

# Back to ST. BARTH'S

After the Caribbean's most stylish playground was hit hard by Hurricane Irma, new ideas and investors rushed in to restore the island's luster. Will the kings of bling come again, or, like the current fashion moment, will St. Barth's return to its boho-luxe roots?

Chanel denim jacket, \$11,000, and jeans, \$1,250; chanel.com. Jade Swim bandeau, \$110; jadeswim.com. Monica Rich Kosann yellow-gold and sterling-silver ring, \$595, and yellow-gold ring, \$585; monicarichkosann.com.





**THIRTY YEARS AGO**, when I first visited St. Barth's, it was already ruined, I was assured.

Whether ruination came with Columbus, who arrived in 1493 and named the Caribbean island for his younger brother, Bartoloméo; with the French, who sailed from nearby St. Kitts in 1648; with the Knights of Malta, who took over a few years later; with the British, who controlled it next; or with the Swedes, who took possession in 1784 and made the island's natural harbor a free port, was left unsaid. The Carib and Arawak natives—who, after all, were there first—would undoubtedly say all of the above.

Friends who'd visited in the 1970s recall a simpler place where locals descended from the Swedish and French settlers and hardy American visitors willing to make a difficult journey by ferry or small plane mixed at a ramshackle bar called, improbably, Gunsmoke. It was exclusive not because it was expensive, but because it was hard to reach.

The reward for enduring the trip was a nine-square-mile island—officially a “territorial collectivity” of France—with 16 different beaches, calm and rough, long and petite, some with reefs worth diving, others with wind worth surfing. A dramatic landscape of jagged peaks, flat savannahs, and views to St. Martin, St. Kitts, Nevis, and other islands. Quaint, colorful architecture, local seafood, fine French food and wine, Cuban cigars. And as the years passed, ever-more-extravagant rental villas and hotels designed by the likes of Christian Liaigre and international cuisine from chefs like Jean-Georges Vongerichten. Into the 1990s, whether you were paying \$100 a night for a basic cottage or \$800 a night for a luxe hotel room, if you made it there, you could be a part of it, St. Barth's, St. Barth's.

However, by the 21st century, St. Barth's had become, if not quite an exclusionary private island, then an über-luxury product, its port stuffed with superyachts and studded with brands like Hermès, Prada, Cartier, Chopard, Bulgari, and Ralph Lauren. On its hillsides, homes of mahogany and teak, damaged by hurricanes, were muscled out by mansions of stone and glass. The Mokes that had long been the island's vehicle of choice were replaced by Mini Coopers. The beach bars serving beer and cheap, cheerful rosé were drowning in wine lists full of four-figure bottles.

Then, in September 2017, Hurricane Irma scored a direct hit. With winds reaching 199 miles per hour, Irma was the first Category Five hurricane in recorded history to land on St. Barth's. Four deaths were reported, many more were injured, power went out island-wide, 456 buildings were damaged, and the

island's fleet of rescue vehicles was neutralized when the fire station was submerged under three feet of water. Insurance claims eventually surpassed \$1 billion.

When I arrived 15 months later, it was three weeks before Christmas, the time of year when every hotel room on the island would normally be full and the runway at Gustaf III Airport—known as one of the most terrifying landing spots in the Caribbean—would be packed with private planes. In anticipation of the holiday, cranes were towering, earth was moving, and European stoneworkers were swarming, while trucks hoisted the thick trunks of mature palm trees into place. At the infamous day club Nikki Beach on the Bay of St. Jean, a DJ was spinning, rosé poured from magnums, and Wall Street types were puffing cigars as their wives ogled models in thong bikinis. By all appearances, St. Barthélemy was back. The island seemed to have simply shrugged off ruination. The only visible reminder of Irma's devastation was the Eden Rock (rates not available at press time; oetkercollection.com), the island's first jet-set hotel, which sits next door atop a volcanic rock that divides and dominates the bay. The red-roofed plantation-style house of mahogany and stone was awash in sunlight but shuttered and under construction.

Irma, it turns out, represented a turning point in the evolution of St. Barth's. While the hurricane temporarily shattered the island, its moneyed residents immediately set about rebuilding—and have almost finished. However, in the brief period of disarray and uncertainty that followed, the island's establishment found itself challenged by new players eager to supplant the old order. No one yet knows how this process will play out. As I took stock of the post-storm landscape, I wondered which forces would prevail. Irma has led to a moment of reset and rebalancing. It's a story of yin and yang, of two St. Barth's—one traditional, one glitzy—of an island where, despite an infusion of foreign investment hot on the scent of global plutocratic wealth, older establishments like Maya's, the *branché* restaurant on the edge of Gustavia that serves simple but perfectly prepared Creole-tinged French food, along with a committed band of immovable locals and tradition-minded return visitors, are pushing back against the seemingly unstoppable force of St. Bling. The question is whether they will devour or enhance the island's considerable charms.

**FOR SOMEONE** like me—I write books on social history—St. Barth's is Treasure Island. Great wealth arrived in 1957 when David Rockefeller, a grandson of the founder of Standard Oil,







Vintage top. **Oscar de la Renta** beaded fringe skirt, \$4,990; oscardearenta.com. **Maria Tash** diamond earrings, \$1,200; mariatash.com. **Cartier** white-, yellow-, and rose-gold bracelet, \$6,700; cartier.com. **Monica Rich Kosann** yellow-gold and sterling-silver ring and yellow-gold ring. Opposite: **Chloé** sleeveless sweater, \$1,250, and silk belt, \$815; chloe.com. **Chloé** jacquard fringed pants, \$1,150; justoneeye.com. **Loewe** calfskin boots, \$950.







Loro Piana silk and cotton sweater, \$1,675; loropiana.com. Verdura yellow-gold necklace, \$22,500; verdura.com. Dries Van Noten silk top (worn as neckpiece), \$1,645; jeffreynyork.com.

sailed by on a schooner and snapped up three huge beachfront parcels. On one, Rockefeller commissioned Wallace K. Harrison, the architect of the United Nations, to design a house. Another was sold to Edmond de Rothschild, the French-Swiss banker, whose heirs still occupy a wooden house on a beach called Marechal; the third went to Francis Goelet, heir to an old New York real estate family. In 2009, Goelet's property passed to Roman Abramovich, the Russian oligarch, for \$90 million. By then, St. Barth's, always a celebrity magnet, had become a celebrity petting zoo, known for its ultra-high-density population of boldface names. One memorable night at Maya's, my wife, my dog, and I were seated next to Steven Spielberg, Kate Capshaw, Tom Hanks, and Rita Wilson after promising not to disturb them. They spent their meal flirting with our Westie. At a 2010 New Year's Eve party, Abramovich's party guests were entertained by Prince. The previous year, a son of Libya's Colonel Gaddafi hired Usher and Beyoncé to perform at his New Year's Eve fêtes just before the Arab Spring.

These days, however, actors, oligarchs, and dictators' spawn aren't the main subjects of gossip. That honor is reserved for investors swooping in from abroad to scoop up the island's assets, such as the reported nine-figure acquisition by LVMH of the venerable Cheval Blanc Isle de France (rooms from \$826; [chevalblanc.com](http://chevalblanc.com)), which has been redesigned by Jacques Grange. (A press release describes its ambience as "aboriginal multicolor pointillism meets the geometry of indigenous Werregue baskets in the unique atmosphere of the Caribbean.") LVMH also incorporated several neighboring properties and swallowed up Taiwana, a hotel next door on Flamands, the so-called Billionaires Beach. Taiwana, where plutocrats and fashion designers dined on simple \$45 lentil salads in the '90s, closed after years of litigation, drama, and controversy surrounding its former owner, whose name even popped up in the Panama Papers scandal. Though it's said that LVMH plans to reopen Taiwana, it's currently a walled-in wound on the face of a beach studded with rubble and unfinished homes. If Taiwana was the birthplace of St. Bling, Cheval Blanc hopes to be its apotheosis.

**IN CONTRAST**, Le Guanahani (rates not available at press time; [leguanahani.com](http://leguanahani.com)), a five-star hotel on the eastern shore, falls on the traditional side of the great divide. Martein van Wangenberg, its managing director, stayed on the island through Irma. "The captain has to stay onboard," Van Wangenberg told me. On the day of the storm, he barricaded himself in the hotel while the winds made "the scariest noise." The rooms mostly survived, but Le Guanahani's beachfront pavilions were destroyed. The day after the storm, the community came together to clear the roads; Le Guanahani (CONTINUED ON P. 150) →

## St. Barth's Essentials

**ARRIVE**  
Fly to St. Barth's on a private charter or the regular shuttle with **Tradewind Aviation** ([flytradewind.com](http://flytradewind.com)) from San Juan, Puerto Rico.

**STAY**  
For seclusion and luxurious simplicity, try one of the 22 freestanding suites at **Hotel Le Toiny** (rooms from \$860; [letoiny.com](http://letoiny.com)). Each comes with a Caribbean view and private heated pool. The island's most Instagrammable beachfront pool is **Le Sereno's** (rooms from \$871; [serenohotels.com](http://serenohotels.com)).

**Le Barthélemy** (rooms from \$768; [lebarthelemyhotel.com](http://lebarthelemyhotel.com)) is the newest hotel, with a spare, chic design, beachfront rooms, and one of the island's few feet-in-the-sand restaurants. **Hotel Manapany** (rooms from \$531; [hotelmanapany-stbarth.com](http://hotelmanapany-stbarth.com)) is an eco-conscious dreamland spilling down the hillside at Anse des Cayes. And don't miss sunset cocktails at **Pointe Milou's Hotel Christopher** (rooms from \$516; [hotelchristopher.com](http://hotelchristopher.com)).

**SWIM AND SUN**  
Gouverneur, Saline, and Colombier are the three most unspoiled beaches. Shell Beach, home of the lunch and beach club **Shellona** ([shellonabeach.com/saint-barth](http://shellonabeach.com/saint-barth)), has become St.-Tropez East. On St. Jean beach, **Nikki Beach** ([nikkibeach.com](http://nikkibeach.com)) does flash and glamour, and **Carib Waterplay** ([caribwaterplay.com](http://caribwaterplay.com)) teaches surfing and offers boat rentals.

**SHOP**  
Along Gustavia's Rue du Général de Gaulle, find designer clothing and accessories at **Montaigne Market** ([montaignemarket.com](http://montaignemarket.com)), colorful shoes and leather accessories for both sexes at **Laurent Effel** (590-590/27-54-02),

multicultural home products at **Baya** ([bayastbarth.com](http://bayastbarth.com)), and of-the-moment beachwear at **Pipiri MC2** ([mc2saintbarth.com](http://mc2saintbarth.com)). Among the plethora of luxury jewelers, **Bijoux de la Mer** on nearby Rue de la République (590-590/52-37-68) is a mainstay. In Lorient, the island's best skin and hair products come from **Ligne St. Barth** ([lignestbarth.com](http://lignestbarth.com)). And stock up on Panama hats and Cuban cigars at **Casa del Habano** in La Villa Créole in St. Jean.

**EAT**  
St. Barth's is known for the best food in the Caribbean. Five new or reinvented restaurants raise the bar even higher. Pass the crowded "cocktail lab" and head to the tiny dining room at **Quarter** (25sbh.com) to sample 23-year-old Lugano-born Saxa Boni's Korean-French fusion food, and then beg entry to the **Rhum Room** ([rhumroom.com](http://rhumroom.com)), hidden in the rear, to sample some of Christopher Davis's 600-plus bottles of pirate's treasure. **François Plantation** was long the island's top gourmet destination in a hotel of the same name. It's been revived by new owner Jocelyne Sibuet, inside her renamed and beautifully renovated **Villa Marie** ([saint-barth.villamarie.fr](http://saint-barth.villamarie.fr)). Back in Gustavia, a local fisherman is a partner in **Fish Corner** (41 Rue de la République), where it's well worth waiting for one of just seven tables. Nearby, **Quartier Général** (Rue Jeanne d'Arc) looks like colonial Vietnam and tastes like the best Paris bistros.





From left: **Versace** silk top, \$1,295, and viscose pants, \$2,675; [versace.com](https://www.versace.com). **Fannie Schiavoni** stainless-steel mesh top, \$750; [fannieschiavoni.com](https://www.fannieschiavoni.com). **Loewe** calfskin boots. **Alexander McQueen** silk and lace dress, \$12,500; [alexandermcqueen.com](https://www.alexandermcqueen.com). **Louis Vuitton** knit dress, \$3,200; [louisvuitton.com](https://www.louisvuitton.com). **Maria Tash** gold and diamond earring, \$960. **Cartier** yellow-gold earrings, \$2,620; [cartier.com](https://www.cartier.com). **Belperron** ear clips, \$19,500; [belperron.com](https://www.belperron.com).





**Gucci** python and leather dress, \$3,800; [gucci.com](http://gucci.com). **Chloé** brass bracelet, \$440. **Belperron** yellow-gold cuff, \$18,750, and earclips, \$19,500. **Maria Tash** gold and diamond earrings, \$960 and \$3,950 per earring. *Opposite:* **Isabel Marant** linen top, \$550; [isabelmarant.com](http://isabelmarant.com). **Brunello Cucinelli** suede pants, \$3,245; [brunellocucinelli.com](http://brunellocucinelli.com). **Altuzarra** cotton cardigan (worn on head), \$695; [altuzarra.com](http://altuzarra.com). **Bulgari** rose-gold and diamond watch, \$32,000; [bulgari.com](http://bulgari.com). **Chloé** brass bracelet. **Loewe** calfskin boots.

HAIR BY RUBI JONES AT JULIAN WATSON AGENCY. MAKEUP BY LAURA STIASSNI USING MAKEUP FOREVER AT THE WALL GROUP. MODEL: LISA VOLLEBREGT. CASTING BY ERIN SIMON





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shared water from its private desalinization plant and, when its fiber-optic cables were restored, its Internet connection too.

"We've been very fortunate," Van Wangenberg said. But despite a \$50 million renovation finished just before the storm, Le Guanahani won't reopen until later this year, partly because of bottlenecks at the port, partly because of a paucity of housing for workers. When it returns, "the feel will remain the same," Van Wangenberg vowed, "funky and basic, no pretense. We don't want to get into that celebrity show-off feeling. Let's keep it low-key. After what people have gone through here, our feet are planted solidly on the ground. We don't need all that jazz. Unfortunately, the excesses get the attention."

**WITHIN A DAY** of our return to the island, it was clear that even after the scars of Irma are erased, St. Barth's will still be a conflict zone, with the battle lines drawn, as they so often have been in the precincts of wealth, between flash and pedigree, new money and old, the sort of folks who expect to see their names in the papers and those who perish at the thought.

"Prince stayed here when he played the Abramovich party," Ashley Lacour, CEO and second-generation owner of Sibarth Bespoke Villa Rentals, long the island's principal villa rental agency, said, unlocking the door to a modern, glass-walled villa with an infinity pool high above Shell Beach. Each of its five bedrooms has a fashion-label theme, so there is plenty of branding. The YSL room is red and gray with images of the late designer naked on the wall. The Hermès and Chanel rooms boast those brands' logos. The Louis Vuitton/Marc Jacobs room has the villa's one traditional touch: wooden floors allegedly recycled from the Orient Express. Ever an island unto himself, Prince stayed in the Bulgari room, on a level separate from the others.

"More and more villas, for us unfortunately, are very modern," said Lacour's wife, Kristina, who helps run Sibarth. "Clients love them, so nobody builds a new house and makes it look traditional." Ashley chimed in, "Which is a little sad for us who grew up here." Investors—like the French-Swiss owner of this home—design new villas to attract fans of bling and rebuild blingier when storms like Irma cause glass walls to "explode or implode," Ashley said. "They're managed from a distance. It's just numbers."

Lacour follows but also tries to lead the market. His office in Gustavia is decorated in colonial style, and he promotes a collection of traditional properties on Sibarth's website. "It's part of our responsibility to keep the island heritage alive," he said. "There is something very special after a hurricane. You go back to ground values. Nature reminds us what's important in life."

"**IT WILL GET** damaged again," said Eden Rock's David Matthews, leading me on a tour of the sprawling construction site of the hotel. "So we're investing quite deeply, to be able to

reopen immediately after the stormy season. Storms will not stop us in the future." Matthews took down and rebuilt Eden Rock's beachfront structures, raising them three feet higher than the original owner built them; reinforced the hotel's technical equipment behind doors designed for submarines; and raised its Sand Bar beach restaurant "to recognize the tidal surge—it was sixteen feet."

Eden Rock will have many new features, including suites at the top of the rock, where its gourmet restaurant used to be; wooden walkways around the rock, a kitchen built into it; and Robuchon-style kitchens added to the villas. But he's also agreed to help restore a channel that used to feed a pond behind his property, a project that will turn a dank-smelling, mosquito-breeding pond into a nursery for fish. He and the government are planting 9,000 mangrove trees there to create a wildlife sanctuary.

The container gridlock that has blocked supplies from reaching the island has slowed things down for Matthews too, but "the island has really pulled together," he noted. "We're all in the same small boat." A small, but very nice boat. Will Eden Rock emerge as an über-luxe property? "We will never go there," he vowed. "We want to compete against it—and win."

**TRUTH IS**, everyone will win. The war for St. Barthélemy's soul will have been good for all concerned, for it will have restored the fragile balance almost washed away by the torrents of crazy money that nearly drowned the island in the 21st century. Irma was a pipsqueak in comparison.

That balance, the yin-yang of tradition and excess, "constitutes the essence of the particular identity of our island," said Nils Dufau, the president of the Territorial Tourism Committee of St. Barthélemy, over a very traditional dinner of foie gras and steak frites washed down with a nice Graves at Quartier Général, a new French restaurant in Gustavia. "That's why we accept some bling at certain periods of the year while perfectly preserving the authenticity."

Dufau argued that flashiness and tradition are not in competition on St. Barth's, pointing out that the island forbids private beaches. "The island's assets should be available to everyone, residents and visitors alike," he insisted. But they aren't really the key to its survival as the chicest of destinations.

That's Gustaf III, the tiny airport wedged between the sea and a mountain pass, appropriately called La Tourmente, because planes must drop onto St. Barth's like stones from the sky. It's a natural limitation, the island's aeronautic velvet rope, guarding it from the ravaging hordes—if not passing hurricanes.

"It's good we don't have a big airport," Maya Gurley said with a laugh, as her restaurant emptied out at midnight on a December Friday. "If we did, we'd *really* be destroyed." ☞