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Claire WRATHALL

The island that is 'pretty close to heaven'

ESSENTIALS

Claire Wrathall was a guest of Villa Marie (0033 4 57 74 74 74; saint-barth.villamarie.fr), which offers rooms from €400 (£354) for a plantation bungalow this summer to €4,500 (£3,990) for a two-bedroom villa with pool at New Year, and Tradewind Aviation (flytradewind.com). Eden

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Among the first to reopen was the François Plantation, despite it having collapsed in the storm. High above Anse de Flamands on the north coast, the largest and perhaps loveliest of the island's beaches, it is accessible on foot from Colombier, a 25-minute walk up a steep rocky path and certainly sufficient exertion to justify its excellent pissaladière (think onion tart with olives and anchovies) and Provençal bouillabaisse, two of the highlights on a succinct menu that revels in luxurious ingredients. Even a simple green salad (€39/£34.50) comes garnished with shaved truffles.

Once an institution on the island, the restaurant had lost its lustre by the time Jocelyne Sibuet, whom Forbes has dubbed the Gallic Martha Stewart and who first came to St Barts in the late Nineties, heard it was for sale. "I loved its timeless colonial style and the individual bungalows," she told me. "It was the very opposite of the resort hotel. A place away from the noise and

buzz, a place we could transform both for the celebrities who craved privacy, and for guests who were looking for a home-from-home atmosphere. So it was love at first sight. *Un gros coup de coeur total!*"

She and her family own 10 hotels and villas in France, most famously Les Fermes de Marie in Megève, La Bastide de Marie in Ménerbes and Villa Marie in St Tropez. St Barts was where her core clientele spent their winters. So she bought the François Plantation and set about both reviving the restaurant and reinventing its rooms. In keeping with the names of the rest of the properties in her portfolio she has renamed it Villa Marie (she also has a daughter called Marie), a place practically without precedent on the island not least because its rates start at €350, which by standards is a steal.

It doesn't have a beach (just a small, pretty pool) and was therefore spared the storm surge and flooding that wrecked so many of the island's hotels,

It too reopened in early March, the first five-star on the island to do so. "We were less affected than other hotels because we are located higher up on a hill," says Sibuet, "so we only had to deal with the damage from the wind, not the sea. And the lush vegetation has regrown very fast."

Each of its 18 rooms and suites is its own secluded, solidly built bungalow, most with sea views, tricked out with a riot of exuberant prints (by Diane von Furstenberg and Pierre Frey) and furnished with objects that Sibuet both acquired with the original property (the leather and wood armchairs in the library) and encountered on her travels: brightly coloured furniture inlaid with mother-of-pearl chests from Jaipur; grass and porcelain lamps from Tunisia; Peruvian rugs; Rwandan baskets; Javanese

sofas; elaborate macramé chandeliers, also from Indonesia, threaded with shells and collars of cowries transformed into conversation pieces. And everywhere you look, carvings of birds and pineapples. The spiky golden fruit is something of a theme.

There's a small spa that uses products by Pure Altitude, another Sibuet-developed venture (in lieu of a chocolate on your pillow at bedtime, you'll find sampler sachets of creams to beautify you as you sleep), with two treatment rooms and a compact gym. But otherwise it's