

LE GUANAHANI ST. BARTS, FRENCH WEST INDIES

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The turquoise waters and soft sands of St. Barthélemy (St. Barts, for short) are born from a dream. This is the French island that made air kissing cool among Americans, that keeps the elite warm during the winter months and has one of the most notoriously tiny airstrips, ever. (The pilot of my eight-seater Tradewind Aviation Pilatus PC-12 handled the landing brilliantly.)

Located southeast of St. Martin, St. Barts is eight square miles of Caribbean luxury, and at the northeast portion of the island is Le Guanahani, perched on a private 18-acre peninsula. Just in time for its 30th birthday, the oceanside property, built in 1986, put the finishing touches on a four-year, \$40 million renovation. A quintessential tropical, casual-chic look reigns throughout its 67 guest cottages, painted in lavender and lemon. The custom furniture, made to mimic travel trunks used by explorers, reflects the island's adventurous beginnings. Discovered by Christopher Columbus in 1493 and named for his brother, Bartolomeo, St. Barts was first settled by the French in the 17th century and changed hands several times before returning to France as an outpost. The island is not shy of European flavor.

It's easy to see why this property ranked among the top Caribbean resorts in *Condé Nast Traveler's* 2015 Reader's Choice Awards. First, the property is expansive; nothing feels cramped. Next, the cottages are colorful pieces of artwork, with sweeping views of frothy waves from every room. The sun's rays enter through seaside patios onto hardwood floors. Third, there's so much to experience. Guests unwind on one of Le Guanahani's two beaches, indulge in a robust menu of services at the Spa by

Clarins and soak in one of two freshwater pools. For the outdoorsy type, there are trainer-led wellness sessions and tennis lessons, ATV excursions and water sports like kitesurfing and snorkeling. For hunger pangs, feast on Mediterranean-inspired dishes at the hotel's two restaurants: Indigo, which features beach and pool views and offers all-day dining, or Bartolomeo, which rests within an elegant garden. Meals are taken at leisure here. Staff and guests alike converse in lilting French, and, like a scene from *Beauty and the Beast*, everyone I encounter smiles and says, "Bonjour." One morning I opt for a light breakfast at Indigo: juicy watermelon, ripe cantaloupe, a blend of orange, mango and guava juice and a symphony of rumbling waves. It's the perfect breakfast before a sailing trip.

Whether coasting by boat or snaking down winding roads by car, St. Barts offers a buffet of sights. To disconnect from the outside world simply plunge into the clear waters of Saline or Gouverneur Beach. For a more cosmopolitan experience, the streets of the capital, Gustavia, where yachts with names like Utopia float in the harbor, are lined with boutiques selling fringe handbags and neon-accented cover-ups. One of my favorite St. Barts gets was a catamaran trip to Colombier Beach, a paradise that can only be accessed via boat or a nearly 30-minute hike.

My days of lounging beachside flew by. As the airplane soars past the sunset and propels me toward home, I peer at the watercolor sky and the red and green roofs peppering the landscape and wonder whether the past few days have been a dream.

—*Sybilana Respassis*

