

CHRISTOPHER MUTHER

St. Bart's is back, and better than ever

After Hurricane Irma leveled it, the island has made a grand return

By **Christopher Muther** Globe Staff, Updated January 9, 2020, 12:00 p.m.



The outdoor dining area at Ristorante Al Mare at Le Sereno hotel in St. Bart's LE SERENO

GRAND CUL-DE-SAC, Saint Barthélemy — The only way to describe it was pure relief.

Two years ago I scrolled through photos of St. Bart's after the Caribbean island was leveled by Hurricane Irma and felt my heart sink to my stomach. Much the way that everyone has a favorite flavor of jelly bean or a favorite Spice Girl, those who spend time in the Caribbean come away with a favorite island. Mine is St. Bart's. Also, in case you're wondering, my favorite Spice Girl is Posh Spice.

A year after Irma roared through I started hearing that St. Bart's had already pulled off an incredible recovery, but I needed to see it myself. Honestly, what were the chances that it would take only a year or so to fully come back from the first category 5 hurricane to ever hit the Leeward Islands? Also, it offered a very convenient excuse to go back to my favorite Caribbean destination.

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So last month, just before the celebrities and the island's jeunesse dorée returned for the sun-soaked high season, I flew down to see if what I was reading was accurate. Not only was I relieved that the island had come back, I was astounded that it looked even better than the last time I was there. Unsightly power lines were buried, narrow winding roads were widened, and hotels and restaurants had taken the opportunity to rebuild better than before.

As my ferry lurched into the capital city of Gustavia, I could see that all the high-end boutiques were back and the restaurants were crowded with locals and the first throngs of holiday season tourists. The Christmas lights hanging throughout the town made it all the more festive.



A look down at the town of Gustavia in St. Bart's HANDOUT

“It’s incredible how quickly we’ve come back, and it’s shocking because the hurricane we had in 2017 was the strongest hurricane ever to hit us,” said Nils Dufau, president of the St. Barthélemy Tourism Committee. “We have about 30 hotels, 10 of them are five-star, we have about 800 villas. Everything is like new. Everything is completely reconstructed.”

The island, an overseas collectivity of France with a year-round population of 10,000, is best known as an escape for bold names such as Leonardo DiCaprio, Gwen Stefani, and Beyoncé. Dufau said the island’s focus on high-end tourism is partially what allowed it to come back more quickly.

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Many other Caribbean islands depend on mass tourism from cruise ships, and when the masses are gone, so is the economy. St. Bart's limits cruise ships to those with no more than 300 passengers. During peak season the population of the island doubles to 20,000. Other Caribbean islands see hundreds of thousands of cruise passengers in their ports every year. After Maria and Irma struck in 2017, those ships were slow to return, leaving local economies in shambles.

St. Bart's devotees were back in 2018 as the hotels and villas began to reopen. Its airport, a tiny strip that hugs the sea, was mostly unaffected by Irma.



An aerial view of St. Bart's. HANDOUT

St. Bart's holds a special place in my heart not only because of its beautiful beaches and French cuisine, but because it's the first place I ever traveled on a solo vacation. Solo travel was a daunting proposition for me in 2011, and I had no idea what to expect. I was on the verge of night sweats as the trip approached, worried about dining by myself or sitting in bars alone.

My fears were pure twaddle. I ended up meeting fantastic people and the only time I dined alone was when I chose to. I have fond memories of sitting at the bar at [Le Sereno](#) hotel and meeting people who then invited me to spend time on their boats or explore the town. Against my mother's advice, I talked to strangers, and I went on their boats.

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Windsurfing off St. Bart's HANDOUT

I stayed at Le Sereno on this trip as well so I could walk out into the clear blue lagoon at the hotel's beach and watch the sea turtles bob up and down. After Irma the property was completely rebuilt and now, like all of the island's five-star hotels, the experience is like staying in a brand new hotel.

As you may have gathered, St. Bart's is not where to go when you're looking to do the Caribbean on the cheap, but you can rent an entire house on Airbnb for less than \$150 a night, and you can eat at more casual restaurants such as the lively burger dive [Le Select](#), or grab a gourmet pizza and a glass of wine at [L'isoletta](#). On those nights when you want to splurge, try [Orega](#). I don't know if I'm just lucky, but to date I've never had a bad meal in St. Bart's.

But this particular trip wasn't about getting out to the restaurants (although I did) or spending time at the beaches (I did that, too). Instead, it was about reconnecting with a place that dazzled me and made me feel entirely welcome during my first ever solo vacation. The very least I could do in return was check in and see how my old friend had weathered the storm.