

Magnificent MARTINIQUE

BY LAURA ALBRITTON





Flying over the glittering Caribbean, I spot sinuous, green mountains warmed by the sun, and the white roofs of a small, coastal town. As the plane descends toward the island’s airport, we pass over the bustling capital Fort-de-France and then cow-studded fields flanked by banana trees and scarlet-flowered poincianas. I’ve flown less than four hours from Miami, but I’m entering another world, one largely undiscovered by American tourists.

Known as the “Island of Flowers,” Martinique lies between St. Lucia and Dominica and is a semi-autonomous department of France, with a population that speaks both French and Creole. Surprisingly unspoiled, the island is known for pristine beaches with gin-clear waters. Visitors can hike through tropical forests and snorkel coral reefs. Or enjoy internationally celebrated rum agricole with refined, Creole cuisine.

The birthplace of Napoleon’s Empress Josephine, Martinique has a fascinating, colonial history still preserved in its Great

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*From
ancient hills to
contemporary
food trends,
the island of
Martinique
offers it all.*

*Colorful architecture, laidback beaches, friendly locals—it's the recipe for a successful vacation.
Photos pages 90-93 by Zickie Allgood*





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Houses and monuments. While profoundly Caribbean, the island also boasts well-maintained French roads, grocery stores carrying French goods, and—my personal favorite—authentic croissants that could rival any in Paris.

After renting a car, I usually head southwest to Les Anses d'Arlet, or the Coves of Arlet, charming villages situated along a sea that shimmers in shades of turquoise and peacock blue. Anses d'Arlet bourg (or town) is known for its 18th century Saint-Henri church fronting the sea and a long pier just begging for visitors to take

vacation selfies. You can snorkel a short way from shore to see multicolored fish, or book a more structured dive trip with a local scuba shop.

At lunchtime, I head to one of the “lolos,” simple beach huts which usually offer three-course menus and nice French wines. I might start with a ‘Ti Punch, white rum with muddled lime and sugar, then order light, crispy accras (shrimp fritters), followed by pan-fried snapper, finishing off with a baked banana doused in rum and set alight. Delicious and not expensive!

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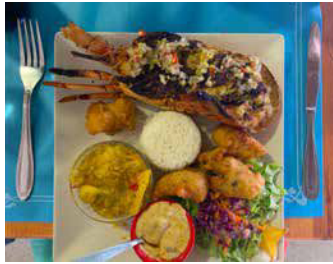
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For lodging, you could rent a cottage in one of the Anses d'Arlets towns or stay on the southern coast in Le Diamant. If so, be sure to stop at the cliff-top l'Anse Caffard sculptures, a memorial to enslaved Africans who perished in an 1830 shipwreck. From here, you'll also spot Diamond Rock, a magnificent 574-foot formation captured by the British navy during the Napoleonic Wars. Today at Le Diamant you'll find a tranquil town with a long, palm-lined beach for walking, surfing and bodyboarding. Here you can rent villas or stay in small hotels. In the morning, two excellent French bakeries sell amazing, warm croissants and pastries.

If you'd rather have the convenience of an all-inclusive, headquarter in the southeast at Club Med, just outside the tiny, attractive town of St. Anne, with a luxuriously clear, calm ocean. Not far from here is Les Salines beach, left completely natural, and an excellent place for a picnic. Wherever you stay, don't miss an excursion to Habitation Clément, a historic estate that creates some of the world's best rum agricole (rum distilled from sugar cane juice, not molasses). Walk through the tropical gardens, tour the historic Great House, explore the factory and art gallery, and end by treating yourself to a tasting.

Nearby at Le François, you can book a boat trip to the Baths of Josephine, a stunning, shallow spot between two tiny islands—allegedly Josephine de Beauharnais's favorite place



to sea bathe. West-coast Martinique has other traces of the woman who became Napoleon’s beloved wife, including her family’s former plantation, La Pagerie, and a small museum with relics from her life.

To fully appreciate Martinique’s stunning beauty, visit the Balata Garden, north of the capital city. With 300 species of palms and 3,000 different tropical plants, the garden immerses you in a natural wonderland of green. Further north lies the historic town of St. Pierre, destroyed in a 1902 eruption of Mount Pelée. You can tour the 17th century ruins, still preserved amid a modern city. The adventurous might hike the lush Mount Pelée National Forest trails. South of St. Pierre at Le Carbet is a striking black sand beach—perfect for an afternoon dip.

No trip is complete without a stop at a large grocery store like Carrefour or Leader Price to peruse aisles of bargain-priced French wines, superb cheeses, genuine French saucisson (sausage), yummy chocolate bars, coffee, and exotic fruit. I always stock up on locally made soaps and rum to take back as souvenirs.

Although I’ve visited many wonderful Caribbean islands, Martinique holds a special place in my heart. There’s an authenticity and a beauty here that haven’t been overwhelmed by tourism or development. When my plane departs at last, and I wave goodbye to Martinique’s airport, I’m already dreaming of when I’ll next say bonjour. **SGL**



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