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# sensational st. martin

Find continental sophistication with a tropical backdrop at La Samanna resort by Adam McCulloch

**LA SAMANNA, A MEDITERRANEAN**-inspired resort on the island of St. Martin, is the perfect mélange of French flair and Caribbean cool. It's a marriage made all the more heavenly by delectable food, great wine and a beach to satisfy any white-sand connoisseur. This unique hideaway was built in 1973 on the French side of St. Martin to take advantage of the expansive 55 acres of tropical shoreline and powdery sand. The original hotel design—inspired by the whitewashed houses of the Greek Isles—proved timeless and attracted glittering guests such as Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis. Since then, La Samanna has undergone many tasteful renovations, most recently in November 2007, when several of the breezy, simply furnished suites were updated and the already enormous wine cellar was expanded (more on that later).

During check-in, I find myself happily distracted by the sights of La Samanna. The lobby opens up to a wrap-around balcony decorated with *bsai* desert roses (a vibrant pink tropical bloom), and I'm drawn to this perfect vantage point to marvel at the Caribbean Sea laid out before me. Five lavish white beach cabanas (which come complete with daybeds, sunscreen, complimentary iPods and an attentive beach butler) indicate the inhabited end of the shore. The rest is a gentle, unpopulated arc of sand marked only by a few footprints and, farther out to sea, a pod of passing kayakers. My wife and I are escorted to our ocean-view room where we find a king-sized bed, plasma-screen TV and our very own private terrace overlooking the crescent-shaped Baie Longue Beach. It is one of 81 suites and rooms strung along the foreshore and, we are pleased to discover, comes with a welcome gift of a chilled bottle of Moët & Chandon.

**FRENCH CONNECTION**  
From top: At La Samanna, the pool, sea and sky are a study in the color blue. The vibrant suites are perfectly positioned to catch sea breezes. The Mediterranean lines of the hotel provide a timeless backdrop to the elegant main pool deck.



It's early yet, though, and for now wine is far from our minds. On a leisurely stroll around the resort's grounds, we discover two pools (the newer, an infinity pool by the beach bar), yoga center, three tennis courts and spa, and also manage to sneak a peek at some other rooms. My favorite one (aside from the enormous three-bedroom "Baie Longue" suite, occupying the entire top floor) is the premium suite with rooftop cabana and private plunge pool. Everywhere we go, the moist sea air is perfumed into a salty-sweet cocktail by the abundance of tropical flowers. On a grassy outcropping among the villas is a stone semicircle embossed in the earth, which we later learn is the most popular ceremony spot for the 25 or so weddings a year the resort hosts.

To rid ourselves of our fast-paced, real-world demeanor, my wife and I head to the spa, which also houses the yoga pavillion and the only pilates studio in the Caribbean. The menu of spa services is extensive.

There is not one but an impressive 11 varieties of massage available, from Swedish to Korean plus hot stones, four hands, seven chakras, and an energetic Chinese technique involving hot sticks made of dry herbs. The treatment rooms open to a tropical courtyard with outdoor showers, and lying on the treatment table, I can hear birds whooping across the tops of the palm trees.

With our body clocks now set to island time, we mosey on over to the champagne bar on the pool deck for a predinner drink. It's a cozy nook with the entire ceiling composed of a vintage Indian wedding tent—a memento picked up by the resort's original owner on one of his visits to Southeast Asia. The sky is darkening to a watermelon pink, so we retreat to the expansive patio for dinner, where each table is a box seat to the tropical sunset. A meal of foie gras, scallops and pan-seared duck is like a slice of the Left Bank magically transported to the Caribbean (which makes sense

when we discover that some ingredients are actually flown in from France). The wine selection is beyond impressive. La Samanna's wine director, Frenchman Thibaut Asso, takes his role very seriously. He won a Gault Millau award for Best Wine List in the Caribbean in 2007, which spurred him to expand the cellar to 15,000 bottles (800 labels), including exceptional vintages like Harlan Estate 1991 (at \$3,000 a bottle, it's worthy of any toast).

Far better than just a storage space, the cobblestone cave is more authentic than many French cellars I've visited. The candlelight and cool cork-scented air make it a favorite for intimate dinners à deux. La Samanna excels at providing memorable moments like this, which may be why its Caribbean-French marriage is still going strong after all these years.

Rooms from \$995, including breakfast and some activities. For more information, call 800/854-2252 or visit [lasamanna.com](http://lasamanna.com).



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