



WHAT TO DO IN GUSTAVIA, ST. BARTS IN 24 HOURS

© Windstar Cruises 📅 February 20, 2020

GUSTAVIA – ST. BARTHELEMY

Frequented by jet-setters and celebrities, St. Bart's is draped in an air of glitz and glamour. With fair helpings of high-end luxury scattered about, the island has exclusive designer boutiques, restaurants serving up haute cuisine and chic beach clubs where you can feel like royalty.

However, although St. Bart's is well-known for all of this it is also a land of [great beauty and Caribbean perfection](#). Hidden around the island, nestled between headlands and in between dramatic cliffs are any number of little pockets of tropical heaven with white powdery sands and sparkling crystal-clear waters which will take you back to the simple life. Otherwise, gently pull aside the patina of glamour and you will find another St. Bart's which will appeal to all those in search of the authentic and traditional.

The island's colonial history has painted its culture with a marvelous mix of distinctive elements which encompass both French and Swedish style, sophistication and flair. Such a past has colored everything from the architecture of its streets to the ambiance of its cafes and from the cuisine served all over the island to the language of its people.

The idyllic setting means water activities are a large part of any activity menu with such possibilities as catamaran sailing, surfing, diving, snorkeling and much more all on offer. There is even the chance to explore the coral gardens and underwater world from the comfort of a semi-submersible.

Sipping cocktails and feasting on the highest quality food is also something of a major pastime on St. Bart's although whether you choose to do this at a humble beach shack or a fine dining restaurant with an international reputation is your decision.

Exploring the entire island is easily achieved in a day as St. Bart's whole area covers just 10 square miles. Some choose to simply hang around the capital –Gustavia –and wander the streets where, at the same time, they can immerse themselves amid the charm of tropical bloom-draped picturesque cottages or browse the world of haute couture boutiques. Others settle at a waterside cafe to watch the comings and goings and keep their eyes peeled for any famous faces.

However you choose to spend your time on this, the chicest of the Caribbean islands, it is unlikely it will leave you unimpressed, whether you pack your day with activities and sights or just kick back on a beach amid scenery of postcard-image tropical perfection.

A MORNING IN GUSTAVIA AND ST. BARTS



Embracing a sun-drenched harbor filled with super yachts and sprinkled with waterside cafes and restaurants, the island capital of Gustavia manages to mix both Caribbean charm with upscale elements that attract the rich and famous.

Here you can find both extreme high-end shopping malls but also meandering cobblestone streets with beautiful Scandinavian-, French-, and English-influenced architecture where coconut palms sprout alongside. There is a quaintly-styled church dating from the 1800s and a small and lovely museum but otherwise the specific sightseeing spots are few. Most head to this Caribbean capital to eat, shop or just wander and soak up the atmosphere.

One exception to this is the town's collection of Swedish forts, one of which you can visit to begin your St. Bart's day followed by a semi-submersible adventure to glimpse what lives beneath the island's waters.

FORT GUSTAV

Gustavia has no less than three old forts raised by the Swedish during their almost 100 years of island ownership which began in the late 1700s and ended when they sold their claim back to France in 1878.

None of these are well-preserved or will take much time to explore but all offer a glimpse of the colonial past along with breathtaking island views.

Fort Gustav was originally constructed in 1787 as harbor protection and today is a ruined complex, free to visit, with little beyond its cannon-studded bulwarks and traces of a guardhouse, bake-house and cisterns. Despite its dilapidation the site is atmospheric with a distinctive, and still operating, red and white lighthouse raised in its middle.

The walk here is lovely and visiting this spot is worth it for no other reason than to get a glorious bird's eye view of the harbor. There is an interpretation sign here that guides you to the location of island landmarks so you can get some orientation.

MORNING COFFEE IN GUSTAVIA

While much in this small town has an air of glitz or refinement there are still authentic and wonderfully casual places to pause if you know where. The grandfather of all in this category is [Le Select](#) which has sat in its central location for 70 years. Proudly claiming the title of the island's oldest bar, Le Select is an island icon not least of all because of its connection with a 1978 song entitled 'Cheeseburger in Paradise'. Written and performed by US singer Jimmy Buffet whose themes often centered around idyllic island escapes and who still has a home on the island, the song was written about this very place which is as unpretentious and relaxed now as it was in Mr. Buffet's day.

The interior is a fascinating tapestry put together from vintage postcards, license plates, flags and stickers while its courtyard scatters a few plastic chairs beneath the shade of a huge and sprawling tree.

Le Select is open all day and every day for drinks (including coffee) and meals offering a chilled spot for domino-playing locals to rub shoulders with island visitors and where the highly diverse clientele order both beer by the can and champagne by the bottle.

For those who crave something sweet to accompany their coffee the French influence gives rise to some great bakeries and boulangeries. Options of this kind include Choisy on the north side of the harbor, [Le Bar de L'Oubli](#) with its little covered terrace and La Petit Columbe which has another branch in Lorient. Packed with freshly-baked French style pastries, sweet treats and breads, most simply dash in to [La Petit Columbe](#) for take-outs but there are a couple of tables out front for those who want to linger over a coffee. The parking lot setting isn't especially picturesque but if you want a water view you can always do as the locals do and order your coffee and pastry and then simply find a harbor-side spot to enjoy it.

EXPLORING ST. BART'S UNDERWATER WORLD BY SEMI-SUBMERSIBLE

Fringed by coral reefs, the waters surrounding St. Bart's are rich ecosystems teeming with marine life and not surprisingly this element, combined with the presence of crystal clear waters, make it a popular snorkeling and diving destination. However, for those who want to keep dry but still want to explore the underwater world there is a wonderful alternative –[the Yellow Submarine](#).

Although this water craft which sets out from Gustavia's harbor is indeed yellow it isn't actually a submarine although its fun design does make it look like one. What it offers is the chance to sit above deck keeping your eyes peeled for wildlife and enjoying the stunning scenery or the opportunity to go down below the level of the water's surface. This tunnel-like space has seats and air conditioning for comfort and is lined with windows so you have a front row view of whatever is swimming past.

As nature doesn't perform to a schedule quite what you will see can change from trip to trip but the wreck of a boat sunk during hurricane Luis in 1995 and the coral gardens of the St. Bart's Marine Park are fixed highlights which you will be able to see on every voyage.

The wreck has itself been colonized by all kinds of marine creatures and is constantly alive with teeming schools of tropical fish both tiny and huge swimming around the rusting hulk. Regular species present are large brightly-colored parrot fish, graceful angel fish, the vibrantly blue and yellow tang and sting rays. Nurse sharks are also frequent visitors here so if you are lucky you will be able to spot these docile creatures cruising around the wreck too.

Turtles are an almost guaranteed part of every trip as they feast on the areas of seaweed at the harbor entrance and can often be seen swimming alongside your craft, typically with a remora fish attached to their shell and hitching a ride.

During your marine ride in the semi-submersible the crew will stop to feed the fish at which point you will find yourself completely surrounded by teeming schools. Whether you choose to watch this from up on deck or through the windows beneath this is really quite an impressive sight.

LUNCH IN GUSTAVIA AND ST. BART'S



As is true with the other Caribbean islands where French is the principal influence, St. Bart's cuisine is considered high quality and the island is lauded as a heavenly destination for foodies. The majority of what you will find here is traditional French or a Creole/French mix but all kinds of international fare from pizza to sushi are also on offer.

Quite where you settle down to enjoy it is another matter. The collection of venues range from the rustic beach shack kind to the epitome of fine dining sophistication; this latter is perhaps not surprising given that this is an island so often frequented by the wealthy and famous.

At just under 10 miles square, one of the great bonuses of this compact Caribbean gem is that everywhere on the island is almost instantly and easily accessible including its range of gorgeous beaches. Despite its small size St. Bart's has lots of beach choices that range from the tiny and secluded to long sweeps of sand offering plentiful facilities which of course means idyllic seaside lunch possibilities are abundant.

One spot to consider is the gorgeous crescent of pale gold sands known as Flamands Beach. The waters which lap here are of the jewel-like turquoise kind while the hills which form a backdrop are lushly cloaked in tropical greenery. Settings don't come more perfect than this and if you head to [Chez Rolande for lunch](#) you can have it all to gaze upon as you dine.

This casual beach shack venue is the kind where swimmers arrive straight from the water and sit down to eat in their board-shorts and bikinis but despite its laid-back vibe the food here is of incredible quality. Menu choices at this Cajun and Creole cuisine spot tend to focus around whatever has arrived from the fishing boats that day but staples include conch gratin and minced beef while the banana flambé –an island specialty –is said to be one of the best on the island. Your dining area is a sand-floored gathering of tables and chairs set beneath the shade of a big tree and strung canvasses with magnificent views of your exotic setting.

Saline Beach is another of the island's offerings but this off-the-beaten path beauty of dune-backed white sands sitting within the arms of two rocky headlands is all but free of any kind of development. People come here for back-to-nature experience and typically bring in their own picnics but there is an alternative –the lovely Le Grain de Sel. This simple beach-side cafe whose entrance up stone steps is all but hidden by a cloak of greenery offers authentic Creole dishes with some wonderful fish and seafood dishes. Totally free of pretension, this gem doesn't serve fancy fare but the quality is incredible and the little open-sided and elevated wooden deck is charming.

AN AFTERNOON IN GUSTAVIA AND ST. BART'S

A quick glimpse into the history of St. Barts mixed with a spot of boutique shopping or a sailing adventure skimming over the Caribbean waters –these are your choices for how to spend your afternoon hours on St. Bart's.

A BRIEF EXPLORATION OF ST. BART'S HISTORY AND SHOPPING

As museum's go, Gustavia's one offering is very small so you will not have to dedicate much time to exploring it. However, it is certainly worth a peep inside if the island's past interests you. The white shuttered and picturesque stone building which houses [the museum](#) is itself a piece of St. Bart's past that dates back to the Swedish colonial era which began in 1785.

The museum's collection of artifacts, traditional costumes, maritime relics and old photographs is eclectic and quirky while occasional temporary exhibitions explore such themes as the years of Swedish rule and the heritage it has left behind.

SHOPPING IN GUSTAVIA

Tiny though it is this sophisticated and duty-free island is known as the capital of the Caribbean for shopping of the haute couture, bespoke and sophisticated designer kind. Collected within three main clusters with offshoot lanes offering further choices, Gustavia has around 200 shops and boutiques offering famous international names along with cutting-edge designer works which come directly from the island and therefore offer plenty which you are unlikely to have seen before.

Beachwear, accessories and jewelry are the most common items but with new shops springing up all the time there is no knowing what you might find during your browsing.

The beating heart of Gustavia's choice of retail attractions is the harbor-side Quai de la Republique where you will find the likes of Cartier, Gaultier, Hermes, Louis Vuitton and much more. If you want to check out the St. Bart's designers the sophisticated [Carré d'Or plaza](#) with its neighboring Coeur Vendome are your best bets where the kind of high quality treasures you might uncover include necklaces made from Tahitian pearls and some stunning haute couture beachwear. Last of the Gustavia trio of hot spots is La Savane Commercial Center which collects together some high-street store names.

Strolling these streets to both see and be seen and people watch is a popular pastime and this is true even if there is no intention to buy anything. Gustavia's high-end nature tends to attract the attention of the many famous names who are frequent visitors to St. Bart's so many head here simply to spend some time celebrity spotting.

For those shoppers more enchanted by island crafts than designer goods and famous faces St. Bart's has a few choices of that kind too. There are some art galleries scattered around the island and several of the large hotels house craft boutiques within their premises.

A highlight of the Gustavia craft variety is the studio-shop of Véronique Vandernoot whose vibrant hand-painted tiles depicting Caribbean island life are seen at locations and venues all over St. Bart's. A visit here allows you not only the opportunity to buy these tiles or one of her range of other gifts incorporating her designs such as jewelry, bags and household items but also to see her at work.

Another choice for those seeking quality souvenirs and gifts is [M'bolo](#) near the harbor where the boutique owners Sandy and Christian are best known for their rums in varieties ranging from vanilla to passion fruit and which you can sample on the premises. This lovely little store also sells such things as handmade jewelry, decorative pieces for the home, bags and all types of other one-of-a-kind items.

AN AFTERNOON ALTERNATIVE – CATAMARAN TRIPS TO EXPLORE THE ISLAND

If feeling the ocean breeze on your face appeals rather more than retail therapy an alternative St. Bart's afternoon can give you just that along with some sensational tropical scenery to soak up. Boat tours come in a variety of guises on St. Bart's with the option for hopping on board a sailing catamaran in the mix.

Typically around three hours in length and setting off from Gustavia, catamaran sailing tours tend to focus on whisking their customers off to secluded off-the-beaten-path beaches which are hard to access by land.

The journey, which generally skirts the island's Caribbean-facing west side, is every bit as wonderful as the destination itself. On route you can gaze back inland to greenery cloaked hills, rocky headlands and secret coves while skirting tiny offshore islets inhabited only by seabirds and lapped by waters in impossible shades of aquamarine and turquoise.

Some boat tours include full meals but the majority offer a range of drinks such as rum punch and snacks and if you choose wisely you might even get serenaded by Caribbean music as you sail.

Once you reach the northern tip of St. Bart's your boat will drop anchor offshore from the gorgeous Colombier Bay, part of a protected marine reserve. Here you can either simply laze around on deck, go for a refreshing dip or take advantage of the snorkel gear on board and set out to meet the turtles, rays and rainbow-colored fish which inhabit these waters and their coral reefs.

PRE-DINNER DRINKS AND DINNER IN GUSTAVIA AND ST. BART'S

Gustavia, as the island's capital, has a good selection of drinking and dining venues but that isn't all the island has to offer. Further afield and sprinkled around its shores and interior there are some truly incredible bars and restaurants and the good news is that all of them are accessible to you in an evening if you don't mind a short ride in a taxi.

Bars and restaurants come in versions ranging from the rustic to the epitome of sophistication where you might find yourself dining next to a celebrity. The majority of the cuisine offered is either French or Creole with a combo of the two commonly found while Italian, Greek and sushi are just a small selection of the more internationally-flavored options you can have. Typically, no matter how humble the establishment, food quality tends to be high with seafood often dominating the menus.

PRE-DINNER DRINKS

For those whose idea of pre-dinner drinks perfection includes a combination of sea views and sunsets St. Bart's has a big menu of choice. The island has no less than 14 named beaches and while some are just a stretch of white sand and turquoise sea without a building in sight others offer a range of bars to choose from. The beach with the biggest cluster is the lively and lovely Baie de St.-Jean which is a water-sports hot-spot during the day and a buzzing center once the sun sets.

Actually split into two separate beaches by the Eden Rock outcrop, the southern end is the more tranquil of the two and where you will find [Nikki Beach](#). This chic beach club with all the luxurious trimmings is said to serve up some of the best cocktails on the island and you can enjoy them at a conventional table at the pool or by choosing one of the bean bags, loungers, teepees or day beds which spill onto the creamy white sands.

For something rather more casual on the Baie de St.-Jean and which could perhaps best be described as a beach shack with chic head to the wonderful [L'il Rock Beach Bar](#). Here you will find a fully stocked bar offering everything from beer to cocktails and a venue which puts you with your feet in the sand along with a fantastic view of the ocean beyond the fringe of coconut palms. Options from which to ocean gaze include oversize floor cushions scattered around low wooden tables, bench seats made from recycled palettes splashed with Caribbean colors and a range of bleached wood tables and chairs hung about with rattan shading and partitions. The whole, dotted about with such decorative pieces as an old 1960s scooter, has a distinctly Gypset styling. This trend which combines the glamour of jet-set living with the free-living elements of the gypsy spirit perhaps embodies the essence of St. Bart's more than any other.

DINNER

Not all St. Bart's dining treasures are those which give you views of the sea. One which proves this point perfectly and has to be a fierce contestant for the island's most romantic restaurant is [the Tamarin](#).

Located just a short 10-15 minute taxi ride east of the capital this brightly sparkling gem sits at the center of the island and from the moment you head down its path and head towards the restaurant you will realize you have arrived somewhere truly magical. The huge tamarind tree from which the venue takes its name is the centerpiece but this is just one part of an enchanting tropical garden with a lawn and lily pond surrounded by banana trees, coconut palms and exotic blooms.

Everything here exudes elegance, from the chairs and low-level tables scattered around the lawn which are perfect for pre-dinner cocktails (and the cocktail menu here is impressively large) to the covered wooden terrace which constitutes the main dining area. All is lit by a soft glow for an instantly romantic air and for those who want an intimate meal there are tables tucked away for absolute privacy.

The food quality –a range of French and international fare –matches the sublimity of the setting in every way and your meal choice from the Tamarin's extensive menu gives you options for seafood, steak and other meat choices. The wine-list is likewise impressive, featuring mainly but not exclusively French wines and a champagne selection for those special occasions. x

For something a little more subtly elegant and for those who truly can't bear the thought of dining without a Caribbean Sea view, [Maya's](#) which sits on the Gustavia outskirts is a great choice. Established since the 1980's, this casual restaurant's husband and wife team deliberately change the seafood-focused menu every day in order to allow the French-Caribbean chef to work his magic with only the freshest of products.

Dishes are simple but delectable and while the likes of locally-caught mahi-mahi, wahoo, lobster and calamari tend to lead the menu there is usually at least one chicken dish and one red meat offering which might be lamb or beef. The only constants are the delicious desserts of which the coconut tart tends to get rave reviews.

The elevated wooden deck where you dine with its white tables and director chairs adding cheerful splashes of color places you steps from the sands and the sea and if you eat early you can catch a glorious Caribbean sunset to make your experience just that little bit more special.

AN EVENING IN GUSTAVIA AND ST. BARTS

Like so many of the Caribbean islands, after-dark activities in the main revolve around taking long leisurely dinners and cocktails at whichever bar or restaurant you decide can give you the ambiance which most suits your idea of perfection.

Again, as is so often true in these tropical islands, music regularly features at some of the venues ranging from chilled live reggae at the beach to DJs spinning tunes for late-night party crowds who want to dance the evening away. The iconic Le Select in Gustavia's center with its ultra-casual vibe and mix of locals and visitors often hosts live musicians and despite its lack of glitz is often the hangout for celebrities.

Several of the island restaurants also host some kind of entertainment with [the Baz Bar](#), La Plage and Nikki Beach three notable inclusions in this list. The former often has some kind of live music on offer which includes both international performers with well-known names along with island artists.

The biggest name on St. Barts for night time entertainment however is Le Ti whose reputation has reached so far beyond its Caribbean Sea-lapped shores that people will travel here just to experience its famous cabarets. Adult-themed and with the reputation for sometimes getting a little wild, [Le Ti's](#) dishes up a true spectacle. Offering something with elements of the Cirque de Soleil splashed about with buccaneer themes and dancers sporting outlandish and elaborate costumes, anyone who is anyone on the island will ensure they have front row seats for this iconic show.

The full experience includes dining here but others simply rock up to the bar to enjoy the fun goings on with a champagne cocktail to sip on and for those who really want to enter into the spirit of the thing there is the chance to go backstage and select your very own costume and headdress. This evening is perhaps not for those looking for relaxation and tranquility but those who do attend this legendary event tend to rate it as both highly memorable and a St. Bart's must-do experience.