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ST. BARTS

# Falling in Love With St. Barts All Over Again

by VASSI CHAMBERLAIN • Photography by KATE HOLSTEIN

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*A bit wild, a bit wonderful, St. Barts is back in business*

*with the revamped Eden Rock and Cheval Blanc's Isle de France hotels.*



Whenever I think of the best and most exhilarating moments of my life, I immediately think of **St. Barts**: driving through the rain in an open-top four-wheel drive at 3 a.m., with friends singing along to Parisian pop on Radio St Barth; dancing till dawn with people I'd just met; swimming in the warm, deep-blue sea. And I think about the glorious, unpretentious French food: heavenly moules marinière, a simple poisson grillé, the perfect tarte aux pommes. This voluptuous **Caribbean island** has none of Barbados's Versailles-like follies or Mustique's Taj Mahals. Gendarmes walk the streets wearing kepi hats; the supermarkets sell vacherin and fond de veau.

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This is how you know you're in St. Barts: a couple strolling hand in hand down Gouverneur Beach, a coalescence of pink-white sand, brilliant green leaves, and frothy cerulean sea. The woman is wearing a chic Eres bikini; the man's suntan is nut brown, like a '70s gigolo. He is also very naked. (So very French!) Sunbathers lying on hammam towels observe him for a second, then close their eyes again. The occasional nudist is part of the scene here, and the locals always look so mischievously and deliriously happy, you imagine they've just had the best sex ever.

Anse du Gouverneur Beach on the south side of St.  
Barts

It has been three years since the volcanic island—named in 1493 by Christopher Columbus after his brother Bartoloméo—was hit by Hurricane Irma, the first Category 5 storm on record in the area. The destruction was widespread: vegetation flattened, buildings decapitated, utilities destroyed. But following a massive undertaking on the part of the territorial French governing body, landowners, and hoteliers, who immediately began a \$1.4 billion rebuilding effort, everything is now pretty much back exactly as it had been.

WATCH THIS

## **Sunset at Place de La Republique, Paris**

Those who have never been to St. Barts have distinct views on its ethos. “It's all about money,” some say. “It's way too social.” Regulars don't try to contradict these assumptions. This is our secret place, and we want to keep it that way. It helps that getting here can feel Sisyphean. The airport shuts at sundown, so if you miss your connection you have to spend a night in Antigua or St. Maarten. It is true that St. Barts is a magnet for the rich, particularly between Christmas and New

Year's, when billionaires parade their **superyachts** in the port of the capital, Gustavia. Passersby, like ornithologists spotting a rare bird, identify which boat belongs to whom. *Symphony* is Bernard Arnault's, *Rising Sun* is David Geffen's. But this only adds to the allure of this citronella-scented adventure playground, which, despite the glitz, manages not to feel vulgar or ostentatious.

Your heart beats a little faster from the moment you arrive, and not just because of the terrifyingly short runway at Gustav III Airport; St. Barts just has that indefinable *it*. There's its beauty—craggy peaks dotted with swaying palms, wild succulents, and scented frangipani— but also its size. St. Barts is neither too big nor too small. It comes neatly dressed, its red roofs complementing the houses and shops. There are two sides: the north, home to the beaches of Flamands, St. Jean, and the slightly out-of-the-way Grand Cul-de-Sac; and the south, with Gouverneur and Anse de Grande Saline. I have stayed on both and can tell you that it doesn't really matter where you are—because half the fun is skipping around and trying everything out.

A sea-facing pool suite at Isle de France

There are many excellent hotels, all boutique in feel and built low on different stretches of beach. Two have always been central to social life here: Eden Rock and Cheval Blanc St-Barth Isle de France. (Although it has been a Cheval Blanc since 2014, everyone on the island still calls it Isle de France.) Both sustained significant damage in 2017 but are fully open for business again, having been upgraded but not changed in essence. They are equally alluring, yet each possesses its own vibe: Eden Rock is sexy, fashionable, and ready to party. Its

exclusively French staff sport man buns, tattoos, and nose rings, and come with a chatty, can-do attitude. Isle de France, part of the behemoth LVMH group, is immaculate and movie-star elegant. The feeling is more reverent, like a grand palace hotel.

**Eden Rock** sits on the calm northern half-moon beach of St. Jean, protected by a reef so the sea is nearly always flat. St. Jean has its own little hub of boutiques, restaurants, and bars that you can walk to from the hotel. French rock legend Johnny Hallyday lies buried in a tiny flower-covered cemetery there. The rooms have been redone by Jane Matthews, who with her husband, David, has owned the hotel since 1995 but handed over management to the Oetker Collection, of Hotel du Cap-Eden-Roc fame, a few years ago. The fresh interiors are quirky and modern, with natural textures and pops of color. No two rooms look the same. Both Leonardo DiCaprio and **Rihanna** have already stayed in the villas. Mine was the Villa James (named after the Matthews' eldest son, who is married to Pippa Middleton), which has its own beach access. I lay in bed looking out at a vista of tiny boats and fishermen emptying lobster pots that resembled neo-Impressionist Paul Signac's paintings of the South of France.

One of the smart but breezy interiors at the freshly renovated Eden Rock

One of the main changes at Eden Rock has been the doubling in size of the open-air common areas by Martin Brudnizki. St. Barts's most famous landmark, the tree-house-like restaurant and bar on the rocky promontory that juts out over the ocean, has been recast as a collection of private suites. At first I wasn't sure about this. It had been an integral part of the island, with a magical quality at night with the sea lit up from underneath. But after a while I realized the cleverness of this

underneath. But after a while I realized the cleverness of this re-juggling of spaces. The hotel had lacked a place to hang out away from the restaurant and the beach, a need the stylish new bar Rémy fills perfectly. Named after the late Rémy de Haenen, the former mayor of St. Barts and the first person to land a plane on the island, in 1946, it leads into Sand Bar restaurant, which overlooks the beach. I went nightly for a sundowner. One evening, Bella Hadid, the male model Jordan Barrett, and a gang of New York friends sat looking at pictures the paparazzi had taken of them on the beach earlier in the day. This is how you know you're in St. Barts.

By contrast, Isle de France is reached by steep zigzagging roads that let out into a green beachside oasis. As at Eden Rock, my three-bedroom beach suite had its own pool and faced the sea, but the vibe was chic 1st arrondissement apartment, as imagined by the great Jacques Grange, who has done all the rooms. Flamands Beach is lined with private houses belonging to the likes of art dealer Larry Gagosian, fashion entrepreneur Stephen Marks, and the New York power couple psychiatrist Samantha Boardman and real estate tycoon Aby Rosen. It feels less tamed, more removed from the hustle and bustle of St. Jean. The swell can get big, but rarely so much that you can't swim. At Christmas the hotel explodes with life and the people-watching along the white sand is endlessly fascinating, from Birkin-bag-carrying Americans in thong bikinis and strutting moguls on their phones to boho girls with simple straw market bags and salty hair.

The island's crystalline waters has long drawn fashionable crowds.

The white buildings' traditional plantation structure, enveloped in lush greenery, remains, but the old beach

restaurant is no more. Again, the loss comes with a gain. Following Irma, LVMH acquired the Taiwana Hotel next door, converting it into the feet-in-the-sand restaurant La Cabane de L'Isle, as well as additional rooms and a shop that sells Pucci and Fendi. The new space, with its simple menu and raffia lamps swinging in the breeze, is a clever counterpoint to the formality of the main restaurant, which serves Creole-inspired dishes by top chef Jean Imbert, like whole mahi-mahi baked in salt.

On the beach at Eden Rock

This essentially wild place is dotted with funny social hubs. One of my favorites is Le Sereno, designed by Christian Liaigre, a temple to the spare modernist aesthetic at Grand Cul-de-Sac. At its Italian restaurant, Al Mare, the food is astoundingly good, in a way you rarely find outside Italy. Another must is the St. Tropez outpost Shellona at Shell Beach. Wherever you eat, you are likely to spot famous faces: Jay-Z and Beyoncé having a romantic lunch à deux; Marc Jacobs, Pat McGrath, and their **New York** fashion crew cackling away; Roman Abramovich and his terribly serious Russian security detail.

The sleek pool scene at Le Sereno hotel

It's a joy to get around the island because nowhere is more than 20 minutes away, and with the roof down and the wind whipping your hair, driving feels intoxicatingly adventurous. One of the best routes is to the largely uninhabited eastern side, with its rugged, almost Scottish coastline, for lunch at Hotel Le Toiny's buzzy beach club, now owned by the Vere

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INCOIS (former proprietors of ISIE DE FRANCE). I ALSO LOVE Colombier, a lookout point with a hiking trail beloved by locals leading down to an isolated beach that can only be reached by foot or boat.

One day I headed to Maya's To Go food store near the airport to pick up a picnic, then moved on to Saline, St. Barts's wildest beach, just beyond a salt marsh. Everyone carts their own parasols, chairs, and towels up the path. It's worth the effort because when you reach the top, a little out of breath, an almost indecently gorgeous view appears. Both Saline and Gouverneur are utterly unspoiled, free of bars, restaurants, and sun beds. On past visits I've seen supermodel Stephanie Seymour playing in the sand here with her daughter, and Anthony Kiedis of the Red Hot Chili Peppers snorkeling offshore.

The entrance to Mapanany hotel in Anse des Cayes

The point of St. Barts is to eat out and putter around, observing the sybaritism while also sucking up the nature. Maya's Restaurant, which opened 35 years ago in an unassuming spot overlooking the industrial side of Gustavia Harbor, is the social weather vane. The food, owing to chef Maya Henry's upbringing in **Martinique**, has an authentic home-cooked Caribbean flavor. She's usually busy in the kitchen, but makes the rounds to say hello. Diners hug her with genuine affection.

Tamarin restaurant, near Saline Beach, is set in a romantic **Balinese**-style tropical garden. Candle-lit L'Esprit is a culinary revelation. Another longtime hot spot is Le Ti St Barth, where evenings end late with dancing on tables. Bonito, high above the port in Gustavia, is known for its devotion to a

well-made cocktail. I saw a couple there start arguing and light cigarettes. The waiter politely asked them to move to the bar, offering them the customary free post-dinner shot of locally made vanilla rum along with a little marital advice. Calm was soon restored.

Le Select restaurant in Gustavia

I would be remiss not to mention how important fashion is on the island. The clothes are subtler perhaps than the brash sort of extravagance found in Mykonos, St. Tropez, or Sardinia. The traditional 6 p.m. walkabout in Gustavia—cocktails at Le Carré, between Hermès and Cartier, or farther down the road at the more rustic Le Select—is obligatory. I love getting lost in the cobblestone streets garlanded with fairy lights, where music pours out of every doorway. I always visit Poupette St Barth to pick up patterned silk pareos and beach dresses, as well as Clic, to browse photography books and resortwear from little-known designers. There's an outpost of **Paris's** stylish Montaigne Market and endless shops waiting to be discovered down alleyways. The island has its own excellent beauty brand, Ligne St Barth, all products locally made, and specialist purveyors of everything from wine to housewares.

This place thrums with character from a bygone era. In a way it reminds me of the tiny Italian islands of Panarea and Pantelleria. Both are fiendishly difficult to get to, but, as with St. Barts, once you arrive you forget you are in the 21st century. Your shoulders drop, you breathe in deeply, you see and feel everything more viscerally. There's a lightness of touch you so rarely find elsewhere today. Other Caribbean islands can seem like they are sacrificing themselves to the gods of tourism, whereas St. Barts has always been, and still is, effortlessly cool, like the Parisian girl who doesn't give a fig

about impressing the boys because she knows they're already in her pocket. For that reason I shall continue returning until the day I die. I wouldn't mind a spot right next to Johnny Hallyday.

## Visiting St. Barts

### Getting Here

The island's relative inaccessibility—thanks to a tiny airstrip that can't accommodate commercial jets—is part of its mystique. The easiest way to reach it is via a 10-minute shuttle from nearby St. Maarten. Several U.S. carriers offer daily flights there from New York, Chicago, and other cities; San Juan, Puerto Rico, is another gateway.

### Where to Stay

At the storied **Eden Rock** (doubles from about \$975), the new bar, Rémy, gives the jetset somewhere to gather, while the revamped **Cheval Blanc St.-Barths Isle de France** (doubles from about \$800) has one of the island's choicest beachfronts. **Chic Manapany** (doubles from about \$597) reopened in 2018 with a focus on eco luxury, and family-owned **Le Sereno** (doubles from about \$847) has a knockout pool.

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