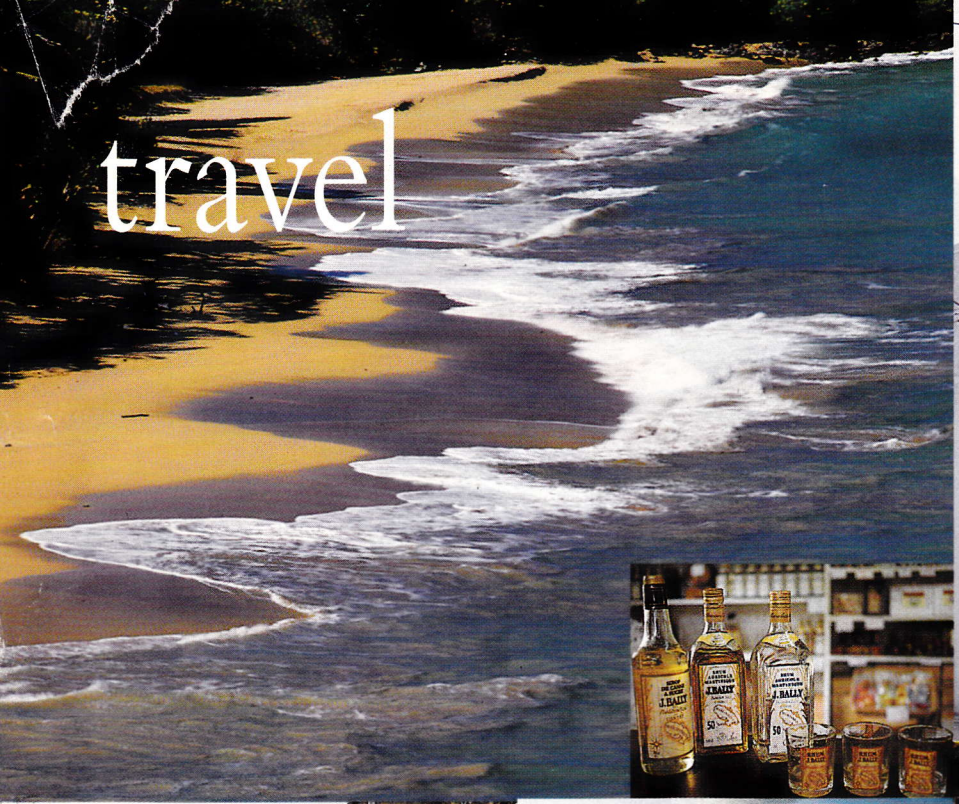
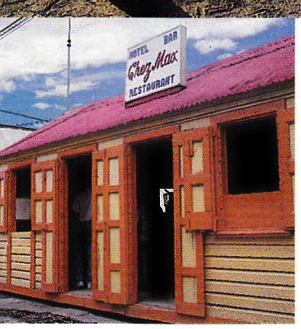




Rum with a view

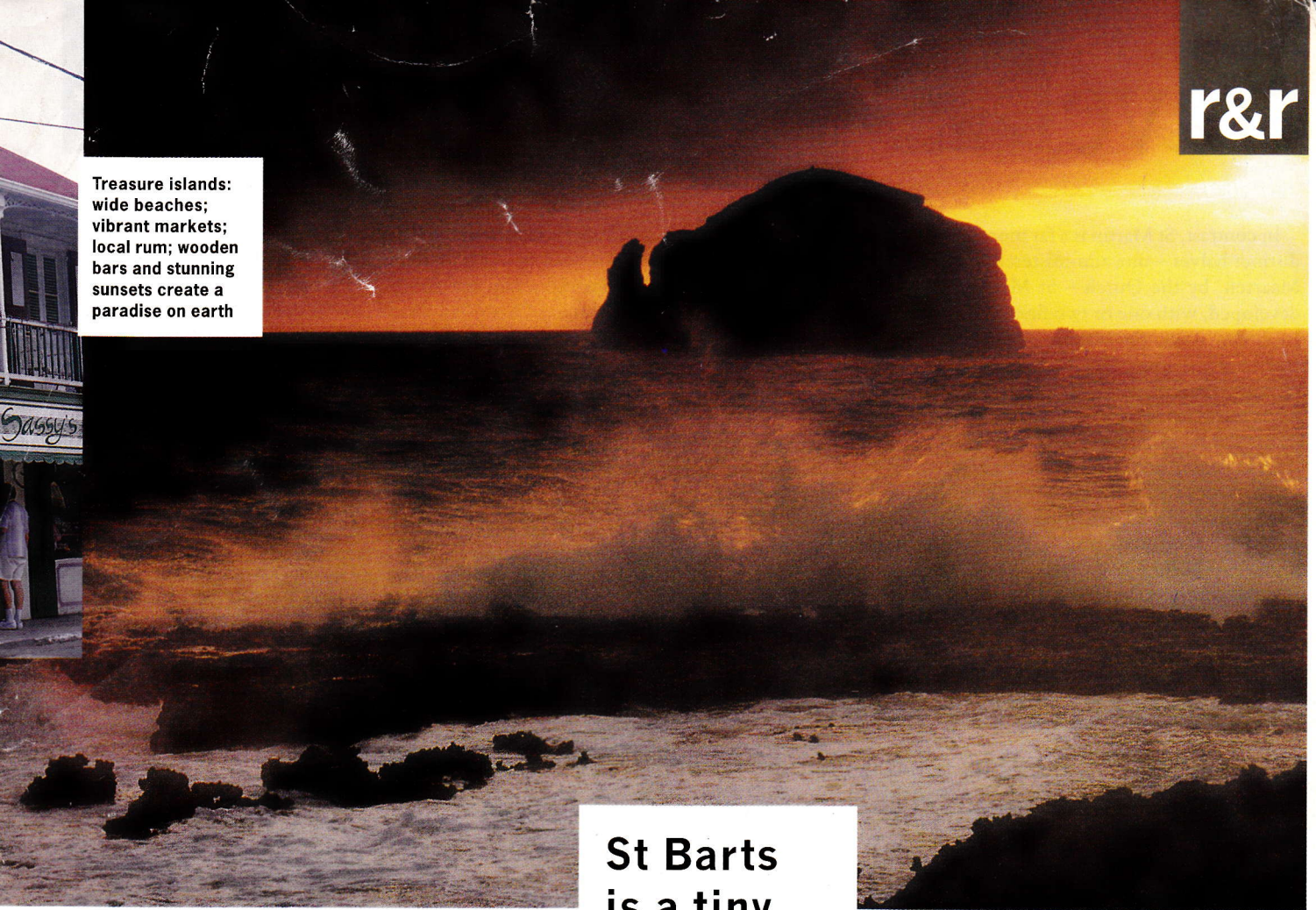
The French West Indies are a perfect combination of Caribbean heat and Gallic chic

IT IS TWILIGHT IN MARTINIQUE AND THE WELCOME Sun Beach café is gearing up for an "*animation musicale*". In the tin-roofed shack fifteen feet from the sea, musicians are unpacking their instruments while white plastic tables and chairs are moved aside to provide a makeshift dance floor.

Minutes later, zouk music, a seductive mix of African rhythms, Caribbean pop and American funk, dances on the breeze. While a dog sleeps and guys swig on bottles of the local Bière Lorraine, couples begin to swing and sway under the 60-foot palms. An exquisitely beautiful mulatto girl dressed in a cropped halter top, cut-off white shorts and black cowboy boots, her hair plaited into intricate conch-like curls, is whizzed around the floor, her body pressed up tight against a nonchalant local boy. It is fast, furious and sweaty, and makes the lambada look like a slow waltz. "Woooooo!" the girl cries as she flops back down in a chair. "Zouk-love: that's the wettest you can get."

Zouk seems an appropriate symbol for the irresistible appeal of Martinique. Creole slang for a "party", it captures the island's *joie de vivre*, its blend of French elegance and tropical flamboyance. If there seems a strong sense of belonging to *La Belle France* (Martinique is actually an overseas *département* of France and so is within the EU), a culture and cuisine redolent of all that is fine and Gallic, and coastal scenery that can remind you of blustery Brittany or the horizon-stretching vistas of the Camargue, Martinique remains resolutely Creole Caribbean – right down to its coconut croissants.

For all this, the islands of the French Caribbean – Martinique, Guadeloupe, St Barthélemy and St Martin – are largely unvisited by the British. Extremely popular with the French – it was to Guadeloupe



Treasure islands: wide beaches; vibrant markets; local rum; wooden bars and stunning sunsets create a paradise on earth

St Barts is a tiny island of grand gestures

that Eric Cantona retreated after he was suspended last season – the islands have until now attracted only the most Francophile of British travellers. This may be because little English is spoken (in fact, French is hardly used in some parts, the locals preferring Creole patois) and flights are via Paris. Britons tend to favour the British Caribbean islands – Barbados, Antigua, Grenada and the like – former colonies where high teas are served and cricket remains the national pastime.

Martinique, with Guadeloupe, is certainly the most French of the islands, if only because French settlers have owned, protected and fought over it for the longest amount of time. It is relatively large – 40 miles long and twelve miles wide – with a population of around 360,000, and its irregular coastline of bays and coves provides a spectacular array of beaches. Sands grade gracefully from powdery white on the eastern, coral-reefed Atlantic coast, to honey beige on the Caribbean side, to peppery black in the volcanic north. It also has a mountainous, rainforested interior dominated by Mont Pelée, which rises to over 4,500 feet. It is this volcano which has given rise to Martinique's biggest tourist attraction – the ruins and museum at St Pierre, the former capital that was buried under burning ash in 1902, killing more than 30,000 inhabitants.

Many are also drawn to the island for its flora – the island's abundance of hibiscus, frangipani, bougainvillea, poinciana and orchids have led it to be called "The Island of Flowers"; its food – lambi (conch), accra (cod fritters), red snapper and lobster are popular; and it has the usual round of scuba diving, windsurfing, horse riding and cycling.

Much more magnetic, though, is the rum. Considered perhaps the finest in the Caribbean, Martinique's *rhum agricole* is made from pure sugar cane juice with no molasses added and is thus far superior than more widely available industrial varieties. It is a drink the Martinicans take seriously. Locals like to start the day with a *décollage* (take-off) and end it with *péte-pied* (farting feet), although *taffiateurs* appear to drink rum at any time of the day or night. Rum consumed on its own is known as a *ti-feu* (small fire) and is often accompanied by a small glass of water to calm the effect and bring out the flavour. More popular still is the ti-punch cocktail, a mix of sugar cane syrup, lemon juice and white rum. In many bars, you are simply given the ingredients and mix your own. The Musée du Rhum in St James and the disused, seventeenth-century sugar cane plantation, l'Habitation Céron, set in the northern jungle, are also rum experiences worth seeking out.

While it is true that most tourists head to Martinique and Guadeloupe, the drier outposts of St Barthélemy and St Martin – roughly 250 miles to the north – are also worth considering.

St Barts (as any reader of *Hello!* will already know) is exclusive, precious and expensive. The favourite holiday spot of such celebrities as Sylvester Stallone, Madonna and Princess Diana (she stays at the villa of her photographer of choice, Patrick Demarchelier), as well as such French stars as Alain Delon, Philippe Noiret and Mathilda May, this is *petite France à la mode*, a sanitised, rarefied microcosm that seems closer to the Côte d'Azur than the French Antilles.

The architecture, lifestyles, culture and air kissing are all quintessentially French, as are the shops, boutiques and restaurants – especially in the ultra-chic capital of Gustavia. This is a tiny island of grand gestures – from the huge luxury yachts that moor in the harbours, to discreet but hyper-confident restaurants such as the Michelin-starred La Toque Lyonnaise at the Soreno Beach Hotel, to small-yet-super-deluxe hotels such as Le Manapany and the Sofitel Christopher. It is an island where the Hotel Carl Gustaf may have only fourteen suites, but each has its own private plunge pool with views over the bay.

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EDITED BY PHILIP WATSON

travel

In contrast, St Martin is a far more touristy place. An island of two very distinct halves – one administered by the French; the other, called Sint Maarten, by the Dutch – St Martin is the quieter northern side, less developed, with one or two first-class hotels (La Samanna, for example). In many ways, St Martin is an ideal introduction to the French Caribbean – most locals speak both French and English; it has an interesting pre-Columbian and colonial history; and it is a good spot for excursions to nearby St Barts (a journey worthwhile solely for the rather hairy landing at the tiny airport) and other surrounding islands such as Anguilla, Saba and St Eustatius.

The Dutch side, on the other hand, seems almost overrun by large commercial resorts, fast-food chains and Mac-culture. While there are no formal border controls – crossings are marked by road signs alone – a journey to Sint Maarten from the French side feels something like travelling from East to West Berlin before the Wall came down. At night, you are struck immediately by the neon lights, and the plethora of Harley-Davidsons and rock 'n' roll bars. There are also numerous discos that bear an uncanny resemblance to La Luz in *Brookside*.

In Maho Bay, just one mile into the Dutch side, it seems anything goes, including Caribbean Stud Poker, a game in which the odds are heavily stacked in favour of the house. At the glitzy Atlantis Casino, the dollar chips are American, the decor Vegas, the cigars Cuban, and France, for two short if surprisingly profitable hours, seemed a million miles away.

PHILIP WATSON

GQ travelled to the French Caribbean with Air France Holidays, Gable House, 18-24 Turnham Green Terrace, London W4 1RF (0181-742 3377). A week's holiday in Martinique costs from £965, and from £1,434 for a week in St Martin and a week in St Barts. Prices include a complimentary night's accommodation in either Paris or the Disneyland Paris Resort plus free transfers and a sightseeing tour/entry pass, but they can as much as double over Christmas and the New Year. For general travel information contact the French Government Tourist Office, 178 Piccadilly, London W1V 0AL (0891 244 123) or the French West Indies Tourist Office (0171-629 2869) at the same address.