

BEST KEPT SECRETS IN MARTINIQUE

Hiking Through Paradise

One of the best kept secrets in Martinique is hiking. Of all the sports that one can enjoy on the island, hiking is among the best organized. And because Martinique is blessed with such a plethora of natural treasures—a tropical rain forest, a world-famous volcano, alpine peaks (or pitons) and rocky hills (or mornes), plus wide stretches of virgin beach—hiking is by far the most appealing way to discover them.

The secret favorite of most every aficionado of hiking on the island, according to Valerie Vulcain of the Martinique Promotion Bureau in New York, who herself has made the exciting trek, is the classic 12.4-mile trail between Le Prêcheur, the northernmost town on Martinique’s Caribbean coast, and Grand’Rivière, a fishing village on the northernmost Atlantic tip of the island. Unless you go by sea, this is the only way to get from one spot to the other. By land you have to hoof it. The Caribbean road stops in Le Prêcheur, the Atlantic road stops in Grand’Rivière, and ne’er the twain shall meet. This may be too bad for drivers, but is truly a blessing for hikers.

To arrange for the excursion, which takes five-and-a-half to six hours and is best enjoyed by experienced hikers, telephone the “Syndicat d’Initiative” in Grand’Rivière, Tel: (596) 55.72.74. Pack a knapsack (hiking shoes, swimsuit, sunscreen, a hat and bottle of water) and meet your guide at 7:30 a.m. in the parking lot at Anse Couleuvre at the end of Route D10 outside Le Prêcheur. The trail begins here and passes through the forest reserve managed by the **Conservatoire de l’Espace Littoral et des Rivages Lacustres** (an organization dedicated to the conservation of coastal and lakeside areas). Along the way, you will discover various types of forest, from dry to tropically humid, and such untouched beaches as Anse des Galets, Anse à Voile and Anse Dufour, as well as three rivers that meet at Rivière Trois Bras and form three stunning waterfalls at the foot of Mont Pelée volcano. Oxcarts drove along this trail until the beginning of the century, and remnants of that era (stone bridges, tunnels, and more) make for fascinating exploring.

The trail ends in Grand’Rivière and after so many hours of hiking, it’s time for a refreshing rum drink and a delicious Creole lunch with wine at Tante Arlette, a charming restaurant in the heart of the village. The cost for the hike, including a professional guide, the lunch and drinks, is 200F per person (about \$36).

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Sip a Rum Punch in Empress Josephine’s Bathtub

While the whole world knows that Martinique’s most famous daughter is the Empress Josephine, wife of Napoleon Bonaparte, few people know about “Josephine’s Bathtub,” or **La Baignoire de Joséphine**, as it is called in French.

Located on the Atlantic coast of Martinique in the Bay of Le François, the beautiful **Baignoire de Joséphine** is reachable by a less-than-ten-minute boat ride from the shore. It occupies a high, white

sandbank protected by coral reefs (called a fond blanc in French), where the water is not much more than three feet deep.

Legend has it that the future Empress of France came here to bathe once upon a time, but this is only legend. What is known is that the area surrounding these waters was inhabited by French settlers around 1620, hence the area's name, Le François. This was just before the colonial era began, and some 150 years before Joséphine was born in Trois Ilets, across the island.

Over the years, wealthy landowners built colonial-style vacation homes in the hillocks and coves of Le François and it became customary for them to boat out to "Josephine's Bath" to meet for a rum punch and even enjoy a picnic lunch while waist-high in the crystal clear waters.

Today, vacationers can get in on this best kept secret of Martinique either by booking an organized excursion or going on their own by flagging down a fisherman at the waterfront in Le François and asking for a lift. A full-day organized trip, including visits to a couple of tiny islands in the Bay of Le François, rum drinks and cod fritter hors d'oeuvres in "Josephine's Bath," as well as a typical Creole picnic lunch, costs about 185F (\$32).

"Either on your own or with a group, a visit to 'Josephine's Bath' is an unforgettable experience," says Muriel Wiltord, Director of the Martinique Promotion Bureau in New York. For overnighting in the immediate area, she adds there are several fine small hotels such as the new **Plein Soleil**, the **Riviera** and the **Frégate Bleue**, as well as two private islands, **Ilet Thierry** and **Ilet Oscar**, which each have a rustic and charming 19th-century house that can be rented by the day or week. **Thierry** has six bedrooms, **Oscar** has five.

The two islands, known collectively as **Les Ilets de l'Impératrice**, each have private docks, small beaches and great views. All-inclusive rates at either island (including pickup at airport, lodging, all meals, wines, water sports, and more) are \$200 per person per day. For reservations, brochures and further information, contact Caribbean Inns Ltd., Hilton Head Island, SC 29938. Tel: (800) 633-7411. Fax: (803) 686-7411. On the Internet: <http://www.caribbean-inns.com>.

"Also," says Ms. Wiltord, "Le François is renowned for its magnificent team of voleurs, a name given to the sailors who race the yoles rondes, small sailboats unique to Martinique. Should a yole ronde event be happening while you're in the area, skip the next rum drink at "Josephine's Bath," and head for the races."

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The Day of the Iguanas

The secret to finding the largest islet off the coast of Martinique is to know that it has two names. On some maps it's called **Ilet Chanel**, on others it's **Ilet Ramville**. This may be one reason why, though it lies within easy reach of one of the loveliest harbors in the Atlantic, Le Robert, the island is populated not by people but by iguanas. And perhaps that's as it should be. The species who live here, called, most delicately, iguana delicatissima, have a certain droit de seigneur. They've inhabited the place since even before colonization.

These days, you can be the first guy on the block to come back from Martinique and tell about the island. You couldn't describe your "night of the iguanas," since there are no overnight facilities, but you certainly could have fun describing the daytime adventure. Boat excursions from Le Robert are now available and, in addition to the iguanas, you can see ruins of an old fort and plantation home, roam the island beaches, four of which have sand dunes, or trek through a forest of cacti and olive trees. And, though there's no living proof of it, the island is said to have been one of the last places in Martinique inhabited by the Carib Indians, perhaps even until the 17th century.

Trips to **Ilet Chancel/Ramville** are offered by the following:

- Escapade Tours: A day excursion with stops at **Ilet Chancel** and nearby **Ilet Madame**, 250F (about \$45). Tel: (596) 71.58.77, Fax: (596) 70.58.54.
- Kayaks du Robert: Organized excursion with meal: 300F (\$55) per person; rental of kayak: 80F (\$5.50) per person for a half day; 130F (\$15) for a full day. Tel: (596) 65.70.68, Fax: (596) 65.33.89.
- Local fishermen: Boat rental for groups of six, 400F (\$73) for day or half day. Tel: Mme Viviane Vouimba, Tel: (596) 65.04.11 or 65.06.98; M. Norel, Tel: (596) 65.16.50 or 65.59.46.

For further information about the island's best kept secrets, contact the Martinique Promotion Bureau, 444 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10022. Tel: (800) 391-4909. Fax: (212) 838-7855. On the Internet: <http://www.martinique.org>. By e-mail: Martinique@nyo.com.

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