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Travel

Island's temperate climate makes for perfect beach weather

By MELODY WREN

Special to The CJN

St. Maarten is the smallest island in the world to be shared by two nations: the Netherlands and France. There is no real border between the territories, just modest monuments and signs. When you do decide to go exploring, you'll find the charms of each side are definitely discernible.

St. Maarten/Saint Martin is a melting pot of French, Dutch and Caribbean traditions with a dash of world culture thrown in for good measure. The French territory (Saint Martin) covers about two-thirds of the island and is technically a part of Europe and the European Community.

The Dutch side (Sint Maarten) is a member of the Netherlands but not considered European territory. The island is small and charming with a cosmopolitan feel, due to the remarkably varied population. Census figures list around 130 nationalities.

St. Maarten doesn't feel as small as it is. The mountainous terrain allows space for several towns and villages, with a rugged and interesting terrain, with winding roads up and down the hills, through small villages and still plenty of untouched land. It is advisable to rent a car while there to get the most out of a holiday.

St. Maarten is the only completely duty-free port in the Caribbean. Philipsburg, the capital of the Dutch side, is lined with duty-free shops selling luxury jewelry, cameras, watches and other high-end goods.

On French St. Martin, the capital, Marigot, is not quite the same size as its Dutch counterpart and has little of its sometimes frenzied pace, but it does have a rich assortment of duty-free shops and high-end international brands, such as Hermes, Chanel, Cartier.

Marigot looks more like a French village transported to the Caribbean. The market stalls in Philipsburg and Marigot offer beautiful linen clothes, palm-leaf purses, locally made jewelry, food, spices and souvenirs reasonably priced. Make sure you try your hand at bartering for the best price!

No matter what your tastes, age or interest, you are sure to find something to suit you in St. Maarten. For travellers that need to be in the hub of activity, Philipsburg offers

nightclubs, casinos and an enormous range of restaurants. Adventurous types can try their hand at sailing, snorkelling and diving.

Walk, jog, or laze on any of the 37 white sand beaches with clear turquoise waters inviting you to explore. Orient Beach, a beautiful long stretch of beach on the French side, is a clothing optional beach. Cupecoy Beach, close to the Dutch-French border, is known for its multi-coloured cliffs, caves and rock formations that resemble modern sculpture.

For history buffs, this island is filled with fascinating facts.



Mullet Beach in Saint Maarten

According to excavations, it is suggested that St. Maarten was settled around 2,500 years ago by American Indian Arawaks. Christopher Columbus sighted the island during his second voyage in November 1493, naming it without setting foot on land. The Spaniards abandoned it in 1648, enabling opportunistic French and Dutch settlers to claim the island.

For outdoor enthusiasts, the possibilities are endless. I participated in a sailing regatta on one of the five famous America's Cup yachts specifically designed for the 1987 competition.

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ISRAEL 2010

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Travel

Caribbean culinary capital

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Try ziplining in a forest or an afternoon of sailing on a catamaran, stopping at a variety of beaches to snorkel. Clear, calm waters surrounding shallow reefs and small coves make the island a snorkeller's heaven.

St. Maarten is known as the culinary capital of the Caribbean, and it's true... the food is amazing. Throughout the island, local (and imported) chefs celebrate the indigenous foods, as well as giving voice to cooking styles from the far-flung corners of the globe. Diners can select from more than 300 restaurants offering French, Dutch, Caribbean, Chinese, Indonesian, Creole, Jamaican, Japanese, Indian, Greek, Italian and more. Make sure to try local freshly caught fish such as grouper, grilled snapper, mahi mahi and tuna

Address book:

• St. Maarten 12 Metre Challenge, In Philipsburg at Bobby's Marina: 599-542-0045, www.12metrechallenge.com. No sailing experience needed. Each boat takes nine to 18 competitors for a thrilling three-hour race. The captains and mates brief their crew on the basics, from grinding a winch, time keeping,

tending bar, or tacking.

• Eagle Tours at Bobby's Marina in Philipsburg, 599-543-0068, www.sailingsxm.com offers snorkelling tours on their 76-foot custom-designed Golden Eagle catamaran. Originally built for the prestigious Whitbread Around the World Race, it features an 80-foot main mast and a 24-foot sail. It cruises to various cays for snorkelling and soaking up tropical atmosphere and drinks. The pampering service includes a floating bar. Transportation to and from your hotel is included in the \$99 fee, which includes lunch, endless drinks, and champagne as you pull into the harbour.

• For information on island tours, check out: www.vacationstmaarten.com.

Temperature: The island offers a temperate climate rarely exceeding 90 F (32 C) with low humidity, and the famous cooling trade winds blowing in from the northeast. It's perfect beach weather. Rain showers are barely noticeable, they are so brief.

Getting there: There are direct flights from Montreal throughout the winter travel season, offered by West Jet.

Melody Wren was a guest of the St. Maarten Board of Tourism.



There are 37 sandy beaches on the island. [Melody Wren photos]

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