

Martinique

Martinique is for (beach) lovers. And foodies. And divers. And hikers. And, especially, Francophiles. A marriage of Gallic culture and Caribbean customs, this overseas department of France is a sunnier, slightly less crowded version of the motherland.

People looking for the more sophisticated pleasures, whether they be the kind you put on your plate or the kind you put on a credit card, will be happy to know that good food and the latest fashions aren't optional here, but a mandatory fixture wherever visitors congregate.

Volcanic in origin, the island is crowned by the still-smoldering Mont Pelée, which wiped out Martinique's former capital of St-Pierre in 1902. There's plenty of hiking and nature-watching on the slopes of the volcano. And since this is often called the 'Isle of Flowers' there are botanical gardens tucked into the rugged landscape.

Long luscious beaches and loads of diving are the main attractions in the south. Fishing villages dot the coasts; most of them have managed to hang on their seafaring soul while offering plenty for visitors to see and do.

There's a lot going on here, but it all happens on Caribbean time. Except for the mountainous north, it's an exceptionally easy island to drive around. One can surf at Presqu'île de Caravelle in the morning and make it back to Fort-de-France in time (avoiding rush hour) to sample the city's budding nightlife.

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 1080 sq km
- **Capital** Fort-de-France
- **Country code** ☎ 596
- **Departure tax** None
- **Famous for** Flowers, including hibiscus, frangipani and bougainvillea
- **Language** French, Creole
- **Money** euro (€); €1 = US\$1.56 = UK£0.79
- **Official name** La Martinique
- **People** Martiniquans
- **Phrase** *Un ti-punch s'il vous plait* (One ti-punch, please); *excusez-moi, savez-vous où est...?* (excuse me, do you know where... is?)
- **Population** 400,000
- **Visa** None required for residents of the US, UK, Canada, the EU, Australia and New Zealand; see p625



HIGHLIGHTS

- **St-Pierre** (p613) See the devastation of Mont Pelée first-hand while the volcano broods in the distance
- **Pointe du Bout** (p618) Take a sailboat tour in the redoubt of the sailing set – food and drink abound
- **Les Salines** (p622) Stretch out on this beautiful long beach
- **Ste-Luce** (p620) Drink and dive in this lively fishing village
- **Presqu'île de Caravelle** (p616) Soak up the sun and sand by day, and gourmet flavors at night

ITINERARIES

- **Five Things You Really Should Try** Try to speak some French – even if you're reading straight from a phrasebook people will appreciate it. Go into a place where there are a lot of locals and order a ti-punch; on the other end of the spectrum, treat yourself to a great meal. You need to see Martinique from the water – on a ferry, sailboat or snorkeling trip – at least once. Finally, lie on the beach. Speedo-wearing grandpas abound here; beaches definitely aren't beauty contests.
- **Village Life** Spend a day in a fishing village and get into the rhythm of an ancient way of life. Wake up before dawn and watch the fishermen preparing for the day, have a leisurely breakfast and then read on the beach while awaiting their return. Then, eat the day's catch for dinner!

CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

Martinique enjoys a year-round tropical climate though its busiest tourist period is during the dry season, from December to May, when temperatures average about 26°C (85°F). The rainy season begins in June and continues until the end of November, with heavy showers most days (September is the rainiest month and, along with August, is most prone to hurricanes). Martinique's average humidity is high, ranging from 80% in March and April to 87% in October and November. The mountainous northern interior is both cooler and rainier than the coast.

HISTORY

When Christopher Columbus sighted Martinique, it was inhabited by Caribs, who called the island Madinina, which means

'Island of Flowers.' Three decades passed before the first party of French settlers, who were led by Pierre Belain d'Esnameuc, landed on the northwest side of the island. There they built a small fort and established a settlement that would become the capital city, St-Pierre. The next year, on October 31, 1636, King Louis XIII signed a decree authorizing the use of African slaves in the French West Indies.

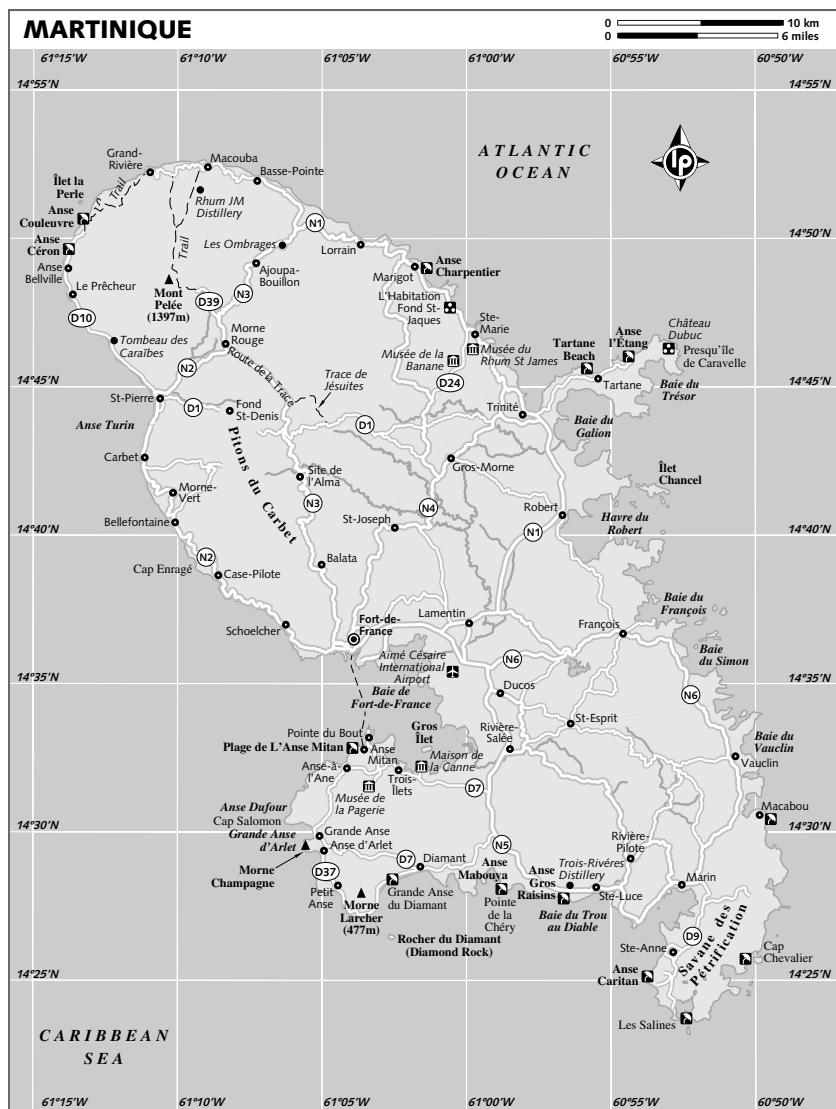
The settlers quickly went about colonizing the land with the help of slave labor and by 1640 had extended their grip south to Fort-de-France, where they constructed a fort on the rise above the harbor. As forests were cleared to make room for sugar plantations, conflicts with the native Caribs escalated into warfare, and in 1660 those Caribs who had survived the fighting were finally forced off the island.

The British also took a keen interest in Martinique, invading and holding the island for most of the period from 1794 to 1815. The island prospered under British occupation; the planters simply sold their sugar in British markets rather than French markets. Perhaps more importantly, the occupation allowed Martinique to avoid the turmoil of the French Revolution. By the time the British returned the island to France in 1815, the Napoleonic Wars had ended and the French empire was again entering a period of stability.

Not long after the French administration was re-established on Martinique, the golden era of sugarcane began to wane, as glutted markets and the introduction of sugar beets on mainland France eroded prices. With their wealth diminished, the aristocratic plantation owners lost much of their political influence, and the abolitionist movement, led by Victor Schoelcher, gained momentum.

It was Schoelcher, the French cabinet minister responsible for overseas possessions, who convinced the provisional government to sign the 1848 Emancipation Proclamation, which brought an end to slavery in the French West Indies. Widely reviled by the white aristocracy of the time, Schoelcher is now regarded as one of Martinique's heroes.

On May 8, 1902, in the most devastating natural disaster in Caribbean history, the Mont Pelée volcano erupted violently, destroying the city of St-Pierre and claiming the lives of its 30,000 inhabitants. Shortly thereafter, the capital was moved permanently to Fort-de-France. St-Pierre, which had been regarded as the most cultured city in the



French West Indies, was eventually rebuilt, but it has never been more than a shadow of its former self.

In 1946 Martinique became an Overseas Department of France, with a status similar to those of metropolitan departments. In 1974 it was further assimilated into the political fold as a Department of France.

In August 2007 Hurricane Dean pounded Martinique and entirely wiped out its banana crop. The hurricane caused damage estimated at \$240 million, and also killed two people. Some of the hotels set on the island's plantations have shut their doors as a result and it's uncertain whether they'll reopen anytime soon.

THE CULTURE

Martinique's society combines French traditions with Caribbean Creole culture. Politeness is highly valued on Martinique, so brush up on your manners.

In general, always address people with the formal 'vous' rather than 'tu,' but know that if someone uses the more casual form of address first (which happens more often here than in France) it's fine to use *tu*.

Only the very nicest restaurants and clubs enforce a dress code; look for signs that read *tenue correcte exigée* (correct dress expected). Elsewhere, dress is casual but generally stylish; save beachwear for the beach. Topless bathing is common on the island, particularly at resort beaches.

Martinique's population is about 400,000, more than a quarter of whom live in the Fort-de-France area. The majority of residents are of mixed ethnic origin. The earliest settlers were from Normandy, Brittany, Paris and other parts of France; shortly afterward, African slaves were brought to the island. Later, smaller numbers of immigrants came from India, Syria and Lebanon. These days, Martinique is home to thousands of immigrants – some of them here illegally, from poorer Caribbean islands such as Dominica, St Lucia and Haiti.

ARTS

Literature

The Black Pride movement known as *négritude* emerged as a philosophical and literary movement in the 1930s largely through the writings of Martinique native Aimé Césaire, a poet who was eventually elected mayor of Fort-de-France. The movement advanced black social and cultural values and reestablished bonds with African traditions, which had been suppressed by French colonialism.

HOW MUCH?

- Taxi fare from the airport to Fort-de-France center €20
- One-tank diving trip €45
- Comfortable hotel double €80
- Sandwich €4
- Meal of fresh fish €12

Music

The beguine, an Afro-French style of dance music with a bolero rhythm, originated in Martinique in the 1930s. A more contemporary French West Indies creation, zouk, draws on the beguine and other French-Caribbean folk forms. Retaining the electronic influences of its '80s origins, with its Carnival-like rhythm and hot dance beat, zouk has become as popular in Europe as it is in the French Caribbean.

ENVIRONMENT

The Land

At 1080 sq km, Martinique is the second-largest island in the French West Indies. Roughly 65km long and 20km wide, it has a terrain punctuated by hills, plateaus and mountains.

The highest point is the 1397m-high Mont Pelée, an active volcano at the northern end of the island. The center of the island is dominated by the Pitons du Carbet, a scenic mountain range reaching 1207m.

Martinique's irregular coastline is cut by deep bays and coves, while the mountainous rainforest in the interior feeds numerous rivers.

Martinique has lots of colorful flowering plants, with vegetation types varying with altitude and rainfall. Rainforests cover the slopes of the mountains in the northern interior, which are luxuriant with tree ferns, bamboo groves, climbing vines and hardwood trees like mahogany, rosewood, locust and gommier.

The drier southern part of the island has brushy savanna vegetation such as cacti, frangipani trees, balsam, logwood and acacia shrubs. Common landscape plantings include splashy bougainvillea, the ubiquitous red hibiscus and yellow-flowered allamanda trees.

Wildlife

The underwater life tends to be of the smaller variety; lots of schools of small fish that swim by in a cloud of silver or red. There are a decent amount of lobsters hiding under rocks, and occasionally a ray will glide by.

Martinique has Anolis lizards, *manicou* (opossums), mongooses and venomous fer-de-lance snakes. The mongoose, which was introduced from India in the late 19th century, preys on eggs and has been responsible for the demise of many bird species. Some native

birds, such as parrots, are no longer found on the island at all, while others have significantly declined in numbers. Endangered birds include the Martinique trembler, white-breasted trembler and white-breasted thrasher.

FOOD & DRINK

Most restaurants serve either Creole or French food with an emphasis on local seafood. Red snapper, conch, crayfish and lobster are popular. The best value at many restaurants is the fixed-price menu, which is sometimes labeled *menu* – a three- or four-course meal that usually runs from €10 to €18, depending on the main course. Remember that this is France, so bring a good book or someone to talk to; it can take a couple of hours for all the courses to be served.

For more moderately priced meals there are a number of Italian restaurants and pizzerias on the island. Bakeries are good budget places to grab a quick meal, because most of them make sandwiches to go and some have a few café tables out front.

The island of Martinique grows much of its own produce, including some very sweet pineapples.

Water is safe to drink from the tap. In restaurants, if you ask for water you'll usually be served bottled water. There's no shame in asking for *une carafe d'eau* if you just want tap water.

The legal drinking age is 18. Lorraine is the tasty local beer, but island rums are far more popular. Martinique's *de rigueur* aperitif is ti-punch, a mixture of white rum, sugarcane juice and a squeeze of lime. Also popular is *planteur* punch, a mix of rum and fruit juice.

FORT-DE-FRANCE

pop 135,000

Fort-de-France, the island capital, is the largest and most cosmopolitan city in the French West Indies. It's not exactly hopping at night, but there's a nice choice of hotels, eateries and places to grab a drink. Its harborfront setting with the Pitons du Carbet rising up beyond is a view best appreciated when approaching the city by ferry.

The narrow, busy streets here are lined with a mixture of ordinary offices, bargain-basement shops and crumbling early-20th-

century buildings with wrought-iron balconies that wouldn't look out of place in New Orleans.

Give yourself a few hours to wander around and take in the handful of historic sites and museums the city has to offer. Most visitors tend to leave the capital by evening but those who do stay find that, even though one can take up the sights in a day, it's a nice city to spend some time in and it doesn't take long to get on friendly terms with the locals.

ORIENTATION

La Savane, the city park, lines the eastern end of the harbor. Northwest of here you'll spot the spire of Cathédrale St-Louis, one of the city's most visible landmarks.

The main shopping street, Rue Victor Hugo, is lined with the boutiques that give shoppers a taste of Paris. It runs parallel to the waterfront.

The Pointe Simon area, on the southwestern edge of downtown, has emerged in recent years as the place to go for fun bars, clubs and restaurants.

Maps

Institut Géographique National has a map of Martinique (€9.70), which is sold at the bookstore **Centrale Catholique** (57 Rue Blénac). The tourist office also has some city and country maps available, as do most hotels and car rental places.

INFORMATION

Bookstores

Centrale Catholique (57 Rue Blénac) Sells books in French about Martinique, and maps.

Emergency

Police (☎ 17; Rue Victor Sévere)

Internet Access

Le Web Cyber Café (4 Rue Blénac; per 15min €2; ☎ 11am-2am Mon-Fri, 6pm-2am Sat) A smoky but central 1st-floor bar.

Medical Services

Doctor hotline (☎ 60-33-33) For after-hours service.

Hôpital Pierre Zobda Quitman (☎ 55-20-00)

Located on the D13 on the northeast side of Fort-de-France near Lamentin.

Pharmacie Glaudon (cnr Rues de la Liberté & Antoine Siger)

Money

Full-service banks can be found next door to Money Change Caraïbes on Rue Ernest Deproge and along Rue de la Liberté, opposite La Savane. Expect to pay a slightly higher commission at moneychangers due to later opening hours.

Change Point (Rue Victor Hugo; ☎ 8am-5:30pm Mon-Fri, to 12:30pm Sat)

Money Change Caraïbes (4 Rue Ernest Deproge; ☎ 7:30am-6pm Mon-Fri, 8am-12:30pm Sat)

Post

Main post office (cnr Rues Antoine Siger & de la Liberté; ☎ 7am-6pm Mon-Fri, to noon Sat) Head here to send faxes, buy phone cards and pick up poste restante mail.

Telephone

Public card phones can be found at La Savane, opposite the post office and around the city.

Tourist Information

Tourist office (☎ 60-27-73; www.tourismefdf.com; 76 Rue Lazare Carnot; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon, Tue & Thu, to 12:30pm Wed & Fri) Has some useful brochures in English on activities and accommodations, and can arrange English-language walking or hiking tours (see p610). In peak season a tourist office kiosk is open on Rue Lamartine, near Cathédrale St-Louis.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Bibliothèque Schoelcher

Fort-de-France's most visible landmark, the **Bibliothèque Schoelcher** (Schoelcher Library; Rue de la Liberté; admission free; ☎ 1-5:30pm Mon, 8:30am-5:30pm Tue-Thu, 8:30am-5pm Fri, 8:30am-noon Sat), is an elaborate, colorful building with a Byzantine dome. The work of architect Henri Pick, a contemporary of Gustave Eiffel, the library was built in Paris and displayed at the 1889 World Exposition. It was then dismantled, shipped in pieces to Fort-de-France and reassembled on this site. The ornate interior is interesting – the front section contains antique books, a series of changing exhibits on local architecture and history, and period furnishing, while the back is a functioning lending library.

La Savane

Normally, this large central park sports grassy lawns, tall trees, clumps of bamboo, lots of benches and souvenir stalls, but it was undergoing a massive renovation at the time of writing. The plan is to turn the area into a cool, modern nexus of city life, includ-

ing shopping and entertainment along a pedestrian-only mall.

Hopefully city planners will keep the **statue of Empress Josephine** holding a locket with a portrait of Napoleon. Years ago, the head was lopped off and red paint splashed over the body. The empress is not highly regarded by islanders, who believe she was directly responsible for convincing Napoleon to continue slavery in the French West Indies so that her family plantation in Trois-Îlets would not suffer.

Fort St-Louis

Opposite the south side of La Savane is Fort St-Louis. The original fort, built in the Marshal Vauban style, dates from 1640, although most of the extensive fort that stands today is the result of subsequent additions. It is still an active military base and public tours were discontinued in September 2001, though there is some talk of restarting tours in the future.

Cathédrale St-Louis

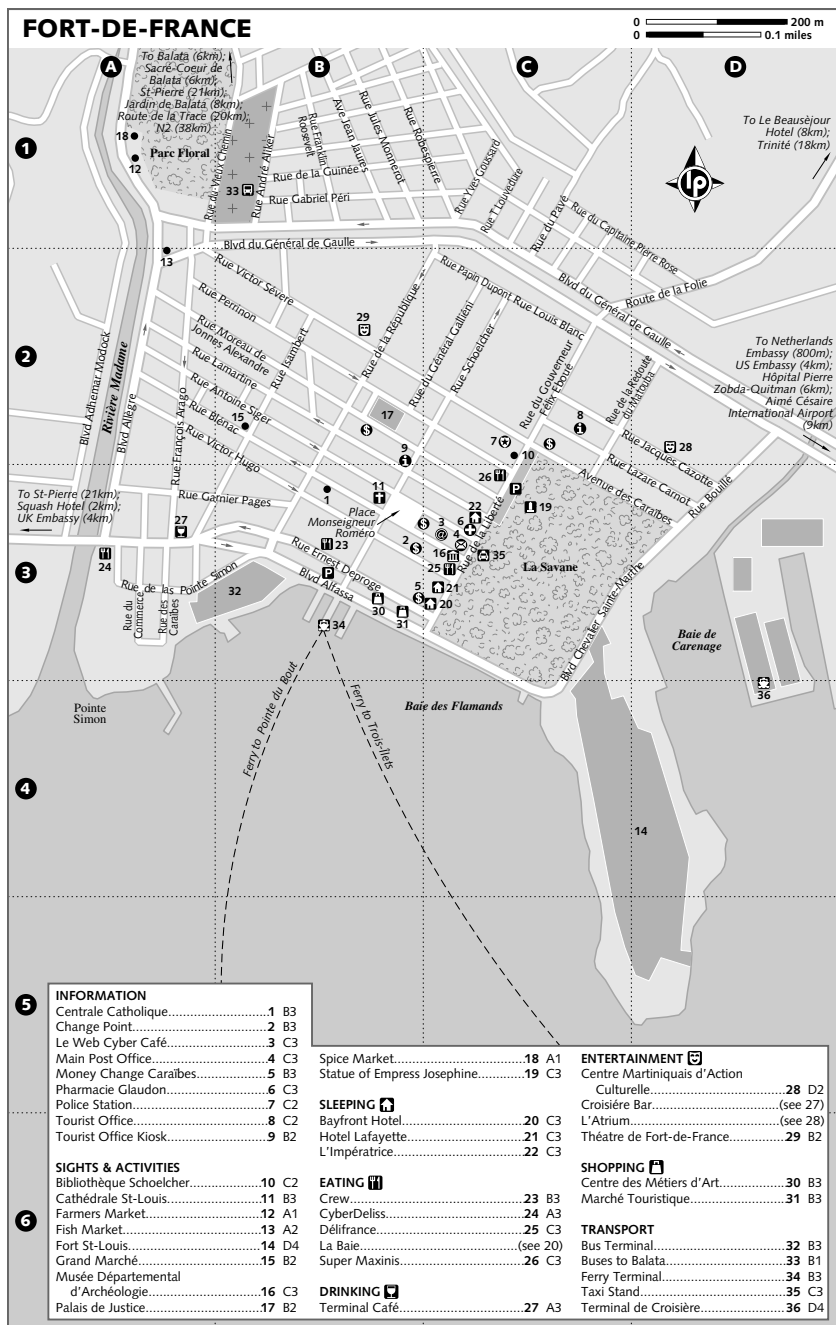
With its neo-Byzantine style and 57m steeple, the **Cathédrale St-Louis** (Rue Schoelcher) is one of the city's most distinguished landmarks. Built in 1895 by Henri Pick, a block northwest of La Savane, the church fronts a small square and is picturesquely framed by two royal palms. The spacious, elaborate interior is well worth a look.

Musée Départemental d'Archéologie

For displays of Native American artifacts, including stone tools, ritual objects and pottery, head to this **archeological museum** (9 Rue de la Liberté; adult/child €3/1.50; ☎ 1-5pm Mon, 8am-5pm Tue-Fri, 9am-noon Sat). It seems designed for children more than for adults. Dioramas of Carib villages are interesting for a minute or two but those who don't make it here aren't missing much – most signs are in French only.

Palais de Justice

The Palais de Justice, a neoclassical courthouse built in 1906, is two blocks northeast of the cathedral and can only be viewed from the outside. The design resembles a French railroad station, as the plaque out front points out. The square fronting the courthouse has a statue of French abolitionist Victor Schoelcher.



Parc Floral & Public Markets

If you're already in the area, the **Parc Floral**, a public park at the north side of the city, is worth a stroll but not worth making a special trip.

Fort-de-France's early-18th-century, Henri Pick–designed **spice market**, with its colorful stalls piled high with herbs, spices and local flowers, is worth a visit, even if only to grab a few snaps of the local stallholders, many in traditional garb.

A **farmers market** runs along the west side of Parc Floral and spills over into the street along the Rivière Madame. The **fish market** is a block to the south, while the **grand marché** – the best of the lot – is on the north side of Rue Isambert. The markets run from 5am to sundown, but get there before noon for the best pickings.

TOURS

A variety of tours can be arranged through the island's **tourist office** (☎ 60-27-73; www.tourismefdf.com; 76 Rue Lazare Carnot; tours from €12; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon, Tue & Thu, to 12:30pm Wed & Fri). The offerings include a walk through the history of Fort-de-France and a bus trip to nearby waterfalls and tropical gardens. The tourist office can also help to arrange English-speaking guides for hikes around the island.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Mardi Gras Carnival A spirited carnival during the five-day period leading up to Ash Wednesday.

Semi-marathon (www.sport-up.fr/semifortdefrance) A 22km marathon around the city in November.

Guitar Festival (www.cmac.asso.fr) A biennial festival held in December in even-numbered years.

Martinique Jazz Festival This biennial, week-long festival is held in December in odd-numbered years.

SLEEPING

All of these hotels are centrally located near La Savane, unless noted otherwise. Parking can be near impossible, but this area of the city is so compact that the furthest point of interest is within a 10-minute walk.

l'Impératrice (☎ 63-06-82; 15 Rue de la Liberté; s/d from €60/80; ☎) It's frayed around the edges but is still a good place to lay a weary head. The outdoor bar and café is where locals and tourists alike spend time watching the world go by over an anise-flavored pastis (€3). It has a certain ragged charm and all rooms have private bathrooms and phones.

Hotel Lafayette (☎ 73-80-50; www.lelafayettehotel.com; 5 Rue de la Liberté; r from €65; ☎) Rooms here are simple and clean, with rustic furniture – and they definitely have a 1970s vibe. There's satellite TV and the wi-fi is free. Breakfast is available for guests (€7).

WITH A SIDE OF GOOD VIBES

François-Xavier is the co-owner of CyberDéliss (opposite), one of the most interesting places in Martinique. It's many things (bar, restaurant, internet spot), but we were struck by how it seems to be a gathering place for all sorts of people.

So, I know you're a rum connoisseur and I have to ask: what's your favorite?

Fleur de Canne St James. It's a white rum that does a great job of imparting the natural, flowery flavors of cane.

Is it hard to have a restaurant in Fort-de-France? I notice it's a welcoming place for young travelers, locals and – maybe I'm wrong – the homosexual community.

To have a restaurant here is a daily battle, and that's without taking into account that, on the one hand, the tourism market isn't really developed yet and, on the other, the rules for running a restaurant are very strict and restraining. But yes, our goal is to be a place of conviviality, a place where everyone can come 'live,' whether you're homosexual, young, a local, a professional.

Speaking of the homosexual community in Martinique, what's the general mood? Besides just a few places, there definitely seems to be a scary amount of homophobia in the Caribbean.

Homosexuality is not at all accepted in Martinique. It's barely tolerated because of the moralizing of the church. Thus, the majority of the population can't stand it. Homophobia is very real in Martinique, even from left-leaning politicians. You should read the web articles in *Têtu* [a French gay and lesbian magazine, www.tetu.com] about the bad things that have happened recently against homosexuals here.

Le Beausèjour Hotel (☎ 75-53-57; www.lebeausèjour-hotel.com; 44 La Jambette; s/d €68/80; 🍷) Located a 10-minute drive east of the center of town. If being centrally located isn't so important, this is a great place to spend some time. The charming villa set in exotic gardens has its own restaurant and 12 rooms with TVs and private bathrooms. There are two disabled-access rooms.

Bayfront Hotel (☎ 55-55-55; bayfronthotel@yahoo.fr; 3 Rue de la Liberté; r from €85; 🍷 📺) A new modern business hotel with all the mod cons one would expect. The 12 rooms here all have a Creole flair and some have nice water views.

EATING & DRINKING

There are several cafés and restaurants opposite La Savane on Rue de la Liberté and in the Pointe Simon area.

Bakeries selling pastries and inexpensive sandwiches are scattered throughout the city. A few American fast-food chains have opened up – not the gourmet French experience but they're open at all hours in case of culinary emergency.

Délifrance (☎ 70-36-99; cnr Rues de la Liberté & Victor Hugo; sandwiches from €2.50; 🍷 breakfast & lunch) This French chain serves standard but tasty enough sandwiches and quiche for lunch. The breakfast croissants are fresh from the oven. During lunch it's extremely busy with workers and cruise-ship visitors.

Terminal Café (☎ 63-03-48; 104 Rue Ernest Deproge; drinks €3-10; 🍷 7pm-midnight) Has a big range of European (mainly Belgian and German) beers and a good selection of spirits and specialty drinks. The 'punch découverte' is a sampler of rum punches in four flavors (€7), a good introduction to rum punches on the island.

Super Maxinis (cnr Rues de la Liberté & Perrinon; mains €4-9; 🍷 breakfast & lunch) A cheerful, always busy café for decent daytime sandwiches salads or a midday ice cream.

Crew (☎ 74-04-14; 44 Rue Ernest Deproge; mains €10-19; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner Mon-Fri, lunch Sat) With full menus in English and French, this nautical-themed place looks like an old-fashioned harbor diner but the food is fine dining. The *salade du crew*, with foie gras on toast and roasted duck on a bed of lettuce, is scrumptious. A long list of French favorites and a rainbow of Creole standards are on offer here and there's a bar that's lively in the early evening.

La Baie (☎ 42-20-38; Rue de la Liberté; mains €10-22; 🍷 lunch & dinner Mon-Fri, lunch Sat & Sun) This is a friendly place run by a native from Brittany. Try the *galettes* – savory crêpes made with buckwheat flour – the *forestier* has ham, cream, mushrooms and tomatoes inside and comes with a salad. There's a good selection of white and aged rums, whiskies, wines and cognacs.

CyberDéliss (☎ 78-71-43; 113 rue Ernest Deproge; mains from €12; 🍷 7am-10pm Mon-Sat) This full-fledged internet café (€5 per hour) is also a hip French restaurant that serves good, modern cuisine or inventive twists on Creole favorites. It's also a bar-café and the owners love to talk (in English) about and serve their favorite island rums.

ENTERTAINMENT

Fort-de France's nightlife is fairly tame, but warms up surprisingly late in the evening in the Pointe Simon area.

Cinemas

Centre Martiniquais d'Action Culturelle (CMAC; ☎ 70-79-39; www.cmac.asso.fr; 6 Rue Jacques Cazotte; adult/child €15/12) This cultural center runs an interesting program of indie films and documentaries.

Theatre

Throughout the year CMAC (above) hosts theatrical shows in its state-of-the-art auditoriums.

Théâtre de Fort-de-France (☎ 59-43-29; Rue Victor Sévere; adult/child €15/9) Offers a program of traditional French drama, dance and mime for adults and children.

Live Music

A handful of piano-bars offer live zouk, jazz and French music; you can pick up fliers at the tourist office or in hotel foyers, or check out the listings site **Martinique Scoop** (www.martiniquescoop.com).

L'Atrium (☎ 70-79-39; www.atrium.mq; CMAC, 6 Rue Jacques Cazotte) Based at the CMAC, this relatively new cultural center hosts an impressive range of classical, jazz, opera and world-music concerts in its year-round program. Music, as they say, is the universal language.

Croisière Bar (cnr Rues Ernest Deproge & Isambert; 🍷 lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) This spacious restaurant and bar has a live band in the evenings. It's easy enough to hear from street level what's playing at the top of the stairs.

SHOPPING

The busy streets of downtown Fort-de-France are crammed with shops selling all manner of trinkets, clothing, jewelry and perfumes.

The main boutique area is along Rue Victor Hugo, particularly from Rue de la République to Rue de la Liberté.

There's an artisan market at **Centre des Métiers d'Art** (Rue Ernest Deproge) that has an okay selection of regional handicrafts for sale. Nearby is the **Marché Touristique** (Rue Ernest Deproge) a big indoor space packed with every type of souvenir, including madras dresses, T-shirts, wood carvings and beach towels adorned with Bob Marley's face.

GETTING AROUND To/From the Airport

The Martinique Aimé Césaire International Airport is just a 15-minute drive from Fort-de-France. The traffic crawls during peak times (from 7am to 10am and 4pm to 7pm), so leave yourself an extra couple of hours if catching a flight. Taxis are readily available at the airport (about €20 to Fort-de-France). If you need to refuel a rental car, head for one of the 24-hour gas stations on the N5 near the airport.

Because of the taxi union, there's no direct bus service from the airport.

Boat

There are boats from Fort-de-France to Trois-Îlets and Pointe du Bout; see p626 for details.

The ferries dock at the quay fronting the minibus parking lot. Be sure to verify you're on the right boat before it leaves as they are not clearly marked.

Bus

The spiffy new 'Bus Mozaïk' company transports passengers around the city and to the suburbs in air-conditioned comfort. Fares start at €1.20, and there are well-marked bus stops around town. The main bus terminal is at Pointe Simon and buses to Balata leave from Parc Floral.

Car

Parking in the city is not a problem on weekends and holidays, but is quite a challenge on weekdays. There's a parking lot along the north side of La Savane that's entered at the intersection of Ave des Caraïbes and Rue de

la Liberté; it costs €1.50 per hour. Streetside parking is free in the evenings, on Sunday and on holidays.

Taxi

There are often taxis prowling Rue Deproge looking for customers. There are also taxi stands at Terminal de Croisière and at Rue del la Liberte. Fares are metered (from La Savane to the spice market costs about €10).

NORTHERN MARTINIQUE

Several roads head north from Fort-de-France. The most interesting sightseeing routes are the coastal road (N2) to St-Pierre and the Route de la Trace (N3), a truly scenic road that crosses the mountainous interior before hitting Morne Rouge and veering toward the northeast coast. The two routes can be combined to make a fine loop drive; if doing the whole loop, give yourself a full day.

FORT-DE-FRANCE TO ST-PIERRE

The N2 north to St-Pierre passes along dry, scrubby terrain and goes through a line of small towns – a merging of modern suburbia and old fishing villages. If you were to drive without stopping, it would take about 45 minutes to make the 21km trip to St-Pierre from Fort-de-France.

It's worth swinging off the highway at **Case-Pilote** to take a peek at the old village center. There's good diving nearby; for more information, see p623. Turn west off the N2 at the Total gas station and you'll immediately come to a quaint stone church, one of Martinique's oldest. Just 75m south is a charming town square with a water fountain, a historic town hall, a tourist office and a moderately priced café.

Further north, the pretty town of **Carbet**, where Columbus briefly came ashore in 1502, fronts a long sandy beach and has a few tourist amenities, including a bunch of restaurants and a scenic garden.

Anse Turin, a long gray-sand beach that attracts a crowd on weekends, is along the highway 1.5km north of Carbet. Opposite the beach is the **Musée Paul Gauguin** (☎ 78-22-56; admission €4; ☎ 9am-5:30pm), marked by a few inconspicuous signs. More of an homage to the artist than a proper museum,

it has Gauguin memorabilia, letters from the artist to his wife and reproductions of Gauguin's paintings – including *Bord de Mer I* and *l'Anse Turin – Avec les Raisiniers*, which were both painted on the nearby beach during Gauguin's five-month stay on Martinique in 1887.

Just north of the Gauguin museum is the driveway up to **Le Jardin des Papillons** (☎ 78-33-39; adult/child €4.60/2.30; ☎ 9am-noon), where the scattered stone ruins of one of the island's earliest plantations have been enhanced with gardens and a butterfly farm. There's a restaurant on site and a small music museum called **Jardin Musical** (☎ 1:30-4:30pm), where children can play on larger-than-life musical instruments in an old church. If lucky, visitors will see Bambouman, an accomplished musician who makes all of his own instruments out of bamboo and occasionally does shows and demonstrations here.

ST-PIERRE

pop 5000

St-Pierre is on the coast 7km south of Mont Pelée, the still-active volcano that destroyed the town in just 10 minutes at the beginning of the 20th century. This former capital of Martinique is an interesting town to wander in. There are numerous blackened ruins throughout St-Pierre, some of which are little more than foundations, while others are partially intact. Many of the surviving stone walls have been incorporated into the town's reconstruction. Even 'newer' buildings have a period character, with shuttered doors and wrought-iron balconies.

The center of town is long and narrow, with two parallel one-way streets running its length. All of the major sights have signs in French and English, and you can explore the area thoroughly in a few hours.

The central gathering spot is the waterfront town park, next to the covered market. A beach of soft dark gray sand fronts the town and extends to the south. There are sail boats and fishing boats in the harbor, and the sunsets here are postcard-perfect.

On the way out of town, notice the murals that commemorate the end of slavery.

Sights & Activities

MUSÉE VOLCANOLOGIQUE

This small but very interesting **museum** (Musée de Frank Perret; Rue Victor Hugo; admission €2.50; ☎ 9am-

5pm), founded in 1932 by American adventurer and volcanologist Frank Perret, gives a glimpse of the devastating 1902 eruption of Mont Pelée. On display are items plucked from the rubble and historic photos of the town before and immediately after the eruption. The displays are in English and French. Maps of the city are handed out on request.

There's free parking adjacent to the museum, which occupies the site of an old hillside gun battery. The view from the old stone walls along the parking lot provides a good perspective of the harbor and city, and you can look straight down, to the left, on a line of ruins on the street below.

Just 1.5km north of town, the earth-science museum **Centre de Découverte des Sciences de la Terre** (☎ 52-82-42; www.cdst.org; adult/child €5/3; ☎ 9am-4:30pm Tue-Sun) looks like a big white box set on top of some columns, and the parking lot is made entirely of grass. Inside is a permanent exhibit on Mont Pelée, in French, but there's a neat contraption that shows stereoscopic black-and-white period photos of the volcano's aftermath. Documentaries are screened all day long, but the one to watch is *Volcans des Antilles*, subtitled in English and shown at 10:30am, 1pm and 3:30pm, which recounts Pelée's tantrum and its dire consequences.

RUINS

St-Pierre's most impressive ruins are those of the old 18th-century **theater**, just 100m north of the museum. While most of the theater was destroyed, enough remains to give a sense of the former grandeur of this building, which once seated 800 and hosted theater troupes from mainland France. A double set of stairs still leads up to the partial walls of the lower story.

On the northeast side of the theater you can go into the tiny, thick-walled **jail cell** that housed Cyparis, one of the town's only survivors (for more on the convict's amazing good fortune, see the boxed text, p614).

Another area rich in ruins is the **Quartier du Figuier**, along Rue Bouillé, directly below the volcanology museum. Two sets of steps, one just north of the theater and the other just south of the museum, connect Rue Victor Hugo with the bay-front Rue Bouillé.

DIVING

Tropicasub (☎ 24-24-30; www.tropicasub.com; one-tank dive €45) offers a vast range of wreck dives (a

THE ERUPTION OF MONT PELÉE

At the end of the 19th century, St-Pierre – then the capital of Martinique – was a flourishing port city. It was so cosmopolitan that it was dubbed the ‘Little Paris of the West Indies.’ Mont Pelée, the island’s highest mountain, provided a scenic backdrop to the city.

In the spring of 1902, sulfurous steam vents on Mont Pelée began emitting gases, and a crater lake started to fill with boiling water. Authorities dismissed it all as the normal cycle of the volcano, which had experienced harmless periods of activity in the past.

But on April 25 the volcano spewed a shower of ash onto St-Pierre. Some anxious residents sent their children to stay with relatives on other parts of the island. The governor of Martinique, hoping to allay fears, brought his family to St-Pierre.

At 8am on Sunday May 8, 1902, Mont Pelée exploded into a glowing burst of superheated gas and burning ash, with a force 40 times stronger than the later nuclear blast over Hiroshima. Between the suffocating gases and the fiery inferno, St-Pierre was laid to waste within minutes.

Of the city’s 30,000 inhabitants, there were only three survivors. One of them, a prisoner named Cyparis, escaped with only minor burns – ironically, he owed his life to having been locked in a tomblike solitary-confinement cell at the local jail. Following the commutation of his prison sentence by the new governor, Cyparis joined the PT Barnum circus where he toured as a sideshow act.

Pelée continued to smolder for months, but by 1904, people began to resettle the town, building among the crumbled ruins.

number of ships sank in the 1902 eruption), canyon dives and trips to Îlet la Perle (right).

Sleeping & Eating

Les Maisonnettes du Volcan (☎ 78-19-30; r.reynal@maisonnettes.com; bungalow per week €520/630) These two bungalows, set 2km north of downtown St-Pierre in the middle of a wooded field, are made to sleep five people. This is a good place for people who want to spend time exploring the nearby volcano. Each bungalow has a washing machine, a TV and a kitchen.

Chez-Marie Claire (☎ 78-21-56; mains €10-15; ☺ breakfast & lunch Mon-Sat) This restaurant is set at the top of some steps inside the covered market. Diners can look down on the bustle below while eating Creole dishes such as stewed beef and freshwater crayfish. It’s a friendly place, and the cook often comes by to make sure that guests enjoyed their meal.

Le Guerin (☎ 78-18-07; mains €13-17; ☺ lunch Mon-Sat) Also inside the covered market. There can be a wait during the lunch rush, but with some of the best *accra* (deep-fried balls of dough filled with fish or shrimp) on the island, the wait is worth it.

You will find an 8 à Huit grocery store in the center of town, a bakery south of the cathedral and a few small sandwich and pizza places scattered around.

ST-PIERRE TO ANSE CÉRON

From St-Pierre, the N2 turns inland but the D10 continues north for 13km along the coast and makes a scenic side drive, ending in 20 minutes at a remote beach. The shoreline is rocky for much of the way and the landscape is lush, with roadside clumps of bamboo.

The limestone cliffs 4km north of St-Pierre, called **Tombeau des Caraïbes**, are said to be the place where the last Caribs jumped to their deaths rather than succumb to capture by the French.

The road ends at **Anse Cérón**, a nice black-sand beach backed by the thick jungle rolling off the base of Mont Pelée. Anse Cérón faces **Îlet la Perle**, a rounded offshore rock off the northwest coast. It’s a popular dive site that’s famous for its colorful, coral-covered walls, and it’s a good place to see groupers, eels and lobsters when water conditions aren’t too rough. The Anse Cérón beach can get crowded, but it does have a shower, toilets, picnic tables and a snack shop.

A very steep one-lane route continues for 1.6km beyond the beach. This is the start of a six-hour, 20km **hike** around the undeveloped northern tip of the island to Grand-Rivière; see opposite for details.

ROUTE DE LA TRACE

The Route de la Trace (N3) winds up into the mountains north from Fort-de-France. It’s a

beautiful drive through a lush rainforest of tall tree ferns, anthurium-covered hillsides and thick clumps of roadside bamboo. The road passes along the eastern flanks of the pointed volcanic mountain peaks of the Pitons du Carbet. Several well-marked hiking trails lead from the Route de la Trace into the rainforest and up to the peaks.

The road follows a route cut by the Jesuits in the 17th century; islanders like to say that the Jesuits' fondness for rum accounts for the twisting nature of the road.

Less than a 10-minute drive north of Fort-de-France you'll reach **Sacré-Coeur de Balata**, a scaled-down replica of the Sacré-Coeur Basilica in Paris. This domed church, in the Roman-Byzantine style, has a stunning hilltop setting – the Pitons du Carbet rise up as a backdrop and there's a view across Fort-de-France to Pointe du Bout below.

The **Jardin de Balata** (☎ 64-48-73; www.jardin.debalata.fr; adult/child €6.20/2.30; ☎ 9am-5pm), on the west side of the road 10 minutes' drive north of the Balata church, is a mature botanical garden in a rainforest setting. If a visitor was only going to make one day trip, this should be it. This attractive garden takes about 30 to 45 minutes to stroll through and is a great place to photograph flowers and hummingbirds. There's also a path to a waterfall that spills into a bathing pool. It's common to see groups of vacationers splashing away; go on in, the water's fine.

After the garden, the N3 winds up into the mountains and reaches an elevation of 600m before dropping down to **Site de l'Alma**, where a river runs through a lush gorge. There are riverside picnic tables, trinket sellers and a couple of short trails into the rainforest.

Some 4km later, the N3 is intersected by the D1, which used to be a very scenic drive and the gateway to a popular hike, but at the time of research was closed. Locals give differing stories as to why (one amusing tale has a road worker accidentally bringing down the whole side of a mountain on the road).

Continuing north on the N3, the Route de la Trace passes banana plantations and flower nurseries before reaching a T-junction at **Morne Rouge**, which was partially destroyed by an eruption from Mont Pelée in August 1902, several months after the eruption that wiped out St-Pierre. At 450m, it has the highest elevation of any town on Martinique, and it enjoys some nice mountain scenery.

About 2km north of the T-junction, a road (D39) signposted to Aileron leads 3km up the slopes of Mont Pelée, from where there's a rugged trail (four hours round trip) up the volcano's south face to the summit.

BASSE-POINTE & AROUND

As the N3 nears the Atlantic it meets the N1, which runs along the coast both north and south. The northern segment of the road edges the eastern slopes of Mont Pelée and passes through banana and pineapple plantations before reaching the uninspiring coastal town of Basse-Pointe, birthplace of *négritude* poet and early Black Power founder Aimé Césaire.

GRAND-RIVIÈRE

pop 840

From Basse-Pointe, there's an enjoyable 35-minute drive to Grand-Rivière along a winding, but good, paved road. En route you will go through the coastal village of Macouba (where there is the well-signed **Rhum JM distillery**), pass two trails leading up the northern flank of Mont Pelée, cross a couple of one-lane bridges and finally wind down into the town. Be sure to watch out for red lights and road signs, there are a few one-way-only stretches of rural road regulated by a traffic signal.

Grand-Rivière is an unspoiled fishing village scenically tucked beneath coastal cliffs at the northern tip of Martinique. Mont Pelée forms a rugged backdrop to the south, while there's a fine view of neighboring Dominica to the north. People for the most part are very warm, and the old men hanging out their windows seem to appreciate a friendly wave from visitors. Things seem to happen very slowly here at the end of world, so don't be in a hurry.

The road dead-ends at the sea where there's a fish market and rows of bright fishing boats lined up on a little black-sand beach. The waters on the west side of town are sometimes good for surfing. The **Syndicat d'Initiative** (☎ 55-72-74; www.grand-riviere.com) in the town center has local tourist information. Besides organizing hikes that range from 10km to 18km and take at least four hours, it also offers sea, canyoning and culinary excursions.

While there's no road around the tip of the island, there is a 20km **hiking** trail leading to Anse Couleuvre, on the northwest coast. The trailhead begins on the road opposite the

quaint two-story *mairie* (town hall), just up from the beach. It's a moderately difficult walk so you might want to take one of the guided hikes organized by the Syndicat D'Initiative. Hikers arrive in Anse Coulevre about five hours after leaving the town hall, and then return to Grand-Rivière by boat. The Syndicat D'Initiative is also a great source of information on the two trails that climb the north face of Mont Pelée, just outside the town.

The name of **Le Bout du Bout** (mains €5-10), a humble café, means 'the end of the end' and they're not lying because the N1 really does stop a few meters from here. It seems to be a rite of passage for French tourists to stop here for a Corsaire beer or one of the proprietor's fresh banana juices. If you drive past Le Bout du Bout, you'll have to back out, as the road just ends. Don't be too embarrassed; it happens a few times every hour.

On the outskirts of town near the river, people travel far and wide to **Yva Chez Vava** (☎ 55-72-72; meals €12-30; ☎ lunch) for large helpings of seafood and Antillaise specials, so it's best to book ahead.

On a side street just north of the Syndicat d'Initiative, the Creole restaurant **Chez Tante Arlette** (☎ 55-75-75; carinetantearlette@wanadoo.fr; 3 Rue Lucy de Fossarieu; mains €12-19; ☎ noon-9pm; 🍷) is renowned for its seafood and lobster. There are three sleeping rooms upstairs (room including breakfast €60) and various packages are on offer starting at €75 per person – a weekend of hiking, romance or fine dining.

BASSE-POINTE TO PRESQU'ÎLE DE CARAVELLE

The highway (N1) from Basse-Pointe to Lamentin runs along relatively tame terrain and is not one of the island's most interesting drives, although there are a few worthwhile sights. The communities along the way are largely modern towns that become increasingly more suburban as you continue south.

Some 2km from Ste-Marie lies **l'Habitat Fond St-Jacques** (☎ 69-10-12; admission €3; ☎ 9am-4pm), the site of an old Dominican monastery and sugar plantation dating from 1660. One of the early plantation managers, Father Jean-Baptiste Labat, created a type of boiler (the *père labat*) that modernized the distilling of rum. It's an impressive site and wandering the ruins feels like wandering the heart of an old European village. The site is 150m inland from the N1. Look for

road signs to 'Fond St-Jacques.' Parking is on the street.

The **Musée du Rhum St James** (☎ 69-30-02; admission free, train tour €3; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, to 1pm Sat & Sun), is set in a beautiful colonial home on the site of St James plantation's working distillery. Some of the signs are in English, and the numbered photos on the ground level are a nice overview of how sugar cane becomes rum. There's an occasional train tour of the distillery and the cane-laden estate, but it only runs if there are enough interested visitors, so the hours are sporadic. In the tasting room you can sample different rums; locals say this is the place to try some of the best rums Martinique has to offer. The plantation is on the D24, 200m west of the N1, on the southern outskirts of Ste-Marie.

The D24 road continues to twist in a general southwestwardly direction to the **Musée de la Banane** (☎ 69-45-52; www.lemuseedelabanane.com; admission €7.50; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Sat, to 1pm Sun), dedicated to all things banana. Set on a terraced plantation, it's a pretty place but for what it is the entry fee seems steep. For those who go ape over the yellow fruit, it may be worth it – there's a banana cake and banana juice tasting at tour's end.

The N1 continues on south through cane fields and passes the Presqu'île de Caravelle.

PRESQU'ÎLE DE CARAVELLE

A tour of the peninsula is well worth the time for the wild landscape and authentic fishing villages. A gently twisting road leads through lush scenery with spectacular views through sugarcane fields to the peninsula's main village, Tartane, and then on to Baie du Galion. On the north side of the peninsula are a couple of protected beaches – the long, sandy **Tartane beach** fronts the village and, one of the island's nicest, the gently shelving, palm-fringed beach of **Anse l'Étang**, which is a good, uncrowded place to surf.

Tartane beach, the larger of the two strands, has lots of fishing shacks, a fish market and colorful *gommier* boats; both places have plenty of beachside restaurants. There's an ATM across from the gas station in Tartane.

Sights & Activities

Set on the tip of the peninsula is **Château Dubuc** (adult/child €3/1; ☎ 8am-6pm), the deterior-

rated ruins of a 17th-century estate. These sprawling grounds have some of the most extensive plantation ruins in Martinique and there's a very small museum. The master of the estate gained notoriety by using a lantern to lure ships into wrecking off the coast, and then gathering the loot. Several hiking trails start at the parking lot, including a 30-minute walk to the site of a historic lighthouse and stellar views.

Besides offering group or private surf lessons for people of all ages and experience levels on the nearby beach, **Ecole de Surf Bliss** (☎ 58-00-96; www.surfmartinique.com; btwn Anse l'Étang & Château Dubuc; private lesson per hr €40; ☎ 9am-5:30pm Fri-Wed) also rents surf and body boards. English is spoken.

Sleeping

Hotel Le Manguier (☎ 58-48-95; www.hotellemanguier.com; r from €74; 🏠) The hotel is perched high above the athletic grounds in the center of Tartane. The rooms are small and basic, with outdoor hot-plate kitchens, but they all have little balconies that face the Atlantic Ocean. A fresh coat of paint would make this place sparkle but, as is, it's a good choice for those who prefer a stiff uphill walk from the village center over driving.

Hotel Restaurant Caravelle (☎ 58-07-32; www.hotel-la-caravelle-martinique.com; Route du Château Dubuc; r from €84; 🏠) On the eastern outskirts of Tartane, this is a small, friendly hotel. Steps leading down to the fabulous Anse l'Étang were under construction when we visited. There is a hibiscus-covered, decked terrace with glorious views to the Atlantic. The simple studios all have colorful furnishings and well-equipped kitchenettes on a spacious front porch with great views.

Residence Oceane Hotel (☎ 58-73-73; www.residenceoceane.com; Anse l'Étang, Route du Château Dubuc; r from €89; 🏠) On the way to Château Dubuc, this hotel is a beauty with stunning ocean views. It's within walking distance of Ecole de Surf Bliss and the beach. Rooms are only cleaned every three days (daily cleaning €7).

Eating

Le Kalicoucou (Route du Château Dubuc; pizza €8-15; ☎ lunch & dinner) On the eastern end of the main strip in Tartane, this is the place for pizza and beer – or, because of the French influence, wine. It also offers big salads (€8) and savory crepes (€4 to €7) as well as thin-

crust, crispy pizzas that come with a kaleidoscope of toppings. Choose from delivery, take-away and eat-in options.

Restaurant La Tartanaise (☎ 58-54-87; Route du Château Dubuc; mains €11-17; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner Wed-Mon) Right on the seafloor, the *accra* here has succulent little chunks of shrimp inside, and this is where many of the locals go for a ti-punch at day's end.

La Table de Mamy Nounou (lunch mains €12-24; ☎ lunch & dinner) Set in the Hotel Restaurant Caravelle, the fabulous restaurant features excellent seafood, grills and mouthwatering desserts. You order and take your appetizers in the lounge, and will be shown to your table when the meal is ready – you never feel like you're waiting. The duck cutlets and the steak in a Roquefort sauce are two dishes that are heartily recommended.

TRINITÉ

pop 15,000

Trinité, 4.6km southwest of the village of Tartane, has some services that Presqu'île de Caravelle lacks. There's a few full-service banks and clothing stores along the main strip, and **Cyber Nésis** (35 Rue Victor Hugo; per hr €5; ☎ 9am-12:30pm & 2-7pm Mon-Fri, 9am-4pm Sat) is a decent internet café and computer store.

Between Trinité and the next town northwest, Ste-Marie, **Match Supermarket** (☎ 69-03-09; ☎ 8am-8pm Mon-Sat, 8am-noon Sun) is good for stocking up on groceries.

SOUTHERN MARTINIQUE

Martinique's south has many of the island's best beaches and most of its hotels, and is definitely the center of gravity for tourism. The healthy competition between numerous hotels gives travelers more bang for their money. Sun worshippers should head straight to Ste-Anne's beaches – probably the best on the island – and those who want a central southern location should consider Ste-Luce, which is also a good spot for diving and has a few passable beaches.

The largest concentration of places to stay is in the greater Trois-Ilets area, which encompasses the uberresort of Pointe du Bout and the smaller, more authentic villages of Grande Anse and Anse d'Arlet. Other major resort areas are Diamant and Ste-Anne.

The interior of the island's southern half is largely a mix of agricultural land and residential areas. Lamentin, the site of the international airport, is Martinique's second-largest city but, like other interior cities and towns, has little of interest to tourists.

TROIS-ÎLETS

pop 3100

This small working town has a central square that's bordered by a little market, a quaint town hall and the church where Empress Josephine was baptized in 1763. Despite its proximity to the island's busiest resort area, the town has avoided developers' attention so far, though its charm has been tarnished by a constant flow of traffic through its main street.

A former sugar estate outside Trois-Îlets was the birthplace of the Empress Josephine. A picturesque stone building, formerly the family kitchen, has been turned into the **Musée de la Pagerie** (☎ 68-33-06; adult/child €5/1.50; 🕒 9am-5:30pm Tue-Fri, 9:30am-12:30pm Sat & Sun, closed Dec), containing the empress' childhood bed and other memorabilia. Multilingual tour guides relate anecdotal tidbits about Josephine's life, such as the doctoring of the marriage certificate to make the bride, Napoleon's elder by six years, appear to be the same age as her spouse. The road leading up to the museum, 3km west of Trois-Îlets on the D7, begins opposite the golf-course entrance. You can poke around in the photogenic ruins of the old mill opposite the museum for free.

The worthwhile **Maison de la Canne** (Sugarcane Museum; ☎ 68-32-04; adult/child aged 5-12 €3/0.75; 🕒 8:30am-5:30pm Tue-Sun) occupies the site of an old sugar refinery and distillery. Inside the main museum building are period photos and items such as the Code Noir (Black Code) outlining appropriate conduct between slaves and their owners. Displays are in French and English. The museum is on the D7, 3.5km east of Trois-Îlets' center.

There's a ferry between Fort-de-France and Trois-Îlets; see p626 for details.

POINTE DU BOUT

pop 3000

Pointe du Bout, Martinique's most developed resort at the southern end of the Baie de Fort-de-France, is home to the island's most-frequented yachting marina and some of its largest resorts. The point is a Y-shaped peninsula, with the hotels fringing the coast

and the marina in the middle. All roads intersect south of the marina, and traffic can get congested.

The small public beach – Plage de l'Anse Mitan – which runs along the western side of the neck of the peninsula, is a good swimming beach and many people bring masks and fins. There's a swim park for the wee ones fenced by buoys.

The closer to the water, the more expensive the lodging is here. There are plenty of restaurants, upscale shops and bars, and it's a lively place at night.

Information

Ferries to and from Fort-de-France (p626) leave from the west side of Pointe du Bout's marina, where a money-changing office, a laundry, the port bureau and marine supply shops are all clustered together. The marina also has a newsstand with some novels in English next to Hotel de la Pagerie. There are a number of car-rental firms near the hotel and a taxi stand next door. The Village Creole complex has souvenir shops, boutiques and a Crédit Agricole ATM.

There's an **Otitour** (L'Office du Tourisme des Trois Îlets; ☎ 68-47-63; www.trois-ilets.com; Rue Cha-Cha) tourism kiosk on Rue Cha-Cha, the street behind La Marine restaurant.

Activities

Coconasse (☎ 98-82-28; www.coconasse.com; tours €75) is one of a few sailboat operators at the marina who give day tours that start around 11am and return after sunset. Snorkeling, a gourmet meal and plenty of rum punch are included. This is one of the most memorable and relaxing ways to see Martinique and the groups are always small.

Espace Plongée (☎ 66-01-79; www.espace-plongee-martinique.com; Pointe du Bout; 1-tank dive €47) offers morning and afternoon dives every day and, if enough people want to go, night dives. It's located right beside the water in the marina.

Although it's next to Hotel Carayou, **Windsurf Club Martinique** (☎ 66-19-06; www.windsurf-martinique.com; windsurfing per hr €20) is a separate business and anyone can visit the center (there's a guarded gate into the hotel). The wind howls here – a good thing.

Sleeping

Hotel de la Pagerie (☎ 66-05-30; www.hotel-lapagerie.com; r incl breakfast from €99; 🚗 🚗) Tucked between

a busy intersection and the inner harbor, this 94-bedroom hotel has straightforward rooms with floral decor – some have kitchenettes. There's an on-site restaurant and bar here too. It's an economical option compared to its neighbors.

Hotel Carayou (☎ 66-04-04; www.hotel-carayou.com; 97229 Trois-Ilets; s/d incl breakfast €270/290; 🏠 📺) The 200-room family-friendly Carayou sits on the peninsula that forms the northeast side of the marina. The modern rooms have faux-rustic furniture; they look like a studio rental, but without a fridge or kitchenette. On the hotel grounds is Windsurf Club Martinique, the only aquatic center in town. There are two restaurants and a small beach for guests.

Sofitel Bakoua Martinique (☎ 66-02-02; www.accor-hotels.com; 97229 Trois-Ilets; r from €430; 🏠 📺) The area's most exclusive resort has 138 rooms and suites that are comfortably furnished (the best 40 are on the beach) and guests have access to one of the area's best beaches and the hotel's water toys. It's a beautiful property inside and out.

Eating

Restaurant La Marine (☎ 66-02-32; mains €12-19; 🍳 breakfast, lunch & dinner) The sailing set and land-lubbing tourists visit this open-air restaurant, fronting the marina, in equal measure. There are daily specials and a lobster lunch menu (€35), which includes an aperitif. If you happen to be here on a Wednesday try the daily special of *moules frites*: a big plate of mussels in a butter and garlic sauce with a side of French fries – here, they're just fries.

La Grange (☎ 66-01-66; mains €14-20; 🍷 10am-11pm) The food, including fish tartar and grilled tuna, is good, but what's even better is the free wi-fi and quality cigars at this outdoor restaurant-indoor cigar bar. Cigars range from €5 to €15, and aficionados can get their Cuban cigar fix here. Wednesday is karaoke night, for those who dare, and Saturdays are for dancing.

Le Ponton du Bakoua (☎ 66-05-45; mains €18-30; 🍷 lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) Hard to find: head toward the Sofitel Bakoua Martinique and veer left on the little road that looks like a service alley; follow the road down to the sailboats bobbing in the breeze. The menu has the normal range of seafood favorites, albeit exceptionally flavorful, and it's one of the trendiest restaurants around. At night it is one of the most romantic spots on the island. Dinner reservations are a good idea.

GRANDE ANSE

pop 600

The pleasant little village of Grande Anse is located on Grande Anse d'Arlet Bay. It's set along a beachfront road that's lined with brightly painted fishing boats and a string of restaurants. The main street is pedestrian only; a nice change of pace that makes it that much more enjoyable to stroll along the long, narrow beach that's nice to look at but not so nice (because of fishing boats and no privacy) to tan on.

Activities

Plongée Passion (☎ 68-71-78; 1-tank dive €45) On the beach right next to Ti Plage, it offers morning and afternoon outings every day. The operators decide which of the many numerous local dive spots to go to, depending on conditions and overall experience of the group. A very friendly, low-key crowd runs the place.

Alpha Plongée (☎ 48-30-34; www.alpha-plongee.com; 138 Rue Robert Deloy; 1-tank dive €45) It's on the main road tucked behind a private home; follow the signs. Runs morning and early afternoon dive trips.

Sleeping & Eating

Ti Plage (☎ 29-59-89; mains €9-13; 🍷 lunch Tue-Sun) Next door to Localizé, this tastefully decorated little beachside restaurant with decked veranda is famous for its couscous royale special on Friday night. Otherwise, expect delicious smoked fish salad, duck confit or vegetarian *galettes*.

Ti Sable (☎ 68-62-44; mains €11-19; 🍷 lunch & dinner, closed Sep) A long-running favorite of many a traveler, this big beach hut with fairy lights is the place to be in the evening. The *chatrou* (octopus) in coconut milk is delicious. They also serve barbecued meats and exotic salads. Ti Sable hosts live music on weekends.

Localizé (☎ 68-64-78; www.localize.fr; studio per week from €469; 📺) The 10 studios here are set in a sprawling, single-level Creole home that's right on the beach. It's a pleasant place to stay with a small library, wi-fi and a garden exterior, and all of the rooms are decorated in exotic woods from around the world. Two of the studios can sleep four people with a main bedroom that's air-conditioned. Localizé also rents two fully equipped homes in the area (from €1300 per week).

ANSE D'ARLET

pop 3200

Anse d'Arlet is a typical pretty fishing village south of Grande Anse that makes the most of its gorgeous beachfront. There's an interesting 18th-century Roman Catholic church in its center (part of its roof was torn off in Hurricane Dean), a one-screen cinema and a handful of laid-back beach huts selling snacks at the northern end of the village.

There's a Crédit Mutuel with an ATM in the center of town and a small produce and fish market along the boardwalk.

Chez Vally (Vally & le Pecheur; ☎ 48-39-77; mains from €8, 🍽️ lunch & dinner) specializes in grilled seafood, and has an outdoor barbecue in the back where fresh, locally caught seafood is grilled. Chez Vally also has good salads, a great way to sample a wide variety of fruits of the sea.

The only accommodations right in the village, **Résidence Madinakay** (☎ 68-70-76; www.multimania.com/madinakay; 3 Allée des Arlesiens; r €58; 🍽️) is on the main street across from the beach. Run by the helpful Raymond de Laval, these simple, colorful studios all have kitchenettes and balconies. The indoor balconies have a window that looks out on a small bird garden full of twittering fine-feathered friends.

DIAMANT

pop 3400

Diamant is a seaside town on the southern coast that's slightly more developed than its neighbors. The main road runs near, but not right on the beach. The gray sands of the strand here stretch for 2km beside town. But, because of a bad current and violent waves, be sure to ask at your hotel for a safe place to swim.

For visitors, the best things Diamant has to offer are some nice hotels and a row of pizzerias and snack places, an internet café and a few banks along the main drag. It's a good base to explore the western horn of the island – which, oddly enough, is shaped a little bit like France. The town also affords a nice view of Rocher du Diamant, a 176m-high volcanic islet that's a popular **dive site**, with interesting cave formations but tricky water conditions. To explore this underwater jewel, visit the dive operators at nearby Grande Anse (p619).

Just north of town on the D7 is the **Le Musée des Coquillages et de la Mer** (☎ 76-41-92; Hotel l'Ecrin Bleu; admission €5; 🕒 9am-6pm). Seeing hard-to-find shells found in Japan in the 1760s, or

off the coast of South Africa in the 1880s, is actually fun.

With 25 bungalows spread out across the spacious grounds, an unusually large hotel swimming pool and the Paillote Bleu Restaurant, **L'Anse Bleue** (☎ 76-21-91; www.hotel-anse-bleue.com; small/large bungalow €60/75; 🍽️) is a nice place to stay a spell. At the time of research, the bathrooms and kitchenettes in all the cottages were being renovated to give them more of a 'rustic luxury' look, characterized by well-crafted dark wood walls and classic cabin fixtures.

Just 1km west of town, lovely **Le Patio de l'Anse Bleue** (☎ 76-28-83; patio-anse-bleue@wanadoo.fr; r from €65; 🍽️ 🚿) only has three high-ceilinged rooms, which are decorated with hand-painted furniture. Rooms all face onto a large open-air inner courtyard and Jacuzzi.

ourpick Diamant les Bains (☎ 76-50-14; diamantlesbains@wanadoo.fr; 97223 Diamant; r from €94; 🍽️ 🚿 🚿) is run by the affable Marie-Yvonne Andrieu and her husband. One son is the chef at the on-site restaurant and the son, Jean-Marc, is an artist who did most of the hotel's paintings. The studios right on the beach (with fridge, but no cooking) are worth the extra money (€110). From the modest exterior that faces the main street one would never guess how spacious and pretty the hotel grounds are. Two bungalows have wheelchair access.

At the western end of the village, the always humming bar and café of **Planete Diamant** (☎ 76-49-82; mains €8-14; 🕒 11am-2am, closed Wed) has menus shaped like Saturn and salads named after bodies in our solar system. The heavenly salads include the Venus, with crab, salmon and shrimp, and the Mars, with grilled *lardon* (halfway between ham and bacon) and goat's cheese. The drink menu is impressive.

STE-LUCE

pop 5800

Many of the tourists who come to this happening little fishing town are locals from other parts of the island. Ste-Luce has a number of bars and restaurants either right on the water or just a block or two away, and there are always a few tourists lounging around with a ti-punch in hand.

The hotels are far enough away from the N5 for you not to feel you're living on a freeway, but close enough to make this a great base to explore the southern half of the island. For

divers there are two shops and numerous sites to choose from. The beaches – **Anse Mabouya**, 4km to the west of the center of town, and **Anses Gros Raisin**, which is really two beaches side by side 2km west of the city center – aren't worth a special trip, but for those staying in the area they provide a pleasant break and are rarely crowded.

There's a Crédit Mutuel bank with two ATMs on Rue Schoelcher. On the D7, where many of the hotels are located, is the 8 à Huit supermarket.

Sights & Activities

Rum connoisseurs say it doesn't produce the best rum, but **Trois-Rivières Distillerie** (☎ 62-51-78; www.plantationtroisrivieres.com; Quartier Trois-Rivières; admission free, guided tour in French €2.50; 🕒 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, to 1pm Sat) is definitely one of the most-visited distilleries. The self-guided tour, with signs in English, starts near the parking lot; start at the first sign and follow the arrows. Many of the 'exhibits' are actually on-site souvenir and snack shops. The one notable souvenir shop is **Art & Nature** (www.artetnature-martinique.com), where the on-site artist makes paintings out of sand and earth from Martinique's 339 different natural colors and invites visitors to touch the paintings. The self-guided tour ends with a tasting at the rum boutique – it sells hard-to-find aged rums but if you want normal rums you'll find them cheaper at most supermarkets.

Ste-Luce Plongée (☎ 62-40-06; www.sainteluceplongee.fr; 15 Blvd Kennedy; 1-tank dive €44) does two daily dives to either nearby sites or further out at Rocher Diamant.

Okeanos Club (☎ 62-52-36; www.okeanos-club.com; 1-tank dive €45) offers two, sometimes three, daily dive outings. It's set in the Village Pierres & Vacances.

Sleeping & Eating

Motorists should take the Trois Rivières exit on the eastbound N5 right before the Ste-Luce exit; the hotels listed here are in the rolling hills near the exit, and the town is 5km southeast of the exit on the D36 (make a left toward the sea).

Le Verger de Ste-Luce (☎ 62-20-72; d from €50; 📞 📺 📺) Bungalows surround a very small pool with sun chairs and there's a stand-alone Jacuzzi – and the friendly owner loves to speak English. The simple bungalows all have their own porch with a kitchenette and a good amount of greenery keeps the small place feel-

ing private. Turn right after the Trois-Rivières exit and keep looking on the left – it's only 100m down the road.

Hotel Le Panoramique (☎ 62-31-32; r from €55; 📞 📺 📺) Just a little north of Le Verger de Ste-Luce on the same road. Five out of the 15 rooms have kitchenettes so be sure to specify. The rooms feel brand new and some have private balconies with panoramic views while other have small flatscreen TVs – and all have big beds, which one doesn't always find in Martinique. There's a bar and restaurant on the property, too.

Hotel Corail Résidence (☎ 62-11-01; www.karibea.com; d from €100; 📞 📺 📺) All of the 26 rooms have kitchenettes and little porches with an automatic screen that either shuts out the morning light or opens up to views of the sea down below. It's a 10-minute walk to Mabouya Beach. To get here, just trust the signs. The same company runs the nearby Karibea Resort.

Casa Pepe (☎ 62-30-99; 29 Rue Schoelcher; mains from €9; 🕒 lunch & dinner Mon-Sat, lunch Sun) Decorated with bullfighting posters and a few huge murals of horses that aren't exactly tasteful, but interesting nonetheless, Casa Pepe has a number of Creole specialties but paella is what it does best. It might be wise to order the *paella géante* (giant, the only size available) to go, and eat half there and half at home.

L'Épi Soleil (☎ 62-36-12; 51 Blvd Kennedy; mains €9-13; 🕒 breakfast, lunch & dinner) The mainstay of the street, the covered outdoor bar on the waterfront across from the restaurant is a popular place that stays open into the night. The restaurant serves sandwiches, salads and pizza.

STE-ANNE

pop 3300

The southernmost village on Martinique, Ste-Anne has an attractive seaside setting with its painted wooden houses and numerous trinket shops. Its most popular swimming beach is the long, lovely strand that stretches along the peninsula to Club Med, 800m north of the town center. Despite the number of visitors that flock to the town on weekends and during the winter season, Ste-Anne remains a casual, low-key place, with abundant near-shore reef formations that make for good snorkeling.

If the beach here is too crowded, Cap Chevalier is 6km east as the crow flies and beautiful Macabou is 12km northeast.

There's a small **office of tourism** (www.sainte-anne.to) kiosk in the town center, near the pier, that has maps of the town and can help with car or hotel arrangements.

The dive shop **Plongée Caritan** (☎ 76-81-31; www.anse-caritan.com; Rte des Caraïbes) is located in the hotel *Domaine de l'Anse Caritan*.

Sleeping

There are a number of gîtes scattered around the edge of the town's center.

La Dunette (☎ 76-73-90; www.ladunette.com; s/d incl breakfast €84/93; ♿) In the center of town and overlooking the beach, this hotel has 13 rooms and a restaurant (mains €12 to €24, open 10am to 11pm) that has concerts on the weekends. The interior of the hotel looks a bit retro, but, rooms are spacious and clean. Get a room on the 2nd level for the best view.

Domaine de l'Anse Caritan (☎ 76-74-12; www.anse-caritan.com; Rte des Caraïbes; s/d from €161; ♿) This massive, modern, family-friendly hotel is at the end of a wooded lane just over 800m south of the village center. There are 96 contemporary rooms with kitchenettes. Rooms are a bit soulless but there's a sandy beach complete with inflatable aquatic playground, canoeing and dive center, so it's unlikely you'll be hanging out in the rooms.

Eating

Sn@ck Boubou (☎ 76-28-46; 28 Rue Abbé Saffache; snacks €4-7; ☎ 8am-9pm) The salads and sandwiches are a good way to fill up cheap and it's open all day long. There's also good ice cream (per scoop €1.50), making it a nice place to cool off at the shaded sidewalk tables. Wi-fi is available at €3 per hour.

Les Tamariniers (☎ 76-75-62; 30 Rue Abbé Saffache; mains €10-22; ☎ lunch & dinner) The most up-market eatery in town. Try the Creole menu (€40), a three-course feast, including lobster grilled in aged rum.

Poi et Virginie (☎ 76-73-54; mains €12-24; ☎ lunch & dinner Thu-Mon, dinner Wed, closed Tue) This seaside spot has an inventive menu of Creole, French and Mexican cuisine. It's a popular place with a see-through floor on the porch with spotlit fish swimming below – the ultimate in on-the-water dining.

LES SALINES

Found at the undeveloped southern tip of the island, Les Salines is probably Martinique's finest beach. The gorgeous long stretch of golden

sand attracts scantily clad French tourists and local families alike on weekends and holidays, but it's big enough to accommodate everyone without feeling crowded; it just might be necessary to pick a direction and keep walking along the beach until the crowds thin.

When we visited, the road that used to run along the beach was under construction, which meant that the parking lot was a big dirt field that got muddy and slippery after rain. While this situation continues, during peak times parking can be a messy hassle.

On a brighter note, this is one of the few beaches where camping is legal, but only during school holidays. Camp on the west side of the beach. Signs depicting tents guide the way.

Les Salines is about 5km south of Ste-Anne at the end of the D9. There are showers and food vans near the center of the beach, and about 500m further south you'll find snack shops selling reasonably priced sandwiches, burgers and chicken.

Les Salines gets its name from Étang des Salines, the large salt pond that backs it. Beware of poisonous manchineel trees (most are marked with red paint) on the beach, particularly at the southeast end; rainwater dripping off them can cause rashes and blistering. There's some good snorkeling at the west end of the beach.

DIRECTORY

ACCOMMODATIONS

There are 7800 rooms in more than 100 resorts, hotels and inns. Most of the island's hotels range from 12 to 40 rooms. By Caribbean standards, nightly rates are moderate, with budget hotels averaging about €60, midrange €85 and top end about €240. The prices listed are for high season (December to May), when the majority of people visit the island. Prices can be as much as 40% lower outside of peak times. Some hotels close in September.

Established campgrounds with facilities are virtually nonexistent on the island. Camping is allowed along the beach at Les Salines during the school holidays. For details on camping, call the **Office National des Forêts** (☎ 71 34 50; Fort-de-France).

Gîtes de France (☎ 73-74-74, in Paris 01-49-70-75-75; www.gites-de-france.fr; BP 1122, 97209 Fort-de-France)

PRACTICALITIES

- **Newspapers** The daily *France-Antilles* newspaper centers on news from the French West Indies.
- **Radio & TV** Tune into Radio France Outre-Mer (RFO) at 92MHz and 94.5MHz on FM or catch up on local TV on networks RFO 1 and RFO 2.
- **Video Systems** The Secam video system is used on the island.
- **Electricity** Voltage is 220V, 50 cycles, and plugs have two round prongs; a plug adapter will come in handy.
- **Weights & Measures** Martinique uses the metric system for weights and measures, and the 24-hour clock.

offers rooms in private homes, with weekly rates beginning at around €280 for two people. The convenient website has an English option, and travelers with disabilities can search for accessible accommodation.

Taxes and service charges are included in the quoted rates. See p815 for details on how accommodations price ranges are categorized in this book.

ACTIVITIES

Beaches & Swimming

The sand on beaches on the southern half of the island is white or tan, while those on the northern half are gray or black. Many of Martinique's nicest beaches are scattered along the southwest coast from Grande Anse to Les Salines. Popular east-coast beaches include those at Cap Chevalier and Macabou to the south and the Presqu'île de Caravelle beaches (p616) of Anse l'Étang and Tartane. However, beaches along the northeast side of the island can have very dangerous water conditions and have been the site of a number of drownings.

Diving & Snorkeling

St-Pierre has some of the island's top scuba-diving sites, with wrecks, coral reefs and plenty of marine life. More than a dozen ships that were anchored in the harbor when the 1902 volcanic eruption hit now lie on the sea bed.

Cap Enragé, northeast of Case-Pilote, has underwater caves harboring lots of sea life; to explore its underwater wonders, book a dive in St-Pierre (p613). Grande Anse (p619), with its calm waters and good coral, is a popular diving spot for beginners and a good area for snorkeling. Interesting diving but

trickier conditions are found at Rocher du Diamant (p620) and Îlet la Perle (p614).

You'll also find good snorkeling around Ste-Anne (p621) and along the coast from St-Pierre to Anse Céron (p614).

Expect to pay around €45 for a single dive. There are dive shops in Pointe du Bout (p618), Grande Anse (p619), Ste-Luce (p621) and St-Pierre (p613).

Most larger hotels rent out snorkeling gear and many provide it free to their guests. Some of the dive shops offer snorkeling trips, while others let snorkelers tag along with divers.

Hiking

Martinique has many hiking trails. From Route de la Trace (p614), a number of signposted trails lead into the rainforest and up and around the Pitons du Carbet. Also popular is hiking around the ruins of Château Dubuc (p616) on the Presqu'île de Caravelle.

There are strenuous trails leading up both the northern and southern flanks of Mont Pelée. The shortest and steepest is up the southern flank, beginning in Morne Rouge (p615), and takes about four hours round-trip. The hike up the northern flank is 8km long and takes about 4½ hours one way; there are two trails, which begin just east of Grand-Rivière. Visit the Syndicat d'Initiative in Grand Rivière for detailed maps (p615).

Syndicats d'initiative organize hikes in various parts of the island, including one around the northern tip of the island between Grand-Rivière and Anse Couleuvre (p615), and the **Parc Naturel Régional** (☎ 64-42-59) leads other guided hikes several times a week.

Walk maps and advice (in French) can be found in the book *La Martinique à Pied*, available at many bookstores in Martinique, or write the regional hiking authority at cdrp.martinique@wanadoo.fr.

BUSINESS HOURS

Most businesses are open Monday to Friday, 8am to noon, close for lunch, and then reopen from 2pm to 5pm. Banks follow a similar pattern, but usually don't reopen after lunch one day per week. Unless otherwise noted, breakfast is served from 7am to 9am, lunch noon to 2pm, and dinner 7pm to 9pm.

CHILDREN

Children will be welcome on vacation in Martinique. Most restaurants will allow children to dine as long as they are accompanied by an adult. Practically all hotels will provide cots, and some hotels provide babysitting services. European brands of baby formula, foods and diapers can be bought at pharmacies.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

The *fer-de-lance*, an aggressive pit viper, can be found on Martinique, particularly in overgrown and brushy fields. The snake's bite is highly toxic and sometimes fatal; it's essential for victims to get an antivenin injection as soon as possible. Hikers should be alert for the snakes and stick to established trails.

There is a risk of bilharzia (schistosomiasis) infection throughout the island; the main precaution is to avoid wading or swimming in fresh water.

Beware of manchineel trees on some beaches, particularly on the south coast, as rainwater dripping off them can cause skin rashes and blistering. They're usually marked with a band of red paint.

Occasional island-wide strikes can grind tourism services to a screeching halt.

After dark, it's not advisable to wander off the strip of restaurants and hotels along Rues de la Liberté and Ernest Deproge; mugging is the main concern.

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

Germany (☎ 50-38-39; Acajou, 97232 Le Lamentin)

Netherlands (☎ 73-31-61; 44/46 Ave Maurice Bishop, 97200 Fort-de-France)

UK (☎ 61-56-30; Route du Phare, 97200 Fort-de-France)

US (☎ 75-67-54; usconsulaireagencemartinique@wanadoo.fr; Hotel Valmeniere 615, Ave des Arawaks, 97200 Fort-de-France; ☎ 9am-noon)

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Mardi Gras Carnival Martinique has a spirited Carnival during the five-day period leading up to Ash Wednesday, though most of the action centers on Fort-de-France.

St-Pierre Commemorates the May 8, 1902 eruption of Mont Pelée with live jazz performances and a candlelight procession from the cathedral. On a smaller scale, every village in Martinique has festivities to celebrate its patron saint's day.

Tour de la Martinique Week-long bicycle race in mid-July.

Tour des Yoles Rondes Week-long race of traditional sailboats in early August.

GAY & LESBIAN TRAVELERS

Fort-de-France has a little bit of a gay scene, but overall homophobia is prevalent (see p610).

HOLIDAYS

New Year's Day January 1

Good Friday Late March/early April

Easter Sunday Late March/early April

Easter Monday Late March/early April

Ascension Thursday Fortieth day after Easter

Pentecost Monday Eighth Monday after Easter

Labor Day May 1

Victory Day May 8

Slavery Abolition Day May 22

Bastille Day July 14

Schoelcher Day July 21

Assumption Day August 15

All Saints Day November 1

Fête des Morts November 2

Armistice Day November 11

Christmas Day December 25

INTERNET ACCESS

The chances of finding an internet café in a particular town on Martinique are 50%. In places that see a decent amount of tourists, restaurants and hotels increasingly offer wi-fi for free.

INTERNET RESOURCES

Martinique (www.martinique.org) General information on the island, provided by the Martinique Promotion Bureau.

Martinique Scoop (www.martiniquescoop.com) Entertainment and nightlife information.

LANGUAGE

French is the official language in Martinique, but islanders commonly speak Creole when chatting among themselves. English is spoken at larger hotels but is understood rather sporadically elsewhere so, if you don't have a fair command of French, a bilingual dictionary and phrasebook will prove quite useful.

MAPS

Maps are available for free at all car-rental agencies and many hotels.

MEDICAL SERVICES

Good medical care is available throughout the island, but not all doctors speak or understand English. There's a decompression chamber at the hospital in Fort-de-France.

MONEY

The euro has been the island's currency since 2001. Hotels, larger restaurants and car-rental agencies accept Visa, MasterCard and, less commonly, American Express.

POST

There are post offices in all major towns. You can also buy postage stamps at some *tabacs* (tobacco shops), hotels and souvenir shops.

Mailing addresses should be followed by 'Martinique, French West Indies.'

TELEPHONE

The country code for Martinique is ☎ 596. We have included only the six-digit number for Martinique listings in this chapter.

To call from North America, dial ☎ 1-340 + the local number. When calling from within the French West Indies, dial ☎ 0596 + the local six-digit number. From elsewhere, dial your country's international access code, followed by the ☎ 596 area code *twice* in front of the six digits.

For directory assistance, dial ☎ 12.

For more information on phone cards and making long-distance calls, see p826.

EMERGENCY NUMBERS

- **Ambulance** ☎ 15
- **Fire** ☎ 18
- **Police** ☎ 17
- **Sea Rescue** ☎ 70-92-92

Cell Phones

To see whether you can use your phone on the island's GSM networks, check with your cell service provider before you leave to see if it has a roaming agreement with any of the service operators here.

SIM cards (starting at €25) are available for unlocked cell phones and usually include some talk time before recharging. Digicel and Orange are the two main SIM card vendors.

Phone Cards

Public phones in Martinique accept French *télécartes* (phone cards), not coins. The cards cost €5, €10 or €15, depending on the amount of calling time on them, and are sold at post offices and at shops with signs that say '*télécartes en vente ici.*'

TOURIST INFORMATION

Many towns have at least a small tourism office where the staff will try to speak in English. Pamphlets, mainly in French but with enough pictures and maps to get the gist, are available at airports and many hotels. The **Martinique Promotion Bureau** (Comité Martiniquais du Tourisme; ☎ 61-61-77; www.martinique.org) is a good source of information on the island in English, French, Spanish and Portuguese.

TRAVELERS WITH DISABILITIES

Some hotels have rooms that are accessible by travelers with disabilities. Sidewalk curbs are still a problem in most places.

VISAS

Citizens of the US, UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand can stay for up to 90 days without a visa by showing a valid passport (US citizens see the boxed text, p830). Citizens of the EU need an official identity card, valid passport or French *carte de séjour* (visitor permit).

TRANSPORTATION

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Entering Martinique

A round-trip or onward ticket is officially required of visitors. This may be checked at customs upon arrival or, if you're coming from within the Caribbean, before you depart for Martinique.

Air

Martinique Aimé Césaire International Airport (DFI; ☎ information line 42-18-77), formerly known as Lamentin International Airport) has an information line. Immigration is courteous and efficient at this large and modern airport, which has a number of ATMs, money change bureaus and restaurants.

The following airlines service Martinique:

Air Antilles Express (☎ 42-16-71; www.airantilles.com)

Pointe-à-Pitre, St-Barthélemy, St-Martin/Sint Martin

Air Caraïbes (☎ 42-16-52; www.aircaraibes.com)

Castries, Paris, Panama City, Pointe-à-Pitre, Port-au-Prince, St Lucia, St-Martin/Sint Maarten, San José, Santo Domingo

Air France (☎ 82-61-61; www.airfrance.com) Paris,

Pointe-à-Pitre

American Airlines/American Eagle (www.aa.com)

San Juan

Corsairfly (☎ 42-16-10; www.corsairfly.com) Brest,

Lyon, Paris

LIAT (☎ 42-16-11; www.liatairline.com) St Lucia

Sea

Martinique is well visited by seafaring vessels. Cruise ships and interisland ferries call on Martinique every day, and the island is a favorite anchorage for private sailboats and yachts.

CRUISE SHIP

Cruise ships land at Pointe Simon in Fort-de-France, at the western side of the harbor and within easy walking distance of the city center and main sights. The arrival facilities have phones, rest rooms, a taxi stand and a tourist information booth that opens on cruise-ship days. See p830 for more on cruises.

FERRY

Two companies provide regular boat service between Martinique and Guadeloupe, Dominica and St Lucia. The ferries use the **Terminal de Croisière** (sometimes called Quai Ouest), 850m southeast of La Savane in Fort-de-France.

L'Express des Îles (☎ 35-90-00; www.express-des-iles.com) operates large, modern catamarans that have air-conditioned cabins with TVs and a snack bar. There are three weekly crossings from Fort-de-France to Pointe-à-Pitre, Guadeloupe (one way/round trip €67/100, three hours), on Sunday, Wednesday and Friday. Boats leave Fort-de-France for Roseau in Dominica every afternoon except

Wednesday (one way/round trip €67/100, 1½ hours) and for Castries in St Lucia every day except Tuesday and Saturday (one way/round trip €67/100, 80 minutes).

Departure days and times for these services change frequently and often bear no relation to the printed schedule. The only way to be sure is to call L'Express des Îles or check with a local travel agent. There are discounts of 50% for children aged under two, 10% for students and passengers under 12 years old, and 5% for passengers younger than 26 or older than 60.

Brudey Frères (☎ 70-08-50; www.brudey-freres.fr) offers an express catamaran between Fort-de-France and Pointe-à-Pitre (one way/round trip €65/95) every day. In high season, there's an additional crossing three to four days per week. The company has crossings between Fort-de-France and Dominica every afternoon, with additional morning departures in high season (one way/round trip €55/80). There's service between St Lucia (one way/round trip €55/80) on Friday and Sunday. Travel times are nearly identical to L'Express des Îles.

Brudey also offers discounts for youths and elders. Schedules change, so check current timetables.

YACHT

The main port of entry is in Fort-de-France but yachts may also clear at St-Pierre or Marin.

Yachting and sailing are very popular in Martinique and numerous charter companies operate on the island. **Sparkling Charter** (☎ 74-66-39; www.sparkling-charter.com) and **Sunsail Antilles** (☎ 74-98-17; www.sunsail.com) are based at the marina in Marin, as are a huge number of other charter companies. **Star Voyage** (☎ 66-00-72) is based at the Pointe du Bout marina.

GETTING AROUND

If time is of essence, renting a car is the most reliable form of transportation in Martinique. Most hotels can arrange airport pickup and car rental.

Boat

A couple of regular *vedettes* (ferries) between Martinique's main resort areas and Fort-de-France provide a nice alternative to dealing with heavy bus and car traffic – they also allow you to avoid the hassles of city parking and are quicker to boot.

Somatours Vedettes (☎ 73-05-53) runs a ferry between Fort-de-France and Pointe du Bout. It's quite a pleasant way to cross and takes only 20 minutes. The boat runs daily from 6:30am to 5:15pm, every hour or so, and costs €3/6 one way/round trip.

Vedettes Madinina (☎ 63-06-46; www.vedettes.madinina.com) runs a boat to Pointe du Bout daily from 6:20am to 6:30pm, every hour or so every day and costs €2.50/5 one way/round trip.

Matinik Cruise Line (☎ 76-73-45) runs a ferry about every 75 minutes between Fort-de-France and the town dock in the village of Trois-Îlets. The first boat departs Trois-Îlets at 6:10am and the last leaves Trois-Îlets for Fort-de-France at 5:45pm (€4/7 one way/return, 15 minutes). There are no boats on Sunday. Supposedly there is a service to Ste-Anne (via Anse d'Arlet) but that couldn't be confirmed.

It's best to buy a one-way ticket only as sometimes your ride home might unexpectedly quit early that day.

There are also countless sailing tours and charters operating around the island. For the latest information, check with the local tourist office or at your hotel.

Bus

Although there are some larger public buses, most buses are minivans, marked 'TC' (for *taxis collectifs*) on top. Destinations are marked on the vans, sometimes on the side doors and sometimes on a small sign stuck in the front window. Traveling by bus is best for shorter distances and for visitors with a lot of extra time in their itinerary.

Bus stops are marked *arrêt de bus* or have signs showing a picture of a bus. Fort-de-France's busy main terminal is at Pointe Simon, on the west side of the harbor. Buses from Fort-de-France to St-Pierre leave frequently Monday to Saturday, but less frequently on Sunday (€3.20, 45 minutes). Other bus fares from Fort-de-France are to Trois-Îlets (€2.40), Diamant (€5.70), Ste-Anne (€9.80) and Grand-Rivière (€5.70). For buses to the gardens of Balata, and Morne Rouge, head to the cemetery south of the Parc Floral in Fort-de-France; they leave about

every 30 minutes during the day, Monday to Saturday.

Car

DRIVER'S LICENSE

Your home driver's license is all that you will need to drive legally on Martinique's roads.

RENTAL

There are numerous car-rental agencies at the airport and in Fort-de-France. You'll find the best rates on their websites, and local firms are generally cheaper than international agencies. Beware companies that list their address as 'Cruise Terminal' but are in fact near La Savane in the center of Fort-de-France.

An unlimited mileage rate is generally preferable to a lower rate that adds a charge per kilometer, particularly if you plan on touring the island.

You must be at least 21 years of age to rent a car, and some companies add a surcharge for drivers under the age of 25.

Car-rental companies at the airport:

Avis (☎ 42-11-00; www.avis.com)

Budget (☎ 42-04-04; www.budget-antilles.com)

Carib Rentacar (☎ 51-15-15; www.rentacar-caraibes.com/martinique/index.asp)

Europcar (☎ 42-42-42; www.europcar.mq)

Hertz (☎ 42-16-90; www.hertz.com)

ROAD CONDITIONS

Roads are excellent by Caribbean standards, and there are multilane freeways (and rush-hour traffic) in the Fort-de-France area.

ROAD RULES

In Martinique, drive on the right side of the road. Traffic regulations and road signs are the same as those in Europe, speed limits are posted, and exits and intersections are clearly marked.

Taxi

The taxi fare from the airport is approximately €20 to Fort-de-France, €60 to Ste-Anne and €355 to Pointe du Bout or Anse Mitan. A 40% surcharge is added onto all fares between 8pm and 6am and all day on Sunday and holidays. To book a cab, call **24-hour taxi** (☎ 63-63-62, 63-10-10).

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