



Travel

How to Do St. Bart's Like a Regular



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For some savvy travelers, the haut Caribbean island is best experienced beyond the confines of a resort.

By Lindsay Silberman on January 06, 2017

On the eight-square-mile paradise known as St. Bart's, vacationers can be divided into two groups: those who stay at resorts and those who book villas. Though you really can't go wrong with either decision (it's St. Bart's, after all) there is something to be said for temporarily moving in.

The eight-square-mile island is home to six five-star hotels, and, according to the island's tourism bureau, the number will likely reach nine in 2017. Of course, the offerings at these posh properties—elaborate breakfast spreads, handsome pool boys—are certainly tempting. But those who eschew the traditional resort experience in favor of a rental are treated to a different kind of luxury: seeing the island as the locals do.

“The real St. Bart's experience is about waking up, taking a coffee at one of the little boulangeries and having a picnic lunch on the beach,” says Jonas Millan, the owner of [Bonito](#), a popular restaurant on the island. Millan, who splits his time between Miami and St. Bart's, sold his home on the island in April and now prefers to rent a villa whenever he's in town. “It's like the French Riviera... without the French attitude,” says Millan. He has a point. With the conveniences of a sophisticated European resort town and the laid-back vibe of the Caribbean, St. Bart's is the kind of place where just about anyone—even first-timers—are made to feel instantly at home.



Breakfast from Maya's To-Go. Photo: Emily Labouerie

Eating Like a Local

Given its dry climate and volcanic rock terrain, growing produce here is nearly impossible. That means everything must be imported, driving restaurant prices up substantially. But those in-the-know will tell you that on St. Bart's, "eating in" can be even more enjoyable than dining out. "A lot of our clients find it fun to drive around town and visit the markets or stop by the great local butcher," says Peg Walsh, the founder and president of St. Barth Properties, a villa rental company. "Many of them consider cooking a hobby, but they don't always have the time for it at home." The island has a number of well-stocked *marchés*, but **Marche U** in St. Jean (just across from the airport) is best for staples like eggs, cheese, produce, spices, and herbs. Stop at **Boulangerie Choisy** for breakfast items like baguettes, croissants, and pastries, and **Le Cellier du Gouverneur** for a jaw-dropping selection of French wine. The shop owner has relationships with some of France's most renowned *Domaines*, so there are rare vintages aplenty—and Le Cellier's in-house experts, Frederick and Thierry, are always keen to offer

recommendations. Across from the Lorient post office, **Le Ti-Marche** (open Thursday and Friday) stocks the area's freshest produce, in addition to fresh-made coconut water, cane sugar, local honey, and fruit juices. Its owners haul fruits and vegetables from the neighboring island of Guadeloupe every Thursday morning. Get there shortly after the delivery arrives for first dibs on the melons, lychees, sugar apples, okra and eggplant. The island's beloved Boucherie St. Jean closed unexpectedly in October, but a newcomer, **Boucherie Ché Yo'** at Les Mangliers (located just behind the gas station) has quickly taken the top spot. On offer are premium quality meats imported from the U.S., Spain, France, and local islands, in addition to pâtés, terrines, and sausages. The butcher is also known for his juicy rotisserie chicken, sold on Saturdays and Sundays only. For fresh locally caught fish, skip the supermarkets, which primarily stock imported seafood. Do as the chefs do instead, and head to **Gustavia Fish Market** (located at the entrance of Gustavia near the pharmacy). It's open Monday – Saturday from 7-11 a.m., but you should arrive no later than 8 for the best selection of mahi-mahi and langoustine. Or, better yet, pre-order your fish the day before by calling Patrick Laplace, one of the local fisherman (590-5/90-27-61-76). Ask nicely and he'll even take you out to cast a line yourself. Planning to spend the afternoon on the beach? Make a trip to **Maya's To-Go** beforehand: The neighborhood favorite has take-away sandwiches, housemade salads, and desserts for an idyllic daytime picnic.



The Wings villa. Photo: Laurent Benoit

The Things to Do

The scenic 20-minute hike to **Colombier Beach**—down a rocky trail shaded by trees—promises just the right amount of seclusion. The trek can be strenuous, especially in the heat, so you won't find many tourists here. Post-hike, grab a fresh-squeezed juice at **KiKi-E-Mo**, then soak in the crystalline sea at **St. Jean** beach nearby. Or explore the natural pools and “Washing Machine” (a small area named for the swirling motion the water takes as it crashes into the rocks), in the unspoiled region of Grand Fond. Getting there requires a short hike up to a narrow goat path that leads to the translucent natural pools. Come sunset, islanders go to **Do Brazil**, a no-frills beach bar where ice cold Caribs are doled out by the dozen.



The Amalie villa. Courtesy Sibarth Villa Rentals

Moving In

The comforts of home aren't difficult to come by on St. Bart's, as swanky villas have all of the amenities a traveler could ever need—and then some. Because the selection is so overwhelmingly robust (there are more than 450 properties available for rent), know what you're looking for in advance. For hosting lavish dinner parties, there's [Villa Amancaya](#)—a seven-bedroom oasis designed by St. Bart's-based architect [Johannes Zingerle](#)—which has a gourmet kitchen and outdoor living room that are tailor-made for entertaining. Design junkies, meanwhile, will love the contemporary architecture of [Wings](#), a tri-level property overlooking the Baie de St. Jean. Couples who prefer something intimate will relish the privacy of [Amalie](#), a charming hillside property, while families are better off at the spacious four-bedroom [Camaruche](#). Rental companies like [WIMCO](#), [St. Barth Properties](#), and [Sibarth](#) can assist with bookings and also provide concierge services, like restaurant reservations, at-home massages, and local recommendations.

Getting Around

St. Bart's is notorious for its windy, picturesque roads and sharp hairpin turns, so driving here isn't for the faint of heart. True locals get around on scooters (available for rent through various companies, including [Mèca Moto](#) in Marigot Bay) but there are plenty of other options too: VW Beetles, Mini-Cooper convertibles, SmartCars, and quad bikes can be found at [Maurice Car Rental](#) and [Sixt](#), or better yet, get to know the island from the driver's seat of a vintage Moke. [Cool Rental](#) has a small fleet of the beach buggy-style vehicles in a variety of fun colors. As a general rule, avoid renting anything too bulky—that Land Rover Defender will be impossible to park (and guarantee eye-rolls from islanders).

When to Go

The see-and-be-seen crowd flocks to St. Bart's over Christmas and New Year's, and during the last two weeks of March, families on spring break show up in droves. To elude the chaos, visit just before the holidays (from early November to early December) or after, from mid-January to June. Walsh specifically recommends booking during low season, which begins on April 16 (rental prices drop by 30-40 percent and the weather is still great). July, August, and September are best avoided, as most of the island shuts down for the season.