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## In the pink in St. Barts: Island locale offers relaxation for weary travelers

BY CAROL ANN DAVIDSON Tribune News Service Dec 25, 2016 (0)



Flamands Beach and Cheval Blanc St-Barth Isle de France hotel.  
Carol Ann Davidson/Tribune News Service

In a 1493 voyage to the New World, Christopher Columbus added an island in the Caribbean to his collection of discoveries. He named it after his brother, Bartolomeo. Almost three centuries later, mariners from Brittany and Normandy settled there and made a go of it.

And, except for a time, just shy of a century (1784-1878), when France sold it to Sweden in exchange for trading rights in the port of Gothenburg, the 13 square-mile island has remained very French indeed. It's both confusing and amusing that this tiny island has variations on its name as long as or longer than some dynastic royals: St. Barthemely, St. Barth, Saint Barths, St. Barths, etc. and now, officially and mercifully, St. Barts.

My 40-minute Voyager boat ride from St. Martin/Sint Maarten, in the French West Indies, glided into Gustavia, the port of entry into a world of laid-back refinement and natural beauty, where I was greeted with a warm “bonjour” as Udo, a proud staff member of my final destination on St. Barts, escorted me to the awaiting car.

His French accent and charming manner set the stage for what would be a memorable stay at Cheval Blanc St-Barth Isle de France, the only hotel outside of France awarded the rare distinction of “Palace” (one leap above a five-star rating). We sped away, climbing hills with their vertiginous drops to valleys and sea below, and within 15 minutes I was introduced to my “maison,” as the staff referred to it.

As we approached the discreet circular entrance, the evening light cast a pink hue over the white facade. It wasn't a conventional hotel by any means, but a two-story villa — quiet and elegant. I entered door No. 9, just a few steps up from the main entrance off a spacious hallway with its collection of handcrafted pottery and furniture, with a room key fashioned from soft gray leather in the shape of St. Barts — just a taste of the many aesthetically creative ideas that continued to surprise and delight.

The suite exuded a rare combination of spaciousness and intimacy — white vaulted and wooden beamed ceiling soared like a canopy over the king-size bed dressed in white linens monogrammed with such restful French words as “Serenite.” Glass doors opened onto a terrace facing the pool and the silken sands of Flamands beach just beyond. A skylight in the expansive bathroom framed the stars at night and sparkled with sunshine in the morning. A silver metal tray cradling a candle, sea salts, natural loofahs and body lotions stretched the width of the avocado-shaped bathtub, while a pair of padded pink slippers on a white bath mat waited for my wet footprints .

Guerlain products greeted me with a welcome note and instructions for their use, as well as a handwritten card: “We can't wait to pamper you with our exclusive Guerlain Rituals tonight.” The invitation pulled me like a sleepwalker to the Cheval Blanc Spa, nestled in a garden, a stone's throw from the main maison. Cassandra revitalized my travel-weary body with a combination of expert hands, soothing music and an unexpected tray of sorbet and biscuits presented to me even before I reluctantly left the heated massage bed 50 minutes later.

Returning to my room, the stars had magically appeared, the velvety air caressed, and the sounds of birds and insects sang a song of southern climes. In my suite I found that, mysteriously, the bathtub was filled with water and pale pink petals. Pink, it turned out, is the signature color motif throughout the hotel. Not just any old pink, but a pink curated exclusively for this property — a blush pink as soft as the inside of a conch shell and yes, that of a tender hibiscus flower.

Cheval Blanc St-Barth Isle de France houses 40 rooms, suites, bungalows and villas and they exude a West Indian flavor mixed with a French style. My room had the sea view, but I could have been equally thrilled with any of the villas tucked away in the tropical garden setting with acres of flowering trees, wooden pathways and private pools. The entire effect was enchanting.

I ate a great deal of very fine French food at both La Case de L'Isle with its specialty seafood dishes, and in the feet-in-the sand beachfront La Cabane de L'Isle. During one lunch at La Cabane, I indulged in a medley of chef Yann Vinsot's magic, including Burrata laced with truffles, lobster salad, carpaccio, salmon sashimi and, as if that was not enough, a chocolate tarte with pears. A pink and white wooden fan had been placed on the table just in case the heat of the day interfered with the pleasure of consumption. It did not.

At dinner one evening, I happened to strike up a conversation with a couple from Alabama. They owned a villa somewhere on St. Barts, but preferred to eat at La Case de L'Isle, their "favorite restaurant on the island." I found out as I traveled around the island that about 30 hotels and innumerable private villas dot its shores and hilltops. Besides the beauty and calm, the island is known to be safe and tax-free. Mind you, it is also very expensive. My suite, during off season when I visited, was about \$1,400, without food, and during high season that rate can be doubled. Nevertheless, as the minister of tourism, Nils Dufau told me, as we toured the island, "55 percent of the tourists in St. Barts return time and time again, 60 percent of them from North America and 30 percent from Western Europe." "They love that it is a little France next to America. They come because it is tranquille."

He added that no building on St. Barts is allowed to be more than two stories high and 65 percent of the island is a "free-zone" to protect the environment, which was evident as we toured many of the scenic spots. One in particular had a breathtaking view of Colombier beach, a bay so secluded that it can be reached only by foot or by boat. I first attempted it by foot- walking along the Flamands beach into a wooded area, up and down rocks in the morning heat. I must admit that despite my desire to reach Colombier, I gave up ... where was that fan when needed it.

Undaunted, I tried again. This time was, shall I say, far less arduous. Going in style, drinking champagne the whole way on a sunset sail from Gustavia, in a 45-foot catamaran operated by Jicky Marine Service. As we sailed around a peninsula harboring one side of the bay, a Rockefeller villa stood sentinel as the lone occupant. (Tourism was really born in St. Barts when David Rockefeller purchased this peninsula in the 1960s and his friends followed). As our catamaran anchored in the crystal-clear waters, considered to be one of the best snorkeling spots in the Caribbean, the sun was angling for a glorious set. Without hesitation, we donned our bathing suits and jumped into the warm water, swam to the beach and watched as the sky morphed into candy-colored streaks. The twinkling lights of Gustavia guided us home that evening.

For tourists of all stripes and colors, St. Barts offers a cast of experiences from little fishing villages, such as Corossol, to the shops and restaurants and art galleries in the village of St. Jean and town of Gustavia.

International music festivals both classical and jazz, as well as boating races and culinary events, such as the recent St. Barth Gourmet Festival, are celebrated yearly.

Leaving my lovely Cheval Blanc St-Barth Isle de France was not easy. On my journey home, I realized that I had been privy to a singular world orchestrated with attention to detail and executed by exemplary staff with impeccable training and a huge dollop of kindness.

I hope to be one of those 55 percent returners.

Cheval Blanc needs just one extra surprise to live up to its name and insignia – a white thoroughbred stallion cantering along Flamands beach ... is that too much to wish for?