

New York  
**RESIDENT**

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***St. Barth For Less***

By Sylvie Bigar



St. Barth is known as one of the more expensive Caribbean vacation spots, but it's possible to visit without breaking the bank.

Some of the bad stuff you hear about St. Barth is true. It is a hassle to get to, can be very expensive, and is a bastion of sometimes annoyingly French culture—in the afternoon, Gustavia, the capital, feels like a ghost town; it is time for lunch and “la sieste.”

But there are pleasures on the island that cost nothing at all. Stroll on the beach, it's all there: the softness of the sand, the turquoise water and above all, the tranquility. There are 14 beaches on St. Barth and most of the time, nature still owns the place.

**Beaches**

Gouverneur Beach on the south side can be reached via a bumpy ride but the road leads you to the dune. Framed by two walls of rock, a stretch of golden powder offers privacy and good swimming but no shade.

Saline Beach, named for the salt marshes nearby, is almost an institution. No need for a bikini to blend in. If you enjoy getting as close to nature as possible, this is the place for you. It is often impossible to decide where to turn for the most beautiful view.

Grand-Cul-de-Sac, in the northwest, is worth the drive. This is the best beach for families with children. The “cul-de-sac” is a lagoon and kids delight in the ripples, chasing small fish close to the shore.

**Where to eat**

Who says you cannot eat under \$100 in St. Barth? Tucked in the hamlet of St. Jean, a small restaurant strangely named “Le Piment” (the chili pepper) is piquant in its own way. Its secret: In the kitchen lives a Sicilian genius and his pizzas are the best in town. Try their pastas (not on the menu). The fettuccini carbonara was the best I

tasted since Taormina—the perfect symphony of bacon, egg and cream.

One of France's greatest culinary achievements are croissants. At 50 cents a piece, have a few at the many fragrant patisserie that dot the island. An all-time favorite is the Epicerie Sainte-Hélène in Flamands.

Another must is lunch or dinner on the beach. There is just nothing like wiggling your toes in the sand as you savor the local accras (cod fritters) or fricassee de lambis (conch stew), with a glass of Sancerre. Try "Coccoloba," on Grand-Cul-de Sac. Start with a Coccoloba drink—pineapple, guava and mango with or without rum—and take a deep breath. Life is good.

In St. Jean, visit La Plage. Reminiscent of St. Tropez, La Plage's décor mixes Asian and Moroccan influences. Whether you choose the "bar en croute de sel" or tuna tartare, this affordable restaurant is seductive and relaxing. In front of the airport, Maya, of the wonderful restaurant Maya's by the harbor, has opened Maya To Go: The signature flourless chocolate cake, fruit tarts or tangy ceviche of wahoo.

### **Where to stay**

St. Barth gets sunnier after January when most hotels drop their prices, sometimes by as much as 40 percent.

One choice is Le Sereno by designer Christian Liaigre (Mercer Hotel, Buddakan). Step through red doors and take in the view: There is a long reflecting pool and an open rotunda housing a good restaurant.

At the Tropical Hotel, guests lounge in a lush garden, enjoying the relaxed atmosphere. An even more economical option, the Hotel Normandie in Lorient is a family-run cluster of eight bungalows around a small swimming pool. Its rates start at around \$100 per night.

### **Shopping**

Since St. Barth's reputation for the best nude beaches this side of Biarritz is justified, you don't need much clothing. But if the shopping bug bites, this is paradise. From gourmet rums to local cosmetics (you can visit the Ligne St. Barth factory in Lorient), the island offers many unique shops. Most French labels are priced reasonably, especially when compared to New York.

In Gustavia, visit Sabina Zest's boutique. A Swedish-born designer, Zest sketches her collection with pastel colors, earth-friendly fabrics and great style. Step in The House Boutique and you won't need a designer for your abode. With furniture and objects from around the world, The House feels like a treasure chest from distant lands at great prices.

St. Barth is not for bargain hunters but it is possible to spend a few days on this magnificent island without needing to refinance your mortgage. Think about it while you plan your next getaway—it's worth it.

### **IF YOU GO...**

#### GETTING THERE FROM NEW YORK

Fly to St. Maarten via multiple airlines and connect to a 10-minute flight to St. Barth.

#### WHERE TO STAY

Hotel Normandie; \$100 per night for a simple room in lovely garden, (011-590) 27-73-78.

Tropical Hôtel; \$150 per night for a single room with garden view, [st-barths.com/tropical-hotel](http://st-barths.com/tropical-hotel)

To splurge, Le Sereno; \$638 per night for a suite with garden view and deck, [lesereno.com](http://lesereno.com)

#### WHERE TO DINE

Le Piment (\$10-\$20)

Rte. de Saline

(011-590) 27-53-88

Epicerie Sainte-Hélène

Flamands

La Plage (\$10-\$35)

St. Jean Beach

(011-590) 27-53-13

Coccoloba (\$10-\$25)

Grand-Cul-de-Sac

(011-590) 27-75-66

Maya's To Go

(011-590) 29-83-70  
[st-barths.com/mayas-to-go](http://st-barths.com/mayas-to-go)

WHERE TO SHOP  
Ligne St. Barth  
(011-590) 27-82-63

Sabina Zest  
(011-590) 27-82-82  
[sabinazest.com](http://sabinazest.com)

The House Boutique  
(011-590) 27-88-04  
[saint-barths.com/thehouse](http://saint-barths.com/thehouse)