

On Guadeloupe, A Fine Blending Of Contrasts

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Americans think they know enough to come in out of the rain, but in Guadeloupe they stay put. Once an hour, light clouds spray the resort beaches of Grande-Terre, the eastern wing of the butterfly-shaped Caribbean island, cooling sunbathers below. The clouds are passing west to Basse-Terre, where high volcanic mountains attract a permanent shroud.

In late afternoon when the sun starts to descend, the result is wide- arcing rainbows high in the eastern sky. For some of us, the simultaneous sensations of a toasting sun, a tickling rain and a storybook rainbow approach a religious experience - except for the decidedly secular distractions of the topless beach clientele everywhere.

Contrasts like that mark the French island in the Lesser Antilles chain. Grande-Terre is flat, hot and bright. Its long, straight beaches are a natural extension of low-lying terrain, full of light green sugar-cane fields and grassy marsh.

Basse-Terre is a forest green, made somber as the sun rotates the shadows of its high central mountains past the villages below. Only the narrow belt highway around Basse-Terre separates its curving beaches from steep foothills. At every turn in the road, a tiny stream carries the runoff from the mountains, where there are waterfalls and deep pools and springs. Here, instead of the high, classic rainbows of Grande-Terre, the coincidence of sun and rain makes for a thick, stunted rainbow seemingly imbedded in a hillside, like a pre-Columbian slab worshiped by an ancient tribe.

SCANTY BEACH WEAR

Vacationing in this overseas department - the French equivalent of Hawaii - is really three or four vacations in one, including island spices and tropical weather, African rhythms, French cuisine - and a Riviera-like lack of restraint.

The beaches of Guadeloupe are not for the modest. Most public beaches have large nudist sections. The more constrained hotel beaches are topless, a riot of chests and bellies of all shapes and sizes. Topless does not say enough; for most sunbathers, there is not much bottom left to the imagination either, no matter the sex.

The French-speaking traveler has an advantage in Guadeloupe. Not much English is spoken beyond the airport and hotel desks, either by natives of Guadeloupe or by the typically insular French tourists who come in large numbers to one of their Caribbean outposts (nearby Martinique is another). But a tourist's high school French will suffice for the basics, and you might have better luck striking up a conversation with bilingual visitors from Quebec, of whom there are many.

If you don't mind crowding, the local bus service is the best way to get around the island. Three francs - about 45 cents - takes one from the tourist hotels of Gosier and Bas du Fort on the southern shore of Grande-Terre to the port city of Pointe-a-Pitre, at the joint of the butterfly wings. Eleven francs (about \$1.70) will take a traveler from Point-a-Pitre to St. Francois, near the eastern tip of Grande-Terre.

The size of large vans, these buses provide a visitor's quota of local color. Stops are unmarked. You just look for other riders waiting at the side of the road, or signal to an oncoming bus headed in the right direction. Like the subway, however, there are local and express buses; this is where some knowledge of French is a help.

Most passengers enter by a rear door manned by a driver's assistant, then pay at the end of their trip. Drivers make change from a coin-encrusted magnet mounted on the dash. More often than not passengers leave from the back, too, then walk to the front to pay through a window. They have to, because the aisles have spring-hinged seats that fold down across the center aisle, providing wall-to-wall seating.

The first time we tried it, headed from Bas du Terre to Pointe-a-Pitre, we hopped in the front door of a crowded bus and immediately paid a surprised driver. Turning to find a seat, or just move back in the aisle, we found a solid mass of seated passengers from side to side and front to back. How did they do that? We were mystified until we discovered the swinging aisle seats.

Bus fares are fixed by the government, but ownership is private and drivers compete for riders.

For longer trips to explore the island, a car can be rented by the day or week (\$35 to \$40 a day, \$180 to \$200 a week). One day can be spent touring each perimeter of the two wings of Guadeloupe, with their natural beaches and pretty fishing villages.

Driving along the north coast of Basse-Terre, a stop at Clugny beach, gives a nice view of English Head Rock - an odd-shaped protrusion a mile out at sea. (It got its name from history: French colonialists warred with Britain over possession of Guadeloupe).

Turning past the Club Med center at Fort Royal to Basse-Terre's west coast, the belt highway begins a sinuous path that continues for three-fourths of the island's circuit. At each peak, the view to the ocean is like one from an airplane, with varied shades of blue reflecting depths and currents below. Then comes a reciprocal descent to the next village at the midpoint of the bay below.

A HAVEN FOR FISH

Villages like Deshaies, Ferry, Bouillante and Baillif lie hard by the sea. Here the highway borders a narrow, rocky beach, or a retaining wall that drops straight to the water. At the point where the road starts to curve away from the shorelines and a new ascent begins, the modest houses of local residents fill the land along the beachfront.

The tiny islands of Goyave and Pigeon are midway down the west coast of Basse-Terre, just off the beach at Malendure. A marine-life reserve surrounds the uninhabited islands - rocks, really - making a haven for hundreds of species of fish, sponges and vegetation. Glass-bottomed boats, named Nautilus,

provide a lazy way to see the underwater attractions. Other boats anchor between the two islands to provide tourists with hours of snorkeling. It's worth it. The undersea world is beautiful through the tour boat's glass bottom, and spectacular for snorkelers. A Nautilus, too, will stop for a half-hour's diving, even providing masks, flippers and tubes.

Another day should be devoted to the Parc Naturel in the mountainous interior of Basse-Terre. Surprising to Americans plagued by the varmint, the raccoon is Guadeloupe's equivalent of Smokey Bear. Raccoons are a major attraction in the park and in danger of extinction on the island.

De rigueur are visits to three-tiered Charbet Falls and nearby La Soufriere, a volcanic peak that still occasionally belches puffs of steam. Wet-weather gear will be needed, for there is a rain forest under the big, water-laden clouds drawn by the heat and elevation of Basse-Terre (it's named Low-Land only because it is south on the map; Grande-Terre is neither larger nor higher). We tried restaurants in each of the tourist clusters along the south shore of Grande-Terre: the Marina just east of Point-a-Pitre; Bas du Fort, site of the large Frontel and Novotel chain hotels; Gosier and St. Francois, where the island's only golf course is found. The restaurants were uniformly small, uniformly filled but without a wait for a table (some kind of economic equilibrium has apparently been reached or arranged - prices were uniform as well) and uniformly slow in service.

Still, you cannot go wrong with the local seafood specialties, either the poisson grille, the grilled catch of the day at 50 to 60 francs (about \$8 to \$9.50), or the langouste, the Caribbean lobster, at twice that price. The French cuisine is fine, and there are also good Vietnamese restaurants, but either of those can be found in the United States. Stay with the island cooking, with torrid Creole sauce on the side for seasoning to taste.

The langouste was a one-night special. Other nights, dinner for two ran \$34 to \$45, including wine, appetizers, main courses and desserts with coffee. We returned to one restaurant, the pleasant Ti-Quebec just past the Hotel Frontel at Bas du Fort (ti is local slang for petit). Arriving early, between 7 and 7:30 p.m., you are seated at a rail above the water's edge, with small but quick waves tossing spray over rocks 20 feet below.

At that time, with the restaurant still uncrowded, the Parisian owners who have settled themselves outre mer (overseas) will engage guests in lively talk of food, wine and life on the island. And all are fine.