

# D DOWN U B L E

Sophisticated cuisine, cafe culture, glamorous beaches—it must be the Euro-centric charm of St. Martin.

By Aaron Gulley  
Photography by Jen Judge



**WATER WORLDS**  
*(Left) The infinity pool at La Samanna Resort.  
(Right) Pool and view from an Inspirato villa.*



RAIN BEGINS TO FAUCET FROM THE SKY MINUTES after I've landed on St. Martin. It's light at first, then steady enough that at the car rental agency I don't bother walking around the vehicle to inspect for damage. "Don't worry, it never rains more than a few minutes," says the rental agent. My few days on this Caribbean island won't be what I expect, but that's not necessarily a bad thing.

It's still pouring 30 minutes later when I reach my Inspirato villa, a whitewash, 4,600-square-foot plantation-style mansion with a red tile roof and huge infinity pool that peers out over a cliff to the Caribbean. Though the views from the patio are painted in slates and grays, it's stunning nonetheless, and I muse to my Inspirato concierge, Steven Calder, that one could probably happily spend an entire week on the patio eating seafood and watching the water. It might as well be a premonition.

"Never mind that. There's plenty to do," Steven assures. He describes top-notch snorkeling on Pinel Island, near St. Martin's northern tip, and catamaran trips around the island.

By some strange historical machinations, the island is divided. To the north is French Saint Martin, a collectivity of France with the same status as, say, Alsace or Burgundy. And Dutch Sint Maarten sits to the south, an independent country that, together with Aruba, Curaçao and the Netherlands, forms the Kingdom of the Netherlands. The difference is like the Florida Keys (St. Martin) versus Disneyland (Sint Maarten), except here the two are 20 minutes apart.

There's shopping in Philipsburg and Marigot, nightclubs on the Dutch side, idyllic beaches on the French half and countless dining options in the sleepy fishing village of Grand Case. "And the forecast is better tomorrow."

I've come for here for the island's perfect, crystalline beaches, quaint bistro-style restaurants with Michelin stars and a healthy dose of vitamin D for the early winter doldrums. The beaches, the food, the tax-free shopping, the nightlife—that's why you visit this little drop of land at the head of the Leeward Islands. That plus, in a space about half the size of West Palm

Beach, Florida, you can tick off not just one, but two European countries.

By some strange historical machinations, the island is divided. To the north is French St. Martin, a collectivity of France with the same status as, say, Alsace or Burgundy. And Dutch Sint Maarten sits to the south, an independent country that, together with Aruba, Curaçao and the Netherlands, forms the Kingdom of the Netherlands. Few places can boast so much exotic bang-for-the-buck, especially just three hours from Miami.

Belmond La Samanna, the resort where the villa is located, is situated on Baie Longue, a ribbon of silky white sand that curves to the horizon. The villas, eight of them in all, perch atop a milky white, limestone promontory at the southeast end of the beach. Once the storm moves out, iguanas materialize from the rocks and alight in my villa's backyard, a grassy verge as neatly manicured as a polo field. I notice them as I explore the property. Eventually take the iguanas' lead, switching

my internal clock to languid island time and sitting down in the gathering sun. Slowly, my American-bred need to "do something!" melts away. For hours, these prehistoric-looking beasts, some as long and thick as missiles, loiter motionless. I, too, begin to nod in and out of consciousness, easing down from the stress and frenetic work routine, and it feels good. Nothing like life lessons from small-brained reptiles.

Later, I head down to the beach, Baie Longue, and continue my reverie, loitering in the sun. It's a stunning strand. Except for a few guests snoozing under hotel umbrellas, the seaside is empty



ST. MARTIN STYLE  
*Marigot, the main town on the French side of the island; Niçoise Salad island-style; Local juice and rum.*







**DIVE IN**  
*A pool overlooking the Caribbean at one of Inspirato's villas.*



**SETTLE IN**  
*Inside one of Inspirato's Signature Residences at La Samanna.*



and broad and pristine, and it feels like my own private paradise. In the evening there's a rum tasting at La Samanna's cave, which houses the biggest wine collection in the entire Caribbean, some 12,000 bottles. But I'm not here in the dark, cool cellar for the wine. Instead, sommelier Christian Mirande lines up bottles of rum from light to dark and pours snifters of the sweet nectar as he explains the differences in the casks and aging processes. When I ask him about the best rum from St. Martin, he laughs. "We have no sugar cane," he says, though he adds that there's a local woman named Ma Doudou who's gained notoriety for her rum infusions. "But the Caribbean's finest rums come from Martinique." He pours a taste of the La Samanna-branded rum, produced by Martinique distillery Habitation St. Étienne. Aged in port casks, the spirit is sweet and spicy and tinged with cherry overtones, and it finishes like good bourbon.

I dine at La Samanna's Trellis restaurant that evening, where chef Gil Dumoulin prepares French classics with modern and Caribbean influences. The marinated herring appetizer, for instance, is a hearty, comfort food mainstay of Alsace and northern France, but here it's deconstructed into tiny bites of tart, succulent fish offset by creamy, bright periwinkle Vitelotte potatoes. And the foie gras, some of the richest, smoothest I've ever tried, is balanced by a surprising mango chutney. "The French take influences that we find in these places, like conch and lobster and creole spices, and we make them our own," Dumoulin tells me after the meal. I ask him where he would suggest for some distinctly local Caribbean cuisine, and he mentions a few French spots in the north shore town of Grand Case: l'Estaminet, Auberge Gourmande and Ocean 82.

"As for the food of St. Martin ... Bof!" he says, with that typical French cheek puff. "There's not so much tradition here."

Three days after I arrive, I venture out to Philipsburg, capital of the Dutch side and the island's only anchorage for cruise ships. Steven says there's not much more to see than a bit of shopping, but it feels important to see the island's first city. The visit, however, is short-lived. Back Street is a patchwork of colorfully painted but run-down Caribbean tenements, while Front Street is dominated by curious trinket shops catering to the cruise ships that dock in the marina at the east end of town. The stores are worse: There's the Yoda Guy Movie Museum, the Dirty Sanchez Crew Bar and Tees By The Seas, where I watch a man buy a T-shirt that reads, "My

AROUND THE ISLAND

A surfer catches the first morning waves at Prune Beach; La Samanna's wine cellar; Kali's Beach Bar; an iguana on Pinel Island.

In the evening there's a rum tasting at La Samanna's cave, which houses the biggest wine collection in the entire Caribbean, some 10,000 bottles. In the dark, cool cellar, sommelier Christian Mirande lines up bottles of rum from light to dark, including a La Samanna-branded one from Martinique.

parents said I could become anything, so I became an asshole. — St. Martin." On the way out of town, a threadbare Rasta with salt-and-pepper dreads on a Segway with a license plate that reads "We Be Jammin'" circles me twice. Philipsburg, check. I can't get back to French St. Martin fast enough. On Steven's advice, however, I stop at Sunset Bar & Grill on Maho Bay, halfway between Philipsburg and La Samanna. It's set on the beach at one end of the airport runway, whose proximity to the water jangled my nerves when I arrived. The place is a tourist dive, crawling with snookered holidaymakers, and I

INSPIRATO RECOMMENDS



St. Martin

Settle into a cliffside residence with 4 bedrooms, all within the luxurious La Samanna resort.

TO LEARN MORE ABOUT INSPIRATO'S ST. MARTIN SIGNATURE RESIDENCES, PLEASE TURN TO PAGE 157.



Steven Calder's picks  
Inspirato  
Destination  
Concierge

**SHOP:** The **Open Market** in Marigot runs every Wednesday and Saturday and features an array of local foods and mementos.

**EAT:** The locals go to **Enoch's** or **Rosemary's** in Marigot for some of the best barbecue in the Caribbean.

Every Thursday night is salsa night at **Calmos Café**, a casual and easy place for a night out with friends.

For a romantic dinner, **La Cigale** is the place to go, right on the beach and serving some

of the best French food on the island (think duck parmentier and lamb).

**BEACHES:** **Long Bay, Plum Bay** and **Happy Bay** are wonderful, while you can enjoy great attention and food at **Pinel Island**. But don't hesitate to charter a boat to take you to **Tintamarre** where you can get away from everything.

From La Samanna you can book a snorkeling trip to **Baie Longue**.

Jan. 30 – Feb. 18, 2015  
**CARNIVAL** Don a disguise and hit the streets to sing, dance and celebrate the annaul bacchanal. Not to be outdone, the Dutch side of the island hosts its own Carnival, with concerts and parades.

Mar. 5-8, 2015  
**HEINEKEN REGATTA** More than 300 sailboats, ranging from family cruisers to sleek racing yachts, meet for this week of races and parties.







FRENCH  
WITH A TWIST  
*Turbot at La Samanna's  
Trellis restaurant.*



BEACH  
PARADISE  
*La Samanna's Baie  
Longue.*



can't really understand why Steven suggested it. Then a Boeing 737 buzzes the beach at around 50 feet off the ground, the entire place erupts with cheers like it's New Year's Eve, and the good unpretentious humor of the place sinks in. I order an icy Presidente and one of the island's specialties, BBQ chicken, which turns out to be pretty good, and settle in for the show.

I order another beer and watch the parade of planes come and go, so close and so loud that I feel like I'm on the open deck of an aircraft carrier, albeit one with a bar. It's fun, but somehow I can't help but think that Dutch Sint Maarten got the short end of the island division.

Officially, the island was divided by treaty on March 23, 1648, but lore surrounds the split. The story goes that the French and the Dutch each selected a representative, both of whom were lined up back-to-back at one extent of the island and told to walk—not run—in opposite directions along the shoreline. The dividing line would be drawn from the start point to the spot where they met on the other side of the island. The Frenchman must have been a better walker as his country ended up with 53 square kilometers to Holland's 34, though, in typical Gallic fashion, the French credited their man's reliance on French wine during the endeavor versus the Dutchman's gin.

I go to the island museum in Marigot, just 10 minutes from La Samanna, to corroborate that story, but it's closed. Instead I end up at Aux Fine Gourmandises, a bustling bakery with a quiet terrace and buttery *pain au chocolat*. Already I like the French side better. Compared to brassy Sint Maarten, this side is bucolic and green and pleasantly scruffy. Baie Orientale, which is billed as the island's St. Tropez, indeed feels like a little town in South France, complete with sidewalk cafes on a pebbly square. After a coffee on the beach and a stroll along the heavily umbrellaed seaside, I head north to Pinel Island.

This undeveloped islet at St. Martin's northeast corner is a short cruise from the mainland; the fact that it's only accessible by boat lends it a sense of quiet and exclusivity. Not much more is here than a couple of restaurants, a nice spot for snorkeling, a scattering of umbrellas, and—blessedly—no Wi-Fi. I assume the lounge chair position, take the occasional dip in bathtub-warm water the color of Bombay Sapphire bottles, fin around with a few parrotfish on the point, and snack on conch fritters and more barbecue. It's a perfect escape, the sort of warm repose you daydream about on cold, gray winter days back home.

Over the next few days, French St. Martin reinforces its ascendancy over the Dutch side. The difference is like the Florida Keys versus Disneyland, except here the two are 20 minutes apart. One afternoon, I spend several hours buzzing my little rental car up and down precipitous, pocked asphalt roads in search of the rum mistress Ma Doudou and finally find her storefront on an unlikely residential street. Her infusions may not be as subtle as La Samanna's HSM distillation, but the breezy claptrap pink and lime green shack location make

it worth the adventure. And later, in Grand Case, a mostly blue-collar fishing village with a smattering of sweet, refined French restaurants along its waterfront avenue. I eat seafood at a white-linen table cantilevered over the water at Ocean 82, a slick fish house with a flashy lobster tank out front. Both spots mix French chic with Caribbean insouciance—a *mélange* just as Dumoulin described.

But I get the definitive view on St. Martin at Friar's Bay, just down the coast from Grand Case, at a long-running beach bar headed by a chilled-out owner named Kali. It's a poky place, with palm trees and fences painted the ubiquitous Rasta red-yellow-and-green on a white sickle of beach, the sort of spot that comes alive at night. Kali, a 50-something St. Martin native with unkempt dreads and a calm face, is at the bar, and he hands me a beer as we talk and watch the surf. "Happiness

Baie Longue is a stunning strand. Except for a few clients snoozing under hotel umbrellas, the seaside is empty and broad and pristine, and it feels like your own private paradise.

isn't about travelin' all over and partyin' every day and eatin' at all 'dem restaurants," he tells me. "Happiness is just bein' here, starin' at the ocean."

I didn't even have to ask.

The next day, Steven offers to get a reservation for me at l'Estaminet. It would be the perfect way to wrap up my plans to climb to the top of the island's highest point, 1,391-foot Pic Paradis. But ruminating on Kali's words, I call it all off. Sure, I could do a big hike, traipse to some other picturesque shores, have another atmospheric meal in Grand Case—but it's unlikely that I'll find any beach better than Baie Longue nor any view more relaxing than the one from my villa. So why not just stay in?

All these years I've been traveling in search of the perfect destination. It's easy to land on a new place and scurry around chasing experiences, as if you can run down tranquility the way you check off a to-do list back home. But sometimes vacation means a beautiful place to stay, good food and the simple act of disconnecting. At La Samanna, I have all of those things, plus the best view on the sea anywhere on the island. If it hadn't been for the storm and the iguanas, I might never have realized.

I leave the villa only once on my final day on the island, picking up *pain au chocolat* at the bakery and a couple of lobsters from a crusty old islander at the market in Marigot. Before heading back to my private patio, where I'll grill the seafood myself and eat it from the pool while watching the sea, I swing by the grocery and grab a couple of bottles of rosé from Bandol. Who knows the truth of it, but French wine might just be the key to everything on St. Martin.

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SEA TIME

*Walking along Baie Orientale.*

