

Diving into the history of St. Martin



Fort Louis, St. Martin, photo courtesy of Donovan Tremor

St. Martin is a stunning canvas painted with fantastic architecture, colonial monuments, beach sports, cobbled pathways, and impressive coastal scenery. While sunny St. Martin may enjoy a reputation as a carefree Caribbean paradise, it is also rich in pre and post-colonial history and culture. Divided into two parts (St. Martin, the French side and Sint Maarten, the Dutch side) this dynamic island should prove riveting for travellers who love their beachside bliss with a side of fascinating tradition. St. Martin's historic structures hide a wealth of interesting tales within their ancient walls, providing a compelling glimpse into the past.

In the year 1493, Christopher Columbus travelled the sea routes to St. Martin, forever changing the course of the island's history. A lesser-known fact is that Columbus never actually set foot on the island but, while sailing by, decided to name it after St. Martin of Tours. In fact, the Arawak Indians first settled on the island around 800 AD - some thousand years before Columbus made his way across the waves. The Arawak arrived by canoe from the Orinoco river basin of South America and subsequently migrating up the chain of Caribbean islands. They named the island "Soualiga " or " Land of Salt" for the abundant salt-pans and salty water.

Satisfy your inner history buff with these on-island historical attractions, representing the full cultural diversity of the island's heritage.



Fort Louis, St. Martin, photo courtesy of Donovan Tremor

Fort Louis

Built in 1789, this fort overlooks the capital city of Marigot and was constructed to defend the French side of the island from enemy attacks. Marigot contained several warehouses which stored essential commodities like sugarcane, rum, coffee, and salt waiting for export. Fort Louis was chosen as a vantage point to protect these goods from attacks due to its tactical advantage.

Reachable by foot, this 18th century stone fort is the largest historical monument on the island. Fort Louis is a great place to visit for a bit of history as well as staggering views that reach out across Marigot Bay as far as the neighbouring island of Anguilla.



Fort Louis overlooking Marigot, photo courtesy of Office de Tourisme de Saint Martin

According to **Christophe Hénocq**, St. Martin's resident archaeologist, *"Fort Louis helped in keeping the island's wealth from its intruders. There was a battle between the French forces and the English wherein the latter party swooped over from neighbouring Anguilla to raid St. Martin. In the 1800s, the fort fell into disuse and gradually, its condition deteriorated. Then, for a time, it was restored and used once again. Today this fort is a steep climb, but its history and view alone are worth climbing. From here, you can see Marigot, Simpson Bay, Baie Nettlé and, on a clear day, as far as Anguilla."*



Rue de la République, photo courtesy of Office de Tourisme de Saint Martin

Rue de la République

Walk down a historic road which dates all the back to the 19th century, and experience a bygone era in St. Martin's Rue de la République. This road is one of Marigot's main thoroughfares. The traditional housing facades dating back to the 19th century have, for the most part, been preserved with architectural authenticity. The ground floor of buildings is built with stone walls mortared with lime, and the second floor is wooden, built with traditional construction methods. The street-facing facades have at least one balcony per floor, and are decorated with friezes, or gingerbread trims, and finely crafted railings. At the end of the street, on the waterfront, Marigot market offers a taste of local flare and flavor every day of the week but Sunday.

The picturesque fishing town of Grand Case:

The town of Grand Case was originally built to house the island's many sugar mill workers and fishermen. Grand Case developed into a town during the second half of the 18th century. But thanks to many archaeological excavations, evidence of human habitation has been found dating back to 1800 BC. According to Christophe Hénocq, this sandy strip of land was mainly used by sailors and fishermen, while the plains behind the town and near the pond were utilized seasonally for their salt. When the tourism boom hit in the 1970s, gastronomic restaurants began popping up along the Boulevard de Grand Case, which continues to be one of the primary reasons to visit St. Martin – a gourmet food lover's delight.



L'Auberge Gourmande on Rue Principale in Grand Case, photo courtesy of Clement Louineau

Today, the village of Grand Case offers tourists a journey through time, mainly through the development of traditional St. Martin architecture and construction methods. Wattle and traditional wooden houses, townhouses in reinforced concrete, and contemporary architecture coexist happily along the Boulevard de Grand Case. These buildings have been preserved by the owners of the shops and gourmet restaurants, anxious to protect their architectural heritage.

This is just a small written part of the history of St. Martin. Life on the French side has a decidedly different feel, a slower pace and enjoying the finer things in life. To experience the island and its bygone era, take a walk on bustling streets and try to spot the historical buildings next time you are in town.