

St. Barts: Idyllic Caribbean hideaway isn't just for the rich and famous. Here's a look

Dan Fellner Special for The Arizona Republic



GUSTAVIA, St. Barts — This chic and sophisticated French island in the Caribbean 110 miles east of Puerto Rico isn't just a playground for the likes of Leonardo DiCaprio, Jeff Bezos, Paul McCartney and the Kardashians.

It's also emerged as a travel destination where the not-so-rich and famous can experience a little taste of French joie de vivre without crossing the Atlantic.

I recently spent a day in St. Barts as part of a 12-day cruise — billed as the “Charismatic Caribbean” — on the 670-passenger Oceania Sirena, one of six ships in the Oceania fleet. The Florida-based cruise line is known for its small to midsize ships and high-end cuisine.

Do cruise ships go to St. Barts?

They do. The Sirena was nearly 90 percent full with 582 passengers from 11 countries, 70 percent of whom were American. We started in Miami, sailed 2,470 miles southeast and ended the cruise in Oranjestad, Aruba. Along the way, we stopped at eight islands, including such diverse places as the Dominican Republic, the British Virgin Islands and the Dutch island of Curacao.

None of the ports, though, matched the charisma of St. Barts. The island offers some of the best white-sand beaches in the Caribbean, gourmet dining, a downtown full of luxury boutiques and upmarket jewelry stores and dozens of multimillion-dollar superyachts anchored in its harbor — evocative of the French Riviera.

What to know about St. Barts and its capital, Gustavia

In fact, the Sirena is one of the largest ships to visit St. Barts. We anchored offshore while passengers were taken by tender boats to the dock in Gustavia, the capital and largest town. The narrow roads on the island are too small for tour buses and there are few organized sightseeing excursions.

It all adds a vibe of exclusivity and seclusion that residents and visitors — especially those who the French refer to as the beau monde (beautiful people) — seem to cherish.

St. Barts doesn't attract hordes of tourists like some of its neighboring islands. There are no direct flights from the United States or Europe, no high-rise hotels and its harbor is too small for mega-cruise ships.



“We don’t have mass tourism,” said Sabine Masegla, the French-born director of the St. Barts Tourism Office who has lived on the island for 34 years. “We are a small island. We cannot welcome waves of people. Everything is on a small scale. That’s what defines St. Barts.”

Just how small? St. Barts is only 8.5 square miles, making it about one-third the size of South Mountain Park and Preserve in Phoenix. It takes just over an hour — without stops — to circle the entire island via car. The year-round population is about 15,000, not counting the visitors who stay on yachts, in 800 private villas sprinkled around the island and just 25 hotels.

The island has an unofficial “palm tree law,” which mandates that buildings can’t be higher than a palm tree. Thus, the tallest hotel is just two stories.

The history of St. Barts

Christopher Columbus sailed past St. Barts on his second voyage to the New World in 1493 and named the island after his brother, Bartolomeo. Its official name as a French “Overseas Collectivity” is Saint-Barthélemy, although it’s more widely known as St. Barts or St. Barth.

The French colonized the island in the mid-17th century before selling it to Sweden in 1784 — making it Sweden’s only long-term Caribbean colony — before France bought the island back in 1878.



Gustavia was named in honor of Sweden's King Gustaf III and several buildings remain from the Swedish era. I stopped at the Dinzey House on the waterfront. Built around 1820, it houses a small museum chronicling St. Barts' history.

I also visited Fort Gustav, the first Swedish fort built on the island, dating to 1787. The view from the fort of the town below, with its red-roofed houses next to a horseshoe-shaped harbor, is one of the most alluring in the Caribbean.

How a Rockefeller made St. Barts a haven for the rich and famous

In 1957 American business tycoon David Rockefeller built a villa overlooking Colombier Bay on the northwestern tip of the island. He didn't know it at the time, but Rockefeller started a trend that led to St. Barts becoming a luxury destination for the jet set.

For a glimpse of Rockefeller's villa, I took a 1-mile hike on a rocky — and occasionally steep — trail, passing wild goats and spotted land turtles, while enjoying stunning views of the Atlantic and Caribbean. After 30 minutes of hiking, I reached a viewpoint where I could see both the villa and the quiet stretch of white sand below that the locals now call Rockefeller Beach.



The villa was abandoned in the 1990s and the property is off-limits to visitors. But St. Barts' reputation as a place where celebrities can relax, shop and soak up sun without being hassled has endured.

“I always see famous people walking the streets,” said Masseglia. “What makes it special is that no one really bothers them. Anyone who is famous feels at liberty to walk the streets without being bothered by anyone running after them for a selfie or an autograph.”



St. Barts: How to get around and can you use dollars?

As a French island, the euro is the official currency, although dollars are widely accepted. Whatever the currency, be prepared to spend a lot as St. Barts is one of the priciest islands in the Caribbean.

There are about a dozen beaches on St. Barts, all of which seemed quiet and relatively uncrowded during my visit. Perhaps none is more unique than Shell Beach, just a short walk from downtown Gustavia. Popular with locals, it's so named because the beach's sand is mixed with millions of tiny seashells.

The best way to see St. Barts is to rent a car or hire a taxi for a private tour. All of the island's taxi drivers are certified guides. A 90-minute tour costs about \$100, which can be split up to four ways with fellow travelers.

It's possible to fly into St. Barts' Gustaf III Airport from nearby St. Martin or Puerto Rico on propeller planes that hold a maximum of 20 passengers. But you better buckle your seatbelt and hold on tight.

The runway is only 2,100 feet long and pilots have to make a steep and rapid descent over a hill and hit the brakes as soon as they land, otherwise they end up on the beach at St. Jean. It's why the History Channel ranked Gustaf III as the third most dangerous airport in the world.

Watching the planes land while standing on a bluff overlooking the airport, I felt a sense of relief that I had arrived on a cruise ship. At the same time, I envied the newcomers who likely would have far more time than I did to soak up the island's suave and elegant milieu — and perhaps even spot one of the Kardashians.