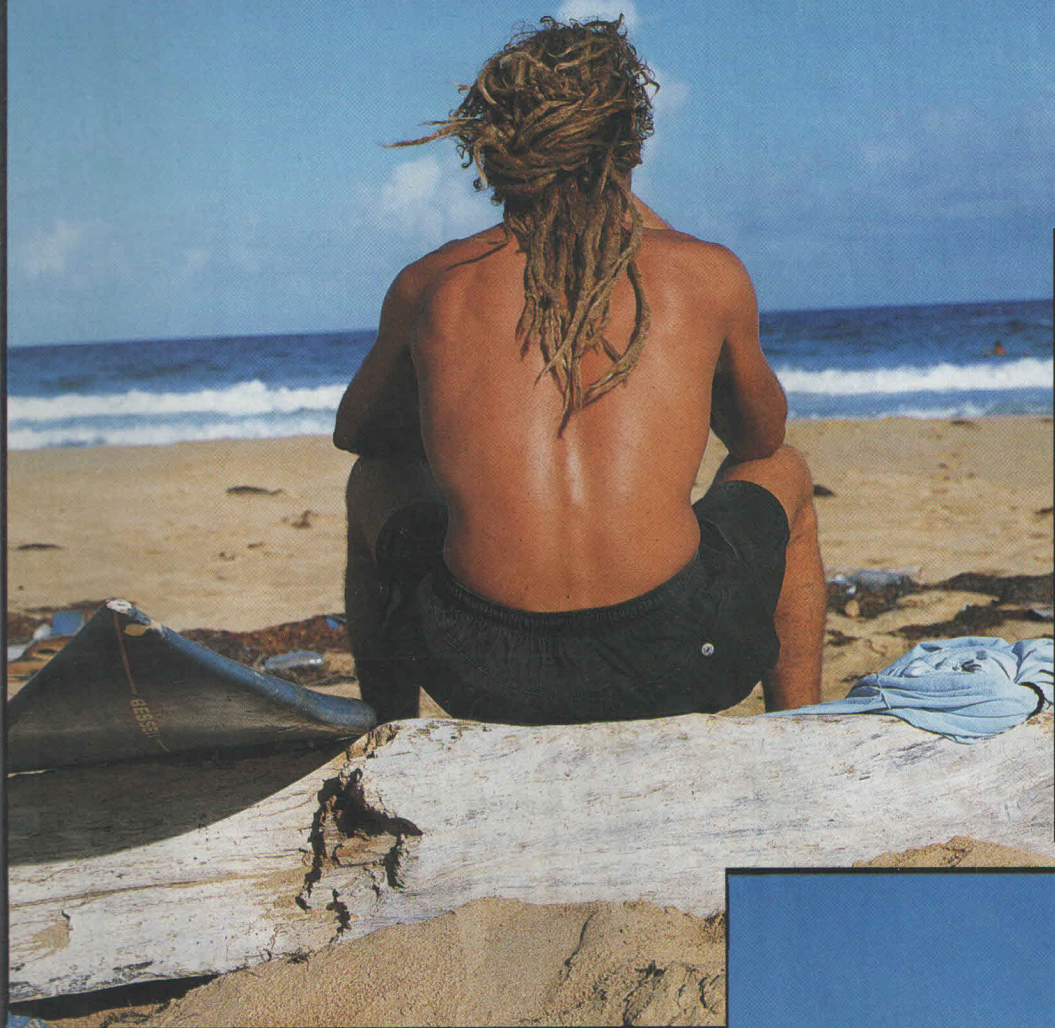
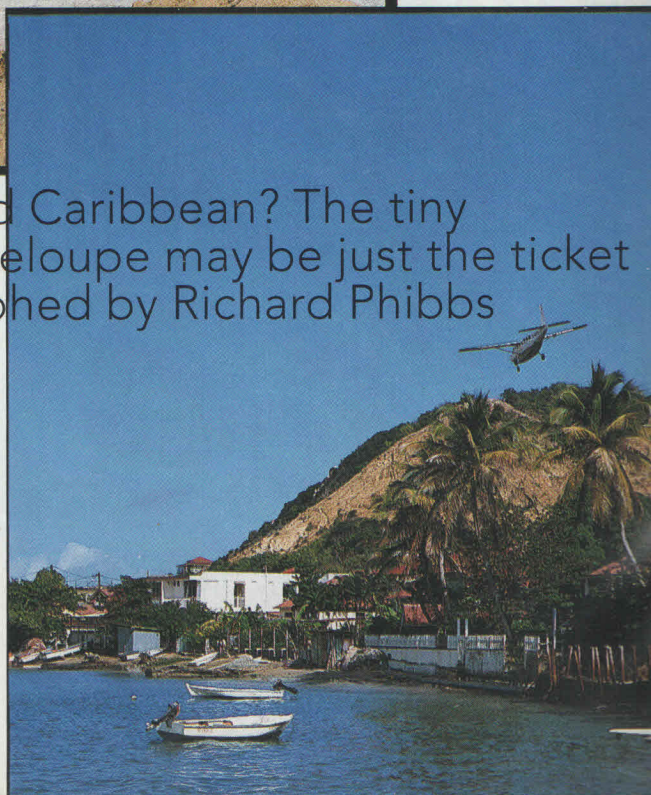


# let's get lost



In search of the undiscovered Caribbean? The tiny islands off the coast of Guadeloupe may be just the ticket  
By Michael Gross Photographed by Richard Phibbs







A volcano on nearby Montserrat has flipped its lid. We've just landed in San Juan, and are hoping to quickly catch the second of the day's three flights. But all travel south has been delayed. A listless ticket agent, who looks as if she'd like a weekend off, waves us to a nearby travel agent's office. There are two seats left on an earlier flight that's just about to leave—late. Never question the logic of good fortune. If we hurry we'll make it to Pointe-à-Pitre on Guadeloupe, where we'll catch a puddle jumper to our destination: Terre-de-Haut, the main link in the chain of islands known as the Îles des Saintes, or simply Les Saintes. The magician who's come up with the tickets approves. "Do you know St. Bart's?" she asks. "Les Saintes is like that, but thirty years ago."

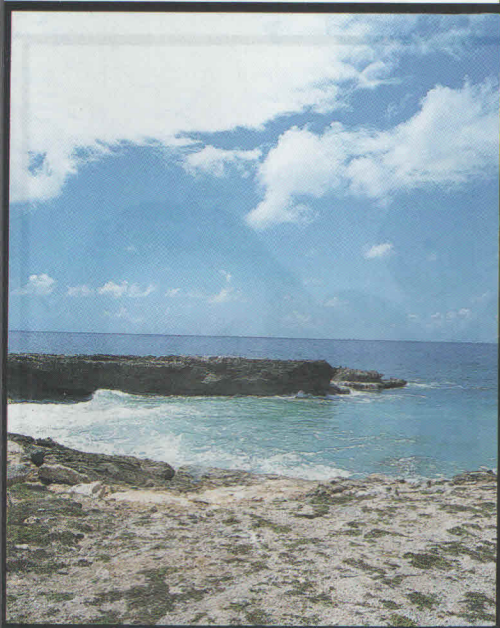
*You shoulda been there when.* Who wouldn't have wanted to join Bardot and Vadim in St.-Tropez, Garbo in Ravello, or Jackie O. on Capri? No one likes to arrive behind the overdevelopers. St.-Barthélemy, the chic French island, isn't overdeveloped yet, but it isn't unspoiled, either. Caviar and Cartier cut both ways. So we've come in search of the undiscovered French Caribbean. And we've decided to look between Christmas and New Year's, when most of those islands are under siege. We joke about ruining our find—if it is one—by writing about it.

We've agreed on two stops, the most and the least developed inhabited islands off Guadeloupe. First Terre-de-Haut, then Désirade, an arid finger of rock pointing into the Atlantic northeast of Les Saintes at the easternmost edge of the Leeward Islands. Each has fewer than 2,000 people and only a handful of services; there are about 80 hotel rooms in Les Saintes, a dozen on Désirade. You can't even rent a car in the former—lucky thing, as the roads are narrow and treacherous. You can rent a car on Désirade, but there's just one road and it's only seven miles long.

The short flight from Guadeloupe takes us over Terre-de-Haut's huge natural harbor. Our plane drops like a stone between two mountains to a runway that stops just short of the longest beach in Les Saintes. I







Neat, shuttered houses, ABOVE, line one of Désirade's unnamed streets. ABOVE LEFT: Désirade's 11-mile-long south coast is nothing but beach. LEFT: A visitor enjoys a day on the island—an easy ferry ride from Guadeloupe.

burnish my fantasy of an idyll in a bamboo-walled Crusoe camp run by sun-battered sophisticates proffering rum drinks under the palms. But our greeting committee consists of children, dogs, and, most important, a van from our hotel—there are no taxis in view.

Hôtel Bois Joli lies at the end of a roller-coaster road, on its own beach in a sylvan cove at the western end of the island. From our bungalow's terrace we can see Guadeloupe in the distance, its volcanic mountain wreathed in a feathery boa of clouds. We crane our necks and there's a hint of the Pain de Sucre, Terre-de-Haut's miniature version of Rio de Janeiro's Sugarloaf, a cake-shaped mound of basalt and trees connected to the island proper by a narrow strip of beach bisected by coconut palms.

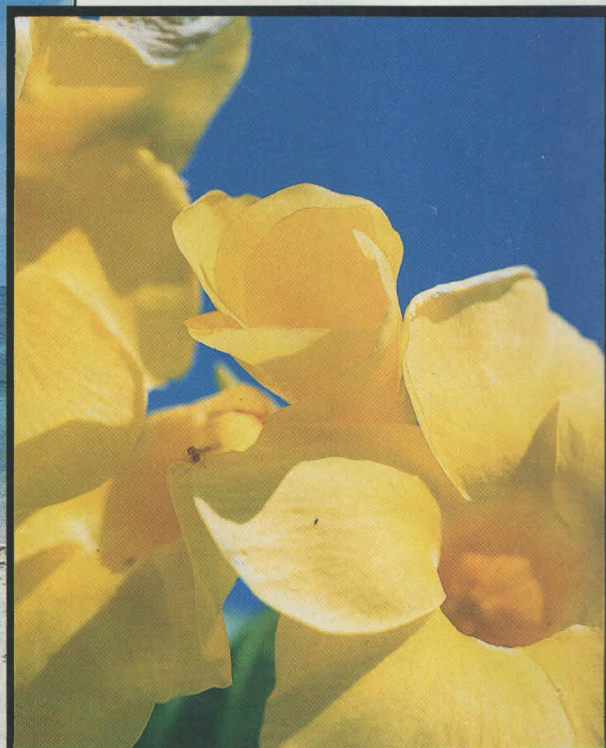
Soon we're drinking rum punches poured with a heavy hand, eating langoustes in the hotel's poolside restaurant, and meeting some of the other guests. Unlike the Hollywood habitués of St. Bart's, they are regular folk, including five tawny divers from Denver and a San Franciscan who proudly displays the angry sores he's gotten from the poisonous green-apple-like manchineels that grow on the island.

At breakfast, fresh fruit and scrambled eggs appear. But it's clear that food isn't a selling point for Les Saintes as it is in refined St. Bart's—the egg whites and yolks are barely mixed, even after our request. Even so, the self-contained world of Bois Joli and its sailboat-filled bay is so seductive, we realize that if we settle in we may never leave. So we resolve over espresso that, after a quick swim, we'll spend the morning exploring.

Though guidebooks say Terre-de-Haut is small enough to walk from end to end, we aren't feeling quite that ambitious. It is serendipitous, then, that as we venture out to inquire about transportation, a ferry pulls up to the hotel's ramshackle dock. The Brudey Frères boats ply the waters between towns on Terre-de-Haut and Terre-de-Bas, the other inhabited island in the archipelago. Soon we're steaming under Le Chameau—the camel—the hump-shaped mountain that is Terre-de-Haut's primary topological feature.



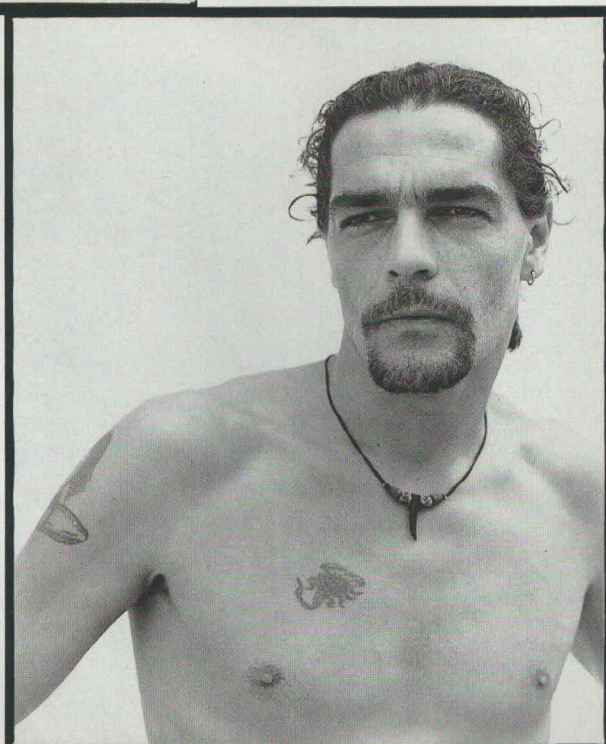
If Les Saintes is what St. Bart's was two decades ago, then Désirade is St. Bart's a half-century before that. Appreciating it requires giving up almost every modern expectation



You can trek to the top for a stunning view, but only from the sea can you appreciate the trove of tiny coves, the uncrowded crescents of beach, and the startling population of watercraft. Sailboats, stinkpots, Zodiacs, catamarans, Windsurfers, and Hobie Cats float suspended in sunlight, a tranquil traffic jam.

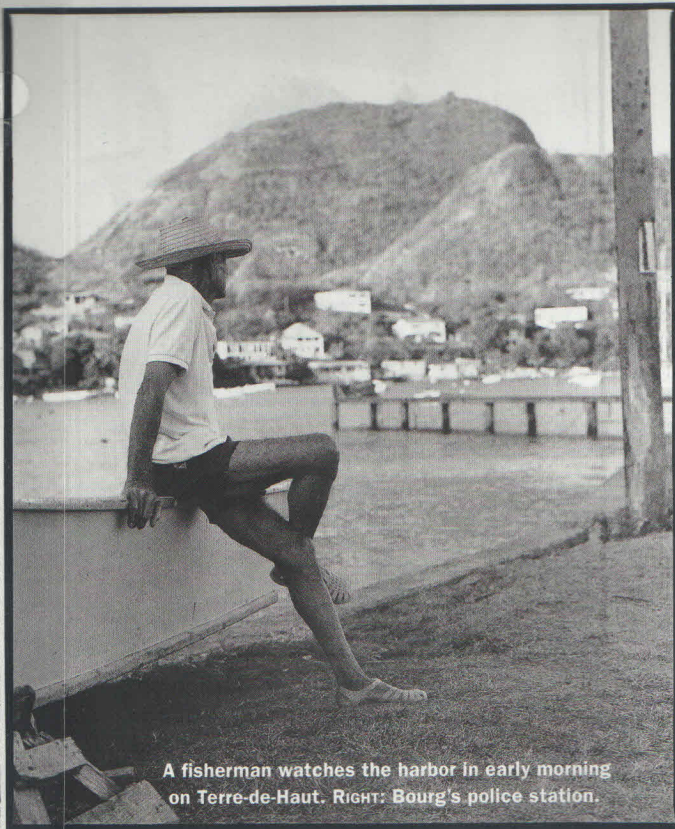
The Saintois are descendants of the Breton and Norman seafarers who colonized the island in the first half of the 17th century. Most visitors today still arrive by sea. Indeed, the island seems better equipped for boaters than hotel-room renters. A large part of its appeal—and the thing that will likely keep it pristine—is the islanders' apparent ambivalence toward travelers: they want you to cruise through, not move in. For Americans, this is a new frontier. Storekeepers sniff at dollars. There are no English papers—not even the *International Herald Tribune*—at newsstands. No one speaks English, really. They claim “a leetle,” but they don't mean it.

Even at mid-morning, Bourg, the main town, is sleepy. A lanky young American woman with a killer grin, one of the divers from Denver, (Continued on page 205; see page 212 for *The Facts*)





## FRENCH CARIBBEAN



A fisherman watches the harbor in early morning on Terre-de-Haut. RIGHT: Bourg's police station.

(Continued from page 165) is the only soul in Nilce's Bar, a local pier-side landmark. There's no sign of the fishermen in straw salacot hats, whom we'd heard play dominoes in the bar, nor of their barefoot children, who sell the island's indigenous coconut tarts—*tourments d'amour* (or "agonies of love," after the longings of mariners' wives)—when the big ferries from Guadeloupe arrive at the dock. The diver sips a coffee and contemplates the silence.

Bourg is built along steep roads just like those on St. Bart's, only narrower and with almost no traffic or noise; the lack of tourist infrastructure definitely has its upside. The town is an orderly clutter of brightly painted gingerbread-trimmed little houses on a few neat-as-a-pin streets, shaded by bougainvillea, pretty as a postcard. The square has a church, a government building, and lampposts entwined with cast metal vines. Everywhere there are dogs, lizards, birds, and children; flame trees, Turk's head cacti, yuccas, and purple grana-dillas. A man sweeps the street with a handmade broom. Everyone smiles and waves. On first glance, it's a Disneyland Caribbean, manicured to within an inch of perfection. Any minute, you think, Donald Duck will round the

corner wearing a Speedo.

Inevitably, the true character of these islands begins to emerge; the charm of Les Saintes is in the tiny idiosyncrasies. At the pharmacy, which carries all the necessities but few luxuries, my wife, Barbara, and I learn that the vet—we've brought our dog—comes only once a week, and the bank won't open until Tuesday. But there's an ATM up the street. It gives us francs.

A friendly clerk at the tourist office next door recommends a restaurant on Baie de Marigot, about 20 minutes away by foot. Past houses hung with Christmas tinsel, the shacks selling rum punch, and

There is only one taxi on the island and at this moment its owner's answering machine is on. The waiter offers us the restaurant's truck, but the place is busy, so we demur.

The walk back seems quicker, but at the end we decide that the man we pass napping on a beach chair in front of his house has the right idea, and we hop the boat returning to Bois Joli. Anse Crawen—*anse* is French for cove—is a short stroll from there. A path leads through a thick grove of trees to a perfect crescent of sand, black at one end, white at the other. There's a magnificent view of three more Saintes, one of which looks like a great ruined castle with a bird of prey perched on its ramparts. On our way back, we spot a sign warning against nudity. But the second word of *NUDISME INTERDIT* and the first of *NO BARENESS* have been methodically scratched out. All the guidebooks mention this nude beach—and it appears the denizens of the island don't want it to change, particularly when the change seems intended to appeal only to puritans from their great northern neighbor.

When the sun goes down, we take the hotel van into town with a former fashion editor and her husband, who tell us—here we go again—they've heard Les Saintes "is just like St. Bart's was forty years ago." We are all going to Auberge Les Petits Saints, a restaurant-hotel in what was once the hilltop home of the island's mayor. The town is stunningly silent; at 8 P.M. you can hear forks hitting plates in distant houses. Neapolitan love songs play softly as we ascend to the eccentrically decorated hotel's terrace for chilled Loire wine, lobster tart, and fresh fish served by co-owner Didier Spindler, a former antiques dealer from Montpellier. Bringing the check in a carved wooden folder, he lingers, talking of his adopted home in a babble of English and French.

"It's *authentique*," he says. "Like St. Bart's, you know? But twenty years ago."

WORD HAS IT THAT THE SAILING IS rough on the ferries between islands, so we charter a Piper to take us to Désirade.



palm-shaded pastures where goats, sheep, and bulls graze, we come to La Paillote Chez Nadia. The restaurant is housed in a shaded gazebo just steps from the water, where a fleet of fishing boats lies beached under dwarf palms.

Our fellow diners are eight fishermen, downing punch at the bar, and a couple of French families (on these islands, the French often rent *gîtes*—inexpensive houses—for weekends and holidays). We eat grilled fish and Creole-style chicken, pungent with garlic. After dessert, we inquire about a taxi. Many phone calls later, our waiter returns to the table, looking disappointed.



## FRENCH CARIBBEAN

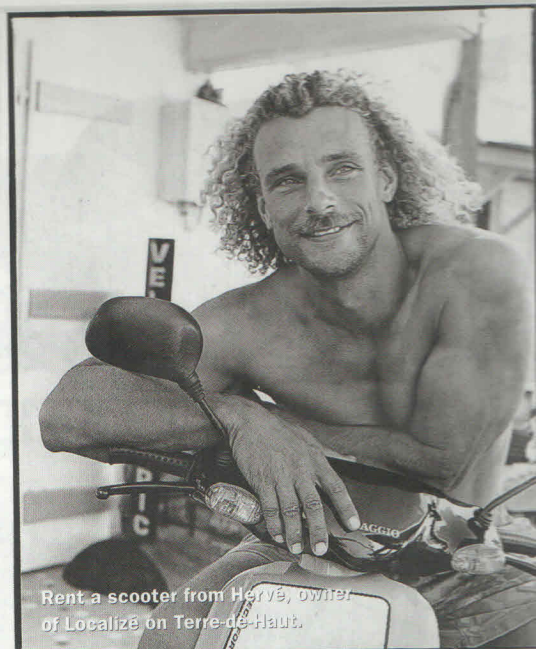
(Scheduled flights are extremely limited.) Désirade looks just like the overturned boat described in the few guidebooks that mention it. Occupied by the French beginning in 1635, the island was long just a dumping ground, first for exiled nobles and then for the occupants of the now-ruined leprosarium.

A woman hangs on a rickety fence near the runway as we land; otherwise there is only stillness and silence. We feel like Rip Van Winkle running in reverse—it's as if we've landed at lunchtime in the 19th century. The woman introduces herself as Chantal Zamia, owner of Oasis du Désert, where we have reserved a room, and leads us to her little truck. Barbara takes the passenger seat while I sit in back with the dog on a tiny wooden bench. Chantal stops at a flat white concrete-and-stucco building with a cinder-block fence and a hand-painted sign: our hotel.

Up a circular stairway are five rooms with views of the island's other hotel, a similarly squat place called Le Mi-

rage, where we are never to see a sign of life. Across the street lies a playground whose fence is studded with signs asking that animals not be tethered there—goats and sheep are tied beneath them. Our room is small but clean. A half-wall and a rickety folding metal door hide the bathroom and shower. Two single beds pushed together, a night table with a dim lamp, a rusty fan, a child-size desk, and a free-standing closet with two hangers and a swarm of mosquitoes inside complete the inventory of furnishings.

Briefly, Barbara looks stricken. But we have found our grail, a place untouched by time or tourist dollars. If Les Saintes is what St. Bart's was two decades ago, then Désirade is St. Bart's a half-century before that. Appreciating it requires giving up almost every modern expectation. The reward for taking that sharp turn is immediate, for you are suddenly as far away from it all



Rent a scooter from Hervé, owner of Localizé on Terre-de-Haut.

as you can possibly be in the Caribbean.

We rent a tiny car at a shack on the dock and drive east. The island is arid and dotted with small houses, many still in a state of disrepair following Hurricane Hugo in 1989. But the road is perfectly paved, the beaches along the southern coast are pristine and well-groomed, and there are signs of new construction on the flat salt plain that parallels the reef-protected beaches. Atop the craggy peak that runs the length of the island are fields of windmills, harvesting electricity. Beyond them, a sheer drop to the sea.

Désirade is an adventurer's paradise, full of exotic flora and fauna. But just being here is an adventure. In the morning we realize that finding an open restaurant on a Sunday will be a feat, so when we see a sign for one on Plage de la Petite Rivière—Baie Mahault on the map—we turn. At the end of the road lies La Providence Chez Nounoune, an open beach pavilion overseen by a burly, bearded man. "What do you want to eat?" he asks in French, when we inquire if he's open. We negotiate an order of langoustes, salad, and rosé, and he tells us to come back at 7:30.

Barbara laughs derisively when I wonder whether we could find a bar with blender drinks. Indeed, we can't find anything open until, in Souffleur, I pull up at a dark little store run by an ancient woman resembling Jabba the Hutt and a small blond boy who seems to fetch for her. (Continued on page 211)

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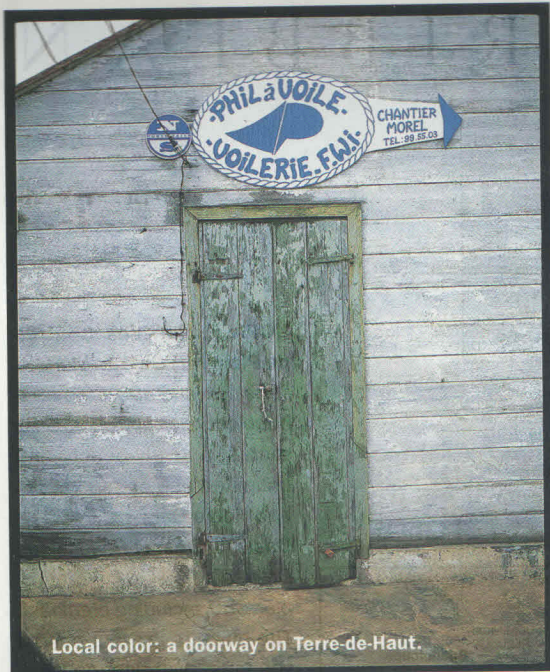
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Local color: a doorway on Terre-de-Haut.

(Continued from page 206) He brings me a bottle of *rhum agricole*—the only kind of rum they have. I hand the woman a 50-franc note, a bit less than \$10, but she gestures at her cash register to show she has no change. After I fetch another bottle of rum, several cans of grapefruit soda, and a bag of chips, she finally nods, satisfied, and hands me two pieces of bubble gum—my change. I pass them to the blond boy. Don't I want some chocolates and cashews? Jabba asks plaintively. She gestures to them, on display in a locked cabinet over her head. They must be her most prized merchandise. Wondering silently how long they've been there, I smile and say, "Non, merci."

Later at the restaurant the same man seats us at a picnic table with a red-and-white checked plastic tablecloth on a deck overlooking the beach. Since we're the only customers, the proprietor lingers to tell us how he spent years in Le Havre, France, as a navigator before returning home to Désirade.

"Here the air is pure," he says, thumping his big chest. "There are no thieves or assassins on the beach, no pollution, no mad-cow disease. The chickens are our own. The cucumbers are good for your digestion."

Our lobsters are slightly overgrilled and the side dish resembles frozen

succotash, but the cucumber salad is delicious and the empty beach is the polar opposite of that other Riviera. After we eat, our host apologizes. The restaurant was actually closed, but he'd opened for us. "Come back tomorrow," he says. "My wife cooks better than I do."

Morning dawns full of life. Birds chatter, butterflies and hummingbirds dart outside our window, dogs bark, and we scratch our insect bites. Chantal's mother serves breakfast on a plastic tray: glass cups of strong coffee, hot milk, and hunks of baguette with butter and confiture. After

eating, we walk around a pretty square a few blocks from the port, with an old anchor and cannons and a monument to children of the island who died at sea. In a grocery store, I spot a *Sunday Telegraph*, the first English-language newspaper I've seen in days. But our isolation is absolute; the paper is four months old.

So we drive. On the road's west end—in sight of Guadeloupe's dragon tail, Pointe des Châteaux—a marker commemorates the arrival of a freshwater aqueduct in 1991. It opened the island to tourism—or at least the possibility thereof. Lucky for us, the tourists haven't come yet; the beaches are almost empty.

Returning to Plage de la Petite Rivière, we find about a dozen people, mostly children, among the shady groves of half-grown palm trees. A man two trees down, a Belgian reading a book in French, asks in English if Messalina, our West Highland terrier, isn't hot. He says he works for a rich Englishman who requires his constant presence for months at a clip, then gives him months off. Driving away from the beach, Barbara muses that Désirade is the perfect hideout for a James Bond villain.

For lunch we've decided on La Payotte, a pretty yellow-and-blue gazebo with a bakery on Grande-Anse. We've

placed our order a few hours ahead, according to what we've decided is local custom. The tables are set under nets that float in the trees to prevent the only crime on Désirade: mugging by coconut. Our lunch—brochettes of shrimp in Creole sauce—comes with more succotash, but the freshly baked bread is so delicious we'll end up bringing a loaf home with us. Not so the special local dessert, which we're offered everywhere—a sticky, prunelike fruit called *acajou*. Once is enough for that (with apologies to Ian Fleming).

After lunch we drive east again, past Petite Rivière to the island's other end. There we find the ruins of a cotton factory, a lighthouse, and an abandoned weather station, all set in a barren, scrubby, breathtaking landscape of blackened hills and steep ravines ending in crashing surf.

Back at the hotel, we watch Fragonard clouds scud in from the Atlantic, scraping Désirade's mountain en route to Guadeloupe. The percussive sounds of a pickup basketball game in the nearby playground beat a tattoo for the waning day; *rhum agricole* burns in my gullet; and I realize that, against all odds, I like this authentic corner of the Caribbean.

At dinnertime we wander down to La Payotte again—and again it's just us and the mother-daughter team that run the place; they've prepared the huge lobster we ordered right after lunch. Later, in our room, we're ready for battle, slathering ourselves with citronella and lighting mosquito coils. We awake to full sunlight, looking at the bright side: we won't have to sleep in this room another night.

The morning is spent at Souffleur, the prettiest beach on the island. Its four parallel lines of palms, planted in perfect alleys, call to mind the Palais Royal. On the beach are a laughing child, a beautiful young couple, and a water buffalo tied up in the shade. Stopping to say good-bye on our way to the airport, we thank the great beast for sharing his island.

"Moo," it says, but I think I hear a challenge. Go ahead and write what you want. This island is mine. (Turn page for The Facts)