

How to Have an Incredible Time on St. Bart's

DESTINATION & TOURISM | [CONNIE WALSH](#) | APRIL 27, 2017



PHOTO: What you need to know before planning a trip to St. Barth's. (photo by Corinne Walsh)

A mere mention of visiting St. Barth often generates a knitted brow and two questions: How do you get there? Isn't it expensive?

Most people equate the island with a playground for movie stars, moguls and divas. They do flock there, but you don't have to be a Russian oligarch with a private jet or a super yacht to come and enjoy.

I'm just back, here's proof that it can be done.

First, get yourself to St. Maarten's Princess Juliana International Airport. There you can hop a puddle-jumper with [Winair](#) for a 12-minute flight or grab a cab to Oyster Pond and ferry over on the [Voyager](#), a high-speed catamaran.

Voilà, as its French inhabitants would say! Thirty minutes later, you are in the heart of the tiny capital Gustavia, St. Barth, French West Indies. Seasonally, [Tradewind Aviation](#) flies the luxurious Pilatus out of Puerto Rico and lands on that notorious little runway. That's a bit pricier though and allows me to segue into that second question.

Yes, it's expensive. Euro is the official currency, and a stay in one of its Architectural Digest-worthy villas or 5-star hotels doesn't come cheap. The bill for sipping Champagne and nibbling Sole Meunière in *très chic* bistros would make many of us gulp.

But a trip doesn't have to wreak havoc with your vacation fund. Sharing a villa with friends, picnicking on those sugar-sand beaches (all public) and grilling some Mahi-Mahi for dinner on your pool terrace are special travel experiences and easier on the wallet.

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My recent visit was courtesy of [St. Barth Properties](#). With offices in the U.S. and on the island, they represent a portfolio of its private villas and a curated collection of its hotels.

My favorite? [Villa Blanc-Bleu](#), a six bedroom home as stunning as its views of the sea. It boasts a 60-ft. pool, an outdoor theater and a paddle tennis court. If its high-season weekly rental rate doesn't fall into that nebulous "if you have to ask, you can't afford it" category, it would be pretty close.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, there's Sud Quest, a modest little villa with a small pool and a big view. A week in Value Season (April 15–December 14) can be had for a palatable \$1,670.00. And it's within walking distance of the island's best bakery, La Petit Colombier. When you pick up your morning baguette, *a la* the locals, have them toss in a few chocolate croissants.

There's also a wide range of choices and prices from among the red-roofed villas that dot the hillsides and line the coves.

Several gorgeous 5-star hotels, each with its own personality, enjoy primo beachfront locations and grace the pages of the glossy travel mags. But those same beaches are home to sweet little hotels like [Les îlets de la Plage](#). On the quieter end of happenin' St. Jean Beach, it has 11, one, two, and three-bedroom colorful bungalows that include fully equipped kitchenettes. Bring the kids.

However, if you are seeking a bragging rights vacation, St. Barth has your back.

This season, the island saw the launch of two new 5 star properties and bid *adieu* to the sometimes-mysterious Hotel Taiwana. (Rumor has it they once turned away Madonna.) It's been purchased by its next-door-neighbor on Flamands Beach: [Cheval Blanc Hotel Saint-Barth Isle de France](#). It'll simply be Cheval Blanc next season in its expanded digs.

[Hotel Le Barthelemy & Spa](#) is the “new kid on the beach.” It makes quite a statement sitting there on the technicolored lagoon Grand Cul de Sac, and it has a cool infinity pool.

Its 46 rooms and suites include several categories with special features—some with direct beach access, others with heated plunge pools. Toiletries are by Hermès, and Le Spa is stocked with La Mer products. All this with a view of local fishermen’s boats gently bobbing.

They kit out their seaside restaurant Le Barth for dinner and call it Aux Amis. Here, diners can tuck-in to island-inspired French dishes courtesy of Michelin-star chef Guy Martin.

Old St. Barth hands will remember Francois Plantation, a boutique hotel high in the hills of Colombier. Its legendary restaurant was widely considered the island’s best. Closed for almost a decade, it caught the eye (and heart) of the Sibuetts—French hoteliers who’ve created an impressive sense-of-place collection of properties in their mother country.

They’ve done no less here, and named it [Villa Marie Saint-Barth](#). It’s boho-chic while artfully capturing the colonial plantation feel. Whirling mahogany fans, brightly colored exotic fabrics and whimsical pieces all add to the ambiance. Twenty-one strikingly decorated bungalows and villas are terraced in into the lushly landscaped hillside. The view of Flamands Bay is breathtaking. You can book a Spa Day here that includes lunch; Their signature products are Pure Altitude.

In homage, Villa Marie named its restaurant Francois Plantation. The menu is replete with classical French cuisine and riffs on heirloom Caribbean dishes. Plus, there’s house-made foie gras. A romantic Hemingway-esque bar stocks a dizzying array of rums and is made for settling in with a digestif and maybe a cigar—should you be so inclined.

St. Barth is celebrated for its world-class dining, and island regulars have their favs.

But if you're eager to try new restaurants, Bo Káo opened in the delightful courtyard of Gustavia's Carré d'Or and generated quite a buzz with its introduction of Nikkei cuisine. This Japanese and Peruvian fusion is a culinary trend sweeping Europe. They had us with a starter of anticuchos—a concoction of marinated chicken tempura, chiso and corn—Divine. Pisco Sours top a creative cocktail menu.

A couple of perennial favorites have changed hands.

The former Andy's Hideaway in St. Jean has just concluded its second season sans Andy. The exuberant British expat's personality had defined the casual eatery (slash pizza joint.) It's been a bit of a rocky road, but, it's now spiffed up. The Hideaway is back shoveling those thin-crust pizzas out of its wood-burning stove, and they are yummy. Ditto their vanilla rum.

The curiously-named and hugely popular Santa Fe is now under new ownership, and everyone approves. Unassuming, it sits hillside in Gouverneur and offers panoramic views at lunch and gentle breezes at dinner. The Thursday special, *moules frites*, is still on the menu. The mussels are flown in from France. (No, really they are.)

And the one place that never changes? The iconic burger shack Le Select. It's claimed that same corner in Gustavia for over 60 years, and there's no better place for people watching. Stop in; the Caribs are always cold.