



## A TOUCH OF PARADISE

Saint Martin...a small island with a lot to offer

BY JODI HELMER

My idea of the perfect vacation involves lying by the pool with a book in one hand and a fruity cocktail in the other—for about an hour. After that, I start to get restless. I start to swim laps, run on the beach, join a game of volleyball or ask the hotel concierge about day trips to hike, bike, snorkel or parasail.

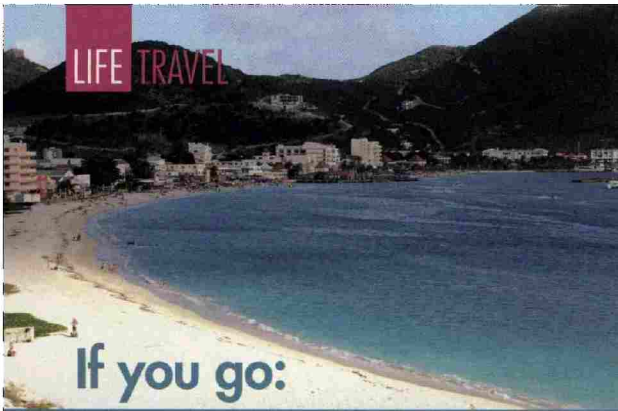
In the past, I've sought out destinations like Costa Rica and Thailand that are known as havens for active travelers. Going to the Caribbean never crossed my mind—until I read about the island of Saint Martin/Sint Maarten.

At just 37 square miles, it is the smallest island in the world to be ruled by two sovereign powers. The Netherlands Antilles rules the southern part of the island called Sint Maarten, and France rules the north, Saint Martin. There are no distinct borders, just small signs as you cross from one region into the next.

Although Sint Maarten, as it is often called, is one small island, both northern and southern regions have their own distinct vibe. The French side is home to secluded white sand beaches and expanses of farmland tucked into the mountainside, while upscale resorts and bathing suit-clad tourists dominate the beaches and boardwalks on the Dutch side. I quickly discovered that no matter which side of the island I was on, there was no shortage of activities to keep me busy.

Just hours after checking into the Sonesta Great Bay Beach Resort & Casino on the Dutch side of the island, I was checking out the activities offered through the resort. You can book a scuba diving trip or rent snorkeling equipment through the on-site dive shop, show up poolside for an aqua aerobics class or learn the merengue. The hotel also has its

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Major airlines have daily flights into Princess Juliana International Airport on the Dutch side of the island. Go to [www.pjiaa.com](http://www.pjiaa.com) for more information. Here are a few more resources to help you plan your trip:

- ✓ [www.st-maarten.com](http://www.st-maarten.com)
- ✓ [www.sonesta.com/greatbay](http://www.sonesta.com/greatbay)
- ✓ [www.trisportsxm.com](http://www.trisportsxm.com)
- ✓ [www.loteriefarm.net](http://www.loteriefarm.net)
- ✓ [www.12metre.com](http://www.12metre.com)

own fitness center. Since I can hop on the treadmill at home, I opted to run along the boardwalk that links the resort to the Dutch capital of Philipsburg.

The boardwalk is lined with colorful beachfront restaurants and signs advertising local specialties like conch fritters and *accra*, a type of battered salt fish favored by the locals. Philipsburg is a maze of narrow streets lined with shops selling T-shirts and souvenirs to cruise ship passengers.

After a bit of window shopping, I walked back along the beach and spent a few hours poolside. The next morning, I met Juan Pablo Piscione, the owner of TriSport, one of the largest outfitters in Sint Maarten, for a kayak and snorkeling tour. We eased our kayaks into the water at Port de Plaisance Resort in Cole Bay and paddled past the mega yachts docked in the Simpson Bay Lagoon.

After an hour of paddling (including some strenuous stretches where we had to navigate across the wake of the yachts coming into the bay) we arrived at Pelican Resort. There is a thriving coral reef beneath the crystal clear waters of the Pelican Keys. The waters were really calm in the bay, making it easy to spot colorful fish swimming among the coral. After that, it was time to paddle back to Port de Plaisance.

While we were relaxing with some postpaddling refreshments, Piscione explained that the majority of travelers who sign up for tours through TriSport are beginners. In fact, 70 percent of his clients are cruise ship passengers who have never paddled before. With a bit of advanced notice, Piscione can tailor itineraries to challenge even the most experienced athletes.

"We have been organizing active travel outings for over 10 years and have worked with travelers of all skill levels," he said.

"We encourage people to tell us what they're looking for so we can meet their needs."

A morning of water sports left me eager to try out some of the land-based activities on the island. The next stop: Loterie Farm.

Loterie Farm is a former sugar plantation-turned-adventure-sport mecca. The 154-acre nature preserve is dotted with hiking trails, obstacle courses and zip lines running through the forest.

A network of hiking trails leads to the top of Pic Paradis, the highest peak on Saint Martin. The summit sits at 1,400 feet and offers breathtaking views of the French capital of Marigot and the nearby island of Anguilla. The trails are well-marked and well worth the effort it takes to get to the top.

No one is sure of the length of the out-and-back trail but, in the blazing afternoon sun, it took about three hours to hike so the view from the summit is not the only thing that will leave you breathless!

As a reward for surviving the day's activities, I stopped at the Tree Lounge for a cold drink. From the patio, I had a great view of the fig and mango trees dotting the property and the roaming chickens that call Loterie Farm home. I relaxed for a few minutes—and then pulled out my notebook and started planning my next adventure.

Prior to traveling to Saint Martin, I had heard about a sailing race called the 12 Metre Challenge. It's a head-to-head sailboat race between two vessels that were once sailed in the America's Cup—and passengers crew the boat.

I had never even been on a sailboat before but the chance to be part of a race team was too good to pass up so I showed up at the dock ready to take instructions. Captain Morgan led our team of 12 onto the deck of the Stars and Stripes, the winner of the 1987 America's Cup. We were each given a role, like main grinder or sail trimmer, and trained in our duties. (The less active passengers could opt for jobs such as iceberg watchers and timekeepers.) Before long, we set sail into the open water to race against True North.

The next 41 minutes were a blur. We went racing through an obstacle course at top speed, making hairpin turns in front of True North in an attempt to take the lead. Onboard, there was a flurry of activity: Captain Morgan yelled out instructions to the crew, the main grinder flew into action and the jib swung from one side of the boat to the other. We lost the race but I had the experience of a lifetime (and gained a newfound respect for sailors as athletes).

On my last day in Sint Maarten, I woke up early to run along the beach. After that, I spent a few hours swimming in the ocean and lounging poolside. In the midst of reading a trashy beach novel, I realized that after a three-day vacation, I had overcome most of my preconceived notions about traveling to the islands. There is a lot more to the Caribbean than too much food and too much sun (although everything I had heard about the rum cocktails was absolutely true). It looks like I might have to add a few islands to my list of must-explore destinations. **AF**

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