



CARIBBEAN JOIE DE VIVRE

AT CHEVAL BLANC, HOSPITALITY EFFERVESCES LIKE FINE CHAMPAGNE

STORY BY MARY K. LOVE

My husband and I had just taken our seats on a small commuter plane on the Caribbean island of St. Maarten when the woman next to us asked, "Are you ready for an exciting landing?" I had no idea what she was talking about. All I knew was that this 19-seat twin-engine de Havilland Otter was about to carry us to Saint Barthélemy (St. Barth for short), an exclusive island in the French West Indies.

Ten minutes later, the tiny island came into view, a knuck-

led mass of steep, green hills surrounded by turquoise water. From my seat near the front, I enjoyed a pilot's-eye view of the approach. We flew in low over the red roofs of Gustavia, the island's picturesque capital and port, until a short airstrip appeared below us. It was book-ended by a steep hill and, at the far end, by the sea.

Suddenly, the plane took a nosedive towards the hill. Did the pilot intend to *slide* down that slope? Squeals erupted

from a group of teenagers at the back of the plane. Adults gasped. But before I could say a prayer, we had leveled out and were rolling to a stop.

We would learn that heart-stopping landings were not unusual for St. Barth, which boasts the second shortest runway in the Caribbean.

Christopher Columbus discovered the island of St. Barthélemy in 1493 and named it after his brother, Bartolomeo. Since the mid-17th century,

St. Barth has been owned by France, except for a brief spell when it came under Swedish rule. Gustavia's three forts, bell tower and charming stone-and-wood buildings date to this period.

In the mid-20th century, Rémy de Haenen, a French adventurer and aviator, fell in love with St. Barth. He landed the first plane here in 1946 and, in 1953, built the legendary Eden Rock hotel, which still welcomes guests.

With an eye to tourism,



de Haenen invited celebrities to visit the island—Greta Garbo, Howard Hughes and Jacques Cousteau, to name a few. Since that time, St. Barth has maintained its reputation as a playground for the rich and famous.

Today, the island attracts visitors from around the world. They come for the beautiful beaches, every kind of water sport (sailing, scuba diving and more), fine restaurants, world-class shopping and sizzling nightlife. But they also come to experience the island's peculiar brand of *joie de vivre*—one that's laid-back and welcoming.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

When to go: Winter is the busy season, but the weather in spring and summer is still good. Festivals and sporting events occur throughout the year—from November's Taste of St. Barth (featuring local and international guest chefs) to July's Bastille Day, celebrated with fireworks and a Caribbean music festival.

Getting there: Unless you're arriving by yacht, fly to St. Maarten from a U.S. gateway then take the scenic 10-minute flight on Winair (st-barths.com/winair/en/schedules) to St. Barth.

Cheval Blanc: For information about the Maison and its activities, call 800-810-4691 or email the concierge at concierge.stbarth@chevalblanc.com. Also visit stbarthisledefrance.chevalblanc.com and chevalblanc.com.

About St. Barth: The island's official tourism site is a good source of information about the island—its history, villages, events and options for dining and recreation. Visit saintbarth-tourisme.com.

See the video at charlestonstyleanddesign.com/travel/multimedia-gallery.



1. Cheval Blanc's pool.
2. The hotel's entranceway.
3. Picnic on Anse de Flamands.
4. Bathroom with a view.
5. Children enjoy the hotel's garden.
6. Cheval Blanc's weekly fashion show.
7. The Port of Gustavia.

Images of the hotel courtesy Cheval Blanc St-Barth Isle de France. Other images © Charles & Mary Love.



Not long after our touchdown, we arrived by taxi at Cheval Blanc St-Barth Isle de France, our home for the next three days.

A high-end hotel with an impeccable pedigree, it's part of the LVMH Group, a French conglomerate whose stable includes luxury brands like Louis Vuitton, Moët & Chandon, Guerlain, Pucci and Fendi—to name just a few. Cheval Blanc

offers privacy, spacious accommodations and service tailored to the needs of a discriminating clientele. In the words of LVMH, their *Maison* represents the highest in the “art de vivre”—an art that would take us no time at all to appreciate.

Cheval Blanc overlooks the Anse de Flamands, a sand-fringed cove on the north side of the island. The location suited us well. From there, we could

easily check out the boutiques, restaurants and nightclubs in Gustavia and St. Jean (each about 10 minutes by car). When we'd had enough, we could retreat to the *Maison* to chill out. And chill we did. The hotel has 40 suites and villas, some on the beach, others in a garden embellished with exotic palms and an occasional strutting peacock. Our suite was a cool oasis with high, raftered ceilings

8. The seaside village of Corossol.

9. Lobster served on the beach.

10. Cheval Blanc's dining room.

11. A garden suite's pool.

and marble floors. The bedroom's all-white palette was accented with subtle touches of taupe and blush pink, the hotel's signature colors.

In terms of amenities, LVMH has definitely raised the bar. I can imagine the management's planning session: *Should we place a mat by the bed at night? Make it a cushion. A safe in the closet? Yes, with a glass-covered, velvet-lined jewelry box inside. Chocolates on the pillow? Pair them with a thermos of exotic tea du jour. Towels for the beach? Don't forget his-and-her canvas totes.*

Every morning we hurried to the Maison's seaside restaurant where youthful, attractive servers (called *ambassadeurs*) offered espresso and fresh juice, then pointed us to a breakfast buffet that included a variety of yogurts, cheeses, cold cuts, breads, cereals and fresh fruit. (We could also order hot items from the kitchen.)

The restaurant is adjacent to a pool, bar and deck with places to lounge and sunbathe. This is the epicenter of Cheval Blanc's universe, where as the day progresses, guests move easily from beach to pool to bar to fine dining.

No need to put on a coat and tie or cocktail dress for dinner. Still, a woman might be inspired to dress up after watching the weekly sunset fashion show by the pool. As cocktails are served, lovely French models (some from the hotel's staff) sa-shay by in colorful Pucci dresses and bikinis.

At night, executive chef Yann Vinsot serves up dishes that are a masterful mix of French techniques and world flavors. My fresh local lobster was served with rice and enlivened with

hints of chili and kaffir lime; my husband's lamb chops arrived with a sweet-and-spicy harissa sauce. For dessert, there was "praline rose des montagnes"—puff pastries flavored with raspberry and lychee.

Sommelier Jo Anne Clarke, we concluded, is a godsend for anyone intimidated by a wine list. Her pairings, all French, were spot on. The *coup de grâce* was an Alsatian dessert wine redolent of lychee and roses.

Cheval Blanc has the only Guerlain spa in the Caribbean. As connoisseurs of fragrance know, the house of Guerlain, since 1828, has been a leader in the world of fine perfume. Though familiar with their iconic fragrances (Shalimar, Samsara, Vol de Nuit), I had never experienced their skin care line before now. My Imperiale Relaxing Massage took place in a quiet, candle-lit room paneled with white leather. Among the blissful moments: a massage that advanced and retreated, like waves, over my body; a soothing wrap in warm towels—first wet, then dry; and a cool, super-luscious face mask, gently slathered on. At the end, I was offered a bowl of coconut ice cream to aid "re-entry." *Absolument divin.*

Cheval Blanc uniquely combines elegance and informality with an unsurpassed attention to details. For couples wanting to celebrate a special occasion or to vacation in an ultra-exclusive setting, it's a perfect choice. Families with children also feel at home. Whatever your circumstances, the hospitality offered by the Maison's youthful and gracious French staff will keep you coming back for more. *C'est vraiment magnifique!* 🍷