

St-Martin/ Sint Maarten

For hundreds of years the Caribbean was the colorful playground of wannabe imperialists who flexed their colonial muscles while transporting rum, slaves and gold between worlds. These faraway kingdoms would repeatedly conquer and retreat, radically changing the political geography with the spark of a cannon. After years of divvying up – and re-divvying up – these sand-strewn paradises like a game of Risk, only one of the 7000 islands in the entire Caribbean remained so dear to two separate empires that they decided to share it.

It's easy to understand why this stunning island – known as St-Martin to the French, and Sint Maarten to the Dutch – has captured the hearts of many. A mere glance reveals conical, coolie-hat-like peaks rising dramatically from the depths of the ocean, and gentle cerulean currents that tumble landward to kiss the bleach-blonde sands.

Today, the allure goes deeper than the island's natural gifts. The arbitrary division of land has given the scrubby island two very distinct personalities, like a set of Siamese twins. Although fundamentally one entity, both sides are engaged in an unconscious game of tug-of-war as they struggle to assert their individuality. At times they work as one, and in other instances they become a caricature of themselves by exaggerating the traits that makes them unique: the French cling to their European roots, as demonstrated by the food and local lingo, while the Netherlands Antilles side plays up their jammin' attitude by appealing to the hedonistic pleasures of visitors. But, although neither side likes to admit it, the whole really is greater than the sum of its parts.

FAST FACTS

- **Area** St-Martin: 54 sq km; Sint Maarten: 34 sq km; Total: 88 sq km
- **Capital** St-Martin: Marigot; Sint Maarten: Philipsburg
- **Country code** St-Martin (☎ 590); Sint Maarten (☎ 599)
- **Departure tax** US\$30; usually included in the price of your ticket
- **Famous for** Being the smallest area of land in the world divided into two nations
- **Language** St-Martin: French; Sint Maarten: Dutch; both sides: English, Creole, Papamientu and Spanish
- **Money** St-Martin: euro (€); Sint Maarten: Netherlands Antillean guilder (ANG); US dollar (US\$) is used on both sides; US\$1 = ANG1.77 = €0.65 = UK£0.51
- **Official name** St-Martin/Sint Maarten
- **Population** St-Martin: 36,000; Sint Maarten: 40,000
- **Visa** Not necessary for visitors from North America or the EU; see p451



HIGHLIGHTS

- **Beaches** (p448) Head to one of the 40-plus beaches on the island: sample Simpson Bay for the odd juxtaposition of cerulean waters underfoot and careening jumbo jets overhead; try Friar's Bay for a Rastafari safari; or go au naturel on Orient Beach
- **Grand Case** (p446) Gorge on sticky ribs at a beachside *lolo* shack or kick it up a notch and drop the big bling on a shmancy dinner that will transport your taste buds all the way to Paris
- **Day Tripping** (p449) Hop on a catamaran or sailboat and spend the day at sea visiting one of the island's scrubby satellites, such as Îlet Pinel, Tintamarre or even Prickly Pear out near Anguilla
- **Sunset Beach Bar** (p441) Visit this jammin' bar, a rite of passage for any visitor: drink a death-defying piña colada and don't forget to duck when the planes come in for landing at Juliana Airport
- **Oyster Pond** (p448) Stop at this remote harbor for a relaxed, pastoral atmosphere – it's half French, half Dutch, and all great

ITINERARIES

- **One Day** One day on St-Martin/Sint Maarten is hardly enough time to even scrape the surface, but if you're arriving by cruise ship, or if you're simply day tripping from nearby Anguilla or St-Barthélemy, it's still worth swinging by to join the fray. Rent a car and make a beeline for Grand Case for an early lunch of sweet barbecue ribs at one of the Creole open-air *lolos*. Next, hit Orient Beach for some sand and sun, and before the day is done, a stop at the Dutch side's Sunset Beach Bar is a must – nurse a beer

HOW MUCH?

- **Compact car rental per day** US\$35
- **Juicy burger at Sunset Beach Bar** US\$8
- **Catamaran daytrip to nearby islands** US\$110
- **Bus from Grand Case to Marigot** US\$4
- **Two beach chairs and an umbrella on Friar's Bay per day** US\$22

as the jumbo jets make a dramatic (and noisy) landing right over your head.

- **Five Days** Oyster Pond is a great sleeping option for a short stay on the island as it straddles the French–Dutch border and maintains a chill island vibe. Spend half your time roaming around Orient Beach, Marigot and Grand Case on the French Side, then bop around Philipsburg and the casino-riddled area near the airport on the Dutch half. A rental car is a must.
- **Two Weeks** Scout out one of the myriad private villas on the island and spend your first week recharging your batteries along one of the quieter beaches like Friar's Bay, Baie Longue, or Le Galion. When you start feeling antsy, hit the fine dining in Grand Case, the lively bar scene at Maho Beach and, now that you've worked up the courage, wear your birthday suit to Orient Beach to get rid of those pesky tan lines.

CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

St-Martin/Sint Maarten averages an annual temperature of a perfect 26°C. July through October sees heat, humidity and, often, hurricanes; many establishments close entirely in September. The best times to visit St-Martin are November to early December and May to June.

HISTORY

For a thousand years, St-Martin/Sint Maarten was sparsely populated by the Arawaks and later the fiercer Caribs. They named the island Sualouiga after the brackish salt ponds that made it difficult to settle.

Columbus sailed past on November 11, 1493, which happened to be the feast of St Martin of Tours, the island's namesake. The Dutch, however, were the first to take advantage of the land, a nice stopping-off point between Holland and their new colonies in Brazil and New Amsterdam (New York City). After a few abortive attempts by the Spanish to regain the island, now found to be brimming with lucrative salt deposits, the French and Dutch ended up fighting for control of it.

As the legend has it, the Dutch and the French decided to partition St-Martin/Sint Maarten from a march originating in Oyster Pond. The French walked northward, the Dutch south. While the French quenched their