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EXPERIENCE THE WARMTH OF MARTINIQUE

Also known as the French Caribbean Little Heaven, Martinique invites Americans to banish their winter blues and to book now their generous winter offers. Participating island hotels are offering special double-room rates starting at just \$75 per night. This includes reduced rates at the lavish Relais & Chateaux *Cap Est Lagoon Resort & Spa* and the 4-star deluxe *Sofitel Bakoua*.

For details and a chance to win four nights at the Sofitel Bakoua, visit

www.franceguide.com/us/martinique

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

Martinique, a Caribbean island with a strong French history and culture, is a haven of breathtaking beaches, a stellar climate, lush vegetation and luxurious hotels. Yet this French-speaking island has a unique distinction all its own, a very special *je ne sais quoi*. It finds roots in the island's Creole joie de vivre -- the excellence of its cuisine, the beauty of its landscape. It's Martinique's history, so rich in romance, drama and tragedy. These characteristics along, with Martinique's warm and inviting citizens with their lust for life are what make a visit to the island a truly spectacular and memorable experience.

Touring the island

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.

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. Today you will find a museum honoring the great artist with displays of his memorabilia and reproductions of his Martinique works.

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 quench your thirst with a cooling *planteur* or a potent punch, both concocted of local rum. Follow this with a house specialty -- freshly caught *langouste*, or lobster, 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 has a very sobering feeling. It was once a culture 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 its 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 museum houses dramatic relics of the tragedy: unrecognizable forms of familiar objects, such as fantastically shaped glassware and distorted clocks melted by the heat, all stopped at the fatal hour of 8. Inaugurated on February 7, 2004, the "*Centre de Découverte des Sciences de la Terre*" is also located in St.-Pierre. In the garden area a memorial to the 28,000 victims of the 1902 Mt.-Pelée volcano eruption can be visited. A serene Pelée now sits under the blue sky as though nothing had ever happened.

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. There is a nice surprise at the last point before journey's end -- a miniature version of the famous Sacré-Coeur Basilica 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, and pastry shops. Stop to visit the Schoelcher Library. Named for Victor Schoelcher, the abolitionist, this gem of rococo-style architecture was built for the Paris Exposition of 1889 and reassembled here shortly after.

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 a passionate letter from the lovelorn Emperor dated 1796.

Attractions in the south include Le Marin, with a top notch marina and plenty of restaurants. 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 Ceron 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 are the Gorges de la Falaise, mini canyons along the Falaise River leading to a lovely waterfall.

Also on the northern Atlantic is the town of Trinité and the Caravelle Peninsula where the ruins of Château Dubuc stand. Returning home to Martinique after schooling in Nantes, Aimée Dubuc de Rivery 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.

In addition to the multitude of beautiful sites to visit and discover, Martinique is alive with festivals and events throughout the year. Don't miss out on Martinique's Carnival celebrations February 6-9, 2005. All business comes to a halt. Streets spill over with parties and parades, and a "Carnival Queen" is elected. Dimanche Gras, or Fat Sunday, features bands in the streets singing and dancing, and revelers costumed as "red devils" parade around La Savane in Fort-de-France on Mardi Gras.

For a complete list of festivals and events throughout 2005, visit www.martinique.org

For further information, contact the Martinique Promotion Bureau, 444 Madison Ave.,
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