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Scorecard St-Barth vs. St-Trop'

by KELLY CARTER

As a St-Tropez regular, I had a special curiosity about St-Barth. The French West Indies offer an array of islands, from bustling Martinique and multicultural Guadeloupe to the smaller Marie Galante, La Désirade, Les Saintes and the northern half of popular St-Martin (an island shared with the Dutch), but the unquestioned capital of jet-set chic is St-Barthélemy—St-Barth—often called the St-Tropez of the Caribbean.

I began my sojourns to St-Trop' years ago, going once or twice a summer. I'd longed to visit St-Barth for well over a decade—smitten from the moment I read that buildings taller than palm trees were prohibited—but I put it off until recently. The island is at its apex of tourist activity in the winter, with well-heeled Americans from the north escaping the cold, the Hollywood crowd looking for an excuse to party aboard a yacht, young Parisians in black and day-trippers from cruise ships. Summers

are quieter but still alive, especially in August, with French, Italian and American tourists enjoying the balmy, breezy days and perfect evenings before the island comes to a near standstill from early September to mid-October.

St-Barth greeted me with a bounty of charms: sherbet-colored houses, fertile mountain ranges, orange flamboyant trees, cactus-lined roads from one village to another, well-kept Mini Mokes, roosters and chickens walking around freely, cemeteries full of faux flowers and even a traditional Chinese junk, owned by a French couple who take clients out for lunch and sunset dinner cruises. I watched people swim with turtles off Nikki Beach; I gazed at local islanders downing beer and hamburgers at the bar Le Sélect, an institution dating back to 1948, in the port town of Gustavia, named after King Gustaf III when the island was traded to Sweden in 1784. This, I thought to myself, is nothing like St-Tropez. If I compared them feature for feature, how would St-Barth stack up to St-Trop'?

GETTING THERE

Let's face it: Unless you're fortunate enough to glide in on a yacht, St-Tropez is a pain to get to, which makes it seem all the more desirable when you finally do arrive, whether by train (no nearby station), rental car (long drive from Nice) or chauffeur (long drive and expensive). Coming at the wrong time, such as Tuesday or Saturday mornings, when the open-air market at Place des Lices snarls traffic something fierce, can be a nightmare. Weekend traffic entering and leaving St-Tropez can be brutal, too. St-Barth isn't nearly the hassle. You do need nerves of steel to handle the heart-stopping landing on the oh-so-short runway, stretching a mere 2,170 feet and ending at St-Jean Beach, where sunbathers stand and stare back as if daring the aircraft to run them over. When it comes to dramatics, there is no better landing than at St-Barth.

Advantage: St-Barth

HOTELS

St-Tropez offers wonderful lodgings like the elegant Villa Belrose, which sits high



St-Barth

above in Gassin and offers a panoramic view; Le Yaca and La Ponche, both in Old Town; and fashionable Le Byblos, recently refurbished, restoring to its former glory this legendary hotel that still draws bold-

face names. The addition last May of the Byblos Spa, featuring a Turkish bath, a rain-shower room, and an opulent relaxation area with 16th-century furnishings, added a much needed accoutrement to

St-Tropez. However, St-Barth's unique Eden Rock Hotel, built on a craggy promontory overlooking St-Jean Bay, surpasses any St-Tropez hotel. If you've got the euros, stay in the James Suite—winter rates

start at €2,175—with a private pool, Jacuzzi and sundeck just steps from the water's edge, plus a shower so spacious it gives you two entrances and double cascades. The more reclusive may enjoy the Howard Hughes Suite, a private, masculine abode with three decks and a kitchen, named after the eccentric multibillionaire, a former guest.

Advantage: St-Barth

NIGHTLIFE

Les Caves du Roy in St-Tropez has a justifiable worldwide reputation as *the* party place in the South of France. Scantly clad women and slick-haired men who aren't fortunate enough to know the handsome doormen can queue for up to three hours to get inside the disco, which rocks from midnight until sunrise during summer months. Papagayo, where the stripper pole gets a lot of use, is another hot spot. While it's possible to bounce, uninvited, from place to place



St-Tropez

in St-Tropez, St-Barth is a bit more insidery. The beautiful people gather at Nikki Beach to sip apéritifs and make plans for which yacht to party on later. The Yacht Club, also with the requisite stripper

pole, gets going around one a.m., about an hour after the table dancing starts at Le Ti, which entertains with a late-night fashion show.

Advantage: St-Tropez

SHOPPING

The Hermès, Cartier, Chopard and Dior boutiques in Gustavia are testament to St-Barth's well-deserved rep as a world-class shopping destination. Local stores such as Pati de St-Barth, with its famous, almost square ST-BARTH FRENCH WEST INDIES logo, and Lolita Jaca, purveying perfect island outfits, provide original items not found everywhere. But the shopping on St-Tropez is supreme, from the swimwear available at the beach clubs to designer duds to shoes, with everyone from Dolce&Gabbana to Diane von Furstenberg represented with their own boutiques.

Advantage: St-Tropez

BEACHES

If you're into long walks on the beach, you can stroll forever along Pampelonne in St-Tropez. The downsides are occasional debris near the shore and the need for transporta-

tion to get there if you're staying at a hotel in town (which is preferable). Delightful coves, reachable by boat, are perfect for watching sunsets or nude bathing. On St-Barth, visitors find a selection of 14 dazzling white-sand beaches, some with hotels shoreside or at least reachable by foot. The best are Gouverneur, which is quite peaceful; Saline, where the pretty people flock and nudity is expected despite the island-wide ban; and Shell Beach, alive with festivals on weekends.

Advantage: St-Barth

LUNCH SCENE

Lunch is a verb in St-Tropez. The festivities start in the afternoon, when rosé flows freely, and a visitor's major decision each day might well be which beach club to choose for the midday repast. Will it be the classy Le Club 55, with its elegant all-white surroundings, where owner Patrice Colmont never forgets a customer's face? The cash-only La Voile Rouge, where the partying gets going around four p.m. when well-heeled men spray bottles of champagne on topless women dancing on

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tables? Or Club Les Palmiers, where the scene is more subdued, but fashion shows in July and August, with models prancing around the tables flaunting sexy swimwear and party clothes available at the on-site boutique, rival the goings-on at La Voile Rouge? Many consider the beachfront Sand Bar restaurant, where tall, gorgeous French chef Jean-Claude Dufour dazzles in the kitchen, the best lunch option on St-Barth, but scene-wise nothing compares to St-Tropez, where what you wear to lunch overshadows what you eat.

Advantage: St-Tropez

PORT

Port de Gustavia in St-Barth looks great as long as it is full of yachts, but when the vessels are gone, so is the life. Not so in St-Tropez, where it doesn't matter whether there are oodles of shiny megayachts docked or empty slips. There are always people

strolling the waterfront to see and be seen. For the best people-watching get seats facing the port at places like Café de Paris and Sénéquier.

Advantage: St-Tropez

DINING

St-Tropez has plenty of palate-pleasing restaurants, such as the Alain Ducasse-created Spoon Byblos or the Banh-Hoi, Villa Romana or Joseph's. But St-Barth is what French cooking should be: foie gras, soufflés and pastries. And Le Restaurant des Pêcheurs at the swank Sereno Beach Hôtel features an authentic *bouillabaisse à l'ancienne*. It's the Friday plat du jour and a local fixture on the island. The Creole dishes at Maya and the fish at On the Rocks, two of the best restaurants on the island, are divine. Although local fishing crews deliver fresh catches daily to the restaurants, some of the fish and meats are flown directly from France—and that's evident in

the steep price.

Advantage: St-Barth

PEOPLE

St-Barth may be a vacation spot for the rich and famous, but its residents don't have a hoity-toity attitude. As in most of the French Caribbean, the residents—descendants of the original islanders as well as French, Portuguese, Brits and Americans—are laid-back and downright hos-

pitable. Sundays are slow, and outside of the occasional stray cat meandering around, there is little life even in Gustavia. As I passed one bar owner cleaning his saloon, he offered my group a round of beers, then refused to accept any money. In all my trips to St-Tropez, a potpourri of French, Germans, Italians and Africans, I've never experienced that from a stranger.

Advantage: St-Barth

The tally, it seems, is a tie—both St-Barth and St-Tropez are pretty terrific. In St-Trop' the glitz of the superyachts and the megabottles of Crystal champagne at the discos make it easy to forget that it's really a fishing village. An evening stroll through the charming old town, where the pedestrian streets are so narrow that they make outdoor dining a challenge, is a wonderful reminder of St-Tropez's calmer appeal. But the portside ostentation, while entertaining, can be over the top. St-Barth's, on the other hand, is more relaxed, at ease with itself. If St-Tropez is the lady who won't be caught outside without makeup, St-Barth's is the natural beauty who doesn't need the Christian Louboutin stilettos and the Vanda Catucci bikini to look great at lunch. ■

Kelly Carter is a freelance journalist and island hoper.



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