



For Immediate Release

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**MARTINIQUE, A FRENCH ISLAND WITH A CREOLE ACCENT,
IS MORE THAN JUST SUN, SAND AND SURF**

Like most islands in the Caribbean, Martinique is blessed with pretty beaches, good climate, lush vegetation and fine hotels. But Martinique also has a cachet of its own, a very special je ne sais quoi.

Perhaps it's the island's Creole joie de vivre -- the excellence of its cuisine, the chic of its women, the beauty of its landscape. Perhaps it's Martinique's history, so rich in romance, drama and tragedy. The island gave a future Empress to France in 1779, carried out its own version of the Trojan Horse legend in 1804, and, on a May morning in 1902, experienced three of the most horrifying minutes mankind has ever known.

A visit to St-Pierre, site of this catastrophe, highlights the classic tour of Martinique. "Classic," however, does not mean driving along a road lined with billboards and souvenir stands. It's a pleasant trip that takes you up the coast from Fort-de-France, the capital, and back inland through totally different terrain.

Touring by Taxi and Self Drive

Book a tour or hire a taxi at the pier. There are plenty around and most drivers speak some English.

Driving north from the city, one sees old wooden structures give way to modern suburbs with sleek apartments and office buildings. After the town of Schoelcher, the road climbs steeply, edging the sea, then twists and turns through picture-postcard villages like Case-Pilote and Bellefontaine, decked out in fishing nets drying under the warm sun. Fishermen's boats here are called gommiers, each carved from the trunk of a gum tree, each vividly painted and humorously named.

Le Carbet is next on the itinerary. This is where Columbus landed in 1502, discovering Martinique on his fourth trip to the Americas. It is also near here, in Turin Cove, where Gauguin lived and painted for five months in 1887. His home was a hut built in the shadows of an old viaduct. Some years ago, Martinique honored the great artist by erecting a museum right on the spot. It displays Gauguin memorabilia and reproductions of his Martinique works.

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Just outside Carbet, on a long beach below the St-Pierre highway, there is a tiny spot called La Datcha, a simple bar-restaurant, one of many in the area. Have a quick swim and dry off with something wet -- a cooling "planteur" or a potent "punch," both concocted of local rum. Follow this with a house specialty -- freshly caught langouste, boiled or broiled -- and the euphoria is complete. That is, until you enter St-Pierre itself, nestled under towering, cloud-shrouded Mt. Pelée.

Once the Paris of the West Indies

The town quickly gives you a sobering feeling. It was a gay, cultivated city of 30,000 until the morning of May 8, 1902, when Mt. Pelée suddenly erupted in an avalanche of fire, gas, and molten rock. Three minutes later, the little "Paris of the West Indies" was a New World Pompeii, with all inhabitants dead but one -- a prisoner named Auguste Cyparis who was jailed in an above-ground dungeon and survived to become a Barnum & Bailey Circus curiosity.

Today, about 8,000 people live in St-Pierre, now designated an official "City of Art and History" by the French Government. A small but truly remarkable museum houses dramatic relics of the holocaust, weird, unrecognizable forms of familiar objects: a huge rock with mad streaks and points, once a pile of ordinary nails; fantastically shaped glassware; distorted clocks melted by the heat, all stopped at the fatal hour of 8. The museum and the Center for Archeological Research are included in guided tours that can be taken on a rubber-tired train called the "Cyparis Express."

Inaugurated on February 7, 2004, the "*Centre de Découverte des Sciences de la Terre*" is also located in Saint Pierre facing the sadly famous Mount Pelée volcano.

This interactive and high tech museum is a project initiated and developed by the Martinique General Council. In the garden area, a memorial to the 28 000 victims of the 1902 Mount Pelée volcano eruption has also been erected.

Numerous activities are proposed, including interactive workshop allowing the visitor to experience history and understand hands on the Earth and its mechanisms.

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A serene Pelée now sits under the blue sky as though nothing had ever happened. But as for climbing the mountain, make the hike only with professional guides.

The return drive from St-Pierre is inland, first leading northeast to cool-aired Morne Rouge, then to La Trace, the spectacular route south through a tropical rain forest. The road, bordered by plunging valleys, has hairpin curves and writhes past lime, banana and breadfruit trees. Farther on, close to Fort-de-France, is the Jardin de Balata, a magnificent botanical garden. Minutes from here on the Route de Balata, there's a nice surprise at the last point before journey's end -- a miniature version of the famous Sacré-Coeur Basilica of Montmartre in Paris.

Sightseeing in Fort-de-France

Back in the capital, stroll around the green Savane, people-watch from a terrace cafe, or wander the busy little balconied streets, lined with boutiques, restaurants, pastry shops, etc., and looking much like the neighborhood streets of Paris. Stop to visit the Musée d'archéologie, pre-Columbian museum, with its impressive exhibits of archeological finds from prehistoric Martinique, and the Schoelcher Library, as incongruous a building as was ever erected on a tropical island. Named for Victor Schoelcher, the abolitionist, this gem of rococo-style architecture, trimmed with cast iron grillwork, majolica tiles and a Byzantine dome, was built for the Paris Exposition of 1889 and reassembled here shortly after. The History and Ethnography museum is also a must see.

On other half-day tours, one can visit the birthplace of Napoleon's Empress Josephine near Trois-Ilets, called La Pagerie. Its museum, once the family kitchen, showcases mementos of the Creole Queen including an astonishingly passionate letter from the lovelorn Emperor dated 1796. (For non-French-speaking visitors, it's translated into English.)

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This tour will also take you to Diamond Beach on the southwestern coast. Offshore is the historic oddity, Diamond Rock, rising 600 feet from the sea and used by the British in 1804 as a sloop of war. They manned it against all odds for 17 months and succumbed, legend says, only when the wily French invaded, first with rum -- barrels of it as bait for the thirsty British -- and then with regiments. Legend or not, the site has been known ever since as H.M.S. Diamond Rock.

Other attractions in the south include Le Marin, with a top notch marina, plenty restaurants and a church that is an antique beauty, built in 1766 in Jesuit-style. Not far away is Ste-Anne, renowned for its gorgeous beaches, notably the Plage des Salines. This quiet and pretty village has lots of good dining spots, a tree-shaded main square that is typically small-town French, boats galore, and a pier where one can board the Aquascope for tours of the island's underwater world.

Full-day Tours to the North

Since the landmass of Martinique is 425 square miles (50 miles long and 22 miles wide), there is an incredible wealth of exploring to do. On a full-day tour of the north, for example, one can visit Le Prêcheur, the northernmost village on the Caribbean, whose magnificent Habitation Céron takes you into the 17th century, with walks through the forest gardens, visits to cassava and sugarcane buildings, and delicious dining in a historic setting. Nearby are hot springs of volcanic origin, and the Tomb of the Carib Indians. Inland, the flower-laden town of Ajoupa-Bouillon has a spectacular and educational nature trail called "Les Ombrages," and not far away are the Gorges de la Falaise, mini canyons along the Falaise River leading to a lovely waterfall. Of note as well is Grand'Riviere, a fishing village constantly braving the fierce Atlantic Ocean.

Also on the northern Atlantic is the town of Trinité and the Caravelle Peninsula at whose tip stand the ruins of Château Dubuc, a spot as fascinating as some of the Dubuc family members who included Aimée Dubuc de Rivery. Returning home to Martinique after schooling in Nantes, she was captured by pirates, sold into slavery, then given as a present to the Sultan of Constantinople. Like Josephine, she, too, became a “royal” -- Sultana Validé, mother of Sultan Mahmoud II.

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