

# PARADISE REGAINED

After the devastation of Hurricane Irma, *Lucy Halfhead* finds St Barths restored to its former glory



manicured lawn, followed by Camilla, the hotel's tabby cat, and a great egret with impossibly skinny legs that perched on the side of the infinity pool (the tiles imported from Indonesia to match the colour of the lagoon) for a quick drink.

At the heart of the hotel is Restaurant Le Sereno, an open-air dining pavilion with a Mediterranean menu that draws diners from all over the island. We lunched on mahi-mahi ceviche and tiger prawns with mango chutney in the shade of the huge coconut palms, and at night, we were wowed by plates of herb-crusted sea scallops with saffron, and lobster linguine. With its palette of taupe and white, the property's soothing aesthetic lulled us into the slow pace of island life, and we whiled away the hours swaying in hammocks with our books or gliding out onto the water on paddle-boards.

After a blissful three days, we set off by car along the winding roads to Villa Marie, the hotelier Jocelyne Sibuet's hillside haven on the west of the island. Here, you can fantasise that you've just won the lottery and have invested in a new holiday home, such is the cossetting nature of the old colonial villa and indeed the staff, who had memorised our coffee preferences by breakfast on our second morning. And what a breakfast it was – heavenly rum-infused French toast, fruit salad, homemade granola and warm, flaky pastries, which we devoured under huge amber-coloured umbrellas by the pool.

At the first whiff of freshly baked croissants, we would hear a rustling in the bushes and turn to see the hotel's resident tortoises padding over in the hope of a titbit. Of course, there were plenty of places to unwind uninterrupted; we loved the living-room filled with dark-wood furniture, local curiosities and countless paintings, and our laidback bedroom with its canopied four-poster bed, seashell lamps, inlaid mother-of-pearl dresser and glorious sea views.

Villa Marie proved to be an excellent base for exploring more of the island's tropical terrain. One morning, we embarked on an adventure to the closest beach, Colombier, which started with an hour-long hike down the hill through a nature reserve, and ended with a cooling dip in the sea, with not another soul in sight. We also spent an afternoon at the LVMH-owned Cheval Blanc on Flamands Bay – quite possibly the most beautiful swathe of white sand on the atoll, fringed by sparkling, turquoise waters. After putting the cloud-like sunloungers to the test for a few hours, we dined on fabulous French cuisine at the hotel's sophisticated seaside restaurant, La Case de l'Isle, and there seemed no doubt about it – St Barths is back, and it's more alluring than ever. □

*Le Sereno* ([www.serenohotels.com](http://www.serenohotels.com)), from about £675 a room a night. *Villa Marie Saint-Barth* ([www.saint-barth.villamarie.fr](http://www.saint-barth.villamarie.fr)), from £400 a room a night. *Virgin Atlantic* ([www.virginatlantic.com](http://www.virginatlantic.com)) flies from London Gatwick to Antigua, from £483 return. Transfers cost from about £240 with *Tradewind Aviation* ([www.flytradewind.com](http://www.flytradewind.com)).



A float in the deliciously warm water, we manoeuvred stealthily so as not to disturb the magical creatures that were sculling beneath us; for though they are endangered, sea turtles can still be found off the coast of St Barths. After kayaking out across Grand Cul-de-Sac, a sheltered lagoon on the north-east side of the tiny French Caribbean island, my friend and I soon spotted their dappled heads surfacing for air. It was a remarkable sight, especially considering that just two years ago, Irma, a category-five hurricane the size of France, had roared in with 180-mile-per-hour winds that churned up the seabed, destroying everything in its path.

While St Barths might have had a reputation as a glitzy playground for the ultra-rich, post-Irma there seems to be an inclination towards more understated pleasures, such as those found at the unpretentious 39-room hotel Le Sereno. Badly damaged in the storm, it has since been rebuilt with three additional suites and a new Valmont spa, gym, restaurant and bar, with a subtly chic design scheme conceived by the French interiors guru Christian Liaigre, who previously created homes for Karl Lagerfeld and Calvin Klein.

We had checked in after a nail-biting transfer from Antigua – no fault of the excellent Tradewind Aviation pilots, but due to the island's famously short runway that requires every plane to make a daredevil descent. Just 30 minutes later, we were gratefully sipping sundowners on the terrace, as an array of wildlife came to welcome us. A three-foot Lesser Antillean iguana slunk across the



Right, above and below: *Le Sereno*. Bottom right: *St Barths' capital, Gustavia*



Top left and above: *Villa Marie Saint-Barth*. Left and below: *the Bay of St Jean*



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