



St. Martin/ St. Maarten

Beyond the Big Boats



by Roberta Sotonoff

The backyard of Norman Wathey's childhood home has a little waterfall and old salt storage ruins nestled under a canopy of large ficus and almond trees.

"My wife thought it would be a good place for a restaurant—very relaxing," says Wathey.

Wathey took her advice. Now the backyard is the patio of the popular Kangaroo Court Café. If you don't mind a scattering of leaves and nuts, it is a pleasant place to escape the cruise crowds. Sometimes as many as six ships at a time are in port, and Front Street, Philipsburg, St. Maarten's shopping mecca, is swarming with people.

The good thing for the islanders is that the cruise ships which swarm here are usually gone by dusk. That's also what is unfortunate for the passengers of the cruise ships. These travelers only get to sample one or two of the island's unique offerings. They never get to see the island when it isn't mobbed with

The St. Maarten 12-Metre Challenge is a sailing contest for everyone—whether you know sailing or not. Above, a vista of Orient Bay.

PHOTO COURTESY ST. MAARTEN 12 METRE CHALLENGE; PHOTO ABOVE BY ROBERTA SOTONOFF



Above: An artist at work on St. Martin. **Right:** Throughout the island you will find colorful homes and secluded beaches.

people and the traffic isn't snarled. They don't have enough time to enjoy the peace of the beaches, have a gourmet dinner, or spend a night at some charming little hotel.

A leisurely exploration of this 37-square-mile isle is the real trip. It's a world unto itself. People of seventy different nationalities inhabit the island's two sides: St. Maarten (Dutch) and St. Martin (French). Sit at an outdoor café, especially on the French side, and the chatter of any number of languages will surround you.

How did this cosmopolitan island-sharing come to be? It dates back to the 17th century when the French and Dutch first colonized the island. It was typical European colonialism of the time. Everyone wanted a piece of the action, especially the Spanish. They came and conquered. Then, in 1648, the French and Dutch teamed up and blew the Spanish away. The French/Dutch

arrangement has amicably continued ever since. Though the borders that separate the two countries are unmarked, today there are differences.

Except when some of the late night clubs bustle, the *rues* of Marigot (the French capital of St. Martin) are farther away from the cruise ships and a bit quieter. Many hotels are smaller and charming. My verandah at La Plantation, which had a sweeping view of Baie Orientale, was shared with the resident cat.

When traveling to the island, it is important to remember that St. Martin is wired with the European-standard 220-volt electrical current—not 120-volt like we use in the States. It can take an electrical maven to bypass those French safety mechanisms. You say you

use a wash cloth to clean your face? Bring it. Like many foreign destinations, the lodgings in St. Martin don't offer them.

The Dutch side is more Americanized. Hotels have wash cloths. Most are also larger and cater to groups. Because of the cruise ships, shopping is a big thing. Bargains? Keep in mind the dollar has tanked. If you really, really look, maybe you can save some bucks on a watch, camera, or a sparkly bauble. The craft market has the best buys. I got a tie-dyed outfit for my granddaughter for \$6.

St. Maarten's funkiest shop is the Guavaberry Emporium on Front Street. It is the one with the giant rum bottle and a pyramid of brightly colored barrels in the front. The shop is known for its hot

It's possible to visit
one beach each
day of the month
and still not get to
see them all



saucers and unique hand-painted rum bottles. Don't overdo the free guavaberry rum and frappe samples. That stuff is potent.

Shoppers frequent the Maho beach area, too. It is located right by the Casino Royale, one of St. Maarten's 13 casinos. Its Showroom Royale and disco are so glitzy, you will wonder if you've made a detour to Las Vegas.

Enough with the shops and casinos. This isle has too many other activities or non-activities—like spending the day at the beach. It is possible to visit one each day of the month and still not get to see them all. All are public and each has its own allure. Baie Oriente is beautiful, but often quite crowded. On its south end, you can let it all hang out—clothing is optional. Baie Longue and Simpson Beach are gloriously isolated.

Spend your beach time dreaming of the tasty tidbits that you will eat for dinner—something else that the cruisers will miss. The island is known for its cuisine. You can dine on anything from Argentine steaks to ziti with a lot of lip-



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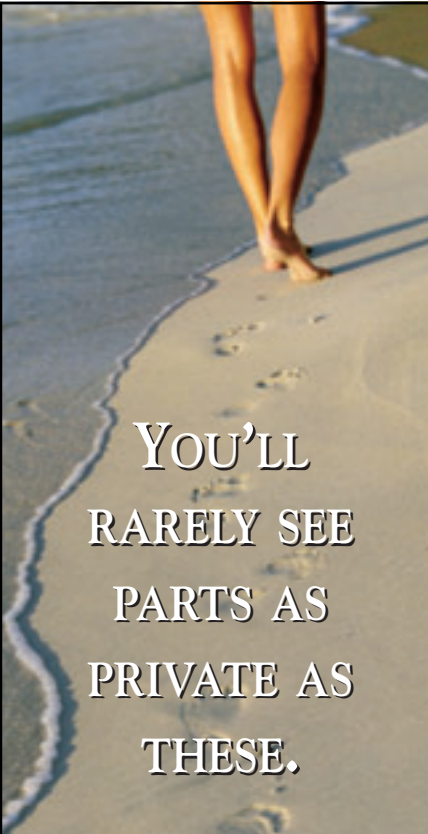
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Narrow streets and intimate, Old-World markets, such as Marigot Market, below, can be found throughout the island.

smacking seafood and French gastronomy in-between. *Lolos* – the little stalls located at the far end of Grand Case — sell reasonably priced seafood and BBQ. It's difficult to get a bad meal anywhere, but you have to have deep pockets to pay for the upscale restaurants, and the St. Martin prices are in Euros. Still, those intimate bistros sure beat the large cruise ship dining room.

If you have the urge to skim the water, try the St. Maarten 12-Metre Challenge. The Challenge is a shortened version of the America's Cup Yacht Race. Teams race in the actual crafts that competed in 1987 America's Cup, including the *Stars and Stripes* – the yacht that Dennis Connor used to win the cup.

No experience is necessary. You don't even have to know the difference between a gaff and a gallow. Teams are chosen. Excitement builds.

Guests can function as grinders, winchers, sail trimmers. Don't want to do much? Well then, volunteer to punch the time clock or just enjoy the ride and guzzle beer.

The Challenge is quite an adventure for novice sailors. When the captain says



its time to tack, they look dumbfounded. Tack? What's that? Some leave the rope out when it should be tightened. Who cares? The wind howls through the sails and there is much whooping it up. Then, at a most opportune moment, would you believe, a camera boat appears to snap pictures? Surprise! They are for sale after the race.

For island photo ops, hike up the craggy path to Fort Louis. The billowing French flag perches above the 240-year-old ruins. The sweeping panorama of the Marigot harbor and Anguilla make a wonderful picture.

By far the best view on the island is at Pic du Paradis, its highest point. You have to want to get there. The road narrows as

PHOTOS BY ROBERTA SOTONOFF



Funky Guavaberry Emporium is one of the most interesting shops on the island.

it ascends. It becomes a bumpy single lane. If you don't remember to turn the car around before you park, you could have a problem. The peaceful walk through the lush greenery to the view from 1,392 feet makes it all worthwhile.

Guess what? You'll miss most of this stuff if you sail away at dusk. 🌅

Roberta Sotonoff is a confessed travel junkie and freelance writer based in Glenview, Illinois.

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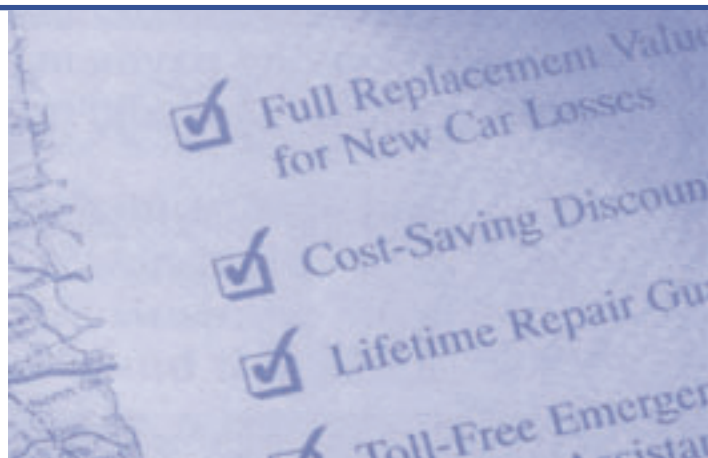
St. Maarten Tourist Office (Dutch side), telephone: 800-786-2278 or 212-953-2084; website: www.stmaarten.com.

St. Martin Tourist Office (French side), telephone: 877-956-1234 or 212-475-8970; website: www.st-martin.org

American Airlines has one direct and several one-stop flights from Miami to St. Maarten.

Departure tax from St. Maarten is \$30. It is included in the cost of an American Airlines ticket. If you are flying another airline, check to see if it is included.

For US citizens, a valid passport is strongly advised for the Dutch side (although a birth certificate with a raised seal is accepted). Passports are necessary for the French side.



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