



How To Experience the More Local Side of St. Barts

by Christina Valhouli

The French-Caribbean island of Saint Barthélemy is unlike any other in the Caribbean. At just nine square miles, St. Barts (or St. Barths) feels like a French village transplanted to the West Indies and strikes just the right balance of being exclusive yet laid back. Impossibly chic at every turn, it boasts 15 beaches, a plethora of gourmet restaurants, and decadent nightlife. The style vibe here is Hermès sandals paired with a colorful Gucci caftan and the requisite straw beach bag. But while the small island has always been a magnet for celebrities and those with private yachts it *is* possible to get off the beaten track and rub shoulders with locals.

Here's our insider guide to St. Barts:

Getting There



Photo: iStock/Jack Metthey

Getting to St. Barts isn't easy. There are no direct flights and landing is not for the faint of heart as it is famously one of the shortest runways in the world, ending mere feet from the beach on which sun worshippers lie. Connecting flights are available from St. Maarten and San Juan, Puerto Rico, or you can hop on a ferry from St. Martin or St. Maarten. A Tradewind private charter flight from San Juan will give you lounge access and expedited security. — you'll want to sit in the last row for easy access to the bags of complimentary chicharrones and the cooler stocked with beers and soft drinks.

Where to Stay



Photo: Courtesy of the property



Photo: Courtesy of the property/Aga Sypniewska

While St. Barts has its share of big-name, sleek hotels (like the Eden Rock and Cheval Blanc St-Barth) we prefer the family-owned Hotel Manapany, which embodies barefoot luxury and a classic St. Barts vibe. It's tucked away from the action on its own stretch of beach in the residential Anses des Cayes neighborhood in the northwest of the island and boasts colorful ceilings and Caribbean-inspired décor.

Beaches



Cabs are elusive on St. Barts so you'll want to rent a car to explore the island's beaches as well as the capital of Gustavia and smaller towns such as St. Jean and the small fishing village of Corossol. Slip on sneakers and hike down to reach Colombier beach, an unspoiled stretch of sand and crystal-clear waters. Your thighs will burn on the steep, sweaty climb up but it's worth the pain. Gouverneur Beach is a secluded spot for a swim and sunbathing, as billionaire Roman Abramovich bought up most of the surrounding land so there's no development here. For a different kind of water experience, walk past Grand Fond beach to reach the natural rock pools nicknamed "The Washing Machine."

Dining & Nightlife



Photo: Courtesy of Artman Agency

Go for a dip at Grand cul du Sac beach, then throw on a chic coverup and roll straight into lunch at the beachfront *Ti' Corail*. Stick your toes in the sand and start with a rum punch. My favorite dish was the lobster cassoulet (it's lighter than you'd think and packed with edamame) and be sure to finish your meal with a shot of the house-made vanilla-infused rum.



A quick drive from Lorient Beach brings you to local favorite JoJo Burger for a French twist on the American classic. Burger toppings include shallots, blue cheese, and goat cheese. The closest thing St. Barts has to a dive bar is Le Select, and it's the perfect place for a fish sandwich and a cold beer. Once you've danced on a table at Nikki Beach, head to Le Ti for the sexy cabaret show and more dancing. To get in the mood, there's a dress-up corner that offers wigs, masks, and butterfly wings.

What to Do



Photo: Courtesy of Guirec Pouliquen

Head to bustling Gustavia to see the mega yachts docked in the marina and enjoy duty-free shopping in high-end shops such as Prada and Louis Vuitton, where prices are significantly less than what you'd find in the U.S.

Not to be missed is a trip to a pharmacy to stock up on amazing French skincare including Caudalie and Nuxe (gotta love a bottle of sunscreen that includes a QR code for a sunny Spotify playlist). In St. Jean, pick up a colorful print featuring a stylized take on the St. Bart's airport runway at Julien. MC2 in Gustavia sells chic bikinis and coverups, but be warned that sizing runs très small.



Photo: Courtesy of St. Barts Tourism Committee

Boating is a way of life in St. Barts and if you didn't get an invite to the annual Bucket Regatta, book a half-day catamaran trip through Salt Life Sailing and bring your most stylish bikini to lounge on the deck. A highlight for me was tucking into a creamy burrata and tomato salad washed down with a crisp rosé, followed by a dive off the back of the boat to cool off. Just when I thought that #yachtlife couldn't get any better, my group spotted a turtle swimming nearby.