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**LA MARTINIQUE, A PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN TRAVELER**  
**When African heritage experience matters**

Whether you are just planning to visit Martinique during a cruise or deciding to stay a while, Martinique will feel like family. The island's population is 90% of African descent, and its colonial past marked by the plantation economy has a lot in common with the south of the United States.

As an African-American traveler you will feel a special connection with the island's cultural and historic heritage, and despite the language, you surely will find the similarities in experience striking.

For those for whom black thinkers and writers are key to understand a culture, it is important to have in mind that Martinique is first and foremost the birthplace of Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon, the former, renowned poet and drama writer, who coined the term negritude, and the latter, author of *Black Skin, White Masks*, who led an anticolonial and antiracist struggle throughout his life. These two native sons of Martinique made great contributions to the current flowering of Diaspora literature.

For sun worshippers and history buffs alike, searching to experience the Caribbean with a plus, Martinique has a lot to offer. It is the island with a French flair, where many cultures and people have come together: African, European, Indian, thus creating a rich heritage. The African influence can be found in both obvious and subtle ways: in the generosity of its cuisine, in the Creole language, in the beauty of the people.

***On the threshold of memory***

Martinique is one of the few islands which celebrates the abolition of slavery. May 22 is indeed a holiday and the occasion for celebrations throughout the island. Slavery was abolished in 1848, and May is the local black history month in Martinique.

Many plantation estates have been converted into tourism attractions. Many will remind travelers of Martinique's heavy and often difficult past:

**Habitation Céron** in the northern village of Prêcheur is one of the oldest estate on the island which dates back from the 17<sup>th</sup> century (1658). Worth the visit are the ruins from the old sugar factory, slave quarters and the beautiful tropical garden with the 250 year old samanea saman tree (or rain tree). If only trees could talk.

**Plantation Levritz**, probably the most important estate in the north of the island, created in 1770 has been a hotel since 1970. The planters house (masters' house) still has an "aret neg", a piece of iron which used to indicate where the slaves could not trespass. The slave cabins were converted into rooms and the hotel has been the site of a summit meeting between President Ford and President Giscard d'Estaing of France in the 70s.

**Habitation Clément** in François, also features an historical plantation home, all furnished with colonial style antique mahogany furniture. With a working rum distillery, the visit is worth the while, and will take you back in time.

The year 1998 marked the 150<sup>th</sup> commemoration of the abolition of slavery, and reminding of the celebrations that took place throughout the island are memorials and statues:

Anse Cafard Slave Memorial in Diamant, is probably the most notable and striking: conceptualized and created by Martinican sculptor Laurent Valère, it is an ensemble of 20 colossal stone statues, overlooking the sea, as a reminiscence of that fatal night of April 7, 1830 when a slaves ship drowned, along with its cargo of men, women and children who were never to see the shores.

Also in Diamant is the statue of the « maroon » saluting its new found freedom welcomes visitors at the entrance of the village.

In Fort-de-France, the **Schoelcher library**, a historic monument, has been named after the French abolitionist deputy and human rights activist, Victor Schoelcher who campaigned to end slavery in the French West Indies. This Byzantine style library, was built in Paris at the same time as the Eiffel Tower, and shipped over, mosaic by mosaic, to Martinique

For those who want to know more about the plantation economy and life style, **La Maison de la Canne** museum in Trois-Ilets has an exhibit which retraces three centuries of history.

But of course reminiscing is not all one can do in Martinique, and the island offers a wide choice of interesting activities, among others:

**Eco-visits:** kayaking, visit of the mangrove, hiking, botanical gardens (for more information, see press release on ecotourism).

**Shopping:** noteworthy: 18-karat gold Creole jewelry, all with names that recall the island's link to its past: *forçat* necklace (slave chain), *tétés négresse* earrings, beautiful feminine adornments, Creole earrings. Most shopping is concentrated into downtown Fort-de-France, the capital city, but many malls in the outskirts offer a wide choice of boutiques and the latest in French fashion (for more information, see press release "Shopping in Martinique"). And last but not least, Creole food aficionados will be happily surprised by the similarities between the cuisine of Louisiana and the cuisine of Martinique. With more than 300 restaurants, there is no better way to understand the island's soul than to taste its food.

### ***Did you know that...***

**Accra**, the tasty cod fish fritter, served as an appetizer in Martinique, homonym of the capital of Ghana, means « small fritter » in Woloff

**Béhanzin**, the last king of Dahomey (now known as Benin) was exiled in Martinique after he fought the French for his kingdom.

**Béké** is the local name for the descendents of the 1<sup>st</sup> French settlers.

**Coffee** was brought in 1720 onto Martinique. From this introduction, coffee was spread throughout the new world. By 1777, 18 million coffee trees were growing on the island, progenitors of most coffee plants growing in the Caribbean, Central and South America today. The Coffee and Cocoa Museum is located at Domaine Chateau Gaillard in Trois-Ilets and presents a 1000 variety of coffee and cocoa plants.

**Laghia**, is a dance of African origins. In 1931, Katherine Dunham who founded the Negro Dance Group in Chicago, Illinois, choreographed one of her most famous works, *L'Ag'Ya* (1938), based on a fighting dance of Martinique after travelling to the island.

**Euzhan Palcy**, a native of Martinique is the first black female to have produced a feature length film in Hollywood, "A Dry White Season", featuring and Marlon Brando. Her well known "Sugar Cane Alley" won the Silver Lion Award at the Venice Film Festival.

**Gombo** is the word in Martinique for okra. According to the legend, some slaves carried the seeds of that plant from Africa with them.

**Habitation** is the equivalent of a plantation home.

**Zouk chouf** is the cousin of zydeco music.

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