

SHOPPING IN MARTINIQUE: **Perfumes and Spice and Everything Nice**

An eye for quality and a penchant for savings are all one needs to make shopping a joy in Martinique. Since the island is French, it's no surprise that most imports carry the prestige label, "Made in France." Fashionable little boutiques sell Paris couture and Riviera resortwear, larger stores carry luxury goods (Baccarat, Lalique, Hermès, Lanvin, Dior), and tiny holes-in-the-wall deal in island rums, spices and varied exotica. There's plenty to choose from and the prices are right. Also, a buying spree here is a breeze since most shopping for visitors is concentrated in downtown Fort-de-France, the island's capital.

Among the most popular shops is Roger Albert, a long-established emporium on rue Victor - Hugo. Like other spots that do good business with cruise passengers, it is open all day Monday to Friday, and Saturday morning. The store is stocked to the ceiling with perfumes of every kind and staffed by hospitable, attractive Martiniquaises (the island is noted for lovely women). There are also cosmetics, watches, jewelry, crystal, and a myriad of other items that make ideal gifts at good prices.

A hint when shopping: Stores such as this give an immediate 20% off on luxury merchandise paid for in travelers' checks or by certain credit cards. It's a local government incentive to boost tourism and is available only to visitors.

Fabulous Savings on Perfumes

Thanks to this arrangement, perfumes, for instance, can be purchased at remarkably low prices, often underselling tax-free ports the world over. In a February '99 comparison with New York prices (including tax), savings prove to be considerable. Chanel No. 5, priced at \$270.63 an ounce in New York, is only \$156.30 at Roger Albert, Guerlain's Samsara, \$270.63 an ounce at New York stores is \$160 in Martinique, and Champs-Élysées, \$259.80 an ounce in New York costs \$160 here. Other outstanding buys are Givenchy's Organza, which sells for \$259.80 an ounce in New York but is just \$154.60 here, and Chanel's Allure, priced at \$270.63 an ounce in New York is only \$148.20 here.

Although perhaps less well known in the U.S. than French perfume, Martinique rum is, nonetheless, considered to be one of the world's finest distilled drinks. Ernest Hemingway in *A Moveable Feast* lauded it as "the perfect antidote to a rainy day." Whether white and light, or amber and aromatic, it is reasonably priced by U.S. standards: about \$8 a liter for light, about \$10 for dark, although precious aged rums are considerably higher. La Case à Rhum, conveniently located on rue de la Liberté, has a good selection of all types, as do shops and supermarchés throughout the island.

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The dozen or so distilleries that comprise Le Syndicat des Rhums de la Martinique welcome visitors to observe the processing of rum from January to July and to sample the product year-round. Rhum Clément in Le François, for example, is open daily and has a hospitality cottage at its antique Domaine de l'Acajou, site of the 1991 summit meeting of Presidents George Bush and François

Mitterand. Like the St. James Distillery in Sainte-Marie, it houses a well-designed museum devoted to the history of rum.

Couture, Both Chic and Exotic

For haute couture and chic resortwear, there are dozens of shops dotting the narrow streets of downtown Fort-de-France. These places, which look as though they've been transplanted from the Riviera or Paris, often go unnoticed by tourists since they are tiny. Their size is a plus, however. Each can be checked out in a matter of minutes, the service is personal, and on-the-spot alterations at many are free.

Some boutiques, like La Chamade on rue Victor-Hugo, are prêt-à-porter (ready-to-wear) shops that have been in business a long time and carry fashions from Paris and Côte d'Azur designers. Newer shops, also on or near rue Victor-Hugo, are Georgia, Ah!Nana, and the very classy Harlem Studio. Others, like Mounia, on rue Perrinon, carry very top names: Christian Lacroix, Claude Montana and Yves St. Laurent, among others. YSL is an especially appropriate label at Mounia since the boutique is owned by and named for the beautiful Martiniquaise who made her mark as a top St. Laurent model.

Young Martinique designers are also now presenting their own collections. Prominent couture names include Paul-Hervé Elisabeth, who returned to Fort-de-France from Paris to open his elegant new space, Le Showroom, on rue Blénac. Top ready-to-wear names are Canasuc and Daniel Rodap, to mention a few.

In fashion-conscious Martinique, a new crop of boutiques seems to blossom each season, though some like Crazy (rue Victor-Hugo) or Eve (rue Lamartine) have been around for a while. A word of caution, however. Even though the owners are often as fetching as the names they give their shops, they aren't always English-speaking, so if your French is rusty, bring along a phrase book or pocket dictionary.

The above places are mostly for women, but shops like Mazarin on rue Gallieni and Samourai on rue Antoine Siger are good spots for men's clothes, as are Gentleman on rue Perrinon, and Man Street and Manly, both in the Boutiques de Cluny.

Madras Galore

One fashion that has endured for generations is the wearing of madras. Shops on every street have bolts and bolts of it, all colorful and inexpensive, from \$15 to \$20 a meter. Long a part of traditional folk costumes, madras makes up nicely into casual shirts and skirts, and the tailoring can be done right in town.

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For truly luxe table settings, **Cadet Daniel**, 72 rue Antoine Siger, offers Limoges china, Christofle silver, and crystal from Daum, Baccarat, Lalique and Sevres -- all very good buys with the 20% tax refund. Since its opening in 1840, **Cadet Daniel** has also enjoyed a special cachet because of its exquisite jewelry. Like such nearby stores as **Thomas de Rogatis, Venutolo, Montclair and L'Or**

et L'Argent, it sells island-made 18-karat gold baubles, including the magnificent beaded collier chou, or “darling’s necklace,” long the requisite ornament of a Creole costume. **Cadet Daniel** also carries the work of Emile Mothie, the ne plus ultra in Creole jewelry design, both classic and new, including his fabulous breadfruit earrings.

Indigenous Art

For novelty jewelry, visit the Caribbean Art Center opposite the Tourist Office, which also sells handicrafts: madras-garbed dolls; ceramics; items in shell, bamboo, straw, etc. Among its prized mementos are brilliantly colored patchwork tapestries, indigenous to Martinique, depicting aspects of island life. The best carry such artists’ names as Corail, Balisier and La Fougère. **Galerie Bleu Vert** and **Artbijoux**, both on rue Victor-Hugo, sell Haitian art of high quality, while **Villa Métisse** on rue Paulo-Rosine in Ravine Vilaine shows Martinique artists, as well as painters who have moved here.

Island antiques are scarce but **Big Ben Antiquités** at Patio de Cluny carries old bibelots and maps, as does **Grenier des Isles** in Lamentin. For CD’s and tapes, from new “zouk” to old folk, try **Georges Debs** and **Nuggets**, among other shops; for interesting stamp issues, visit the main post office on rue de la Liberté.

Gourmet chefs will find exotic spices in the city’s open-air markets and goodies like tinned paté or canned quail at local supermarchés. **Galleries Lafayette**, **Cora** and **Match** sell shredders, graters, and other culinary collectibles. For French wines and champagnes, a corner grocery will often do the trick. And to see a shopping center à la martiniquaise, a visit to **La Galeria** near the airport is de rigueur.

Island Spices and Delicacies

Up north in the village of Bézaudin near Sainte-Marie, Madame Nogard’s “boutique gourmande,” Ella, specializes in unusual homegrown spices, homemade preserves and syrups. To transport them, there are sturdy straw baskets at La Paille Caraïbe in nearby Morne-des-Esses, the vannerie (basket-weaving) capital. Another homemade delicacy that makes a distinctive gift is glass-jarred rillettes landaises au foie gras from Mme Laurent de Meillac’s 1,500-duck farm, **Habitation Durocher**, near Lamentin. Her Christmas specialty is a terrine de foie gras spiked with Armagnac and set in a lovely crock from the **Poterie de Trois-Ilets**, the place for ceramics.

Finally, last-minute shoppers need not leave empty-handed. A counter at the airport just beyond customs sells bouquets of anthuriums, beautifully boxed. They travel well, last three weeks, and make a nice souvenir from this “Isle of Flowers.”

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