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Tempt Your Taste Buds in St. Maarten



St. Maarten is one of the tiniest islands in the Caribbean; for its 37-square mile size, it packs a huge punch in tourism, with duty-free shopping, 37 beaches and 325 restaurants. With so many places to eat, you can find a wide range of cooking styles and ethnic food, including French, Italian, American, Mexican, Indian, Indonesian, Japanese and Chinese. St. Maarten boasts the highest concentration of fine restaurants per square mile in the entire Caribbean — don't forget the roadside stalls with their focus on local farm to fork. Their offerings are authentic Caribbean and downright delicious.

Coconut Man

Felix Artsen and his son, Jermaine, have been in the same location for 13 years serving up shakes and juices made on-the-spot when you order; you couldn't get any fresher than that. The most requested is the coconut and sugar cane juice shake — all natural, all the time.

While there, check out the market stalls for light-as-a-breeze cotton tunics, beach cover-ups in stunning colours, and beautiful handmade jewellery with touches of silver. Shop carefully and swerve the mass-produced tchotchkes (knickknacks), and be sure to barter. Keep a look out for Laramar — a light, water-blue turquoise-coloured stone that, sadly, is quickly disappearing. (The last mine is in the Dominican Republic; if you see something that grabs you, snap it up while you can.)



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Melody's Pick: Try the coconut shake!

Pedro's

At Orient Beach there is a lot to see. This beach is probably the most developed, most popular and the busiest beach on the island; Orient Beach is likely the most famous beach in the entire Caribbean because this beach is St. Maarten's foremost swimsuit-optional beach.

Even so, Pedro's takes priority. Walking toward Pedro's food stall, the smell of barbeque hooks you in and pulls you directly to the best ribs on the beach. Served with chicken and that ever-delicious Caribbean combo of rice and peas is a lip smacking deal of \$14. A view of the sea and sand, a drink in your hand, and the best ribs ever on your plate — could it get any better?



Melody's Pick: Always the finger-licking ribs!

I-tal Shack

Rasta Bushman gives new meaning to self-sufficiency and organic farming. In a country that is largely an import society with little emphasis on farming, Ras Bushman, as he is widely known, turned the stony, steep hills above his I-tal shack café into a food lover's dream. Bushman began growing and serving I-tal (vegan-type) cuisine under a tree over ten years ago; it is the only organic café in St. Maarten.



In this colourful café, Bushman explains that the Rasta way of living is generally referred to as I-tal — "I-tal is Vital" — to a healthy life, offering up the closest to vegan cooking, using no chemicals or packaging. Behind him, his wife, Ras Liza cooks up the daily specials, Rotis, Patties, lentil pea stew, and I-tal soup served with fried plantain. Even if you aren't a vegetarian, everything made in the tiny kitchen is scrumptious, sometimes with a hint of spice, and always fresh from the garden.

Melody's Pick: Whatever Bushman suggests or the special of the day along with Sorrel juice which is surprisingly tasty, fruity, not too sweet, in fact, a little sour with a spicy twist.

Johnny B Under the Tree

At both locations, the most popular dish is a toss-up between lobster and ribs; both served with the ubiquitous rice and peas for \$14, the perfect barbeque nosh after a day on the boat.

Melody's Pick: Go for the lobster!



With so many restaurants on one small island, it would be a downright shame not to dress up and try some of the best.

Temptation

For the night you want to treat yourself, dress up and celebrate, Temptation is the place to go. The devil is in the details, rosemary sprigs tied with raffia on the napkins, the tinkling of the ivories on a grand piano in the corner, with the atmosphere to match, so much so, I expected Frank Sinatra to saunter in at any moment. Menu items were so detailed that my mouth watered while I waded through the multitude of choices. Just when I thought I knew what to order, a second menu arrived with a focus on steak and sushi.

Melody's Pick: The Crème Brûlée Quartet: OMG! Vanilla bean with kumquats, berries, pistachios with chocolate pop rocks served in perfect taster sizes for sampling and sharing (I don't think so!).

Big Fish

Big Fish is the catch of the island, rising to the surface every time. The simple, sleek sophisticated interior is a stark contrast to the warmth and friendliness of the staff who make you feel right at home — and no request is too much. The dazzling all-white décor means the focus is on the food, exactly where it should be. Specialties are local grouper, red snapper or kingfish served with a choice of lobster, dill, or creole sauce. Ozzie, the head waiter with a mischievous smile, has been serving here for over seven years. Servings are generous, but I didn't want to waste one bite of the perfectly-cooked grouper with rice, and a scrumptious mixed salad topped with dried fruit. Without asking, Ozzie brought two desserts for those with the space for it, and added nine spoons for the rest of us.

Melody's Pick: Grouper with dill sauce.

Even though most people go to St. Maarten for sun and sailing, they leave praising the cuisine. Whether you enjoy dining on bone china in one of the many upscale, on-trend restaurants or off a paper plate at the island's many lolos (roadside barbeque stands), the culinary options appeal to every palate.

FAST FACTS

Big Fish, Oyster Pond
Emerald Merrit Road #14, Oyster Pond
721-586-1961

Coconut Man
Marigot Market
I-tal Shack
Bush Rd. No. 7, Philipsburg
www.sxmfreedomfighters.com/restaurant

Johnny B Under the Tree
Cay Hill Road, Cole Bay

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Enter Your Boat Now for the 2013 St. Maarten Heineken Regatta

The 33rd St. Maarten Heineken Regatta, taking place February 28th–March 3rd, 2013, is now open for registration. The St. Maarten Heineken Regatta is one of the "must do" sailing events in the Caribbean. It is the perfect combination of first-rate sailing during the day and fabulous parties at night. That is why it's called "Serious Fun!" With 200 entries from 32 countries in 2012, it is rated the biggest Caribbean regatta.

The regatta is a fantastic sailing event for every skill level — from cruisers (who can easily charter a boat) to professional sailors.

St. Maarten offers ideal sailing conditions with trade winds coming from the north-east, an average temperature of 25°C and the best of marine facilities available. Besides sailing, St. Maarten offers something for everyone: tax-free shopping, gourmet dining, water sports, white sand beaches and beautiful hotels and villas to serve as your accommodation. Even non-competitors enjoy the island and the event.

www.heinekenregatta.com

Photo Captions:

Photo 1: Felix Artsen, Coconut Man, Marigot Market

Photo 2: Check out the Coconut Man's menu...lots to choose from.

Photo 3: Check out the market stalls at Marigot Market. Beware of the tchotchkes!

Photo 4: One of the 37 beautiful beaches in St. Maarten. Explore them all.

Story and Photographs by Melody Wren

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