

# After St. Barts' borders closed, Le Barthelemy resort swung into action

By Gay Nagle Myers | Mar 16, 2021

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How a Caribbean island and a Caribbean hotelier are coping with a second border closure at the height of the peak winter season is just one story, among many, during this pandemic.

The eight-square-mile French island of St. Barts, 22 miles southeast of St. Maarten, had reopened on June 22. But it wasn't until the Caribbean's Festive season swung into full gear that its visitor surge began to take off: More than 4,300 passengers arrived on commercial flights to the island between Dec. 19 and 31, only 17% fewer than the same period in 2019, according to figures released by the Collective de Saint Barthelemy.

The tiny Remy de Haenen airport recorded more than 200 aircraft arrivals and departures on Dec. 26 and 27 and Jan. 2, topping off with 247 on Jan. 3.

(For those who have never flown into St. Barts, it can be a white-knuckle experience. The landing strip is packed between two volcanic hills; aircraft brake within feet of sunbathers on the beach; the short strip can only accommodate 19-seater planes, and pilots need special training and a license to land there.)

It's an island known for its high-end resorts, villas, fine dining venues and the A-list of celebrities who choose it to regularly celebrate the peak season. And the sudden announcement by the French government that St. Bart's **borders were closing to all visitors on Feb. 2** dealt a blow to the island's upscale tourism product.

<http://bit.ly/3bTnWkR>

The announcement was precipitated by France shutting its continental borders on Jan. 30 to all non-EU visitors as it struggled to contain the spread of Covid-19. Three days later the ruling was expanded to include all French overseas territories, including those in the Caribbean -- St. Barts, St Martin, Guadeloupe and Martinique -- as well as French Polynesia.

This meant no visitors would be allowed to travel to St. Barts or any other French island until further notice.

St. Barts had accounted "for some cases, but thankfully we are not enduring any epidemic. We have managed to keep it at bay and the situation is well managed and under control," according to a statement from Nils Dufau, president of the tourism board.

"However, independently of the will of our local authorities to keep St. Barts open, the French government has just decided to put in place new preventive measures against Covid-19 variants," Dufau said.

St. Barts authorities began negotiations with the French government to ease the entry restrictions and to find an alternative solution to the closure.

"Our aim is to reopen the island's borders as soon as possible," Dufau said.

### **What the closure meant for the visitors on the island**

I spoke with Marc Dobbels, managing director of Le Barthelemy Hotel & Spa, on Feb. 3, the day after the island officially closed to visitors.

The hotel, set on the quiet bay of Grand Cul-de-Sac on the northeastern side of the island, had reopened its 44 rooms and suites in October and had a full house on the day the news broke.

"Guests currently in house may stay until their departure date, or they can extend their stay. Their return travel arrangements will not be affected as departing flights are available," Dobbels said at the time.

Guests holding future reservations were notified and travel advisor partners were alerted to the situation.

Dobbels emphasized that Covid safety protocols had been in place since reopening, including the testing of the entire staff every 15 days.

"We credit this, along with other common sense protocols, for the good news that Le Barth has not had a single reported case of Covid since we reopened," he said.

I checked in again with Dobbels last week.

More than 20% of the guests who were at the hotel when the French government shut down the border in February stayed on till their original departure dates. Staff stayed busy caring for the in-house guests; Dobbels said they were offered "long-stay gestures" like spa treatments and in-room dining.

People who held reservations after Feb. 2 were able to cancel for a refund or to postpone their trips for up to a year.

"It's key for us to help our guests in such a special time," he said. What matters most to us is the trust and loyalty our clients have in us. We always go the extra mile for them to feel supported in return as well."

Dobbels said that his team had used the past month to enhance food and beverage offerings and to maintain the property and facilities.

"We invited the Red Cross volunteers for lunch at the hotel. These workers operated the open-air Covid-19 test center in St. Jean and did an amazing job," he said.

### **No reopening date set**

I asked him when he thought the border might reopen.

"We have good reasons to expect a border reopening by the end of March," Dobbels said. "This depends upon the French government, even though St. Barts has managed the Covid situation extremely well with very few cases throughout."

However, a recent announcement by the Prefet, a representative of the French government, confirmed that St. Barts would remain closed to nonessential travel (such as tourists) and no date was given for the reopening.

Meanwhile, more than 300 locals already have received the Pfizer vaccine, and the Astra-Zeneca vaccine now is available as well to inoculate a wider slice of the island's population of 10,000.

Open-air test centers on the island are set up to handle the **pre-departure Covid testing** for visitors entering or returning to the U.S. per the new CDC requirement.

When St. Barts does reopen, travelers 10 years and over will need to present proof of a PCR test taken within three days of arrival. Antigen tests will no longer be accepted.

Visitors staying more than seven days will be tested on the eighth day using a rapid antigen test.

The annual St. Barts Bucket Regatta yacht competition, scheduled for later this month, has been canceled for the second year in a row.