel Saint-Barth Isle de France, the view (opposite, top left), the suites (top right) and the staff (bottom left) are sure to encourage return visits.

something spirit-lifting about a destination that offers a complete respite from that particular reality, insisting that everything will be okay if only you accept that second glass of Champagne and hit the dance floor.

That carpe-diem attitude was in full swing during a recent visit to Hotel Carl Gustaf, a family-run boutique hotel located high above the comely capital, Gustavia. While I'd picked the property for its relative seclusion from the main party scene, concentrated around St-Jean Bay in the north, it wasn't long before I encountered two larger-than-life fellow guests – honeymooners who'd decided to hole up here with a posse of friends. She resembled Amy Winehouse crossed with Katy Perry, complete with gravity-defying coif, tiny hot-pants and enough expensive jewellery to pay off a portion of the Greek national debt, while he was a buttoned-up banker type in a pastel polo shirt, his face a mask of benign bewilderment (Edith Piaf's *Je ne Regrette Rien* playing in the bar was surely a coincidence, non?). The newlyweds and their hangers-on proceeded to work their way through the cocktail list at scandalous volume, creating their own little party in this otherwise tranquil eyrie. It was better than anything I could have found on the cable TV in my room.

About that room. It wasn't hard to feel like a master of the universe with the million-dollar view from the terrace. Each of the 14 cottage-style suites here is ingeniously designed as its own mini-universe, fringed by tropical landscaping that screens neighbours while revealing the sweeping vista of peaked red rooftops spilling down to a glistening harbour bristling with yachts. The terrace, with its plunge pool, was almost as large as the room itself. Swarms of white butterflies floated by on the balmy breeze. On the horizon I could just make out the blurry outline of St-Martin, an island divided into French and Dutch sides, the Gallic part of which desperately wants to be St-Barths when it grows up. (Do I sound smug? This preposterous paradise will do that to a person.)

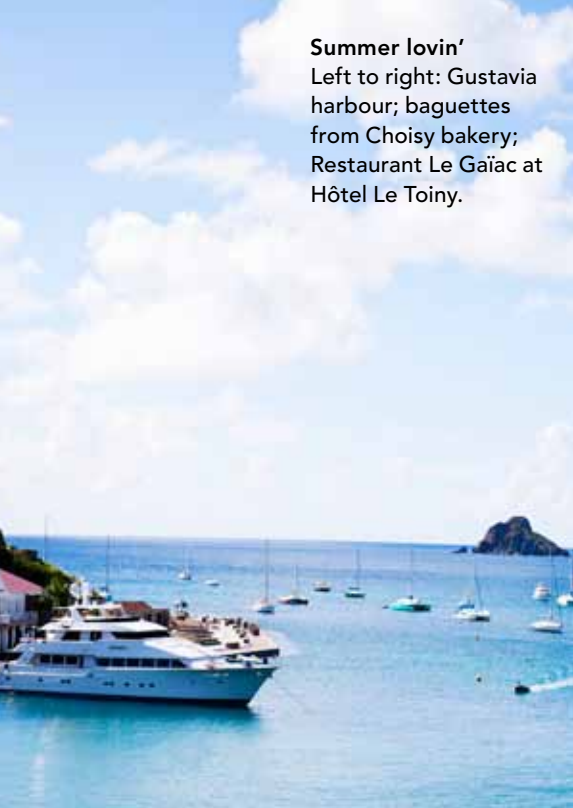
Apart from the rooms, everything else at Carl Gustaf is compact, from the sweetly petite spa, where I had a wonderful massage, to the elegant dishes served in the restaurant, to the ever-gracious staff, svelte in fitted pink shirts. I had two memorable meals at Victoria's by Akrame, the hotel's fine-diner, with its floor-to-ceiling windows framing a view that really, at this point, is just showing off. The mood on the plate here sums up a lot of what St-Barths is about: classic French technique with a soupçon of Caribbean-Creole flair. Not surprisingly, seafood is the star on this and many other menus across the island. Lobster in all its cholesterol-be-damned permutations – steamed, butter-poached, grilled – is particularly ubiquitous. Caviar is also a big player.

One standout dish was both rustic and au courant: grilled oeil de boeuf (a kind of red snapper) served with beetroot two ways – puréed and foamed – on a bed of summer vegetables, spinach sprouts and shallots. In a nod to tradition, the restaurant also serves sole meunière, a dish I wouldn't normally order but which feels utterly right in this setting.>



It's overflowing with **GENETICALLY BLESSED** people and has the region's most gorgeous beaches.





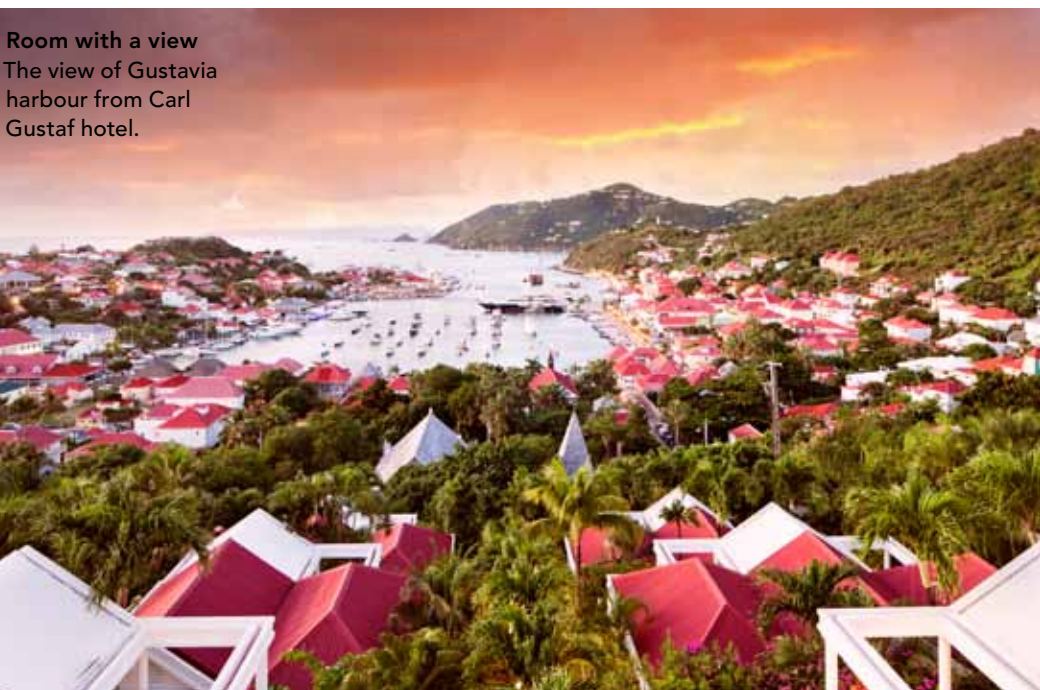
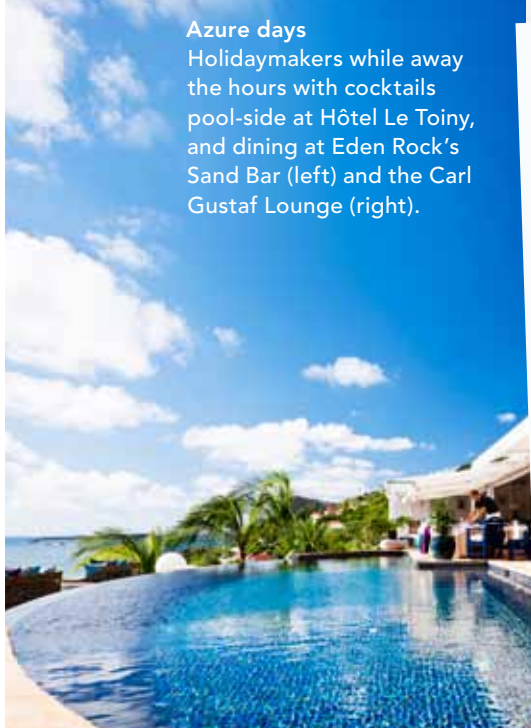
Summer lovin'
Left to right: Gustavia harbour; baguettes from Choisy bakery; Restaurant Le Gaïac at Hôtel Le Toiny.



Daydream believer
Guests at Hotel Saint-Barth Isle de France have a prime beachfront base.



Azure days
Holidaymakers while away the hours with cocktails pool-side at Hôtel Le Toiny, and dining at Eden Rock's Sand Bar (left) and the Carl Gustaf Lounge (right).



Room with a view
The view of Gustavia harbour from Carl Gustaf hotel.



There's **SOMETHING CHARMING** about the unhurried, tropical pace and the pastel-coloured colonial buildings with their iced-gingerbread trim.



The big blue
Visitors can enjoy the ocean's offerings at Gustavia's fish market (above) or take a dip themselves at St-Jean Bay (top left) or Flamands Beach (top right, with Hotel Saint-Barth Isle de France in the foreground).

One day I strolled down the steep road to Gustavia – a journey precipitous on the way there and heartbreaking on the way back. The town itself is little more than a cluster of narrow streets crowded around the waterfront, but there's something charming about the unhurried, tropical pace and the pastel-coloured colonial buildings with their iced-gingerbread trim.

The hub of Gustavia's main drag is Carré d'Or, a kind of open-air mall doing a brisk trade in five-figure jewels and status handbags, anchored on each corner by Hermès and Cartier, the patron saints of the island. (I kid, but only sort of.)

I foraged instead in the independent boutiques, the two standouts being Mademoiselle Hortense, a cosy space lined with racks selling sexy little dresses made on the island from Liberty prints, and Poupette, where the stock in trade is wisps of lingerie and floaty frocks. Being a sucker for cosmetics and products with cute foreign names, I also spent an inordinate amount of time in the pharmacy, whose French inventory was both fabulous and mystifying.

On the way back up the hill I flirted with the idea of getting a pastry from the heaven-scented Choisy, one of the island's oldest bakeries, which supplies many of the hotels and restaurants with pain quotidien. My better self prevailed when I considered the need to don a bikini for the afternoon's beach excursion. A good move, as it turned out, considering that by the time I made it to my favourite beach, Gouverneur, on the island's south-west shore, it had been invaded by a gaggle of topless young French beauties whose zero body-fat percentage was as good a gluttony deterrent as you're likely to find.



St-Barths is saturated with outstanding beaches, but there's something special about the wildness of Gouverneur with its crescent of fine white sand, insanely clear blue water and rocky headlands studded with cacti and grazing white goats. Russian oil billionaire and Chelsea Football Club owner Roman Abramovich, renowned for throwing wild parties here at his compound overlooking the beach, certainly seems to think so.

There are several other beaches where it's well worth staking out a towel-sized piece of real estate. Nearby Grande Saline, reached by scrambling over a series of sand dunes, has a similar feel to Gouverneur, but is the island's unofficial nude bathing spot (which mostly translates to going topless, something European women do everywhere anyway). Postcard-perfect Flamands beach, which ends at the lovely Hotel Saint-Barth Isle de France, is more cultivated, with raked sand, beach chairs and roving drinks waiters. It's also a popular spot for stand-up paddle boarding, that newfound marine cult.

I drop by Isle de France to see what's new since I last visited a few years back. A lot, as it turns out. In January 2011, the hotel debuted a pair of grandiose new digs, the Flamands Villas, each equipped with VIP-worthy extras such as a private fitness room, home cinema and state-of-the-art kitchen, along with direct access to Flamands Bay. The spa has a new relationship with esteemed Spanish beauty company Natura Bissé and is offering glamorous treatments such as the Diamond Experience facial. And the resort's beach suites have also undergone some serious "refreshment": the dazzling white décor and pristine French country-style furnishings are enough to make you want to book in for some nipping and tucking yourself.>



Some like it hot
Clockwise from left: Le Ti St-Barth; a villa at Hotel Saint-Barth Isle de France; cruising Gustavia; Choisy baked goods; a villa bathroom at Hotel Saint-Barth Isle de France; Saline beach.





The **HUB OF GUSTAVIA** is anchored by Hermès and Cartier, the patron saints of the island.

I'm partial to Flamands Bay, with its air of well-bred serenity, but at the height of the season, there's only one place to really be seen: St-Jean Beach. To set the scene: there's a bacchanalian Nikki Beach club at one end, the airport at the other (low-flying prop planes seemingly graze the heads of sun-worshippers) and in between, the legendary Eden Rock hotel.

If the island has a nucleus around which all the other fabulousness spins, it would have to be Eden Rock. This perennial hot spot is a celeb magnet, which may explain the Villa Rockstar, a sprawling compound set slightly apart from the rest of the hotel, with its own recording studio, butlers, private pool and art gallery. Art is an obsession of owner Jane Matthews, a glamorous Brit who has helped raise the profile of the island as a serious art destination, thanks to an on-site gallery that hosts

exhibitions of high-profile and emerging artists, as well as an artist-in-residence program.

I spent my final two St-Barths nights at the hotel. The rock itself holds the premium themed suites, the most desirable (and, fittingly, the most secluded) of which is the fabulously old-Hollywood Greta Garbo Suite. Then there are the New England-style cottages and sprawling beach-side bungalows. If you ignore the prices (the first and only rule of St-Barths), the hotel's signature restaurant – On the Rocks – is just about heaven on earth. The dining area curves around the rock and is illuminated by flickering candles and the floodlit ocean beyond. It feels not unlike being marooned at sea, in the nicest possible way. The kitchen collaborates with New York chef Jean-Georges

Vongerichten, who brings some of his Pan Asian-inspired chutzpah to the menu, most notably in dishes such as the Asian coleslaw and seared shrimp with egg noodles in spicy herbal soup. I tried a simple dish of mahi-mahi steamed with vegetables en papillote and served in a delicate bamboo basket. A glass of wine, a soundtrack of waves gently lapping the rock and it all felt pretty close to perfect.

Though it's isolated from most of the island's action on windswept Toiny Point, the restaurant at Hôtel Le Toiny – another swanky hotel, co-owned by cyclist Lance Armstrong – is also worth a visit. (Considering you'll need a car to get everywhere anyway, the remoteness isn't a deal-breaker.) Restaurant Le Gaïac, loftily positioned high above the ocean, is arresting in its untrammelled beauty. The menu tells a familiar story – classic French cuisine with a Caribbean spin – but is rendered special by a devotion to fresh produce, much of it from the hotel's greenhouse, and seafood. Tuesdays are given over to the Fish Market, where guests choose a catch of the day which is grilled a la plancha in front of them.

While in the area, pay a visit to Pointe Milou, windswept cliffs that afford a panoramic view across to some of the island's most exclusive villas. Down a rocky little side road you'll find Le Ti St-Barth, one of the island's most famed night spots, which is a peculiarly French-Caribbean mix of cabaret, Champagne bar and Creole food joint. When I passed by it hadn't opened for the season yet, but on returning to my room at Eden Rock, I found the neighbouring Nikki Beach club in full swing, so I got my not-entirely-voluntary fix of high-octane house music anyway, late into the night.

That's okay. St-Barths might seem like the quintessential enchanted isle of our collective dreams, but this isn't the place you come to get away from it all. Au contraire: St-Barths is where you come to be right at the heart of things.*

THE FINE PRINT

Getting there

Qantas flies daily from Melbourne, Brisbane and Sydney to New York via Los Angeles, with onward connections to St-Martin/ St-Maarten via codeshare partner American Airlines. From St-Martin, several shuttle airlines such as Winair make the 10-minute flight to St-Barths (about \$180 return). [qantas.com](#)

Stay

Carl Gustaf This 14-suite boutique hotel is the only high-end offering in the glitzy capital of Gustavia. Doubles from \$867. *BP700, Rue des Normands, Gustavia, +590 590 297 900, [hotelcarlgustaf.com](#)*
Eden Rock – St Barths Accommodation at this

star-studded property ranges from contemporary garden cottages (from \$662) to extravagant private compounds such as the Villa Rockstar (from \$19,708). *St-Jean Bay, +590 590 297 999, [edenrockhotel.com](#)*
Hotel Saint-Barth Isle de France Glamorous, French-country-inspired retreat set on an arc of stunning beachfront. The pool-side fashion show, held each Tuesday evening, sees models parading the boutique's upscale wares. Doubles from \$616. *BP612, Flamands Bay, +590 590 276 181, [isle-de-france.com](#)*

Eat

L'Isola A convivial, romantic Italian restaurant dishing up classics such as beef

carpaccio with baby artichokes and shaved parmesan, along with seafood salads dressed simply with lemon. *Rue du roi Oscar II, Gustavia, +590 590 510 005, [lisolastbarth.com](#)*

On the Rocks Freshly caught seafood, a fine wine list and very pretty people in a peerless setting. *Eden Rock – St Barths, St-Jean Bay, +590 590 297 999, [edenrockhotel.com](#)*

Restaurant Le Gaïac Rich French staples reinvented with a deft touch by renowned chef Stéphane Mazières. *Hôtel Le Toiny, Anse de Toiny, +590 590 278 888, [letoiny.com](#)*

Victoria's by Akrame Offers a mix of inventive nouveau dishes and

French classics, with gorgeous views of Gustavia's harbour. *Hotel Carl Gustaf, Rue des Normands, Gustavia, +590 590 297 900, [hotelcarlgustaf.com](#)*

Drink

Le Ti St-Barth

A decadent late-night cabaret-inspired club, featuring fashion shows, Caribbean barbecue, theme nights and free-flowing Champagne. *Pointe Milou, +590 590 279 771, [letistbarth.com](#)*

Nikki Beach St-Barths

The international jet-set beach club chain, with its revolving cast of DJs, is ground zero for the young party crowd. *St-Jean beach, +590 590 276 464, [nikkibeach.com](#)*

Shop

Calypso St Barths This high-end resort-wear label started on the island and has now spread around the world. Shop for sandals, colourful silk dresses and sexy beach cover-ups. *Route de Saline, St-Jean, +590 590 277 839, [calypsostbarth.com](#)*

Mademoiselle Hortense

Liberty-print dresses made on the island, along with elegant accessories and swimwear. *Rue de la République, Gustavia, +590 590 271 329*

Poupette

Divine, barely-there slip dresses and lingerie sold in two St-Barths boutiques. *Tamarin, +590 590 278 993; Gustavia, +590 590 279 449; [poupette-st-barth.com](#)*



La vue

A stunning St-Barths vista from the car window. Opposite, clockwise from top left: St-Jean; Gustavia harbour; On The Rocks restaurant at Eden Rock – St Barths.