

Sunbathing at Le Sereno hotel, on Grand Cul de Sac beach. Opposite, left and right: in Gustavia, the island's capital; centre, view of St Jean beach from Eden Rock





Hôtel Saint-Barth Isle de France on Anse des Flamands, one of the more secluded beaches on St Barth. Opposite, its private sundeck

Do you think I'm sexy?

The Caribbean island of St Barts is famed for its over-the-top celebrity glamour and tropical beach chic. Jonathan Bastable is quite taken with its natural beauty, too. Photographs by Sean Gleason





Clockwise from left: the weekly fashion show at Hôtel Saint-Barth Isle de France; Grande Saline beach on the south of the island; Charlie Vere Nicoll, owner of Isle de France hotel and vicar of St Barts, with his wife Mandy; a room at Isle de France; party goers in Gustavia, the island's capital. Opposite, a view of the sands of Anse des Flamands from Isle de France



IT IS A LOVELY THING to be at Anse des Flamands and to walk along the water's edge at the beginning of a new day. Let the tide wash over your feet: the gentle waves are topped with spume that is warm and white as cappuccino foam. The sand is the colour of shortbread, and is so soft and powdery that you sink in up to your ankles. It is surprisingly hard work to get to the far end of the bay, like trudging barefoot through hot snow. But it is also the closest thing to toil that you are likely to have to do on the Caribbean island of St Barts. At this early hour, before the sun is high, there is no sound but the respiratory in-and-out of the sea – but occasionally a light breeze blows through the palms and makes their dry fronds clack together, as if the trees were greeting the new day with a polite round of applause. This morning a rainbow – or the right-

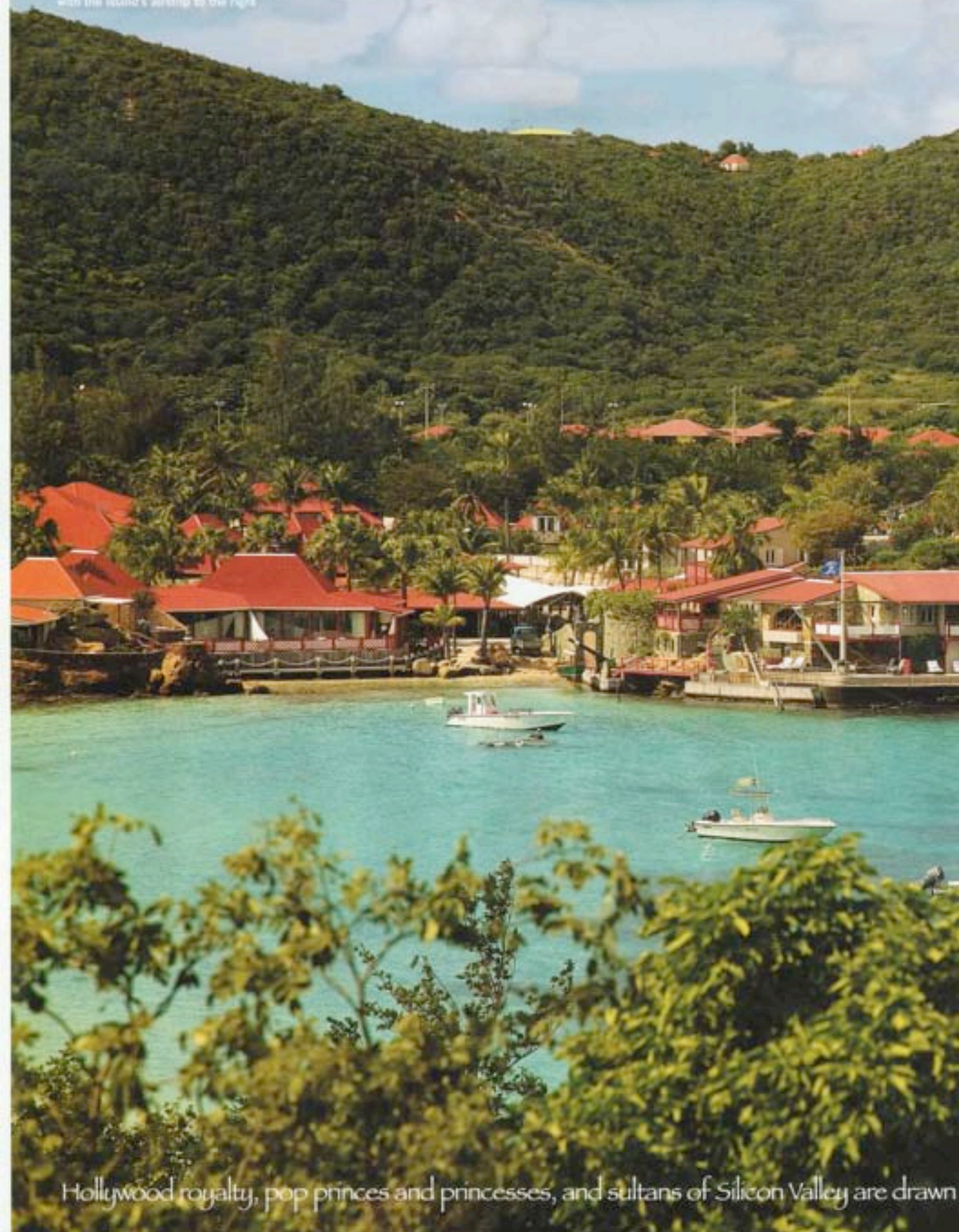
hand shaft of one – appeared quite suddenly out to sea: a coloured pillar of light in the dead centre of the horizon, rising vertically out of the dense blue of the water and curving gently into a lone white cloud. It was a magical sight, all the more so because there was no hint of rain. I imagine it was caused by the humidity rising out of the water, but I don't know. At any rate, rainbows were a daily gift of the tropical dawn, and I found myself getting up at first light every morning especially to see them.

At the western end of Anse des Flamands stands the entirely fabulous Hôtel Saint-Barth Isle de France. The main building, a kind of colonial mansion, is spotlessly white – and so are all the rooms. But it is not at all minimal. The public spaces are dotted with comfy sofas and in the rooms huge beds are strewn with big cushions. The

cherry-pink lampshades add a lively touch of colour, but the most eye-catching thing in all the rooms is the view through the doors to the terrace and the vast, sapphire expanse of the ocean. Isle de France is owned by an Englishman, Charlie Vere Nicoll, who also happens to be the Anglican vicar of St Barts. 'Both jobs,' he says, 'are all about making people feel welcome.' He first came to the hotel in 1985 as a guest, and later gave up a career in corporate finance to buy the place. At the same time he was training for the priesthood – and he was appointed vicar of the island in 2001. 'Thank you, Lord,' he laughs, as he recounts how the change of direction of his career and the path of his calling converged on this island.

Charlie says that St Barts is like nowhere else in the Caribbean. 'The fact that it has no topsoil means it has never been used

The glamorous Eden Rock Hotel,
with the island's airstrip to the right



Hollywood royalty, pop princes and princesses, and sultans of Silicon Valley are drawn

La Plage
FISH & SEAFOOD





Clockwise from top left: Villa Nina at Eden Rock hotel, which comes with a butler, Land Rover and Mini Cooper; Eden Rock's owner, David Matthews, with head chef Jean Claude Dufour; the view from Villa Nina's plunge pool; a waitress at one of Gustavia's many bars; on St Jean beach at Eden Rock. Opposite, La Plage restaurant on St Jean beach, one of the prime people-watching spots



as a plantation, and so never had a slave population. The first settlers here were French families who came 300 years ago from Brittany and Normandy. For centuries they were the poorest people in the Caribbean. Apart from fishing they had no means of sustenance at all. The population of the island is about 8,000, of whom about 3,000 are descended from the early settlers. The other 5,000 are mostly people from mainland France who have made a life here. Practically all the chefs on the island are French, and the island is crammed with outstanding restaurants. 'St Barts is a little sliver of the Côte d'Azur in the Caribbean, and that is very attractive to Americans. It gives them a taste of St Tropez without their having to cross the ocean.'

Among those visitors are Hollywood royalty, pop princes and princesses, and

sultans of Silicon Valley. They are drawn not just by the handy location of St Barts and its Gallic ambience, but also by an alluring air of hedonism than hangs in the balmy air like expensive perfume. This appeal is the legacy of a Dutch aviator and adventurer named Remy de Haenen, who came here in 1945 and built a house on Eden Rock, the rocky outcrop that dominates St Jean beach. He became mayor of the island and invited a string of famous friends to come and stay at the house on the rock: Greta Garbo, Howard Hughes, Johnny Weissmuller, Robert Mitchum. In short, he brought money and glamour to his arid fiefdom, and these have been the island's hallmarks ever since.

The house that Remy de Haenen built was acquired in 1995 by a Yorkshireman named David Matthews. There was a little bar attached to the property, and a few

rooms to rent. Matthews reconfigured and expanded the house, and soon found that he had accidentally become a hotelier. So it has come to pass that the two finest places to stay on the island – perhaps in the whole Caribbean – are owned by Englishmen.

But they could hardly be more different. While Isle de France is coolly understated, Eden Rock is a big gaudy pageant of a place. Given that it clings to the rocky outcrop like a Tibetan monastery, discreet invisibility was never going to be an option; but my word, Eden Rock makes the most of its prominence. Everything in the hotel is suffused with texture and colour – and not the same colours, but a different bright palette in every room. In the Howard Hughes suite, for example, there is a lovely curving wall of green copper, and the floors and partitions are made of polished mahogany



★ *Le Select*

A jumping burger bar right in the middle of Gustavia. It looks like a kebab shop with a garden, and is very popular with locals and with visiting celebs who feel like a night off from fine dining. Sad by some to have inspired the Jimmy Buffet classic 'Cheesburger in Paradise', it is certainly the cheapest on the island. 00 590 5 90 27 86 87. About €15 for two without wine

★ *La Cantina*

A good local bar. By no means the swiftest place in Gustavia, but it's friendly and a fine spot for people-watching. Does a good Greek salad at what passes for a reasonable price (€35) as well as tartare de saumon and tataki de thon avec spaghetti. 00 590 5 90 27 55 66. About €50 for two without wine

Getting to St Barts

Air France (0871 66 33 777; www.airfrance.co.uk) flies from Heathrow to St Barts via St Martin.
British Airways (08444 930787; www.ba.com) flies from Gatwick to Antigua, then with **Liat** (www.liatarline.com) to St Barts. **Carrier** (0161 491 7620; www.carrier.co.uk) offers tailor-made trips to the island.

as sleek and dark as a thoroughbred's flank. The hotel is also full of art, really good art that catches the eye or sparks a thought or makes you laugh. You feel that there is a creative wit, an impresario's eye, behind all this – and it turns out that the eye and the wit belong to David's wife Jane, who has designed pretty much every interior inch of Edén Rock.

'Good art, good food, and good music: in all modesty, these are the three mainstays of Edén Rock,' says Matthews. The beachside restaurant is simply sensational, a great place to watch the world's most beautiful people promenading back and forth along the strand in the world's priciest swimsuits. As for the music, that flows naturally from the high esteem in which the hotel is held by divas and rock stars, Mariah Carey, for example, throws her birthday party here every year. A bit of that glitter seems to have rubbed off on Matthews, too. He has the relaxed, slightly louche charm of an erstwhile rock'n'roller; if he were to tell you that for a couple of short months in 1973 he played keyboards for the Floyd, you wouldn't be in the least surprised.

Famous visitors to Edén Rock often rent the spacious villas that are set a little way back from St Jean beach. Villa Nina comes with accessories such as a butler, a Land Rover and a Mini Cooper ('for the ladies') and an enormous and luxurious kitchen. Next door is a brand-new villa – unequivocally named Rockstar – which is just as glamorous as Nina, but even bigger. In the basement there is a fully functional recording studio housing all the latest digital equipment alongside antique curios such

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Where to stay

★ *Hôtel Saint-Barth* *Île de France*

If you don't come to stay, you must at least visit for a drink – or have lunch on a Tuesday, when there is a fashion show in the restaurant. 00 590 5 90 27 61 81; www.ile-de-france.com. Doubles from €498

★ *Edén Rock*

Both the Sand Bar (for lunch) and On The Rocks (for dinner) are superb. Every room is different, but the Thirties-style Garbo Suite has to be seen to be believed. 00 590 5 90 29 79 99; www.edenrockhotel.com. Doubles from €414

★ *Hôtel Guanahani* & Spa

Fabulous resort on the east of the island, away from the bustle. Some of the suites are on the rugged cliff top, above the beach and the bay. There is a fine spa on the extensive grounds. 00 590 5 90 27 66 60; www.leguanahani.com. Doubles from US\$367

Where to eat

★ *Le Restaurant des Pêcheurs*

Attached to Le Sereno hotel on Grand Cul-de-Sac beach, this is designed in understated charcoal and ivory by Christian Liaigre. The waitresses – each

more beautiful than the last – wear the same colours. Coconut palms and oleander abound in the fisherman's village – a little network of cool chalets close to the beach and the bar. 00 590 5 90 29 83 00; www.lesereno.com. About €130 for two without wine

★ *Le Ti St-Barth*

Set in Pointe Milou, this is a jolly spot for a party – all dark and swathed in scarlet velvet, like a Wild West brothel. Try the Zen Tartare or the Lion Qui Rit (beef fillet with Thai salad and crispy noodles). 00 590 5 90 27 97 71. About €120 for two without wine