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Colonial meets contemporary in Martinique, where the centuries-old facade of Habitation Clément (left) is equally as authentic as La Suite Villa's modern interiors.



SEE ANOTHER

FRANCE



SARAH SAYS YOU MUST

“Martinique is a captivating dichotomy, with a fascinating culture that’s equal parts familiar and foreign.”

blame Pierce Brosnan. Ever since I watched him seduce Rene Russo by whisking her off on a romantic island getaway in the 1999 movie *The Thomas Crown Affair*, I've longed to visit Martinique, where those steamy scenes were shot. So when the invitation to visit arrived last summer, I jumped at the chance.

That first morning, I'm struck by the dichotomy of Martinique: With its undulating terrain, roadside fruit stalls and tracts of sugar cane intersected by winding roads (some so hilly they change the orientation on my iPhone), the tiny isle first appears as Caribbean as any other. But those narrow two-lane thoroughfares soon connect us to an asphalt ribbon of cross-country highway punctuated with Euro-style electronic signs that signal the speed limit in kilometers as zippy little Renaults and Peugeots whiz by. (I don't yet see the Mustang that Pierce drives in the movie but resolve to keep an eye out.)

"We are French by history, but we are Caribbean at heart," explains Guy Ferdinand, chef and owner of Petit Bonhom, a beach bar and restaurant in the village of Le Carbet. And as I devour his take on French bouillabaisse, made with breadfruit and pork, I can only conclude that he's right. How better to explain that Martiniquans consume the most champagne per capita of all of France's regions (the beach umbrella above me touts Carib beer, the one next to it Moët & Chandon's finest), but also "suck their teeth" (or *faire le chip*, as they say here) with only-in-the-Caribbean prowess? This

and French intrigues me, and I'm hungry for more.

I find it (literally) at Freres Lauzea, where master local chocolatier Thierry Lauzea crafts ganache-based treats. They're made entirely by hand in the painstaking French tradition, but Thierry's truffles feature distinctly local flavors: guava, basil, coconut and bay leaf. His exquisite sugar-dusted fruit pastilles are laid out in the glass-fronted display case like a jeweled rainbow. "The colors reflect the colors of my country," Thierry says proudly. "They are bright and beautiful. After all, this is the Caribbean!"

Indeed it is. And at Ti Sable, a hip joint in Anse d'Arlets, the vibe feels quintessentially Caribbean, with cabanas on the sand, white plastic lounge chairs lined up like rows of teeth, and waitresses (dressed just like Rene in bikini tops and hip-slung sarongs) sashaying past. But the reggae playing isn't Bob; it's French. And instead of whoops of "Yeah, mon!" and "Irie!" cries of "Allo!" and "Ça va?" ring above the beat. It feels as if we're on little piece of France that broke free of mainland Europe and floated off to warmer climes. *C'est si bon!*

The rest of my trip is a whirlwind, and I'm on the plane before I realize that I never did see the hilltop villa in Vauclin where those *Thomas Crown* scenes were shot. Never careened along the coast in that convertible, the wind tousling my hair as it did Rene's. But I'm not disappointed because I too was seduced. Not, alas, by Pierce Brosnan. But by the wonderful cultural mash-up that is Martinique.



An overseas region of France, the island of Martinique is French by history, but undeniably Caribbean at heart.



Bienvenue! Martinique's brown-sugar beaches, the island's signature aperitif *ti punch* (top right) and public art installations such as Laurent Valere's slave memorial at Diamant (opposite) are calling our name.

