

Oceans Three

France is not just in Europe—it can be found in the Atlantic, Pacific, and Indian oceans

by Ethan Gelber



Well beyond France's continental frontiers lie nine territories and overseas *départements* falling to various degrees under the French flag—the *France des Trois Océans*. Surfing the bright waters of the Atlantic Ocean are the Caribbean retreats of **Martinique** and **Guadeloupe** (and the latter's dependant islands of **St-Martin** and **St-Barths**), as well as the northern Atlantic islands, off the Canadian coast, of **St-Pierre & Miquelon**. In the same hemisphere, **French Guiana** is a pristine equatorial forest toehold on the north coast of South America. In the Pacific Ocean, **French Polynesia** (whose primary port is on Tahiti Island),

New Caledonia, and the small volcanic archipelagoes of **Wallis & Futuna** are a bit more remote, whereas mountainous **Réunion Island** and its tiny neighbor **Mayotte** lie off the coast of Madagascar in the Indian Ocean.

Most of these lands, particularly those in the tropics, have developed well-deserved reputations as vacation hideaways. The cottage and luxury industries that have developed around the tourist trade are quite advanced and afford most of the world a small taste of France in their own backyards. Here then are brief looks at some aspects of six of these magical sanctuaries.

Lands Ho!

The overseas lands of France featured here include:

1. Guadeloupe
2. St-Martin
3. St-Barths
4. Martinique
5. French Guiana
6. French Polynesia

The others are:

7. St-Pierre & Miquelon
8. New Caledonia
9. Wallis & Fortuna
10. Réunion Island
11. Mayotte

Martinique

Rum for Your Life



Martinican rums

Everyone around you knows when you open a bottle of Martinican rum: A syrupy sweetness permeates the air and thoughts turn to the gentle beachfront ruffle of an incoming tide. The 11 *rhumeries* (rum distilleries) of Martinique produce some of the world's

best fermented sugarcane liquor. In fact, *rhum agricole de la Martinique* is the only rum that carries France's exalted Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée (AOC) label. It should then come as no surprise that the French département of Martinique accords special honors to its local nectar, celebrating it at a yearly festival, lauding it in its own special museum, and promoting its producers as tourist attractions.

In mid December, the 24th annual Fête du Rhum attracts locals and tourists to a morning parade, an all-day open-air market of locally produced traditional products, free rum tastings, and evening live music by the island's best bands. The festival grounds—and the Musée du Rhum, set in a classic Créole house—are at the 18th-century Saint James Rum Distillery on the northeast coast of the island. (The road out to the distillery also passes by the Musée de la Banane, located at the heart of some of Martinique's extensive banana plantations.) Other rums distilled along the island's Route du Rhum include Dillon and La Favorite (in the Fort-de-France area), both of which are exported to Europe; prestigious Clément (in Le François), square-bottled Bally, and newly lauded Neisson (both in Le Carbet), and "special reserve" Depaz, all on the northwest coast; and the vanilla-flavored white rum of Trois-Rivières (near Ste-Luce) and Martinique's most famous product, La Mauny (near Rivière-Pilote), both in the south. Near the town of Macouba, the famous JM Crassous de Medeul distillery produces a vintage rum for true connoisseurs.

French Guiana

Nature's True Call



Headed upriver in the French Amazon

French Guiana, or Guyane, as it is known to French speakers, is the small French département on the northern coast of South America sandwiched between Suriname and Brazil. Since 1502, it has been prospected and administrated by the French. The protection of biodiversity and development of

active ecotourism have taken root in French Guiana. With lush coastal-, river-, and forest-based ecosystems sheltering a stunning surfeit of life (5,500 species of plants, 700 species of birds, 177 species of mammals, 430 species of fish, and 109 species of amphibians), the lands of French Guiana are a rare vision of this planet at its most natural. Fortunately, public and political opinion have worked to establish protected environmental zones for the long-term preservation of these natural wonders.

Just as fortunately, careful ecofriendly plans for the organized appreciation of these zones, as well as elsewhere, are in full swing.

Trips by regular or dugout canoe (the latter called *pirogues*), by horse, and by mountain bike can be made into many of the parks. Try the coastal Amana Nature Reserve, particularly well known as an annual nesting place for sea turtles; the seaside Kaw Nature Preserve and abutting Nature Reserve of Trésor, bird-watchers paradises noted for caimans; and the inland Nourague Reserve, France's largest nature reserve. Plans are underway to establish a 7.4-million-acre (3-million-hectare) national park in the southern part of the territory to protect one of the planet's few remaining equatorial forests.

French Polynesia

Fantasy Islands



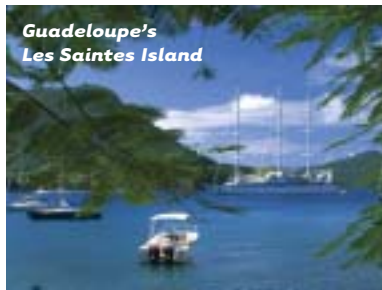
Breakfast delivery at the Bora Bora Pearl Beach Resort

Some special occasions call for a special treat. And few treats are more uplifting than awakening after a night of gentle rocking to a sky thick with rainbows and a horizon filled by cobalt waters and a mist-shrouded volcanic peak. So it always is on a honeymoon or anniversary cruise in French Polynesia. Most French Polynesian cruises set sail from Papeete, the capital of Tahiti, since many cruise packages include airfare to Tahiti from the West Coast of the United States. A week-long slide into a watery Eden ensues, and can come complete with island visits for sports pleasures (jeep trips, hiking, boating, kayaking, scuba, and snorkeling), beach ease, and food and drink indulgence; over-the-top wow opportunities (helicopter flights, pre- and post-trip lagoon resort stays in stilt bungalows with glass floors); and on-board classes, entertainment, and feasting.

French Polynesia is a French-held South Pacific territory consisting of five archipelagoes of volcanic and coral islands and atolls: The Society Islands, the Tuamotus Islands, the Austral Islands, the Marquesas Islands, and the Gambier Islands. Tahiti and Bora Bora, both of the Society Islands, are probably the most famous French Polynesian destinations, although the native Maohi people of the other 116 islands, including those in the Marquesas celebrated by the 19th-century painter Paul Gauguin, are no less proud of their homes.

Guadeloupe

A Taste Sensation



At 10 A.M. on the Saturday closest to August 10, Saint Laurent's Day, 200 women clad in traditional, colorful Créole finery gather for a Mass at the Cathédrale de St-Pierre et St-Paul of Pointe-à-Pitre in the overseas French département of Guadeloupe. These women, the most talented cooks in the

country, are solemnly preparing to celebrate the Fête des Cuisinières, or Festival of Women Cooks, Guadeloupe's most colorful and important annual event. Dating back to 1916, the festival's climax is a five-hour banquet of Créole specialties prepared fresh for the occasion and accompanied by local music and song, the *biguine* dance, and, of course, the warmth and spontaneity that are hallmarks of the island.

The force behind the festival is the membership of Cuistot Mutuel, a registered women cooks' mutual aid society with a strict hierarchy of titles and responsibilities, all led by a "présidente" and chaperoned by many mistresses of ceremonies. Each of the society's "sisters" is a cook (in a restaurant or in her own home), and for the festival she prepares whatever she likes, pulling from the fresh materials in her kitchen or at the market. Commonly seen dishes include: lobster, vegetable salads, *boudin* (blood sausage), chicken colombo, *matété de crabes* (rice and crabs), *jambon de Noël* (Christmas ham), and desserts and pastries, all washed down with a potent ti'punch (a local rum drink with sugarcane syrup and fresh lime) or a sweet wine.

St-Barths

Lapping Waves of Luxury

The largest aircraft accommodated by the St-Barths, or more formally St-Barthélemy, airport has no more than 19 seats; and the eight square miles (21 square kilometers) of semi-arid land are not used for cultivation, so all food must be imported via daily flights from France. Such is the precious secluded exclusivity of this West Indies island paradise 143 miles (230 kilometers) northwest of Guadeloupe. Once the retreat of famous patrician families—the Rockefellers and the Rothschilds still own property here—it is even now a delightful haunt for the well-healed (visited frequently by the likes of Steve Martin, David



Letterman, and Donna Karan), although it has also begun to appeal to a broader market. First charted by Christopher Columbus in 1493, this French Caribbean outpost is a dependency of Guadeloupe.

The island's isolation lends itself to visitors' favorite vacation pastimes: eating, drinking, sleeping, swimming, low-energy merrymaking, and high-end boutique shopping in Gustavia, the only real population center. More than 50 excellent restaurants and a couple score luxury hotels—from full-service beachfront resorts to hillside bungalows and a few villas—provide for the physical amenities, while a fine spread of *anses* (coves) and about 20 *plages* (beaches) cover the natural ones. The most famous of the idyllic white-sand strands (believed by many to be the most beautiful in the Caribbean) include the Anse à Colombier, one of the most private; the Anse des Flamands, perhaps the most gorgeous; and the Anse du Grand Cul de Sac, whose wave-stalling reef makes for relaxed swimming. For a little action, boating and sailing, coastal and deep-sea fishing, horseback riding, scuba diving, and tennis are also possible.

St-Martin

When Duty-Free Calls



Water temperatures around St-Martin rarely drop below 70° F (21° C) and the shopping is rarely less than outstanding. But whereas the scuba and snorkeling opportunities are plentiful, particularly if you like exploring shallow wrecks, it really is the island's more than 500 duty-free shops that draw the crowds, especially those visiting from the nearly 200 cruise liners that call here every year. Prices on standard duty-free items—perfumes, alcohol, cigarettes, and high-profile designer products and clothing—can be as much as 25 to 50 percent less than in American or French stores. Some of the best buys are in Marigot at the Marina Port La Royale, and in the Rue de la Liberté and Rue de la République.

The French territory of St-Martin, a dependency of Guadeloupe, with Marigot as its principal municipality, is actually the northern half of the island, adjacent to Sint-Maarten, the Dutch holding to the south, Philipsburg being its administrative center. The beaches on both sides of the island, named after the bays they border, are the focus of most of the noncommercial attention, like those at Baie de Friar (Friar's Bay), Baie de Grande Case (Grand Case Bay), Baie Longue (Long Bay), and the prettiest but sometimes rough-surfed Baie Rouge (Red Bay). When shopping and sunbathing no longer suffice, the island does have several attractions, like Fort Louis and the butterfly farm, and a full menu of adventure activities—sailing, diving, horseback riding, hiking, paragliding, surfing and other water sports, and sea excursions.

