

St. Maarten offers perfect beaches for honeymooners

By Angela Davison

If you're considering a Caribbean honeymoon, and have done any research, you probably already know that while all of the islands have in common a glorious climate, miles of perfect beaches, crystalline blue-green water, and almost indescribably beautiful flowers, each has its own distinctive character as well. Except for St. Maarten, of course, which has two—one side of the island, Sint Maarten, is Dutch, the other, Saint Martin, is French. And thanks to the island's compact size and borders marked only by a "welcome" sign, you can easily enjoy the best of both.



There are many online resources to help if you'd like to plan your trip on your own. A direct flight—passport required—from Philadelphia to sparkling new Princess Juliana Airport takes about four hours. Do take heed of the extraordinary changes taking place in the airline industry, however. What seems written in stone today could be anything but that in a few months. And even if you are planning to stay at one of the more self-contained resorts, with so many wonderful beaches, and arguably the best restaurants in the entire Caribbean, getting around will be easiest with a rental car. For these reasons, if your honeymoon is your first trip to St. Maarten, a good travel agent may be your best bet. With so much to do to get ready for the wedding, why add unnecessary stress?

Certainly many people prefer the Dutch side. Phillipsburg is a major port of call for all the big cruise lines—even the extraordinary Queen Mary II and the even more massive Independence of the Seas dock there. The town has redone its waterfront in the last five years, and, though crowded, it's a fun place to walk, shop, and dine. Because the Netherlands Antilles isn't on the euro yet, your dollar will probably go farther here. Dawn Beach is a favorite destination. It boasts a brand new Westin resort, complete with casino and spa—perfect for any honeymoon or, for that matter, an unforgettable destination wedding. Port de Plaisance offers not only an array of amenities, but an incredible view of the megayachts that dock in Simpson Bay.

For a more American experience, many people enjoy the Sonesta Maho Beach in a complex that includes restaurants, shopping, a casino, and nightlife. The island's only golf course is a stone's throw from Maho at Mullet Bay. The Dutch Side also has plenty of timeshare resorts, like the Wyndham Sapphire Beach Club at Cupecoy, or Divi Little Bay, that rent available suites more like apartments, with small kitchenettes and hotel-like services. At a timeshare you will have assistance with your luggage, housekeeping and concierge service, linens and kitchen equipment, but you will not find the sheets turned down and



a chocolate on your pillow at night. It's definitely not the same as a deluxe hotel. That's the Dutch side in a nutshell. But remember that there is another Saint Martin...the French side...where an entirely different experience awaits.

Near Maho, by the way, is the rapidly growing enclave of Cupecoy, with its rocky, sheltered beach. This area of the island, just before the French side border, is home a medical school and a complex that hosts a casino and a number of fine restaurants. One of them, Temptation, is exceptional, with cuisine that fuses the tastes of the Caribbean and the Far East with the sophistication of a Manhattan piano bar. Chef

Dino Jagtiani grew up on St. Maarten and is the first St. Maarten resident to have graduated from the Culinary Institute of America. It is a different dining experience than you will have at any other restaurant on either side of the island.

Start your day in Marigot, the capital. Watch the little town come to life as you enjoy fresh from the oven croissants at La Croissanterie on the Marina Port La Royale. Then, treat yourself to a world class shopping experience, with stores like MaxMara, Hermès, Desmo, Longchamp. and the extraordinarily beautiful West Indies Mall. It's a taste of the Riviera on our side of the pond. After you shop, go back to the marina and lunch on one of the fabulous salads at Tropicana, where maitre d' Christophe will welcome you like an old friend. To work off lunch, climb to Fort Louis for a breathtaking view of the island. As you walk down the narrow streets, notice the Creole cottages and the stunning red flowers of the flamboyant, the official tree of the island.

The crème de la crème of French side resorts is La Samanna, on Baie Longue, where Jackie Onassis vacationed for many years. It is nestled in the Terres Basses, or lowlands, a high end residential area punctuated with gated Mediterranean style villas.

Two "can't miss" places to stay at the far end of the French side are the Radisson Saint Martin at Anse Marcel (scheduled to open this September) and the Grand Case Beach Club in a most remarkable town often referred to as the "Gourmet Capital of the Caribbean." The town's main street is lined with restaurants, one more wonderful than the next. Nothing is more romantic than a perfect dinner overlooking the water and neighboring Anguilla.

The French side beaches are incomparable. Baie Rouge and Baie Longue are in the Terres Basses. Orient Bay is beyond Grand Case and Anse Marcel. One section of Orient is clothing optional, and on most (but not all) of the beaches, topless is acceptable. Orient Bay also boasts a number of hotels—La Plantation and Palm Court among them.

For lunch at Orient, try Bikini Beach Bar. The food is great and there's live music, often during the lunch hour, too, in high season. Not far from the turn to Anse Marcel, you can take a water taxi to Pinel Island for the day. The water there is still and clear as a bell, and several restaurants serve lunch. Of course, your concierge can arrange day trips to Anguilla or St. Barth; horsebackriding; snorkeling; or a romantic sunset sail.

With the euro's value soaring against the dollar, prices are higher now in French St. Martin than they used to be. Many of the restaurateurs and shopkeepers recognize the problem this presents for American tourists, and as a result offer a break on the exchange rate. If you pay with cash in many French side restaurants, it's an even exchange—one dollar for one euro. Just as in France, the French in St. Martin have rather rigorous standards for politeness. If you observe them, they will treat you kindly in return. When you enter a shop, for example, it is customary to greet the shopkeeper with "Bonjour, Madame" or "Bonjour, Monsieur" (or "Bonsoir" in the evening) and to preface any request with "S'il vous plait,"—literally, "if it pleases you." And don't forget to say thanks—"Merci beaucoup." While just about everyone on the French side also speaks English, these few French phrases will take you far. (And by the way, in a dozen or more trips to St. Martin, two to France, and two to Québec, this writer has never encountered a rude français.)

A word about safety. The people on both sides are extremely friendly and helpful, and island is a fairly safe place. Nonetheless, always exercise common sense when traveling and take all the same precautions that you would anywhere else. Don't leave anything in your rental car, ever, and don't park in poorly lit areas. If you go to a casino at night, park in a well lighted area within the security guard's view. And don't take valuables to the beach!

Whether you go Dutch or French, if you honeymoon on this remarkable little island, you will probably find yourselves wanting to return again and again.

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