

MARTINIQUE'S MUSEUMS, MORE THAN TWENTY IN NUMBER, VIVIDLY PORTRAY ISLAND'S HISTORY AND HERITAGE

Just as every other département of France is proud of its museums, so too is the French West Indies island of Martinique. Not that her museums make any pretense of rivaling those of Paris, but there are well over a dozen of them, and each is distinctively different, with intriguing stories to tell of the island's past, its way of life and art.

Since they must vie with the lure of sun, sea and sand, the museums of Martinique are purposely small and easily visited -- planned so that one can "do" them in a rather short time, and yet depart satisfied and enriched.

A 20-minute ferryboat ride across the bay from the capital of Fort-de-France near the village of Trois-Ilets, is the **Musée de la Pagerie**, chockful of mementos recounting the adventures of Napoleon's Empress Josephine. The stone building --once La Pagerie's kitchen -- stands in a luxuriant valley blooming with hibiscus, eucalyptus and frangipani, the grounds of the sugar plantation where Josephine was born in 1763. Perfect for enjoying a journey into the past in a pastoral setting, the museum includes a pavilion where one can relax over a cool rum drink.

Some Museumgoers May Blush

Inside the museum is a fascinating collection of furniture (including the bed that Josephine slept in until her departure for France at age 16), portraits of her and of Napoleon, invitations to great Paris balls, medals, bills attesting to her extravagance as the Empress, and letters. The most notable is a passionate missive from the lovelorn Napoleon that makes many an unforewarned reader blush. The museum is open daily, except Monday, from 9 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Admission is 20 francs for adults, 5 francs for children under 16.

About one hour's leisurely drive north of Fort-de-France, in St. Pierre, is the **Musée Volcano-
logique**. Of special interest to Americans because it was founded by Dr. Franck A. Perret, an American volcanologist, it is a dramatic reminder of the eruption of Mont Pelée in 1902 which wiped out St. Pierre's 30,000 inhabitants in three terrifying minutes. Then called "the Paris of the West Indies," the city never regained its former splendor. But photographic murals recall it, as well as the disaster.

The museum displays bizarre relics of the tragedy: petrified spaghetti; lava-encrusted teapots; twisted musical instruments, and distorted clocks, melted by the heat, all stopped at 8, the hour of the holo-caust. It is open daily from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Admission is 10 francs; children under 8, free.

The **Cyparis Express**, also known as the "little train of St. Pierre," offers an easy way to explore this historic town. The tour is available Monday through Friday, takes 50 minutes, and costs 50 francs for adults, and 25 for children. On weekends, advance reservations are required. Tel: (596) 55-50-92.

Gauguin in Martinique

Located at Turin Cove between Carbet and St. Pierre is the **Centre d'Art Musée Paul Gauguin**, actually a memorial to the work which this noted French painter completed in Martinique during his five-month stay in 1887. Not far from the simple hut which was Gauguin's home, the **Musée** houses reproductions of the dozen pictures he painted on the island. Among them are "Two Women of Martinique" and "The Bay of St. Pierre." Also in the **Musée Gauguin** are books about the painter, biographical information, and some of his letters. The memorial, a contemporary structure designed to encompass the same surroundings of natural beauty that inspired Gauguin, is open daily from 9 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Admission is 20 francs for adults, 5 francs for children under 10, free for those under 8.

In a beautifully restored colonial house at 9 rue de la Liberté in the center of Fort-de-France is the **Musée Départemental de la Martinique**. Here, in air-conditioned galleries, are exhibits of archeological finds from prehistoric Martinique (primarily the Arawak and Carib civilizations) and representations of the island's everyday life as expressed in literature, art, music, clothing and crafts. The museum is open daily, except Sunday from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. and 2 to 5 p.m. Admission is 15 francs for adults, 5 francs for children under 12.

Brand new in Fort-de-France is the **Musée Régional d'Histoire et d'Ethnographie**, 10 boulevard Général de Gaulle, in a beautifully restored building of architectural interest – built in 1885, the building was one of the oldest home in Fort-de-France. The museum presents both temporary exhibits and its permanent collection of art retracing the history of the island and the history of its people. The museum is open daily from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. except Sunday, Tuesday from 2 to 5 p.m. and Saturday from 8 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. Admission fee is 20 francs for adults and 5 francs for children and students.

Pottery As a Work of Art

Showcase for a sometimes neglected art form is **La Poterie** located near Trois-Ilets. Pottery plays an important role in Martinican history. Arawak pottery was polychrome, with handles or snouts being formed in the shape of masked human heads or animal figures, while Carib pottery was formed from clay sausages and rolled and assembled by hand. Today's potters have learned to identify the best clays of the island, varying both color and form, using the more modern potter's wheel. Once largely used in homes as domestic items, today these objects are considered works of art. Open Monday to Saturday from 9:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. No admission charge.

Yet another charming curiosity, located on the grounds of Leyritz Plantation Inn near Basse-Pointe in the far north, is the **Musée de Poupées Végétales**, or Doll Museum, created by a talented resident artist, Will Fenton. Utilizing over 600 types of fronds, leaves and other plant material, Fenton has fashioned fabulous doll-sized miniatures of such celebrated women as Mme. Recamier, Mme. de Pompadour and Josephine Baker. There are over 50 figures in the collection. The exhibit can be seen daily between 10 a.m. and 5 p.m. The entrance fee, which includes a visit of the Leyritz gardens and main house, is 15 francs. No charge for children under 12.

On the Caravelle Peninsula jutting out into the Atlantic, the **Musée du Chateau Dubuc** honors Aimée Dubuc de Rivery, a local lass who made history as the legendary Sultana Validé,, wife of the Sultan of Constantinople. Of the chateau, only ruins remain, though there is a small museum at the entrance. The Chateau is open daily from 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. Fee: adults 15 francs; children 5 francs.

Reliving the History of Rum

Also in the north, at Sainte-Marie, are two other interesting stops. The **Musée du Rhum**, set in the heart of the St. James sugar plantations, offers --through engravings, tools, artifacts and machinery - - an informative history of rum and sugarcane from 1765 to the present, as well as tastings of the St. James product. Weekdays, 9 a.m.- 6 p.m.; weekends, 9 a.m.-1 p.m. Admission: free.

A few miles north is **Fonds Saint-Jacques**, one of the best-preserved estates on Martinique. Built by Dominican Fathers in 1658, it was the home from 1693 to 1705 of Père Labat, the French Dominican priest who was also an explorer, architect, engineer, historian, and even warrior against the British. The chapel, windmill and workshops of Fonds Saint-Jacques still remain, and the beautiful sugarcane purgery has been restored. The estate's museum, called **Musée du Père Labat**, is open Monday to Friday 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., Saturday 9 a.m. to noon, and Sunday by appointment. Admission is 15 francs for adults, 5 francs for students.

Another of Martinique's museums, the **Maison de la Canne**, likewise deals with sugar and rum. Opened in 1987, it is housed in a modern, two-level structure in the south near Trois-Ilets on the road to Pointe du Bout. Hours: 9 a.m. to 5:30 p.m., closed Mondays. Admission for adults is 20 francs, for children 5 francs.

Also down south, in the inland town of St. Esprit, is the **Musée des Arts et Traditions Populaires**, located near the marketplace and exhibiting furniture, glassware, pottery and crafts indigenous to the area. Open Monday through Saturday 9 a.m.-12:30 p.m. and 2-5 p.m. Fee: 30 francs for adults, 10 francs for children under 16.

One of the more recent of the island's museums is the beachside **Ecomusée de Martinique**. at Anse Figuier outside Rivière-Pilote in the south. A retrospective of Martinique's history, its 19 exhibits and panels present artifacts dating from prehistoric amerindien times, through early colonialism, slavery and the plantation economy, to present day traditions. The **Ecomusée** opens daily except Tuesday and Sunday from 9 a.m.-1:30 p.m. and 2:30-5 p.m. Fee: 20 francs for adults, 5 francs for children under 12.

Behold the Bountiful Banana

The very newest of Martinique's museums is the **Musée de la Banane**, located in the northeast, on the lush hills above Sainte-Marie. Set amidst a working estate, "Habitation Limbé," the complex boasts four distinct sections: the former Master's Mansion, housing the museum itself which depicts "everything you ever wanted to know about bananas"; the packaging plant where today's crops are actually prepared for shipping; the former Creole shanties which now serve as boutiques for all the products derived from the banana plant and fruit (perfume, dolls, soap, jams, cakes and cocktails); and, lastly, the lovely park where visitors may take relaxing walks along well-marked paths lined with a variety of banana plants and exotic tropical flowers. Open Monday through Saturday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Sundays in winter, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. and Sundays in summer, 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. Admission charge is 30 francs for adults, and 15 francs for children.

For folders and information on Martinique, 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>. E-mail: Martinique@nyo.com.

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