

Go ahead, indulge – St. Barts beckons with luxe island leisure



There are beautiful views from every corner of St. Barts (photo by Moira McCarthy)

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December 12, 2021 at 12:23 a.m.

Getting away to a Caribbean island is a commonplace vacation these days. Why not make a jaunt to balmy climes worth the plane ride by choosing a splurge-worthy destination?

I speak of St. Barts. St. Barthelemy if we're being formal.

It's rugged yet posh, with rocky coastlines tucked up against sandy beaches. The scene can get a little wild — visit St. Jean's Beach every Sunday afternoon for proof — yet there's a quieter side too: take in a seaside breakfast at a resort for the perfect peaceful way to start your day.

Its no wonder famed banker David Rockefeller built a masterpiece home there after spotting it from a sailboat way back in 1957.

Today, while St. Bart's is still one of the more expensive islands, it's also one of the most worthwhile.

Just eight square miles, (it's about a 15-minute car ride from one end of the island to the other), but in those miles you'll find breathtaking views, unique and well-appointed resorts, countless rentable villas, a vibrant foodie culture, cool shopping and 22 beaches, all open to the public.

The moment you land at St. Barts' single strip airport — said to be one of the most beautiful and dramatic plane landings out there — you know you're onto something.

Getting there: There are no direct flights to St. Bart's from any American airport. Best bet? Get to St. Martin and then, from there, splurge and — rather than take the 45 minute ferry ride to St. Bart's — hop aboard a private flight with St. Barth Executive (www.stbarthexecutive.com).

It might feel extra, but with the short cuts through customs (particularly with COVID rules; this airline makes it easier), and saving as much as a half a day's precious vacation time, it's a smart add.

You'll want to rent a car. St. Bart driving is the same side as American, and while the roads are steep, windy and sometimes a bit challenging, going slow works, and no one minds.

Choosing your base camp: I opted for two spots over my stay. First, I settled into Le Sereno (www.serenohotels.com), an all-waterfront-suite property tucked into the shore of the Grand Cul de Sac.



Breakfast by the sea at Le Sereno, looking out on the Grand Cul de Sac in St. Barts (Photo by Moira McCarthy)

I found it peaceful, beautiful and friendly; I knew more than a few guests by name before departing.

The second half, I chose the newly renovated Carl Gustaf (www.hotelsbarriere.com/en/saint-barth/le-carl-gustaf.html), built out of the side of a high hill looking over the harbor of Gustavia, St. Barth's biggest town.

While there's no beach at my feet, my suite has a small pool (with the option of a water spin bike), and a view that I simply cannot stop admiring.



Looking out over Gustavia from the Carl Gustaf Hotel in St. Barts. (Photo by Moira McCarthy)

I can drive — easily — to many beaches from there, and the shopping and dining of Gustavia is a short walk down the hill. It's a perfect bookend with Le Sereno; two distinctly unique and lovely ways to experience the island.

There are many other great choices too. Villas, small and large, nary one without a sweeping view, can be booked via WIMCO (www.wimco.com). Eden Rock offers luxury accommodations right next to the fun of St. Jean's beach and Nikki Beach. Hotel Manapany (hotelmanapany-stbarth.com) brings you in touch with nature and offers surfing lessons right at their private shore.

Each beach has its own sense of arrival; some via thickly vegetated paths that open to that amazing sea view; others that pop out to you from behind a building.

Gustavia has great high-end shopping, and since cruise ships cannot come into port, you'll find space. I tend more toward the little local shops, with handmade scarfs, bags and locally inspired fashion. It's fun to explore.

Dining is a big thing here. You can opt for simple perfection with seafood at Fish Corner (Ludacris was spotted there during my visit), and there are incredible dining spots all across the island. Based in French most often, the food also brings on tastes from all over the world.



The Beach at Manapany Hotel, where you can learn to surf from a pro. (Photo by Moira McCarthy)

I leave wanting to come back — to actually spend a wild Sunday at legendary Nikki Beach and spray champagne with abandon; to get out on that water again and just soak in the craggy shore and sea; to nosh on more insanely delicious meals.

St. Bart's is small in size but boundless in experience. You can learn more at www.saintbarth-tourisme.com/en.