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# ESCAPE TO STORIED ST. BARTHS

BY ANJA MUTIĆ

I woke up early on a late November morning and sat poolside as the sun rose over the wild southeastern coast of St Barths. Around me gardens overflowed with vegetation that hid my villa from plain view with palm trees, bougainvillea and the island's rare Gaiac trees. After sunup, I dipped into the pool for a swim before breakfast arrived, delivered to the terrace on silver trays, for alfresco enjoyment.

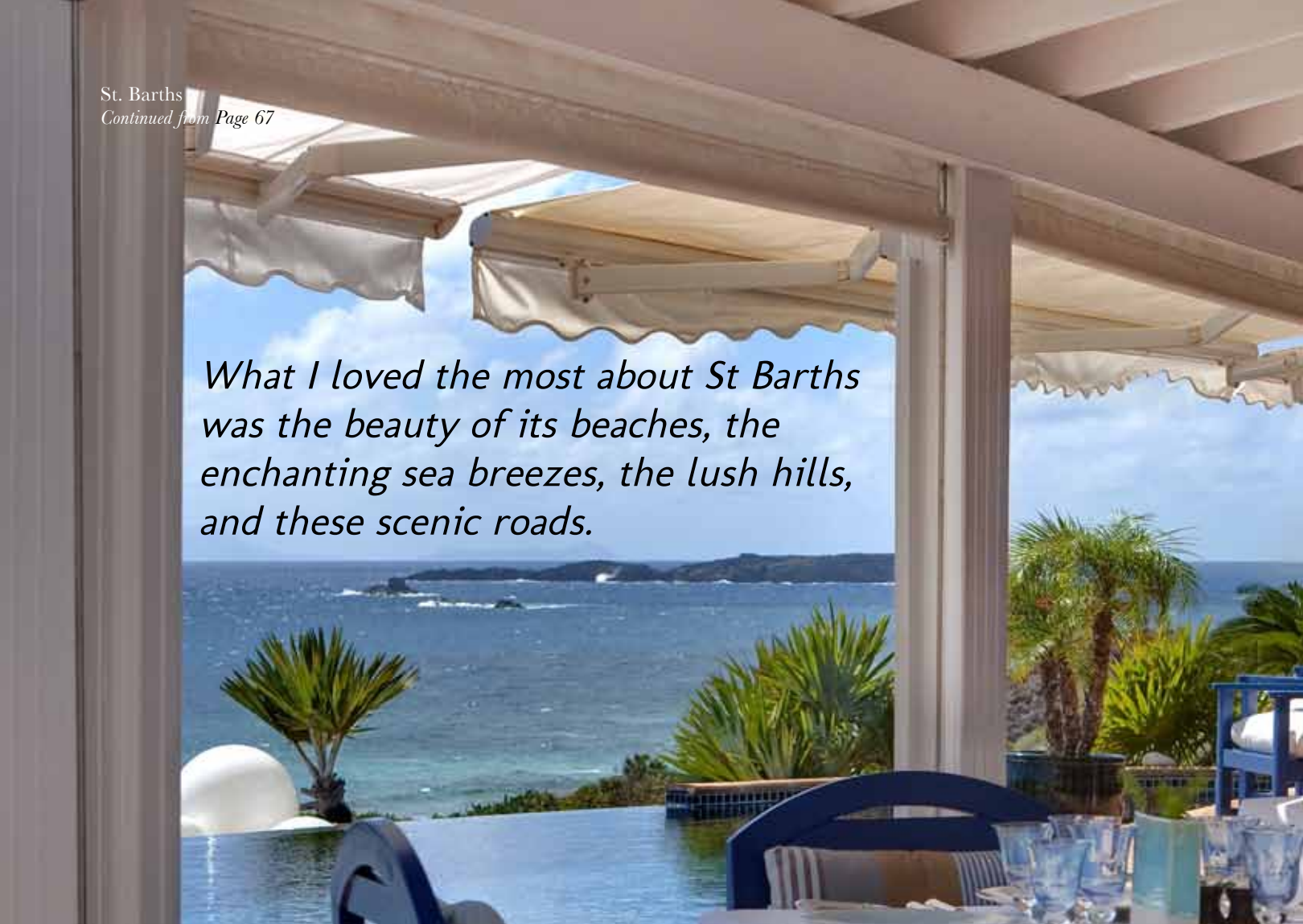
All that at Hôtel Le Toiny on St Barthelemy, also known as St Barths, a small but sexy island in the French West Indies. It was my first visit to this storied hideaway known for its high celebrity quota, chic vibe and gorgeous beaches. A friend and I flew from New York to St Martin, a non-stop jaunt of just four hours. From there, a 15-minute flight and a hairy landing to the tiny airstrip, known as one of the world's trickiest – the runway here is so short that pilots are required to get a special license for landing – delivered us to St Barths. But no need to fly if you're not crazy about small planes and dramatic landings; a regular ferry plies the route from St Martin to St Barths, a 45 to 90-minute ride.

We got out of the small plane high on adrenaline. Safely back on land, the driver took us on a winding ride along narrow hilly roads to Le Toiny, poised on the windward coast of the island, the least developed stretch on St Barths. The 38-acre retreat has been a popular escape since 1992, with its 15 pastel-colored villa suites showcasing French colonial style, marvelous ocean views, large terraces, private heated swimming pools and kitchenettes.

We headed straight to Restaurant Le Gaiac, for a meal by the swimming pool with endless coast vistas as the backdrop. At this renowned restaurant where we ate for the next few days, the food is conjured up by chef Stéphane Mazières who blends French and Creole styles in his culinary creations. On that first day, our lunch was a fresh crab wrap with oven-baked fries – simple but delicious. The side salad featured veggies from the hotel's three organic green houses, the island's first, on a former pineapple field on the grounds.

After lunch, we were showed to our villa. There was a secluded feel to our hideout yet without lacking in modern conveniences. It had them all – Wi-Fi access, 40-inch satellite plasma television, an iPod® station, iPod music library and an espresso machine. The villa also featured elegant four-poster canopy beds, luxurious linens, colonial-style teak wood furnishings, and rich fabrics in toile and stripes.

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*What I loved the most about St Barths was the beauty of its beaches, the enchanting sea breezes, the lush hills, and these scenic roads.*

I spent that first afternoon in a hammock with a dazzling view of the coastline, enjoying the chirp of hummingbirds and sea breezes coming straight from sea. Before I knew it, it was time for dinner. Tuesday is fish market night at Le Gaiac so the waitress brought out a platter with fresh local catch and our job was to pick our choice of fish and sauce. As an appetizer I had smoked mahi mahi in a zucchini cannelloni and fresh goat cheese. My fish was yellowtail snapper and tuna, served kebab-style on a skewer, with aniseed-flavored butter. Well fed, I slept tightly that night on my four-poster mahogany bed, under mosquito netting, with the doors open to the garden.

The next morning it was time to discover the island. Our guide on the informative tour was H el ene Bernier, owner of Easy Time tour agency. A tenth-generation resident whose family has been on the island since 1648, H el ene packed us into her sturdy van and drove along hair-raisingly curvy and slim roads to beaches loved by locals, famous viewpoints, salt ponds (up until the 1970s, St Barthelemy was exporting salt to the nearby islands) and pristine strips of sand like the famed Saline. What I loved the most about St Barths was the beauty of its beaches, the enchanting sea breezes, the lush hills, and these scenic roads.

I also loved the fact I learned more than what the surface shows. H el ene informed us of a hotelier's attempt to build an "eco-resort" right on the protected Saline beach, and proceeded to tell

us about the petition she had spearheaded and helped circulate, which – at least for now – had prevented the hotel construction from continuing. It turned out this soft-spoken tour guide was also an environmental activist, and the founder of St Barth Essentiel, a non-profit association which thrives to protect the island's historical, cultural and environmental heritage.

H el ene showed us a slice of "real" St Barths, such as the fishing village of Corossol where an old lady weaves dried latanier palm leaves into handbags, placemats, hats and baskets. With her passing, this old-fashioned handicraft will likely disappear, too. H el ene drove us to the gorgeous beach at Grand Fond, said to be a vortex of energy, told us of different hiking routes around the island and shared local lore (if a woman spots the island's only snake, called couleuvre, she will get pregnant within a year). Her love for the island was palpable.

Back at Le Toiny that afternoon, we took a walk along the path that leads directly from the property to the beach, past a late 18th century-hut, built from coral to withstand hurricane force winds. Down on the volcanic beach, one of the island's most popular surfing destinations with year-round action from sunrise to sunset, we watched the surfers hit the waves. I was tempted to get one of the long boards from Le Toiny and give it a shot at hitting the waves myself. But I chose indulgence instead.

St. Barths

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What awaited me back up at Le Toiny was an hour of bliss, called St Barths Chill Out, at the hotel's charming Serenity Spa Cottage. Putting a Caribbean spin on the traditional hot stone massage, this treatment uses hand-polished round clam shells for a deeply relaxing massage. The therapist filled local clams with a natural self-heating mixture of minerals derived directly from the sea. He then warmed cold-pressed avocado and applied it directly to the shells. The treatment that followed relieved my muscle tension and lessened the stress. It also apparently stimulated my tissue metabolism and lymph flow, and promoted circulation.

There was one thing on St Barths I didn't get a chance to do, reason enough to go back: a hiking tour with H el ene. Guests can choose between 15 hiking routes around the island, including a climb to the island's highest peak at 930 ft high, with a view that can reach as far as the islands of Sint Eustatius and St Kitts. The most frequent stroll is from Petite Anse to Columbier Beach, only accessible by foot or by boat. There was plenty more I could have done at Le Toiny, including snorkeling on one of the many beaches with coral reefs, numerous tropical fish and tortoises just beneath the turquoise water.

And that hammock, that hammock was so heavenly that I would have happily spent many more afternoons lulling in the ocean winds.



IF YOU GO

Le Toiny: [www.letoiny.com](http://www.letoiny.com)

Easy Time: [www.stbartheasytime.com](http://www.stbartheasytime.com)

***All photos courtesy of H otel Le Toiny***