



St. Maarten and St. Martin Destination Guide

Two nations, beaches, dining, hotels, history and cruise-day itineraries

By Scott Kalvinek, KalviTravel | Reviewed August 1, 2026

Helping You Discover the World.

How to use this guide: Choose the sections that match your trip, then recheck time-sensitive prices, hours, transportation and reservation policies before travel.

Overview

One island is shared by Dutch Sint Maarten and French Saint-Martin. Cruise ships dock near Philipsburg on the Dutch side. Water taxis, taxis and tours connect the port with Great Bay, Front Street, Maho, Simpson Bay, Orient Bay, Grand Case and Marigot. Traffic can be severe, especially near bridges and popular beaches, so the best plans focus on one side or a small number of stops.

This guide is designed for travelers who want more than a list of famous places. It explains how to shape a realistic experience in St. Maarten and St. Martin, where to stay, what to eat, how the destination developed and which details can create unnecessary stress. The best plan is not always the busiest plan. It is the one that matches the interests, budget, mobility and energy of the people traveling.

What to See and Do

Philipsburg and Great Bay. The Boardwalk, Front Street, beach, shops, courthouse and museum are close to the port. This is one of the experiences most visitors recognize immediately, but it is more rewarding when you understand how it fits into the rest of the destination. Check current hours, reservation rules, mobility requirements and the time needed to travel from the hotel or cruise terminal. A place that appears close on a map can require a longer transfer once traffic, security or tender operations are included.

Maho Beach. Famous for aircraft approaches; visitors must follow safety warnings and stay away from jet blast. It works best as a planned part of the day rather than an unplanned stop added at the last minute. Plan shade, water, restrooms and food instead of treating comfort as an afterthought. Tropical heat and Florida humidity can make an otherwise reasonable schedule feel exhausting.

Orient Bay. A broad French-side beach with restaurants and water sports. The atmosphere changes with weather, crowd levels and time of day, so timing can matter as much as the attraction itself. Photography is part of the fun, but the experience is stronger when travelers leave time to listen, explore and understand why the place matters.

Grand Case. A small town known for restaurants, beaches and casual lolo barbecue stands. Families, couples and multi-generational groups may experience this place very differently, which makes realistic expectations important. Independent travelers should use reputable transportation and confirm pickup details in advance. Cruise guests should keep a conservative return buffer rather than aiming for the final possible minute.

Marigot and Fort Louis. The French-side capital offers market, waterfront, shops and hilltop views. A guide or well-researched plan can add context and reduce time lost to transportation, ticket lines or uncertainty. Review the cancellation and weather policy before payment. Conditions can change even when an attraction remains technically open.

Loterie Farm. A private nature retreat on Pic Paradis with hiking, pool, dining and adventure activities. This is one of the experiences most visitors recognize immediately, but it is more rewarding when you understand how it fits into the rest of the destination. Check current hours, reservation rules, mobility requirements and the time needed to travel from the hotel or cruise terminal. A place that appears close on a map can require a longer transfer once traffic, security or tender operations are included.

Rainforest Adventures. Chairlift, zipline, views and historical interpretation at Rockland Estate. It works best as a planned part of the day rather than an unplanned stop added at the last minute. Plan shade, water, restrooms and food instead of treating comfort as an afterthought. Tropical heat and Florida humidity can make an otherwise reasonable schedule feel exhausting.

Island beaches. Mullet Bay, Little Bay, Friar's Bay and other beaches have distinct atmospheres. The atmosphere changes with weather, crowd levels and time of day, so timing can matter as much as the attraction itself. Photography is part of the fun, but the experience is stronger when travelers leave time to listen, explore and understand why the place matters.

Where to Stay

Philipsburg and Little Bay. Holland House and Divi Little Bay provide cruise-port convenience. Compare the total price after taxes, resort fees, parking, breakfast and transportation. A lower nightly rate may become more expensive once daily logistics are added.

Maho and Simpson Bay. Best for nightlife, airport access, restaurants and casinos. Sonesta Maho and many condos serve the area. Match location to the main purpose of the trip. Early mornings, late dinners and multiple activity days make convenience more valuable.

Oyster Bay. A quieter border-area stay with marina and beach access. Read recent reviews for noise, room condition, accessibility, beach quality and service consistency. Photos rarely show every practical detail.

French side. Grand Case, Orient Bay and Terres Basses offer boutique hotels and villas. Grand Case Beach Club and La Samanna are notable. Families should confirm bedding, connecting rooms, refrigerator access, pool hours and shuttle capacity. Couples may place more value on atmosphere and dining.

Restaurants and Local Food

Grand Case lolo. Casual open-air barbecue stands serving ribs, chicken, seafood and local sides. Menus, hours and reservation policies can change, so check before making the restaurant the centerpiece of the day.

Bistrot Caraibes. A long-established Grand Case fine-dining restaurant. Ask about local specialties and portion sizes instead of automatically ordering the most familiar dish.

Ocean 82. Waterfront French-Caribbean dining. Cruise guests should allow enough time for a relaxed meal without creating a stressful return to the ship.

Ocean Lounge. Beachfront dining at Holland House in Philipsburg. Dietary needs are easiest to manage when communicated in advance, especially at smaller restaurants.

Emilio's. A restaurant in a historic estate setting. Popular restaurants can be crowded during holidays, conventions or multi-ship port days, and an earlier meal may feel more relaxed.

Yvette's Kitchen. A local-style restaurant known for Caribbean dishes. Menus, hours and reservation policies can change, so check before making the restaurant the centerpiece of the day.

Chesterfield's or Greenhouse. Convenient Dutch-side seafood and casual dining. Ask about local specialties and portion sizes instead of automatically ordering the most familiar dish.

History and Cultural Context

The island was inhabited by Indigenous peoples before European arrival. France and the Netherlands agreed to share it in 1648 under the Treaty of Concordia, creating an open border that remains today. The economy included salt production, plantations, trade and enslaved labor. The Dutch side developed major airport, cruise, shopping and entertainment infrastructure, while the French side became known for beaches, villages, restaurants and villas. Hurricane Irma caused catastrophic damage in 2017, followed by a determined recovery.

History matters because it changes how a traveler sees the destination. A fort is no longer only a photo stop, a market is more than a shopping area and a local dish becomes part of a larger story. Travelers who spend even a short time learning the background usually return with stronger memories and greater respect for the community.

Useful Facts

Fact 1: The Dutch side is Sint Maarten; the French side is Saint-Martin. This detail may seem small, but it can affect transportation, spending, timing or the way visitors understand the destination.

Fact 2: The border is normally open, but legal systems and currencies differ. This detail may seem small, but it can affect transportation, spending, timing or the way visitors understand the destination.

Fact 3: U.S. dollars are widely accepted; euros are common on the French side. This detail may seem small, but it can affect transportation, spending, timing or the way visitors understand the destination.

Fact 4: Traffic can make short distances take much longer. This detail may seem small, but it can affect transportation, spending, timing or the way visitors understand the destination.

Fact 5: The island has an unusually diverse population and restaurant scene. This detail may seem small, but it can affect transportation, spending, timing or the way visitors understand the destination.

Suggested Itineraries

Philipsburg day. Use the water taxi, enjoy Great Bay, walk Front Street and eat near the Boardwalk. Begin with the activity farthest from the ship, then work back toward the terminal.

Beach and planes. Combine Mullet Bay with a carefully timed Maho stop. Do not add a distant stop simply because a vendor suggests it.

French-side food day. Visit Marigot or Grand Case and choose one nearby beach. Build shade, hydration and food into the schedule.

Scenic island tour. Use a reputable guide for viewpoints, border history, one beach and a food stop. Return before the final possible moment and allow for traffic or tender lines.

Practical Planning Advice

Cruise visitors experience St. Maarten and St. Martin within a fixed window. The published time in port is not the same as usable sightseeing time. Guests must account for clearance, walking from the cabin, tender boats when applicable, transportation, security and the all-aboard deadline.

Ship-sponsored excursions usually provide the clearest return protection if a tour is delayed, while independent tours may offer smaller groups or different experiences. Compare the operator, cancellation terms, group size, physical demands and actual activity time.

Carry modest cash in useful denominations, keep valuables secure and understand the local currency. Card terminals and internet connections can fail, while merchant exchange rates may be less favorable than bank rates.

Bring water, sunscreen, a hat and lightweight rain protection. Protect reefs and wildlife by avoiding coral contact, feeding, handling or removal of natural objects.

Look for locally made art, food products, textiles, books or crafts. Ask where an item was produced; cruise-port districts often mix local businesses with international chains.

Questions to Ask Before Booking

What is included in the price, and what will cost extra? Ask about transportation, admission, equipment, gratuities, food, lockers, taxes, resort fees, parking and cancellation terms.

How much travel time is required? A tour described as four hours may include a large amount of time in a vehicle or boat.

What happens in bad weather? Understand whether the operator cancels, substitutes an activity, issues credit or continues in light rain.

Is the experience appropriate for the group? Confirm age, height, weight, swimming, mobility and medical restrictions before payment.

What is the backup plan? A strong itinerary includes a lower-cost or weather-friendly alternative.

Responsible and Respectful Travel

Visitors to St. Maarten and St. Martin are guests in a community or protected environment. Dress and behavior that feel normal at a resort may be inappropriate in a church, neighborhood, memorial, government building or cultural site. Ask before photographing people and follow posted rules.

Water destinations require special care. Use reef-conscious practices, do not stand on coral, never remove shells from protected areas and keep a respectful distance from wildlife.

Local spending can make a trip more meaningful. A meal at an independent restaurant, a locally guided tour or a genuine craft often creates a stronger connection than another mass-produced souvenir.

How to Decide What Is Worth Your Time

The right plan for St. Maarten and St. Martin begins with priorities. Ask each traveler to name one experience that would make the day feel successful. When answers differ, choose a route that gives everyone one meaningful moment rather than trying to complete every possible activity.

Budget is part of the decision, but value is not always the lowest price. A guided tour may prevent confusion and add context. A premium location may be worthwhile for shade, restrooms, convenience or dependable service. Compare what the price solves.

Physical comfort matters. Heat, walking, stairs, boats, sand, motion, noise and crowds affect people differently. A destination can be enjoyable without choosing its most strenuous or famous activity.

Money-Saving Strategies

Set a complete budget before booking. Include transportation, parking, taxes, resort fees, meals, admission, tips, equipment, souvenirs and the cost of changing plans.

Spend money where it changes the experience. Location, a small-group guide, reliable transportation or a room layout that prevents conflict may be worth more than a cosmetic upgrade.

Avoid paying for convenience that the group will not use. Day passes, beverage packages, premium parking and bundled tickets have value only when they match the actual itinerary.

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Planning Sources and Official Links

Information reviewed August 1, 2026. Hours, prices, transportation, hotel benefits, restaurant operations and attraction policies can change.

[Official St. Maarten tourism](#)

[St. Maarten history](#)

[St. Maarten dining](#)

Why Book With KalviTravel

Personal planning matters: A trip to St. Maarten and St. Martin is more than a price and a reservation. Location, room type, transportation, timing, activity level, travel protection and the true total cost all affect the vacation. KalviTravel helps you compare the complete trip, understand the fine print and choose

options that match the people who are actually traveling.

Instead of starting over with a different call-center agent every time a question comes up, you have a personal point of contact who understands the plan. Scott focuses on honest advice, clear explanations and helping clients avoid expensive or inconvenient mistakes. The goal is not simply to book something; it is to help you choose the right vacation.

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Let's Discover the World... Together.