

Curate's Egg, Caribbean Style

Tea Break Travels, No 6

This is one story from a collection of travel related stories called "Tea Break Travels". They are designed to be read in a short break from work or whatever, and cost around the same as a biscuit! Some are true, some embellished, and some fictional. Some are from near 20 years of too much business travel, or our holidays, others are relayed from friends and acquaintances, yet others are just plain made up! This one relates a trip to St Martin, the part Dutch and part French island in the Caribbean. A good place to go even if the weather was bad, hence the curate's egg!

Enjoy.

Curate's Egg, Caribbean Style.

On our 2004 main holiday we feel we made a great discovery and want to share it with you all! We've "done" the Caribbean many times, sunny and warm, great beaches, "oh dear" food, and the occasional hassle. This was the first time we ventured into the French islands and I must say it was very different! Good in parts as they say. The food was good – yes, good! In the Caribbean!! The weather was bad, but I guess you can't blame the French connection for that. And there were lots of other differences as well as I'll explain in this Trip report.

BAD. For the first time in many years we found ourselves booking a package holiday rather than arranging flights and hotels on the Net. The good part should have been that we didn't have to worry about any arrangements once we'd made the booking. Should have been, but alas we found the holiday company's administration somewhat lacking and the itinerary had a gap of one night in it. When we questioned this it transpired they had forgotten to book us into a hotel for the first night. We are still discussing this with them. But anyway the great day came and we headed off from little, old Claygate to Gatwick for our flight to Antigua.

GOOD. For the first of the good parts, Virgin Premium Economy is well worth the upgrade. On the 747 it is the upper deck, plenty of space, only 2 seats each side of a wide aisle and even 3 loos for around 50 people. If you can get the upgrade don't think twice – book it.

We had to stay overnight on Antigua – the less said about that, the better, and so next morning returned to V C Bird International airport for the short LIAT flight to St Martin, via St Kitts. Now Saint Martin, as the French call it, or Sint Maartin as the Dutch call it, is an island which is both a part of France and a part of the Nederlands Antilles. I believe it is the smallest land that is shared between 2 countries and although you would not notice the actual border except for the signs, the difference between the two parts is very marked. Fortunately we had booked to stay in the French part.

GOOD. The hotel faced the Caribbean and was at the northern end of Grand Case Beach, with another, smaller beach (well it is called Petit Plage!) on the other side. Both beaches are Caribbean white sand – absolutely perfect! We strolled along Grand Case Beach most mornings. About 2 kilometers long, it was virtually deserted. Only when the local school came down for swimming lessons did the number of people get above twenty. Small fish swam off shore, local restaurants caught their white bait there, crabs ran for cover, it was great. But it's not palm fringed! Most of the beach is lined with the backs of Grand Case Village's houses and restaurants.

More on the restaurants later!

BAD. The brochure promised cooling Caribbean breezes. I think somebody got the wind machine setting wrong. We had sudden, very strong gusts, that sand blasted the skin off your body and threw sun loungers through the air leaving them piled in the corner of the beach like discarded toys. The whole two weeks suffered from these "breezes", some days more violent than others, but always there.

With the hotel facing east over the sea, sunsets were expected in spades. It is said that if the sun sets here directly into the water, as opposed to going behind clouds, there is green flash just at the moment the disc disappears. So each day we took advantage of happy hour and watched the sunset with a G&T. Thirteen sunsets, thirteen cloudy skies, and no green flash!

And more about the weather later as well!

GOOD. Within a few days we noticed another difference. Just about everywhere you go in the Caribbean somebody will try to sell you something. They appear from nowhere and offer a coral necklace or other local jewellery, aloe vera for that sunburn, an island trip, and more recently a disguised trip to a timeshare. In the two weeks we had no such hassles on the beach or around Grand Case, and only one "lotto card" timeshare seller attempt in Marigot, the capital on the French side. He started with the "Did you hear on the radio this morning about the official lottery" and got the reply "But I don't want to go and see a timeshare", at which point he just said "OK" and walked off. The Caribbean "sans" hassle was really a pleasant difference.

GOOD. The hotel restaurant was built out on a small pier over the beach and the edge of sea. It was open from breakfast through to dinner and late drinks. What a great crew of people that ran it! Some local, some from France, but all very welcoming, ready to chat and help in what ever way was needed. And honest as the day is long. I forgot to pick up our "bumbag" with passport, credit cards and cash in it one day. They came and found me to tell me I'd forgotten it, which was the first time I realised I did not have it. We had some great lunches and dinners there and then just walked (who said staggered!) back to the room. It was owned separately from the hotel. One day we were just chatting to the owner, Pascal, when he asks where we are from.

"England, near London" we answered, thinking that would be enough.

“Whereabouts?”

Well even people ten miles from Claygate have never heard of it so we gave the normal non-specific answer, “South West of London”

“I used to live in Surrey, do you know Claygate?”

We’re almost shocked. “We live there”

“Do you know the Greek Vine?”

“Just round the corner”

“I used to work there”

So we’ve traveled 4,000 miles to a French Island, and the French owner of the restaurant used to work about 100 yards from where we live! Small world.

The better news was that Pascal owned another restaurant in Grand Case village, so we booked to go there. It was like a French country Auberge transplanted to the Caribbean. Good ambience, good food, good service and French wines, with the Caribbean outside. Magic.

And that was not the only good restaurant. Grand Case must have over 100 restaurants covering classic French, bistro, sea food, Italian, Chinese, Indian, and Cajun / Caribbean. As far as we were able to tell they are all fine, even the road side grills. If you like food and love the Caribbean, then Grand Case is the place for you.

BAD. St Martin is a popular destination with the Americans. In fact throughout the island dollars are accepted without question, even though on the French side the official currency is the euro. It is interesting to see how the Dutch and French react to this onslaught. English is spoken everywhere and even my wife’s good French was usually answered in English. On the French side things look French. EDF provides the electricity at 220 volts through sockets that have round pins, the road signs are French, and things generally could be in the South of France. The first sign of compromise is in the portions of food. It is French cuisine with huge, American portions. Often we shared a starter, or just had a starter and plate of cheese (yes French cheese!)

The Dutch side had not resisted so well. Everything was in English (well American), casinos abound and all the street signs and furniture, and even the yellow school buses were straight out of downtown, mid west America. Take our advice, stay in the French side!

BAD. Rain! Well the Caribbean is never always dry, but this time it rained every day. Usually a few showers with sun in between, but on some days it did a good imitation of Cleethorpes in March, with grey sky merging seamlessly into a grey sea. And on our one sailing trip to St Barths it gave a special performance! The Catamaran picked us up direct from the small beach by the hotel. On the way out, the morning rain seemed to have cleared. But as we left the lee of St Martin and they hoisted the sails, the catamaran hit a good swell, like around 8 to 12 feet of it. While the brand new boat never felt out of its abilities some waves swept the deck giving everybody a soaking. No matter, the spray was warm, and all aboard we’re taking it in their stride, including one American woman who seemed to take off any item of clothing that got wet! I have to admit that

her super structure was money well spent, but then my wife noticed the direction of my gaze. Ah well.

Once in St Barths the sun came out, we strolled around and all was well.

St Barths is well worth a visit. There could not be a better attempt of a model of St Trop on a Caribbean island. All the designer shops are there, the harbour is packed with multi million euro yachts and the people are chic. The prices probably exceed the Cote d'Azur however. We had a short island tour, then back to the catamaran for a short sail to a bay for lunch and a swim if you wanted to. Lunch was fine but as we lazed afterwards, a finger of grey cloud protruded across the sky to the south of us. Dark curtains below it indicated heavy rain. By the time all were back on board and we'd up anchored, the first spots of rain were falling on us. As we left the bay the wind kicked in and rain poured down. Well not so much down as across. Even under the canopy we were soaked, but this time with cold rain. The captain ran with the wind for a while but as we failed to escape from the rain he eventually pulled into the lee of a small island off St Barths to sit out the storm. Once it eased the rest of the trip wasn't too bad, but it was good to get back to beach, and off for a warm shower and a change of clothes. Was this really the warm, sunny Caribbean!!

GOOD. The next day we booked in for an hours massage to finally ring the chill out of our bones. And what (ouch!) a great (arh!) mass(ow!)age it was too. Where did all those muscle knots come from when I'm relaxing? And where does this wisp of a woman get such strength from!?!? If you like massage as we do, the hotel team is highly recommended!

GOOD & SAD. Parting, it is said, is such sweet sorrow and the end of our stay came too quickly. On our last night we revisited Pascal's restaurant in the village to indulge ourselves, and then returned to the hotel for drinks. We'd made friends with a few folk so had a drink with them and then said long goodbyes to restaurant staff. They'd been great and were genuinely sad to see us going. The next morning we just had time for breakfast, a last cloud bathe and a final drink at the bar before heading to the airport. The lunch time staff and the masseuse bought our drinks and then gave us a bottle of mango rum to take! Could there be a friendlier team?

Now the ultimate question. Would we go again? Yes – but please, please can the weather be better!!

Pat Cresswell
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