



THOMAS TRAVEL

Hello Friends! Another edition for Armchair Traveling for us to get into the spirit of exploring our wonderful & beautiful world that is waiting out there for us to return. Our topic today is the beautiful port of St. Martin!

ST. MAARTEN & ST-MARTIN

TOGETHER, SEPARATELY



In January this year, St. Maarten/St-Martin was named "2020's Most Innovative Destination in the Caribbean" in the annual Caribbean Travel Awards, cited for its "impressive strategy in ushering in a full-fledged tourism renaissance" since Hurricane Irma landed a direct hit here nearly three years ago. With a large number of hotel, bar and restaurant openings throughout 2019, as well as the island's 37 remarkable beaches, finding the key to St. Maarten's success is almost easier than making friends on The Friendly Island.

This tiny, dual-personality island situated in the vague border between the Atlantic Ocean and the Caribbean Sea has two different languages and is ruled by two different nations. Just 37 square miles, or about half the size of Washington, D.C., the divided island is the smallest territory in the world shared by two

sovereign states. The southern half (actually slightly less than half: 16 square miles) is St. Maarten (or Sint Maarten), ruled by the Dutch, and the northern 21-square-mile area is St-Martin, the French side.

Typical of the chaotic Caribbean control in its history, the island has changed hands dozens of times since Columbus first anchored offshore on November 11 – St. Martin's Day – in 1493. Although he named it – and made note of how impressed he was with its natural beauty – he sailed on. The heyday of 16th-

century corsairs and buccaneers then saw the Spanish, French, Dutch, Portuguese, English and Flemish all coveting the island for its protected waters and salt deposits (it was often referred to as *Soualiga*, Land of Salt). Eventually the conquistadors lost interest until the Dutch began to settle the island in the early 17th century.

The Dutch and the French made a treaty to share rule of the island in 1648, but the method of the actual division is pure legend. Both the Dutch and French armies allegedly assembled at Oyster Pond, and after much friendly fortification – the Dutch with Jenever gin and ale, the French with cognac and wine – representatives of each side were chosen to walk around the island in opposite directions, and the border line would be drawn from where they started to where they met. Supposedly, the Frenchman found his cognac more invigorating than the Dutchman did his gin, hence the French side's larger 21 square miles. Others say that the Dutchman was distracted by the attentions of a French maiden, thus losing time and completing a shorter – but possibly more entertaining – course.

PHILIPSBURG



Ships dock at the A.C. Wathey Cruise Pier in Philipsburg, the Dutch capital, which stretches about a mile along the isthmus between the harbor (Great Bay) and Salt Pond. Opposite the pier is bustling Wathey Square, home to the imposing Town Hall and Post Office; built in 1793, it has served as the commander's home, a fire station and a jail. Opposite the square is Front Street, the

town's main thoroughfare only 16 blocks (about a mile) long. It is lined with stores, hotels, restaurants and cafés, most in quaint, pastel-colored cottages. Little alleys called *steegjes* lead to flower-filled arcades, more boutiques, and eateries. These little lanes connect Front Street with Back Street, which is less congested. Old Town, near the end of Front Street, has another 20 stores and open-air cafés.

MARIGOT

A 30-minute drive from Philipsburg brings you to the French capital of Marigot, which looks like a charming village of Provence transplanted to the Caribbean. It has none of the frenetic pace of Philipsburg, yet also offers duty-free shopping with a wide selection of goods – mostly French. Wrought-iron balconies, colorful awnings and gingerbread trim reminiscent of New Orleans decorate the smart shops and



small boutiques at Marina Port La Royale, known for its morning harborside market selling fruit, spices and local handicrafts. Port La Royale bustles with activity – boats unloading produce from neighbor islands and people boarding ferries for picnics on deserted beaches. All around, proprietors of dining spots are setting up for the daily ritual of a leisurely lunch. After all, this is part of France, so meals are très important.

THE BEACHES



Nearly 40 flawless beaches line ten miles of the island's shoreline, from unspoiled, quiet shores to lively hubs of activity. On the French side, the blue waters at Grand Case Beach are calm and clear, situated at the end of celebrated restaurants and traditional eateries known as lolos, and Orient Bay has been

called the "St-Tropez of the Caribbean." On the Dutch side, Little Bay is a haven for birdlife while the world-famous Maho Beach is known for a different kind of bird: the airplane! Located at the end of the island's airport runway in the flight path, beach goers can feel the whipping engine blasts on take-offs and landings! As on most Caribbean islands, the snorkeling and scuba-diving here are nothing short of perfection, and excursions are easily arranged aboard your cruise ship.