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Take Monday Off: Martinique

Pack a week's worth of breathtaking hikes, Technicolor snorkeling and plenty of sugar-cane rum into three sunny days

By CHRIS NUTTALL-SMITH



Claire Martin/Oculi/Agence VU for The Wall Street Journal

The beach at Sainte-Anne.

Martinique has the pristine beaches, wild jungle hiking and super-luxe nightlife that are a given in more exclusive parts of the Caribbean. But the island's 400 years of Gallic lineage give it a delicious twist: A trip here is both a French vacation and a tropical escape, justifying the two flight changes it can take to reach the

island from the U.S. A volcano climb and scuba dive might be followed by a Guerlain wrap and Champagne cocktails, with a shot of 50-year-old rum on the side. The cuisine blends French technique, local ingredients and Creole spices, and the city architecture feels like New Orleans mated with the Mediterranean. The island's greatest beauty, however, may be its lack of all-inclusive artifice—Martinique has none of the walled-off resorts that keep travelers inured to local life. It's an island for exploring: well-signed, welcoming and packed with delights, as easy or involved as you want it to be.

Photos: Around Martinique

Day One: Friday

11:15 p.m. Pick up car at Aimé Césaire International Airport. The Avis here (0596-42-11-00; avis-antilles.fr) has an Audi TT roadster, which you're going to want—Martinique's coastal and


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Kayaking near La Plage de L'Anse Michel.

mountain roads are some of the twistiest of your life. Head south on the N5 to the **Hotel Bakoua Martinique**, about 35 minutes away (La Pointe du Bout, Les Trois Ilets, 0596-66-02-02). Sip a Ti' Punch—lemon, sugar and three fingers of white agricultural rum—on the beach before turning in. If you're not the early-to-bed type, stop in at **L'Amphore**, the trendy nightclub a couple of minutes west (La Pointe du Bout, Les Trois Ilets, 0596-66-03-09). Heed the dress code and leave your shorts and flip-flops in your room.

Day Two: Saturday

9:30 a.m. Meet kayak guide Roger Delafargue (0696-90-95-74; lagon-evasion.com) in the coconut grove on La Plage de L'Anse Michel, on the Atlantic coast near Sainte-Anne,

and spend the morning paddling around shallow reefs and pale beaches (a few of them are naturist areas, if that's your thing) of La Baie des Anglais. The three islets to the east are part of a national ornithological reserve; there are more sea birds here, including puffins and frigatebirds, than anywhere else in the Lesser Antilles. Cocktails and snacks are included.

1:30 p.m. Stop by the beach in Sainte-Anne for a *coupe* of the incredible local sorbet, made with fresh papaya and coconut milk. Watch for the elderly couple who sell it, trundling down the sand, she ringing a bell, he pushing a wheelbarrow. Drive toward Sainte-Luce, dipping south when you get to the D18, the narrow coastal road that leads to L'Anse Fond Banane, a quiet little crescent beach so pretty it feels like a Corona commercial. Stop at **Aqua Grill** (0696-50-30-20), a waterside shack, for grilled fish, ridiculously good fries and an icy bottle of Bière Lorraine, the local ale. That's St. Lucia's craggy outline on the horizon.

4:30 p.m. Pull into Le Carbet, a picturesque fishing village an hour north on the Caribbean coast. Columbus stopped here, and Paul Gauguin spent a formative five months painting around the town in 1887. Though it has only reproductions, the **Musée Gauguin**, a couple of minutes north on the D62, is worth a stop (Quartier Choisy, Le Carbet; 0596-78-22 66). Check in at the **Hôtel Marouba** (0596-78-00-21; hotel-marouba.net).


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 Claire Martin/Oculi/Agence VU for The Wall Street Journal
 Grilled lobster at Le Petitbonum Restaurant.

6:30 p.m. Try to arrive at **Le Petitbonum** (Le Coin, Le Bord de Mer, Le Carbet; 0596-78-04-34; reservations recommended) before sunset. The beach restaurant and open-air nightclub, run by garrulous local chef and demi-celeb Guy Ferdinand, has an overhead water misting system to keep guests cool at their tables, and rents super-wide chaises longues for 10 euros per day (cocktail included). They're usually filled with well-toned, smoke-ringed French women in Dior bikini bottoms. It is quite possibly the most fabulous beach-front restaurant on the island. The shoreline is black sand, which retains heat well into the evening. Take a dip before settling into tempura-battered balaou—a local fish—with crayfish and Chablis. There's live music under the stars until 11.

Day Three: Sunday

8 a.m. Saint-Pierre, just a couple miles up the coast from Le Carbet, was the island's capital until May 8, 1902, when Mount Pelée, a 4,600-foot volcano that is the highest point on Martinique, erupted. The town's 30,000 inhabitants were killed in minutes. St. Pierre is lovely (palm-lined streets; yachts and brightly painted fish boats in the harbor) and haunting, but it is best viewed from near the volcano's summit. Stop at **La Kay Alice** (0696-38-81-55), the little grocery store in Le Morne Rouge, for cheese (the processed emmenthal is strangely excellent), bread and fruit before continuing your ascent. The road up the volcano's flank is steep beyond belief;

follow the signs and you'll run into the hike-in lot.

9 a.m. Start hiking. (You'll need some decent shoes.) The first three-quarters of a mile is the toughest stretch by far, ascending nearly 900 feet, at times headed up so sharply that it's more climb than hike. French families with children in tow will almost certainly lap you. But buck up: If the summit's cloud cap parts when you're on the hairline ridge of Morne La Croix (elevation 4,120 feet), the view will temporarily cancel out the pain of blisters. Plan on an hour each way unless you're in prime shape, plus lunch and pictures at the top.

1 p.m. Drive 45 minutes to the sclerotic northern terminus of the Caribbean coastal road. There, down a short footpath and past the ruins of a cocoa plantation, you'll find a black sand beach called Anse Coleuvre. It's the sort of place that makes city people consider giving it all up for the simple life. The rainforest and cliffs drip with Jurassic-looking vines and wildflowers, and the dominant ethos here appears to be French Antilles-style peace and love (watch for the "Jah is My Co-Pilot" bumper stickers on the way in). Now's the time to bust out the snorkeling gear. If you surf, barrels roll in fast from the north on good days. You can buy passion fruit and seedy papayas from the hippie in the parking lot who works from the trunk of his Renault.



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Barrels of rum at l'Habitation Clement distillery.

4 p.m. The road that crosses the island and heads south through the canefields along the Atlantic coast to Le François is beautiful but long. By the time you arrive at **l'Habitation Clement** (Domaine de l'Acajou, Le François; 0596-54-62-07; habitation-clement.fr), one of Martinique's most important producers of aged agricultural rum, you should be ready for a tot. The distillery was founded in 1917 to whet the whistles of WWI soldiers and sailors; the company has some 320,000 gallons aging in oak barrels at any one time.

5 p.m. Check into **Cap Est Lagoon Resort and Spa** (Le François; 0596-54-80-80; capest.com), a couple of minutes away and easily

the most luxurious hotel on the island. Unwind with a massage and body wrap in the Guerlain spa before dinner at Le Belém, an exquisite room that mashes high-French ideas and execution with local ingredients. (On the menu: chilled, vibrant leek soup with a molten fried shrimp; a voluptuous foie gras trio that layers passion fruit and Szechuan pepper with creamy duck liver.) The cocktails are brilliant, and the wine list veers deep into the best parts of France, with corresponding prices. Be glad you're sleeping over.

Day Four: Monday

8 a.m. There's plenty to do out of Le François, from half-day fishing charters for tuna, sailfish and monster blue marlin to kite surfing and catamaran tours to the white sand shoals where Martiniquan Joséphine de Beauharnais, the first wife of Napoléon Bonaparte, is said (with scant evidence) to have bathed. A better idea might be to have a long, late breakfast and loaf on the beach until noon.

12 p.m. Drive west to Fort-de-France, stopping at one of the little Creole barbecue operations that pepper the roadsides. You'll see them at roundabouts—watch for plumes of smoke. The sweet-sauced chicken legs and pork ribs make for a great lunch, particularly if you can pair the meat with another roadside vendor's ripe local fruit. At Fort-de-France, drive a few minutes north to the **Balata Garden**, set on seven ultra-lush acres (km 10, route de Balata; 0596-64-48-73; jardindebalata.fr), is a petal-head's dream, with hundreds of varieties of orchid, hibiscus and other tropical plants from across the globe, plus a system of catwalks suspended more than 45 feet up in mahogany trees.

3 p.m. Return car and stock up on booze at the excellent airport rum shop. Head home.