



LEFT Freshly caught fare at Nikki Beach

BELOW LEFT Nikki's pizza sushi

BELOW RIGHT Relaxed déjeuner chez La Langouste

BELOW Langouste's grilled lobster

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best of st barths, part deux

IN OUR SECOND APPRAISAL OF FINE DINING ON ST BARTHS, MACO DISCOVERS THAT LAID-BACK CAROUSING ON ISLAND IS ALL ABOUT TIME AND PLACE

ST BARTHS HAS MYRIAD SANDY BEACHES, DESIGNER SHOPPING AND A FINE YACHTING HERITAGE, BUT IT'S SOME OF THE FINEST FOOD IN THE CARIBBEAN THAT VISITORS FIND PARTICULARLY ALLURING. When it comes to relaxed dining, certain restaurants excel at lunchtime, others in the evening, while a few, usually part of larger hotels, provide delicious service throughout the day.

The hippest lunchtime venue du jour is undoubtedly Nikki Beach, where small talk is conducted standing waist-deep in Saint-Jean Bay with a glass of Cristal in one hand and an iPhone in the other, while keeping half an eye on the yoga practitioners strutting their stuff on paddle boards offshore. On my visit, a Brazilian party crowd were enjoying life to the full, so the ambience was somewhere between sybaritic and downright louche.

This is a high-energy beach restaurant with enthusiastic young waiters, a vibrant rock 'n' roll mix, and an extensive French, Italian and Japanese menu. My Sexy Salad Wrap featured shrimp, crab and tobiko (flying fish) caviar, while the creamy homemade pasta with Perigord black truffle was absolutely à point. As is the way on St Barths, almost all ingredients are flown in regularly from France, so salads are up there with Ottolenghi's, and meats from the rotisserie positively ooze flavor.

For somewhere altogether quieter and more modestly priced, La Langouste on Flamands Bay is a quintessential French bistro that's more Brittany than the Côte d'Azur. Chef Michel le Fèvre executes simple fare such as soupe de poissons, sole meunière and grilled lobster with élan in a setting that is delightfully unpretentious. I have two particular memories of my lunch: one was the beautifully executed crêpes suzette, the other was the sight of Hollywood star Uma Thurman sitting at the next table, happy to have escaped the cameras.



RIGHT Bartolomeo's sole and asparagus

FAR RIGHT A trio of desserts at Guanahani

BELOW Yo Sushi Mania's tuna and foie gras speciality

BELOW RIGHT Yo's sushi and sashimi selection

BELOW FAR RIGHT A chilled affair at Indigo on the beach

BOTTOM Sushi with a view at Villa-Lodge



FEATURING A MENU DÉGUSTATION, DINNER AT THE CANDLE-LIT BARTOLOMEO IS A MORE POLISHED AFFAIR WITH FRESH FISH VERY MUCH TO THE FORE



Le Guanahani, a family-oriented 67-room full-service resort celebrating its 30th anniversary this year, also offers a secluded lunch, but works equally well all day. Its two palm-studded beaches, several tennis courts, water sports and well-organised wellness programme have always attracted a loyal international clientele.

Lunch is best taken at Indigo on the Beach, where a variety of Mediterranean classics such as gazpacho, tapas and ceviche are complemented by Caesar salad and even a French cheeseburger. Under the experienced eye of managing director Martien van Wagenberg, service is family-friendly and efficient. Featuring a menu dégustation, dinner at the candle-lit Bartolomeo is a more polished affair with fresh fish very much to the fore.

My final lunchtime recommendation would be Yo Sushi Mania, a small bar that's part of the four-suite Villa-Lodge guest house overlooking Grand Cul de Sac. There are far grander establishments on St Barths, but few can surpass the personal service of Amandine Guineau and her team. For a brief out-of-the-way stay, it's highly recommended.



And as for the poolside sushi—well, if you've never tried yellow tail topped with caviar, or Yo's tuna and foie gras sashimi, you haven't lived. Younger diners looking for a change from traditional European dishes are attracted by the presentation, freshness and exotic tastes accompanied by a reggae soundtrack from nearby Guadeloupe. If selections are pre-ordered, this absolute gem also makes home deliveries.





After lunch it's time for a swim, nap and a spot of power tanning. Later in the afternoon, when it comes to watching the sunset with an aperitif to hand, Hotel Christopher at Pointe Milou is hard to beat. Down a winding road, this is a quiet 42-key hotel with a lovely Sisley spa and sublime pool area that prides itself on value for money. Lounging on the deck as the waves caress the rocks below and the sun dips towards the horizon is an enchanting experience.

The menu at the hotel's Taïno restaurant may be a little overambitious, and the resort is probably due some refurbishment, but if you're looking for peace and quiet, the establishment's day pass is *une bonne idée*.

Should you decide to go into "town" after your sunset cocktail, there's a trio of grazing establishments on or around Rue Oscar II in Gustavia that is not to be missed. Begin at the achingly hip 25 Quarter bar with a Wasabi Martini—vodka, wasabi and lime—or maybe an Air Mule R-St Barth—white rum, ginger beer and vanilla-peppercorn syrup— while munching on chef Kristine Kelly's mahi mahi dumplings and mini quesadillas filled with beef short rib, cantal cheese and cilantro lime crema. The gang is young, music loud and sake menu extensive.

Next, move on to Isoletta, the little sister restaurant of the esteemed Isola. Isoletta is essentially a pizzeria that also serves focaccias and fresh pasta as well as traditional Italian comfort food like meatballs, porcini with melted mozzarella, and prosciutto with rucola. After you enjoy a day's sailing, before a night's clubbing, this is a pleasingly informal haunt, where everything is freshly made, piquant and presented with knowledgeable enthusiasm. It's also a popular spot with children at lunchtime.

For dessert, head to Natural Delights, an organic ice cream parlour and crêperie a few doors down from Isoletta. All the traditional flavours are available, with the emphasis on freshness and originality—brook no argument to the contrary; these are simply the best gelati, sorbets, crêpes and smoothies on St Barths, attracting devotees from every walk of island life. Most stand at the bar or wander the backstreets while happily slurping, but there's also a take-out service available, a boon for last-minute dinner party planning.

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LEFT ABOVE Hotel Christopher's Iberian grilled pig
 ABOVE Pizza selection at L'Isoletta
 FAR LEFT Hotel Christopher at sunset
 MIDDLE Fresh gelati at Natural Delights
 LEFT Street-side grazing



CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT
Baz Bar's sushi; harbourside feasting at Baz Bar; foie gras burger, truffle, honey and pear at Bagatelle; tuna tartare at Bagatelle; Tamarin's bucolic splendour; dining next to the water garden at Tamarin; party time at Bagatelle

After that, party central is Bagatelle, the Caribbean edition of the upmarket St Tropez to New York group of hipster hang-outs, ever popular with celebrities. If you hanker for a magnum of champagne delivered by Superman crowd-surfing over the assembled revellers, this is the place.

Chef Emmanuel Chavant presents contemporary French cuisine with a twist, so foie gras sliders are one late-night favourite, as are truffle pizzas. Thanks to varied wine and inventive cocktail lists, all is sophisticated calm earlier in the evening, but after

11p.m. most guests are attracted to Bagatelle by the happy vocal house music-fuelled party vibe. If you lunched at Nikki Beach, you'll recognise a few faces—or maybe not, depending on the mood lighting and general joie de vivre.

Alternatively, if quiet romance is on the agenda, the newly refurbished Le Tamarin on the way to Grand Saline has to be considered. Back in the day, this location had something of a celebrity rock 'n' roll reputation, but husband and wife Paco and Julie Granseau have transformed it into a bucolic sanctuary set in lushly designed gardens complete with water-lily pools and quiet little nooks ideal for that dreamy dinner à deux.

Open at midday, in the evening, and on Sundays for a sumptuous brunch, it serves mostly French or Italian, while American tastes are also catered for. There's a burger, club sandwich and even a lobster hotdog on the lunchtime menu, but in the evening it's strictly haute cuisine. The pan-seared foie gras served with a fresh banana mousse and a tangy mango coulis got my attention, as did the magret de canard with sugar-coated almonds. Le Tamarin is a fine new addition to the St Barths restaurant roster.

Lastly, my favourite night spot on the whole island. The harbour-side Baz Bar, presided over by Jean Marc Lefranc, is the Gustavia restaurant and intimate nightclub for live music. There's seating both inside and out on the marina boardwalk, with international acts which change every two weeks. When I dropped in, Carolina blues man Lipbone Redding was in residence, demonstrating the small stage to be ideal for jazz and cabaret performers.

As well as the blues, Lefranc has a passion for exotic sushi prepared by his two Japanese chefs. If soft shell crab, asparagus, avocado, scallion and roe maki, or tuna tataki with fresh wahoo and caviar float your yacht, then Monday through Saturday, 4 p.m. till late, Baz Bar will oblige.

Sublime food, chilled location and good live music—what more could any visitor to St Barths possibly want.M



THANKS TO VARIED WINE AND INVENTIVE COCKTAIL LISTS, ALL IS SOPHISTICATED CALM EARLIER IN THE EVENING, BUT AFTER 11P.M. MOST GUESTS ARE ATTRACTED TO BAGATELLE BY THE HAPPY VOCAL HOUSE MUSIC-FUELLED PARTY VIBE