Don’t Miss the Boat!

By Sylvie Bigar

The last time I sailed it didn’t go well. Out of 200 avid gawkers on the whale-watching cruise out of Montauk, Long Island, only two became seasick. My husband and me. Which perhaps explains why I was a bit nervous last fall as I boarded the proud catamaran at Le François marina on Martinique. The boat belonged to Les Ballades du Delphis, an organization started in 2003 by Jose Cloquell, a Parisian artist and lighting designer who fell in love with the island and never left.

There was nothing to fear. As soon as we left the dock, the boat showed its amazing stability—the advantage of two hulls—and the turquoise Caribbean water happily carried us forward. Just the right amount of wind in the tall sails, a few plump clouds and our small group felt as if we’d jumped right into a tropical screensaver!

The jolly crew, led by Captain Stéphane, guided us towards the tiny sandy patches off the coast: Îlet du Loup-Garou (werewolf), Îlet Madame and my favorite, Îlet Anonyme with its sole, sturdy palm tree, deformed by the assaults of the wind. “I guess that one doesn’t belong to anyone,” said the captain.

First stop: Îlet Chancel, a mountainous speck owned by the Bally family, descendants of the first colonists. Taking the rowboat to shore is an appealing option, but most of us couldn’t wait to plunge into the warm Caribbean water and swim to shore. There, 18th century walls covered with moss and interspersed with chunks of coral call to mind another era. Martinique’s rich history still burns the memory: infinite fields of sugar cane, slavery, crossroad of civilizations and culture. We kept an eye out for the wild iguanas that still roam the gnarled tamarind trees.

Another stop at “La Baignoire de Joséphine,” a shallow area sprinkled with sandy points where Napoleon’s wife Joséphine, Martinique’s most famous daughter, is rumored to have enjoyed bathing. Quick! Snorkel and fins appeared on the deck and soon, the swimmers were off again. Even though colorful fish and pink conch shells line the fine sand, nothing can be brought back—nature is to be admired and respected.

Suddenly, the captain sounded the horn. A hurricane? A shark? No. Of course it was time for lunch! Jojo the cook had prepped everything that very morning and the golden accras (cod fritters), served with the apéritif of delicious Martiniquais rum, soon reminded everyone that we were in France and that cuisine must be taken seriously. Marinated octopus with cruditétés, grilled dorade with plantains and Creole rice; as we stood to toast life in Martinique with a very Provençal rosé, I was already making plans for my next cruise.

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