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Cracking the Caribbean: Three Islands, One Epic Journey

Winter's almost here, but it's not too late to peace out.

BY BRANDON PRESSER

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St. Barth

More than anywhere else in the Caribbean, St. Barth has essentially become a brand — unreasonably priced tote bags stitched with the island's name practically fly off the shelves of the harbor shops in Gustavia. Synonymous with the high life, the Francophone island is often regarded as a high-end sanctuary for celebrities and the elite. But what is St. Barth *really* like?

Established in the 1640s, Saint Barthélemy was initially a place of great hardship, owing to its arid climate and scarce fresh water. Settlers were devout Catholics, erecting stone chapels in the tropical heat, then performing penance in the darkness within. But its perfect beaches, perhaps the best in all the Caribbean, couldn't be kept a secret forever. The first generation of jet-setters arrived in the 1950s and colonized the island with private beach homes. Today, the duality of provincial charm and high-roller glitz perpetuates its conflicting perceptions, like an island version of Kim Kardashian.

Le Guanahani (LeGuanahani.com) best exemplifies the St. Barth of our imagination: lavish cottages, champagne clinks, and guests in loose linen, all set along a backdrop of aquamarine. And the resort truly excels in the details, from the Clarins products in the bathrooms to the perfectly painted gingerbread trim hand-carved into the eaves of every roof. The property negotiates the island's lack of real estate by constructing its cottages in an almost-linear fashion up from the beach along the cactus-clad hills. So while a cluster of rooms sits away from the sand, they all have views of the blue betwixt sun-bleached palms.

Reflecting its Frenchness, the resort also places a great deal of importance on its food. Casual lunches on the beach come with freshly caught seafood, and **Bartolomeo**, Le Guanahani's fine-dining option, elevates Creole seafood recipes by passing them through a gourmet lens. Secluded in a gated garden, the restaurant has earned a solid reputation throughout the island, attracting a smattering of patrons beyond the hotel, from locals celebrating birthdays to Oscar winners on holiday.