

A French Sampler... Guadeloupe

★ By Marcie Connelly-Lynn

Only 40 miles past bleak and smoldering Montserrat, the harbor of Deshaies (Day-hay), Guadeloupe is very inviting. The town is built right on the water's edge. The harbor is well protected and the view from "le mouillage" (the anchorage) is awesome. On a Friday afternoon, we anchored and headed to shore to check in before the weekend. At 3PM, Customs/ Immigration was closed.



Lovely, inviting Deshaies waterfront

We awoke the next morning to a light breeze, which delivered a delicious fragrance to the anchorage. The smell of fresh croissants and rich French coffee wafted through the air and we were ashore in minutes to sample the wares. The main street of Deshaies reminded us of a very rural, very French little town. We bought coffee and fresh pastry at a boulangerie and sat at a table on the sidewalk and watched the world go by.

Most of the basic services a cruiser might need are available: Internet, bakery (boulangerie), butcher (bucherie), diesel and gasoline by jerry jug, a reasonably stocked grocery store (SPAR supermarche), library (bibliotheque), auto rental (louer a voiture), phones, pharmacies and friendly people...even an ATM! Nearly everyone walking around town had a baguette of bread in their basket and a bottle of wine under their arm... including us. When in Rome...

On Saturday morning, once again, we climbed the hill to the Customs office, but it was closed for the weekend we were told. In frustration, we stopped in at the Police Department and explained our problem (very slowly in high school French to a patient gendarme). He replied in French, "Oh, well, don't worry. You can only do, what you can do. If you can't clear in, you can't clear in." The word "nonchalant" came to mind. We finally ended up checking in at Basse Terre later in the week without any hassle at all. About a 1-1/2 km walk from the anchorage was a botanical garden. It was a Sunday afternoon and most things in town were closed, so we decided to hike up the very steep hill to check out the gardens. We didn't expect much in a small town, so we were pleasantly surprised to find a delightful setting with over a mile of bricked pathways and several new species of flowers, trees and plants we hadn't seen or been able to identify previously. In addition to flora, the gardens had pink flamingos and, in a separate aviary, several varieties of parrots and parakeets perched on your hand and ate seeds from a cup provided by the park.



A small path from town led across a suspension bridge and into the forest.

Though our time in Guadeloupe was limited (getting out of the proverbial hurricane zone was on our minds), we wanted to do more than smell the coffee and sniff the roses. We rented a car for two days and drove inland to the Guadeloupe National Park to find the Chutes du Carbet...three sets of impressive waterfalls approachable via

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well-kept trails. We saw #2 and #3 on two separate hikes, but the access to #1 was closed. A sturdy suspension bridge gave access to one of the trails and walking across it reminded me of the “fun house” in the old amusement parks.

On Day 2 of the car rental, we drove to Pointe a Pitre across the Route de Traversee, which cuts directly through the middle of the island of Bas Terre and through the National Park. It's steep and curvy with lots of switchbacks, great views and crazy bus drivers.

Pointe a Pitre is Guadeloupe's largest city and a wonder to explore. We found it hard to get away from the markets. There was just too much to see, smell, taste and buy. Fishermen, lined up along the wharf, sell their fish right from their boats. Crayfish, lobster, tuna, ray, shark, octopus, crab, squid, red snapper...you name it, it was there. We decided a “smell” chip for the digital camera would be a neat idea, so that you could smell as well as see the scenery.



Caribbean fruits and colorful vendor.

Fruit vendors were decked out in their traditional Guadeloupean madras dress complete with turbans. The vivid colors, smells and sounds of the marketplace were absolutely splendid. Each vendor competed for our attention, but they were friendly and smiling. We bought cabbage, green bananas, breadfruit, flamboyant melon and

something new, pomme d'amour (love apples... ooh la la!).

A spice market further down the street lured us in. We saw aisles and aisles of every spice imaginable including a local favorite, Colombo (a curry mix), which we purchased along with a locally made mortar and pestle to grind up the peppercorns we also bought. Across the street, fabric stores displaying all color combinations of the vivid Guadeloupean madras were abundant. Any number of small sidewalk cafes displayed billboards with specials for lunch and tiny boutiques offering fine French wines and cheeses beckoned us in.

Parking places had been scarce when we arrived, but we were lucky enough to find one right in front of the market. As we returned to the car we noted ours was the only car left and a local gendarme was writing us a ticket for parking in a “No Parking” zone. We expressed our apologies, smiled, looked liked tourists and though he grimaced, he let us go. Timing is everything!

Sugarcane was being harvested and trailer truck upon trailer truckload could be seen on the highway and along the roadsides. The production of “Rhum Agricole” is a major industry in Guadeloupe and the rum produced is highly prized in France. We stopped at a small rum factory for a tour and a sample or two. The smell of the freshly cut cane is somewhat sweet, mixed with earth smells. There were huge vats of molasses and the smell was overpowering at times, when mixed with the heat and humidity of the day. We found the clear white rum to be closer to white lightning in our estimation, and begged off any purchases.

We were back to the boat by dark, wishing we could stay longer and sample more of the country “Frenchness” of this hospitable island. The best we could do was buy more croissants and wine to savor and reminisce in the days to follow.

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