

Visiting St. Barts During the Pandemic Changed How I Travel — Here's How

A COVID-era trip to the Caribbean island taught me the importance of taking it slow.

BY ALISHA PRAKASH | JULY 19, 2021



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It's often said, to fully appreciate the present, you must acknowledge the past. For me, like so many others, that trickles back to February 2020 — the *before times*.

<https://bit.ly/3eEkk2c>

Two winters ago, my husband and I sat in [Hanoi](#), wedged between the blur of motorcycles, cars, and buses, all competing for space amid the cacophony of blaring horns. I can't quite recall the exact words exchanged in that moment, but I remember the feeling of being controlled by the clock, fretting that we might have to forgo something on our itinerary as a result of the standstill traffic.

We had only 48 hours to fully immerse ourselves in Vietnam's buzzing, beguiling capital, but like so many other trips, I was steadfast in seeing it *all*. A near-impossible feat, I recognized – one that often meant experiencing a place widely, but not deeply – but that rarely shook my resolve to try, sprinting from place to place, attraction to attraction. No time for pausing, only built-in moments to linger. But the pandemic changed that.

It had been roughly 350 days of being cramped in our tiny Manhattan apartment, when the idea of getting on a plane went from fantasy to fixation – swift flashes that swelled as the days dragged on. Unloading a bag of groceries unexpectedly whisked me to my favorite food markets in [Mexico City](#) and [Thailand](#); sitting on my balcony at home abruptly pulled me to that patio in [Santorini](#) where I sipped wine with my mom while overlooking the sparkling Aegean; and listening to the radio suddenly conjured the slinky, sinuous music at the underground bar my friends and I closed out in [Lima](#). The mere sight of a plane flying overhead yanked me into a quicksand of scrolling through my camera roll of trips past.

So, after months of a should-we, could-we tango, my husband and I plunged into planning a proper trip. With short flights from the East Coast, [the Caribbean](#) felt like the perfect cure to our cooped-up energy, and after much deliberation and research on how we could travel responsibly, we landed on [St. Barts](#), an island I've visited twice before and love dearly.

Why St. Barts?

Roughly a four-hour flight from New York, St. Barts can feel like it's twice the distance – with French as the official language, the euro as the official currency, and the cuisine giving center stage to the island's French heritage, St. Barts is a French Riviera-like utopia situated much closer to home. The surreal setting packs in talcum beaches ringed by windswept hills, bright bougainvillea spilling from the rooftops, and turquoise coves flecked with ritzy sailboats.

In the *before times*, the island's physical attributes would have been enough of a draw, but there were other vital things to consider now: St. Barts had seen low overall cases (under 200 since the start of the pandemic at the time of our visit), plus it offers mostly outdoor, socially distanced activities and is easily accessible from the U.S. — factors that made us more comfortable with our decision. We would also test multiple times over the course of our 14-day trip (72 hours prior to departure, upon arrival at our hotel, on day seven per island regulations, three days before returning to the U.S., and finally a week after arriving back in New York). We also planned to wear our masks everywhere, and keep distance from others, giving us further peace of mind that we were moving around as safely as possible. (Note: Masks are mandatory on the island, except while eating and drinking and on the beach.)

Since this was not my first visit, I was acquainted with the lay of the land — and there was comfort in the familiar. Still, I knew this time would be different. There were new rules and regulations to follow to ensure the safety of both locals and visitors.



CREDIT: GETTY IMAGES

Planning and Preparation

Unlike previous trips, our visit to St. Barts this time required a lot more paperwork. A negative PCR test taken within 72 hours of travel was mandatory, and a transfer through St. Martin called for submitting our results and a health authorization application through an Electronic Health Authorization System. (It can take up to 12 hours for this to process, so timing was key.)

As of June 9, [the island opened](#) to vaccinated visitors without quarantine, though a negative test taken within three days of arrival is still required. Unvaccinated visitors, meanwhile, have to present a negative COVID-19 test 72 hours prior to departure, plus self-quarantine for seven days after arrival, followed by a PCR test on day seven.

We also opted for travel insurance, which covered COVID-related emergencies abroad, and our packing list similarly reflected the times: Masks, sanitizer, and disinfecting wipes sat alongside mandatory printed approvals and negative test results. Despite the intense preparation that travel, especially during an ongoing pandemic, asks of us, it wasn't lost on me that, ultimately, little is in our control, even in a pre-COVID world – for better or worse.

Flying to St. Barts



In the *before times*, I flew without paying any mind to the minutia – that is to say, from the moment I stepped on board, I spent my airborne hours sleeping or zoned out in front of a screen, rather than observing and taking in my surroundings. But when the plane took off that day, the small details came into focus. Seats were mostly empty, and the eerie look of masked passengers joining in a synchronized choreography of disinfecting their seats and tray tables was apparent, but the nervous, excited energy in the air was palpable, too. As the plane banked away from Newark, I watched a couple – dressed in shorts and sandals despite the snow on the ground outside – begin to beam. No, I could not see their smiles behind masks, but the enthusiasm in their eyes and words as they pointed at the plane window was unmistakable. I, too, carefully surveyed the scene below – a gray patchwork of highways and homes waking up as the morning sun shifted. It was a view I had missed on all of those takeoffs and landings I hadn't experienced over the past year. I spent the next four hours without my laptop, phone, or any entertainment at all, simply letting myself feel the freedom of heading somewhere new.

Arriving in St. Barts is equal parts invigorating and intimidating. With no direct flights from the U.S., traveling here requires getting on a short puddle-jumper, usually from San Juan, Puerto Rico, or St. Martin – [Tradewind](#) and [Winair](#) are both solid options. And after a brief 15 minutes in the air, *ooing* and *aahing* at the sublimely blue waters daubed with green island formations below, the small, roughly dozen-seat plane tilts downward, teetering between craggy peaks before touching down on a tiny, miss-it-and-you'll-land-in-the-water tarmac. The door flung open, I stepped out, moved my mask to the side for a moment, and gulped in the sun-soaked air. We had made it.

Hotels and Villas on St. Barts

Renting a car is the best – and most cost-effective – way to get around St. Barts. Taxis on the island are hard to come by, and everything – restaurants, shops, town, beaches – is under a 20-minute drive away, a major assist in getting accustomed to the roads quickly.



CREDIT: COURTESY OF HOTEL MANAPANY

We picked up our rental at the airport with no issues, and headed to our hotel, the [Manapany](#), or as it translates, "small paradise." And it really is: Situated on wild Anse des Cayes beach, the property is no doubt luxe, but without a fussy, formal air. It's the kind of place where you kick off your shoes to eat (the alfresco restaurant is directly on the sand) and start your morning with outdoor yoga accompanied by ocean sounds. On some mornings, roosters may even serve as your alarm clock. It was not my first time at the hotel, but finding my balance during tree pose took on a different meaning this time – wobbling, I searched for steady ground, much like I had, much like we all had, during the past year.

And it's not just the daily yoga and Pilates or fresh, locally sourced menu – some procured from the on-site garden – that serves to reset. Pandemic or not, at this hotel, health is wealth, and that goes for both visitors and the environment. Electric vehicles are on offer for guests and the property uses solar-powered water heating in keeping with its eco-minded practices. Meanwhile, accommodations – tumbling out onto the sand or requiring an ascent for gorgeous sea views – are breezy and built to camouflage into the tropical surroundings, rather than upstage it. To avoid coming into contact with others on the island, we remained at the hotel, though this wasn't exactly a downside.

The perfect antidote to a year in lockdown, our days here were spent entirely outside – drifting off to sleep on the sand under the sun, watching the waves from the wooden deck of our room, and lingering over meals as the sky shifted from a field of blue to a dark expanse speckled with stars. Sundays brought a BBQ on the beach, with live music, lobsters, and flowing wine. We spent our time doing typical vacation things, as far as the *before times* go anyways, but everything felt brand-new in the age of COVID.



CREDIT: EMILY LAB

And after a few days of bliss, we packed our bags and checked into [Le Sereno](#), which as its name suggests, promises serenity. A tall order given the circumstances of the pandemic, yes, but the Christian Liaigre-designed sanctuary undoubtedly delivered, starting with its location, seated at the end of the Grand Cul de Sac, a peaceful, reef-protected cove. Upon arrival, there was a bottle of Champagne waiting for us in our room – fitting, as a stay here is certainly something worth celebrating.

Our days here also chimed at a slower pace: Mornings were reserved for paddling alongside turtles in a glass-bottom kayak, and evenings slipped away as we spoiled ourselves with indulgent seafood pastas and wine at the open-air beachfront restaurant, Al Mare. The hours in between were filled with simple pleasures: taking long dips in the freshwater infinity pool; watching, spellbound, as kitesurfers skimmed the glassy waters; luxuriating over a croissant and cappuccino on our private terrace; and strolling the nearly deserted sand, stopping to turn our faces up toward the sun to feel a pinch of hope disguised as warmth.



CREDIT: LAUREN BENOIT

Just down the beach from Le Sereno, [Le Barthelemy](#) offered a busier, more bustling waterfront, complete with a live afternoon DJ, though nirvana was not far. The water here, too, is calm, clear, and shallow, ideal for active pursuits like snorkeling, kayaking, and windsurfing, and the food – an innovative blend of French and Caribbean flavors – is an experience alone.

But after months of being confined to our neighborhood, we savored even the small joys of walking somewhere new, feeling the warm breeze, and seeing different surroundings – the gorgeous infinity-edge pool being the pièce de résistance. The interiors are no less photogenic: Rooms are extra-large with tropical accents, and many have private terraces, plunge pools, and sea views that are always within reach thanks to a drop-down screen. We especially loved the bird cage-like swing chairs found in the lobby. The staff, like the property itself, is welcoming, thoughtfully attending to every need, down to ensuring your beach cooler is stocked with fresh bottles of water.

It was enough to take our minds off the relentless news cycle for more than a moment, though the effects of the pandemic made themselves visible throughout all the properties we visited: Smiles tucked behind masks, touchless hand sanitizer dispensers in common areas, and plenty of empty tables and loungers despite it being busy season.

A lack of peak-season visitors was evident at all hotels we visited, including those characterized with slightly livelier scenes, like the [Hotel Christopher](#). The action here surrounds a beautiful infinity pool, where guests sprawl out – adequately apart – at all hours of the day with refreshing beverages from the property's poolside bar, Mango. Framed by palms and backed by a rocky shoreline and ocean, it's a stunning, convivial vibe that more than compensates for the absence of a sandy beach. But even with a sprightly air, our visit was no less therapeutic. Every morning, sitting on the balcony of our oceanfront room, I'd find myself listening to the breaking waves on a meditative loop; come dusk, we'd watch the sun dip into the horizon with a glass of wine enjoyed at the open-air, toes-in-the-sand restaurant.

Speaking of rooms, the spaces are crisp and clean, with white-washed wood ceilings and bright pops of orange that remind you of the tropical island setting. Not that you need reminding – the floor-to-ceiling windows work to blur the line between indoors and outdoors 24/7. It's refined yet relaxed, luxurious yet down to earth. For total dream-home vibes, guests can book one of the four-bedroom villas, nestled within lush greenery and perched above the sea with a private pool.

The whole experience was very Robinson Crusoe, and though I was relieved by the almost castaway nature of our stay on the island so far, I still felt occasional pangs of worry, learning soon that ridding myself of months of anxiety would take time.

We briefly chatted with waiters and shop owners, all masked, about how they hoped for more business on the island, and I, too, found myself longing for more of the face-to-face exchanges that usually colored my travels, the spontaneous run-ins and moments spent swapping stories with locals and travelers who had come from all corners of the world. But we had an unspoken pact to maintain distance for now.



CREDIT: COURTESY OF WIMCO VILLAS

And nowhere was that easier than at our private villa, [Villa Lina](#), part of the [Wimco collection](#). A day here starts like this: You wake up to a tranquil view of the blue ocean, emerald mountains, and clementine-colored skies, but you swear you're looking at a watercolor painting. You have a hankering for breakfast, but before you can pull yourself away from the plush bed, a butler arrives with a fresh baguette, pastries, and juices from a local bakery – a daily occurrence that sets the tone each morning. You pour yourself a cup of coffee in the wide-open kitchen, grab your croissants, and step through the large sliding glass doors to your private terrace with an infinity lap pool and panoramic views.

"Broadly speaking, even the most ardent hotel devotees fall in love with the Wimco villa experience in St. Barts," says Heather Warburton, who oversees the company's sales and marketing. "There's a certain comfort in being met at the airport by your Wimco concierge, who will not only escort you to your villa, but then exchange WhatsApp details and quite literally respond to any questions or requests within minutes. When you combine that level of service, with the sense of freedom at a villa, not to mention a setting that may be totally unlike your own home, that culminates into a hard-to-beat combination."



CREDIT: COURTESY OF WIMCO VILLAS

In fact, *freedom* might just be the perfect word to describe the Wimco villa experience. There's the quite literal physical freedom that comes from having space to move around – with an open-plan design, our villa, for example, had an extra-large living room with cushy sofas, a dining table suitable for 14 guests, a spacious kitchen, and two master bedrooms (each with an en suite bathroom). Then, there's the mental freedom you get from shedding any worry about encountering others during a pandemic. And that's to say nothing about the near-overwhelming natural beauty of the ocean ahead that helps you recalibrate from nonstop virtual life, liberating you from the daily digital deluge.



CREDIT: COURTESY OF WIMCO VILLAS

"Villas are one of a kind, and the beauty of that is that they appeal to all sorts of travelers," says Warburton. "Some clients gravitate toward the centrality of villas in St. Jean...others experience the ease of staying beachfront when their kids are toddlers, and others seek hillside breezes with expansive views, where they can be content to relax all day long. I think couples enjoy the sense of having space from one's spouse in an organic way, whereas groups of friends find a level of bonding that occurs in unscheduled moments, like early risers congregating over espresso."

Radiating a real sense of place, Wimco's villas are for the traveler who has been everywhere, done it all, Warburton tells me. And I couldn't agree more.

Restaurants and Beaches on St. Barts

During our villa stay, we relished the opportunity to shop at local markets for cheeses, charcuterie, wine, and produce, then devoured them on our private deck. But if you do feel like being somewhat social, restaurants – almost all open to the elements – are welcoming visitors. And luckily, St. Barts' dining scene, fueled by its French and Creole roots, is superb.



CREDIT: COURTESY OF WIMCO VILLAS

At [Bonito](#), a trendy, French-Latin restaurant perched on a hill above the harbor, we bellied up to creative cocktails, ceviche, tiraditos, and scallops lovingly bathed in a coconut milk sweet potato puree. And at [Eddy's](#), we feasted on wild prawns and a Creole curry with goat in a tropical, garden-like setting. [Maya's](#) is an institution on the island, with a menu that changes every day to the tune of the freshest ingredients available, though you'll never be disappointed — Jean-Georges Vongerichten called the restaurant's chef, Maya Gurley, "the best cook on the island." Then, there's my favorite, [Orega](#), a French-Japanese fusion restaurant where ingredients arrive daily from Tokyo, Paris, and New York markets. Opt for the omakase if you want something you'll talk about long after you've returned home.

In between exquisite meals, we hiked to Colombier Beach, a secluded, dreamlike spot that's accessible only by boat or foot. The relatively easy coastal trek takes travelers through low-lying shrubbery and pebbly paths before emerging onto the powdery white sand for an afternoon of swimming and picnicking. Other beaches, like St. Jean and Gouverneur, are also stunning and easier to reach. And beyond the beach, we meandered the shop-lined streets of Gustavia and paused to watch the comings and goings of boats and people in the harbor. What a gift it was to be there, and to take it in leisurely.

Rather than painstakingly planning every single moment of our vacation, we had no spreadsheet detailing where to be when, no rushing to the next item on our itinerary. Instead, day after day, we appreciated the island's gentle, relaxed tempo, letting each day lead us. This deliberately unhurried pace was antithetical to my always-on-the-go brand of travel, but it was welcome, even after staying still for so long. Would I return to my fast and frenetic nature on trips once this was all over? Perhaps, but St. Barts had reminded me that sometimes slow is, in fact, better. What a difference a year makes.