Martinique is for (beach) lovers. And foodies. And divers. And hikers. And, especially, Francophiles. A marriage of Gallic culture and Caribbean customs, this overseas department of France is a sunnier, slightly less crowded version of the motherland.

People looking for the more sophisticated pleasures, whether they be the kind you put on your plate or the kind you put on a credit card, will be happy to know that good food and the latest fashions aren’t optional here, but a mandatory fixture wherever visitors congregate.

Volcanic in origin, the island is crowned by the still-smoldering Mont Pelée, which wiped out Martinique’s former capital of St-Pierre in 1902. There’s plenty of hiking and nature-watching on the slopes of the volcano. And since this is often called the ‘Isle of Flowers’ there are botanical gardens tucked into the rugged landscape.

Long luscious beaches and loads of diving are the main attractions in the south. Fishing villages dot the coasts; most of them have managed to hang on their seafaring soul while offering plenty for visitors to see and do.

There’s a lot going on here, but it all happens on Caribbean time. Except for the mountainous north, it’s an exceptionally easy island to drive around. One can surf at Presqu’île de Caravelle in the morning and make it back to Fort-de-France in time (avoiding rush hour) to sample the city’s budding nightlife.

**FAST FACTS**

- **Area** 1080 sq km
- **Capital** Fort-de-France
- **Country code** 🇫🇷 596
- **Departure tax** None
- **Famous for** Flowers, including hibiscus, frangipani and bougainvillea
- **Language** French, Creole
- **Money** euro (€); €1 = US$1.56 = UK£0.79
- **Official name** La Martinique
- **People** Martiniquans
- **Phrase** Un ti-punch s’il vous plaît (One ti-punch, please); excusez-moi, savez-vous où est…? (excuse me, do you know where… is?)
- **Population** 400,000
- **Visa** None required for residents of the US, UK, Canada, the EU, Australia and New Zealand; see p625
HIGHLIGHTS

- **St-Pierre** (p613) See the devastation of Mont Pelée first-hand while the volcano broods in the distance
- **Pointe du Bout** (p618) Take a sailboat tour in the redoubt of the sailing set – food and drink abound
- **Les Salines** (p622) Stretch out on this beautiful long beach
- **Ste-Luce** (p620) Drink and dive in this lively fishing village
- **Presqu’île de Caravelle** (p616) Soak up the sun and sand by day, and gourmet flavors at night

ITINERARIES

- **Five Things You Really Should Try** Try to speak some French – even if you’re reading straight from a phrasebook people will appreciate it. Go into a place where there are a lot of locals and order a ti-punch; on the other end of the spectrum, treat yourself to a great meal. You need to see Martinique from the water – on a ferry, sailboat or snorkeling trip – at least once. Finally, lie on the beach. Speedo-wearing grandpas abound here; beaches definitely aren’t beauty contests.
- **Village Life** Spend a day in a fishing village and get into the rhythm of an ancient way of life. Wake up before dawn and watch the fishermen preparing for the day, have a leisurely breakfast and then read on the beach while awaiting their return. Then, eat the day’s catch for dinner!

CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

Martinique enjoys a year-round tropical climate though its busiest tourist period is during the dry season, from December to May, when temperatures average about 26°C (85°F). The rainy season begins in June and continues until the end of November, with heavy showers most days (September is the rainiest month and, along with August, is most prone to hurricanes). Martinique’s average humidity is high, ranging from 80% in March and April to 87% in October and November. The mountainous northern interior is both cooler and rainier than the coast.

HISTORY

When Christopher Columbus sighted Martinique, it was inhabited by Caribs, who called the island Madinina, which means ‘Island of Flowers.’ Three decades passed before the first party of French settlers, who were led by Pierre Belain d’Esnambuc, landed on the northwest side of the island. There they built a small fort and established a settlement that would become the capital city, St-Pierre. The next year, on October 31, 1636, King Louis XIII signed a decree authorizing the use of African slaves in the French West Indies.

The settlers quickly went about colonizing the land with the help of slave labor and by 1640 had extended their grip south to Fort-de-France, where they constructed a fort on the rise above the harbor. As forests were cleared to make room for sugar plantations, conflicts with the native Caribs escalated into warfare, and in 1660 those Caribs who had survived the fighting were finally forced off the island.

The British also took a keen interest in Martinique, invading and holding the island for most of the period from 1794 to 1815. The island prospered under British occupation; the planters simply sold their sugar in British markets rather than French markets. Perhaps more importantly, the occupation allowed Martinique to avoid the turmoil of the French Revolution. By the time the British returned the island to France in 1815, the Napoleonic Wars had ended and the French empire was again entering a period of stability.

Not long after the French administration was re-established on Martinique, the golden era of sugarcane began to wane, as glutted markets and the introduction of sugar beets on mainland France eroded prices. With their wealth diminished, the aristocratic plantation owners lost much of their political influence, and the abolitionist movement, led by Victor Schoelcher, gained momentum.

It was Schoelcher, the French cabinet minister responsible for overseas possessions, who convinced the provisional government to sign the 1848 Emancipation Proclamation, which brought an end to slavery in the French West Indies. Widely reviled by the white aristocracy of the time, Schoelcher is now regarded as one of Martinique’s heroes.

On May 8, 1902, in the most devastating natural disaster in Caribbean history, the Mont Pelée volcano erupted violently, destroying the city of St-Pierre and claiming the lives of its 30,000 inhabitants. Shortly thereafter, the capital was moved permanently to Fort-de-France. St-Pierre, which had been regarded as the most cultured city in the...