

St-Barthélemy

The mere mention of St-Barthélemy conjures up fanciful dreams such as having cocktails with supermodels, sampling caviar with a four-digit price tag, or dropping some serious bling on a Dior bathing suit...for your miniature schnauzer. Does this stuff really happen in St-Barth? It sure does.

So how, you may ask, did St-Barth become *the* playground for the rich and famous? The question is answered simply by seeing the island. From afar, dozens of sky-scraping mountains dramatically rise to the heavens. As you get closer, these craggy peaks start to reveal their sexy beaches like a dirty secret. Then, when you arrive, the possibilities for decadence become obvious: perfectly positioned bays beg for shmancy restaurants and rolling hills yearn for rambling villas.

For the rest of us, St-Barth still has plenty to offer. Under its star-studded surface, the island has a quiet community of locals who can trace their ancestry back to rural Brittany or Normandy – and even the rugged coastal terrain dotted with lonely cottages feels bizarrely French. Rent a seaside villa with an ocean view and spend your days basking in the warm Caribbean sun. Escape in the evening to sample some savvy French-Creole fusion cuisine, or head to a vibrant local market for some floppy fish and legumes.

Whether you're after the glamorous life of the jet-setting glitterati, or simply a hushed bucolic village vibe, St-Barth can supply it. Just remember: while the two cultures of the island are almost diametrically opposed, they are ultimately united by their love of the Madonna (albeit different ones...).

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 21 sq km
- **Capital** Gustavia
- **Country code** ☎ 590
- **Departure tax** €4.50
- **Famous for** Being the ridiculously expensive playground of the rich and famous
- **Language** French
- **Money** euro (€); €1 = US\$1.56 = UK£0.79
- **Official name** Collectivité de Saint-Barthélemy
- **People** French
- **Phrase** I would like to thank the Academy...
- **Population** 7500
- **Visa** Not necessary for most nationalities; see p467



HIGHLIGHTS

- **Beaches** (p464) Try Anse de Colombier in the far west for powdery white sand or head to Anse de Gouverneur in the east for a perfectly rugged stretch of beach – it's so hard to pick just one!
- **Gustavia** (p458) Strut your stuff while window-shopping and yacht-ogling in St-Barth's stunning fort-flanked capital
- **Fine Dining** (p457) Bust out the plastic – the island's legion of world-class chefs dedicate their careers to eliciting a visceral 'mmm!' from guests
- **Corossol** (p463) Step back in time to this charming village ripped straight from the tranquil western coast of France
- **Staying in Style** (p464) Set your Louis Vuitton luggage down at an opulent resort, such as the Guanahani, or slip away to a hidden beachside villa

ITINERARIES

- **One Day** Take a puddle jumper or the ferry over from St-Martin/Sint Maarten and spend the day ogling giant yachts and shopping in Gustavia. For an early dinner try popular Le Select, or head to Public and eat at Maya's. Adventurous types with plenty of energy may consider grabbing a cab to the western lookout point at the end of Colombier and walking back to Gustavia.
- **Five Days** Get a room at the Guanahani in Grand Cul-de-Sac (if you've just won the lottery) or at Saline Gardens in Anse de Grande Saline and spend three blissful days by the beach. In the evenings try out some of the internationally acclaimed restaurants that pepper the island. On your last two days, undergo some retail therapy in Gustavia followed by a couple of hours roaming the quiet west coast, particularly around quaint Corossol.
- **Two Weeks** Snag one of the many private villas scattered around the island, and spend your first week at a different beach each day. Then get your adrenaline pumping with a sailing day trip and a scuba dive, plus some hiking in the east, and round out the week swiping your plastic at the boutiques in Gustavia.

CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

St-Barth has two seasons: the *carême*, the dry season; and the *hivernage*, the hurricane

season from July to November, when heavier rains are expected.

During Christmas the rates skyrocket from pricey to outrageously ridiculous, so this may be a time to avoid.

HISTORY

Due to its inhospitable landscape and lack of freshwater, St-Barth never had a big Arawak or Carib presence.

When Christopher Columbus sighted the island on his second voyage in 1493, he named it after his older brother Bartholomeo. The first Europeans who attempted to settle the island, in 1648, were French colonists. They were soon killed by Caribs. Norman Huguenots gave it another try about 25 years later and prospered, not due to farming (which was near impossible) or fishing, but by setting up a way station for French pirates plundering Spanish galleons. You can still hear traces of the old Norman dialect in towns such as Flamands and Corossol.

In 1784, the French king Louis XVI gave St-Barth to the Swedish king Gustaf III in exchange for trading rights in Göteborg. There are still many reminders of the Swedish rule – such as the name Gustavia, St-Barth's continuing duty-free status, and several buildings and forts – on the island. However, Sweden sold St-Barth back to France in 1878 after declining trade, disease and a destructive fire affected the island.

Throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, St-Barth wasn't much more than a quaint French backwater, and life was tough for residents. Without the lush vegetation typical of the Caribbean, farming was difficult. Many former slaves emigrated to surrounding islands to find work, leaving St-Barth one of the only islands in the region without a substantial African population.

In the 1950s, tourists slowly started arriving at the tiny airport on small planes and private jets. The scrubby island suddenly found new natural resources: beaches, sunsets, quiet. Quick-thinking islanders created laws limiting mass tourism to guard their hard-earned lifestyle; as a result, you won't see casinos, high-rise hotels or fast-food chains, but you will pay for the atmosphere.

On December 7, 2003, an overwhelming 90% of the population of St-Barth voted to grant themselves more fiscal and political