MARTINIQUE MEMORIES

Our holidays in 1993 and 1995





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1. The Island

Martinique is one of the Windward Islands in the eastern Caribbean. Columbus landed there in 1502 during his fourth voyage to the 'New World', and in 1635 the French established their first settlement on the island. Except for a brief period in the 18th century when the island was a British Protectorate, Martinique has remained French up to the present day.

In 1946, Martinique became a fully fledged 'Departement' of France, and unlike the 'British' islands in the Caribbean it has not sought independence.

So Martinique is very French; the villages have their 'Mairie', their catholic church, their familiar French banks, and their blue and yellow post-offices. The people are French - but black. The roads are good (except where there are dangerously steep drops into drainage channels at the edge of the road).





But Martinique is also an exotic tropical island. Golden beaches are fringed with palm trees. The tropical vegetation of the island, spreading across fairly mountainous terrain, is rich in colourful flowers. The birds are prolific and include the colourful humming birds of our tropical aviaries. The fields are filled either with bananas or with sugar-cane.

And all this means that Martinique is a wonderful holiday destination, and deserves far more than the day spent by the many whose cruise ship calls briefly at Fort de France.

Thanks to VFB, who are so good at finding small and charming hotels, we selected a perfectly situated small hotel in 1993, and returned in 1995; we hope to return again to this same hotel, the 'Diamant les Bains' at Diamant in the south-west corner of Martinique!



Grande Anse du Diamant - looking west

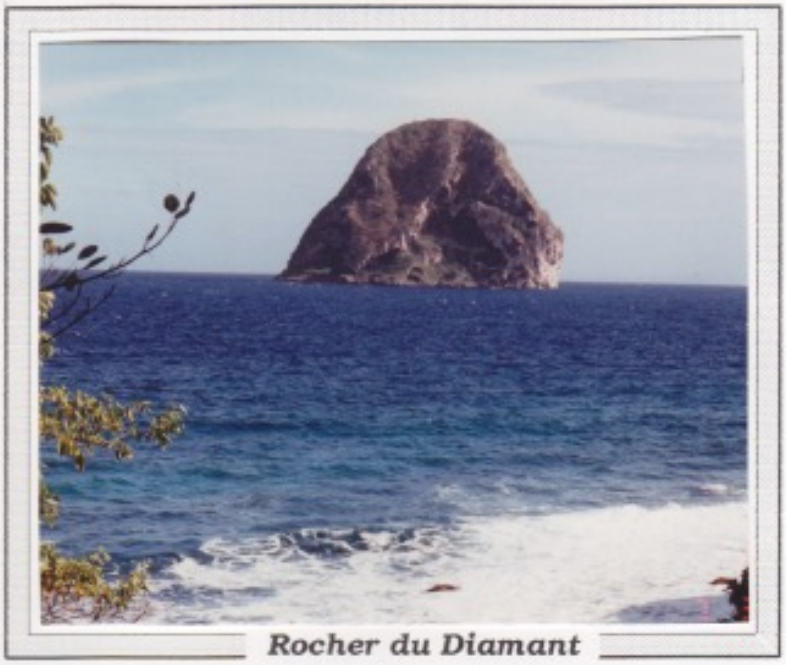
2. La Grande Anse du Diamant

Here I am (in 1993) on the 2-mile long 'Grande Anse du Diamant', with the 1500' peak of the 'Morne Larcher' behind me. The white fence of our hotel can be seen part way down the beach.

The huge 'Rocher du Diamant', some 600 ft high, lies out to sea. There are traces of British occupation there. Beyond the rock, the island of St Lucia can be seen on clear days.

Diamant village is at the eastern end of the bay; continuing westward, the road passes 'Anse Cafard', climbs around the 'Pointe du Diamant' promontory and then descends to the quiet 'Petite Anse du Diamant', a place we liked to visit.

The sea at Diamant is rarely calm, unlike some of the more crowded beaches elsewhere - but this makes it interesting!



Rocher du Diamant

And here is Kay with the hotel fence just behind.



Grande Anse du Diamant - the eastern end

3. Hotel Diamant les Bains

The hotel "Diamant les Bains" has a near perfect location! (VFB call it "local colour at the village inn", but this understates the three-way attraction of this hotel). Firstly, it lies on the village street at Diamant, a village which has not (yet) been overwhelmed by tourism. Next door is the village supermarket and filling station, and nearly opposite is the local school.

Secondly we have the charm of the hotel itself with its mature garden, the chalet accommodation and the swimming pool being placed amongst the lawns and tropical plants and flowers. But even more important is the friendly feeling associated with a small family-run hotel.



Hotel "Diamant les Bains"



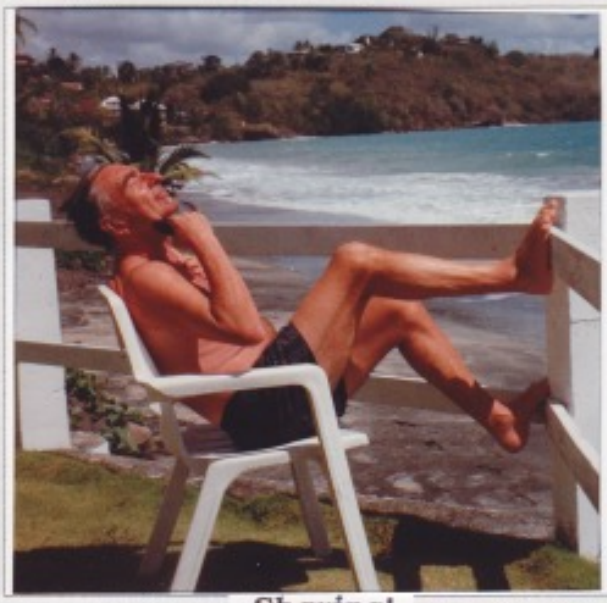
The hotel garden



Chalet "Orchidee"

And thirdly there is the direct access to the wonderful beach, only a few steps from the sea-side chalets - such as our favourite chalet, "Orchidee".

Yes, only a few steps from "Orchidee to the beach, or to shady spots under the palm trees.



Shaving!



Hotel beach



View from the beach!



But we haven't mentioned the food yet - "Creole and French cuisine with seafood specialities"!

For the breakfast buffet one (almost) shares one's table in the airy dining room with the birds and the small green lizards!

For lunch we could picnic outside our chalet (frig provided in the chalets for storing our food, drinks, and ice-cream!)

And in the evening, after drinking our own aperitif by the sea, we would go to dinner in the good hotel restaurant, served by the two sisters, Marie-Louise and Victoire, who do almost all the work in the dining-room - in a leisurely fashion!

But all this food demands some exercise to work it off - a walk to the end of the beach before breakfast and a game of table-tennis afterwards; and a splash in the sea or a swim in the pool whenever we felt like it.



Lunch!



Victoire



Gardener's lunch!



Table-tennis

4. Diamant Village

Picnic lunches mean shopping for food. The village supermarket is right next to the hotel - but how much more interesting to walk along the village street to the market in the square opposite the church. Stalls such as the one pictured at the bottom of the page sell all sorts of fruit, flowers, and bottles of home-made potions which we didn't dare to investigate! Some other stalls cater more for the tourists - but there is no hard-sell here. And after buying some fruit for lunch we could step down onto the sands and walk back along the beach.



Diamant church



The market



Market stall



Weather hazard!



Knock-out hazard!

5. Coping with the hazards!

This is the tropics, so what about the heat ? (Bangkok, our last year's hot-spot, is at a similar latitude). In fact the trade-winds make Martinique comfortable, and the scudding clouds give relief from the sun. Brief rainstorms (with beautiful rainbows) can come suddenly - dress appropriately as above!

Will you get mugged, and hit on the head? (As one risks on some Caribbean islands - and in Miami). No, one feels very safe here; but one should heed the notices in the chalets warning of falling coconuts!

And what about hassle that tourists experience (as we found in Bali) from persistent hawkers and taxi-drivers? That does not happen here; but of course you might be pressed to try your hand at Limbo on Tuesday evenings at the hotel!



Limbo hazard!



Market trading



Fishermen



Mourner

6. The People

We were lucky to be in Martinique in carnival week. At Lorrain, in the north, we were surrounded by a sea of black faces, and assailed by ear-drum bursting music in the Sunday procession. At Diamant, on Shrove Tuesday, we sat at a cafe pavement-table as the red-clad procession passed. And then on Wednesday we were in the market square for the traditional burning of the effigy on the adjacent beach.

But there is always activity to see on the ordinary days as well.



Carnival - young reveller



Carnival - float-driver



School children



Funeral band



House in Diamant

7 -- their houses

Some houses in Diamant are as primitive as the one above. But in the Martinique climate one really does not need glass in the windows. A sound roof to keep off the sun and rain is the only requirement (and somewhere to mount the TV aerial which is just visible in the picture!).

The 'Maison du Bagnard', below, is now a tourist attraction. It was built and lived in by an ex-convict.



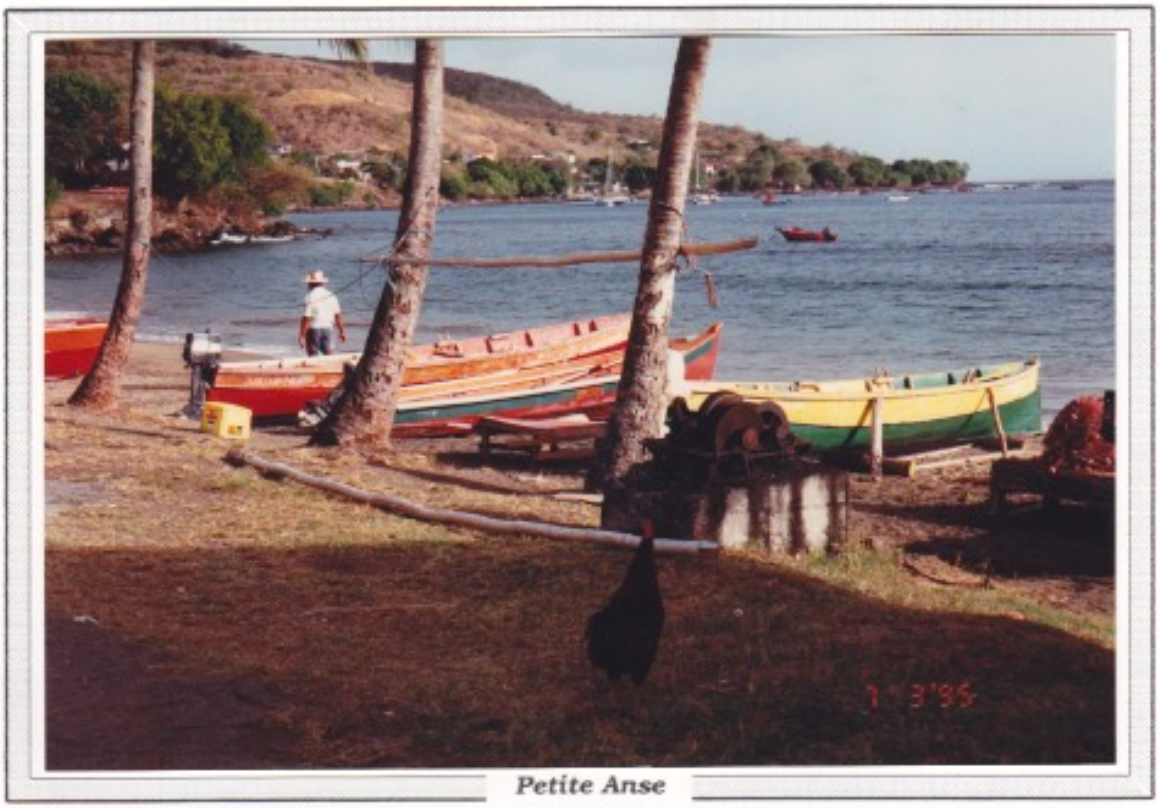
Another house



Maison du Bagnard

8. Beyond the Pointe du Diamant

The coast road from Diamant passes the Maison du Bagnard, climbs around the Pointe du Diamant, and then descends to Petite Anse du Diamant - a quiet fishing village where there are few tourists. Next comes Anse d'Arlets, rather more developed as a resort, and then the Grande Anse d'Arlets. Like the beach at Diamant, these are all fine sandy beaches - but the sea is much calmer on this coast. Continuing further, the road crosses the next headland to the busy resorts facing Fort de France.



Petite Anse



Grande Anse d'Arlets



Habitation Lagrange



Maison de maitre

8. The Colonial past

Habitation Lagrange, where we spent two nights, is a conversion of a colonial plantation house into a hotel. Though it re-creates the past, we found out that the buildings were not old. Plantation buildings from earlier in this century had been abandoned and had become the basis for rebuilding less than five years ago.



Dependance