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TOP
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Bonjour, ST. BARTHS

DISCOVER COUNTLESS REASONS TO VISIT THE FRENCH WEST INDIES.

BY STACIE STANDIFER

I still remember the first time I landed on the runway that welcomes visitors to St. Barths. It's a rush I've experienced every time since. If anything, my anticipation grows each time I'm welcomed to this magical place. At only eight square miles, it's not a big island. But it offers more than almost any other island in the Caribbean. I find that there's nothing like it aside from possibly points along the coast of France. But here, English is more widely spoken and the state of mind is much more relaxed. You will mingle with interesting people from all over the world, view the latest international fashions and culinary trends all while lounging on some of the most glorious beaches ever discovered. There's a reason that St. Barths is a draw for so many high-profile personalities seeking an ideal vacation. There are no high-rise developments (nothing taller than a big palm tree) or anything resembling a massive cruise ship port. It's a piece of paradise comprised of good taste and a surreal landscape—it's the ultimate island escape.

TIM NICHOLS





Typical decor in a villa at Le Toiny

Stay

My most recent trip was actually my fourth to St. Barths. For many reasons, it was the best yet. While I've previously enjoyed the chic hotels surrounded by nightlife and action in the heart of St. Jean or Flamands Beach or the tranquility of a private villa, this time I found the best of both worlds at Le Toiny (letoiny.com). This quaint, well-appointed property is set on one of the most beautiful hilltops on the island. The "rooms" are actually private bungalows available in various sizes, each with an expansive terrace and infinity pool. They are situated so that you have complete privacy and each is tastefully furnished, making it feel like a private home.

What's more, you have access to room service, a top-tier restaurant and bar, and a luxe spa and fitness center. There is also a charming library filled with books to borrow. The atmosphere is completely laid back, with an emphasis on taking special care of each guest. And, if you want complete isolation, you can find it here: You can dine, sun, and swim on your own terrace with total privacy. But, personally, I enjoyed conversing with the staff as well as the fascinating guests I met in the common areas. Le Toiny is one of those places you have to experience to understand just how truly special it is.



View from private pool at Le Toiny



Explore

You can't think about St. Barth's without considering the shopping. European designers not readily available in the U.S. are showcased throughout the intimate boutiques. Before or after lunch (businesses here traditionally close for a couple of hours in the middle of the day), take time to scout the selection, which ranges from high-end clothing and accessory haunts to specialty stores selling everything from sporting goods to fine rums and Cuban cigars. Even house wares are in great supply. There are many linens, tableware items, and pieces of art beckoning through creative window displays. And, as a bonus, there are gourmet pastry and coffee shops and wine bars along the way, meaning there is plenty of time to consider each purchase.

Beyond shopping, there is plenty to keep you busy. Boating enthusiasts flock here for the fishing and sailing opportunities, as well as to see some of the world's best mega yachts docked in the harbors. Others might enjoy a day on the water for scuba diving, fishing or even just sightseeing.

One activity to put into your schedule is a day at one of the many private beaches. Some are easily accessible while others require a hike. On our trip, we were lucky to go to several, with my top pick being Saline. With a gourmet packed lunch and a blanket provided by Le Toiny (one of their many perks) we set off to spend an afternoon soaking up the sun, waves, and extraordinary people watching (yes, swimsuits are optional).

I also recommend renting a car or jeep, as it is the best way to become familiar with all of St. Barth's. Since the island is so small, there's no fear of getting lost. You can take winding roads to the highest points for photo opportunities, visit roadside shops and cafes, or simply enjoy the open air. Scooter and cycle rentals are also available for those who want a bit more adventure and sport. >>>

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The open dining room at Le Gaiac



Dine

The island may be small, but it is big on flavor and home to more than 70 unique bistros and fine dining options. From casually elegant beachside tables to romantic spots nestled in the hills, there is something for every mood and palate.

Bonito

Tough to find, this gem is tucked high on a hill in Gustavia, and truly one of St. Barth's hidden treasures. The sophisticated beach décor sets the scene while a light but uplifting electronic soundtrack completes the vibe—and there are breathtaking views of the harbor. Locals describe it as “Cape Cod meets St. Tropez.” Locally caught fish and shellfish are menu highlights and there's a lively ceviche bar, which prompts plenty of “oohs” and “ahhs.” (*ILoveBonito.com*)

Wall House Restaurant

This quaint spot sits practically on the water on Gustavia Harbour, offering a glorious view of the boats. I highly suggest it for a late,

lengthy lunch. The fresh salads and seafood dishes were my choices, but this place is also known for being one of the island's top steakhouses. There's an impressive wine list, too. Don't miss out on their popular dessert cart. It's on display at the entry as a reminder to save room for one of their pastry chef's daily creations. (*wallhouserestaurant.com*)

Restaurant Le Gaiac

Set inside Le Toiny, this restaurant offers fun events like Fish Market dinners on Tuesdays where the day's fresh catch is inventively prepared. There are nightly tableside pasta creations served in oversized Parmesan wheels and an unforgettable Sunday brunch. This weekly treat is actually quite famous with the locals and returning visitors as live music and a view of the sea are accompanied by an elegant buffet. After many meals here, I think that the constantly changing selection of desserts were a close second to the amazing seafood entrees combined with produce and herbs from the onsite garden. These were likely the best meals I've had this year. (*letoiny.com*)



Hibiscus cocktail on the rocks

Nightlife

St. Barths can be a bit of a scene during the high season, which usually falls during the winter holidays. But, there is always live music and a shimmering evening atmosphere. Glamorous people, superior mixologists, and a European elegance all mix well together for unforgettable evenings. I suggest starting with one of the concoctions from Eduard Godard at On the Rocks bar and restaurant at Eden Rock Hotel. Tasting his dedication to perfectly crafted cocktails while sitting atop the bluff overlooking the ocean is pure magic (and, by the way, the bar and dinner menu from chef Jean-Georges Vongerichten is equally enticing). From there, hit any of the hotspots in St. Jean and Gustavia. No matter where you end up, you are sure to be entertained. (edenrockhotel.com)

Getting There

Southwest Airlines has added a direct flight from Nashville to San Juan, Puerto Rico and from there, you can catch a direct flight to St. Barths on Tradewind Aviation. (I found this out the hard way when my previous travel plans were disrupted.) Their planes are ultra plush and comparable to flying private, but with fair pricing and a superior service record. (tradewindaviation.com)

Many hotels close during the month of October and reopen in November before the busy holiday season. In November, you can get value season pricing, so this is a great option for those seeking the best of the island at a better value. November is also when the wildly popular Cata Cup Regatta and Beachside Bash events are held. But, no matter when you decide to visit, there is always plenty to do. (stbarths.com)

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