

# The Perfect (Long) Weekend in St. Barts

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*The tiny tony Caribbean island has made a remarkable recovery from damages caused by Hurricane Irma in 2017. Go now!*



St. Barts is back in business: You'll know it by the boats in the harbor, as last year's spring regattas commenced without a hitch, and wooden schooners pulled-in for the **West Indies Regatta** over the first weekend of May. Outdoor movie screens were set up on Flamands beach and the docks of Gustavia for the 23rd annual **St. Barth Film Festival**. Hotels are back **online**, and the island's private villa rentals are in a healthy state. The hurricane season of 2017 that devastated the island may not be forgotten, but St. Barts has moved on. Nils Dufau, the President of the Territorial Tourism Committee of Saint Barthélemy, notes that the fifth annual **Saint Barth Gourmet Festival** in November was a roaring success.

Stiles Bennet, president of **WIMCO**, one of the island's preeminent villa rental companies, says that "96 percent of properties are open for the season." That's more than 1,500 bedrooms to choose from. A smaller villa rental company like **Happy Villa** is a great choice for lovely one-bedroom hideaways with private pools—an affordable option for far less than the cost of a conventional hotel room.

With a completely up-and-running infrastructure, empty beaches, and guaranteed Gallic flair, now couldn't be a better time to finally take that first visit, or a return to see what's new.

## Getting there

Factor in a day of travel on both ends to create an extra long weekend (or hey, stay the week). Your best option, currently, is to fly from the U.S. to San Juan, Puerto Rico, or the island of Antigua. **Tradewind Aviation** flies from both airports to St. Barts in about an hour. It's a pricey but chic option, with 8 first class-style seats in roomy Pilatus PC-12 aircraft. When booking online, even if flights appear sold out, the company's vice president, David Zipkin, assures us they have the resources to add extra unscheduled departures. Another option is to fly to St. Maarten where **WINAIR** and **St. Barth Commuter** have frequent, 15-minute service from the newly re-opened Princess Juliana International Airport. The **Great Bay Express** ferry, if you'd rather not brave St. Barts' famously **white-knuckle landings**, departs from the port of St. Martin for 45-minute crossings. Once on the island, a car rental is essential for exploring. Driving, on the right-hand side, isn't fast but roads can be challenging with tight turns and steep hills—often affording breathtaking views.



## **Day One: From Gustavia to St. Jean – Getting the Lay of the Land**

Drop any preconceptions you might have of what a vacation on St. Barts might mean. It's not all Rolexes or tubs of Iranian caviar for two—it's a naturally gorgeous island with a fascinating history. A great way to take the temperature of the island is to start with a morning walk around the capital, Gustavia, a tidy collection of old red-roofed buildings clad in volcanic stone. The pretty harbor promenade, re-planted with more foliage and trees than ever before, starts near the

ferry terminal and small, open-air fish market. In high season, the docks are known to be crowded with mega yachts, all jostling for prime preening space—and perfect for FOMO rubbernecking. Few visitors venture to the opposite side of the harbor, but it's well worth it for panoramic views of town and neighboring islands from Forts Karl and Oscar.

French Huguenots were the first to make a real go at settlement of the island in 1673. About a hundred years later, King Louis XVI gifted the island to Swedish King Gustaf III in return for trading rights in Gothenburg. Less than a hundred years later, it was back in French hands, but notice the street signs in Gustavia are almost all in both languages. Seek shade in St. Bartholomew's Anglican Church before window-shopping along the streets that parallel Rue de la République (note that many stores close for lunch). We were happy to discover a Paris outpost of the menswear and accessories store **MacKeene** at 8 Rue du Roi Oscar II. **L'Isoletta**, informal sister to the upscale **L'Isola** Italian restaurant, is a perfect pitstop for Roman-style pizza on a covered terrace.

On your drive out of town to explore beyond Gustavia, there are two viewpoints worth pulling over for: the 1961 Gustavia Lighthouse, reached by a short trail; and the roundabout above the Saint-Barthélemy-Rémy de Haenen Airport, appropriately named the Col de la Tourmente, with a bronze statue of Savaku, an Arawak. If you find a spot to park off of the busy intersection, do so and look to the horizon to the south. Tiny specks in the sky soon become distinguishable as incoming light aircraft, and before you know it they'll be nose-diving directly at you and at the runway below and behind.

Only a mile north is the small village Corossol. Residents here still speak a hybrid of old Norman tongue, the beach is lined with colorful fishing boats, and dried lantanier palm leaves are still hand-woven to make hats and baskets.

Heading west to St. Barts' second main town, St. Jean, stop at the well-stocked Marché U supermarket opposite the airport if staying in a private villa (there's also a smaller version in Lorient). Most of the inventory is imported directly from France, including a vast selection of well-priced wines). St. Jean itself feels much like a laid-back Saint Tropez, with boutiques galore, perfect for beach wear and stocking up on expensive European sunscreens.

If you're not staying in a villa, dinner at the impossibly chic **Villa Marie's** François Plantation restaurant is a real treat for upscale, West Indian-inspired food. Rooms here, 18 of them in the heights of Colombier, are equally impressive in bungalows or villas. Another best option is **Manapany**, a completely renovated hotel in peaceful Anse des Cayes. Almost all of its 43 rooms face the ocean and two swimming pools. The restaurant serves fresh, healthy Caribbean-centric food, the spa (which occupies what was once an oceanfront tennis court) utilizes Dr. Hauschka products, and the entire property has become engineered to be the most ecologically-efficient in the region.



## Day Two: Beaches, Beaches, and More Beaches

St. Barts is blessed with 14 superb beaches—each with its own distinct character. The island is so small you could easily pack in a visit to two or more in a single day. Bring sunscreen, an umbrella, and plenty of water as few have public facilities to offer beyond those with hotels and restaurants fronting the sand. In a nutshell, and in clockwise fashion, here are our favorites:

**St. Jean** is lined with small hotels, including the soon-to-reopen **Eden Rock**, and backed by charming shops and cafes. The waters are calm and clear and nothing quite beats watching airplanes take off directly overhead as the island's only runway ends where wavelets begin. An excellent option for picking-up a picnic lunch is **Maya's To Go**, nearly directly opposite the airport.

**Lorient** is a favorite with surfers; thankfully, its famed surf shack has been rebuilt following storms. The adjacent village, the island's first French settlement (1648), is home to a true dining bargain—**JoJo Burgers**, for casual bites overlooking two picturesque cemeteries.

**Grand Cul-de-Sac** is the perfect spot for water sports as the bay is reef-protected and waters are shallow. Windsurfing and kayaking are especially popular. The major hotels that front the sand, Le Guanahani, Le Sereno, and **Le Barthélemy Hotel & Spa** are the best accommodations, the latter two having **reopened** last year.

**Toiny** marks the beginning of the Côte Sauvage, or "wild side" of St. Barts. A small beach club run by the **Hôtel Le Toiny** is in the process of being reconstructed (the hotel itself, with ultra-private hilltop villas, reopened October 15, 2018). It'sl well

worth driving the dramatic coastline before heading west back up into the mountains.

**Salines**, arguably one of the best in the Caribbean, is approached through a deep valley between Morne de Grand Fond and Morne de Lurin. You'll park by the edge of what was once a large salt-harvesting pond and walk five minutes up and over dunes to find a wide stretch of sand, left to right. Depending on the day, surf can be rough or non-existent, but never threatening. The beach attracts its fair share of those who prefer to frolic *au naturel*.

**Gouverneur** sits at the bottom of a steep, sparsely populated road—it's remote and pristine. A small, well-maintained parking lot comes courtesy of the privately owned land (by none other than Russian billionaire Roman Abramovich). Access to the sand is through a small, shady grove of trees—a popular spot for picnics at the eastern end of the beach. The farther west you walk, the fewer people you'll find. Expect to encounter wild goats on occasion and keep a lookout for traces of buried treasure belonging to the notorious French pirate, Montbars 'The Exterminator.'

**Colombier**, well beyond Gustavia at the very northwestern tip of the island, it can only be reached on foot (or by boat). The easiest trail begins just beyond the Auberge de la Petite Anse in Flamands. It'll take about 30 minutes along a narrow trail, surrounded by cacti and impressive rock formations, and the views are spectacular. The beach itself is popular with Sunday locals, but on a weekday it might just be you and a few luxury yachts in this beautiful bay.

Whatever your party beach style, St. Barts has it. **Nikki Beach Saint Barth** on St. Jean, reopened after much anticipation on March 30, and is a hopping hotbed of

club-centric beauties morning, noon, and now the occasional night. What was formerly the Tom Beach Hotel nearby is now **Pearl Beach** and hosts a lively Saturday Bikini Brunch. Farther along, the newly opened L'll Rock has a distinctively funky Tulum-like vibe (think oversized pillows in the sand). For a complete change of scene, **Shellona**, on quiet Shell Beach just south of Gustavia, you'll find a laid-back Greek restaurant helmed by chef Yiannis Kioroglou (open 10 a.m. to sunset)—and it's one of the nicest of ways to end a long day in the sun.



## Day Three: In and On the Water

Consider yourself more of an outdoorsy, active soul, less inclined to laze on the sand or search for retail therapy outlets? St. Barts is surrounded by shallow reefs



with 22 dive sites in all in the Natural Reserve of Saint Barthélemy, with 15 lying within 30 minutes of Gustavia harbor. One of the most fascinating is the upside-down wreck of the *Nonstop*, a fancy yacht sunk during Hurricane Hugo in 1989. **Big Blue Diving** has dives suitable to all levels of experience (or none) which include snorkeling programs for kids that employ underwater scooters for extra propulsion.

Perhaps our favorite outing, though, is with **Seabob St. Barth**, located on Shell Beach. Eight-year-olds and up can learn how to zoom underwater, holding on to these zippy, bright yellow watercraft. Beginners lessons, snorkeling and scuba diving expeditions are also available. Those without prior certification for Diver Propulsion Vehicles (PADI DPV) can take a half-day course before heading out to Coco Island for a few hours of exploration.

Several surf shops, like Hookipa in St. Jean, dot the island, and private instructors are always available for lessons. The best windsurfing is in the calm waters of Grand Cul-de-Sac. Private boat charters are aplenty, and a comfortable way to spend the day at Colombier beach.

Finally, take another visit to the wild coast for a dip in the natural pools of Grand Fond. Just beyond Toiny, as the coastal road starts to turn inland, park in a small lay-by. A trail leads to a rocky beach. Turn right to its end and the beginning of a rough goat path (bring sturdy shoes). Your first thrill will be the sight of the 'Washing Machine'—a confluence of sea and cliff that creates the illusion of a giant, gyrating swirl of water. Less than half an hour later and a series of sun-warmed natural pools just beg to be sat in. The contrast of their bright green waters with the Caribbean blue of the ocean is astonishing. Your only worry? The occasional sea urchin.

Keeping with the day's aquatic theme, there's no better a place for dinner than at **Bonito** in Gustavia. Originally a private house, the open-air circular dining room overlooks the harbor. Known for its menu of seafood-centric Peruvian *ceviches*, *tiraditos*, and *anticuchos* this unpretentious yet highly sophisticated restaurant is a great way to end a short trip to St. Barts.

