

In person: Guadeloupe

The secret escape

If clients think they've seen it all in the Caribbean, suggest they take a look at the island gems of Guadeloupe, a little patch of France that's packed with intense cultural experiences and views worth travelling the extra mile for

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The concert was nowhere to be found. Three laps around Baie-Mahault's suburban streets confirmed it. I began to recognise the same houses but there were no singers to be seen – or rather heard. Even among one of Guadeloupe's most populous communes, frog chirps, not music, punctuated the otherwise still and humid night. Now 8pm and thoroughly dark, we were ready to call it quits. But our guide, Manoel, who runs local tour company Guadeloupe Shuttle, was determined.

Hotel group Des Hotels et Des Iles had brought me and a number of operators to this French overseas region to see for ourselves why it is attracting a growing number of international visitors. Long a destination for the French, recent flight uplift – especially from the US – is drawing an increasingly varied crowd to this relatively unknown destination. And there's an increasing focus on luxury, with Des Hotels set to launch Guadeloupe's first five-star property.

Whereas other Caribbean islands suffered widespread devastation at the hands of hurricanes Maria and Irma, Guadeloupe had a lucky escape. When I visited in December, clusters of wind-scorched vegetation, ongoing repairs to a handful of roofs and waterfront properties and the occasional beached yacht were the only reminders left of the winds.



How to book it

Western & Oriental offers seven nights at La Toubana in Guadeloupe from £1,939pp based on two adults sharing a Bungalow Partial Ocean View room on a B&B basis and including return flights with Air France via Paris Orly and private airport transfers.

Tel: 020 3588 6130, westernoriental.com



Philippe Giraud

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On an earlier boat trip around the Grand Cul-de-Sac Marin – a marine nature reserve encircled by extensive mangroves and the longest coral reef in the Lesser Antilles – I'd spent my morning watching rainbows as they hovered over neighbouring islands including Montserrat, with not a whisper of wind to disturb the mirror-like water. In this tropical archipelago, clouds tend to cluster around the peak of its mountains and La Grande Soufriere volcano, before drifting down to the lazy lap of the Atlantic and Caribbean Sea.

Perfect picture

In short, with its rainforests, waterfalls, beaches, mountains, volcanoes, vibrant towns, national parks and historical monuments, Guadeloupe is obscenely picturesque. But so are a number of other islands in the region – what makes Guadeloupe unique?

Manoel was keen to explain: "The food, the culture, the French flair combined with our Caribbean lifestyle."

The concert we had been trying to find was in fact a carol service he had seen advertised on Facebook, and soon we could hear something. But it wasn't carol singers – instead, 20 or so drums beat in unison, cut by the high-pitch horn of a conch shell, whistles and the shake of percussion. We found the noise on the sports court of the local school, where a drum group was practising, surrounded by hundreds of people.

These caisse-claire (drum) bands were

deep in practice for Carnival, which tends to start just after Christmas and conclude on Ash Wednesday. I don't know if it was the sheer wall of noise or the force of so many drums playing all at once, but I felt the cold spike of adrenaline building in me.

Later, we moved on to a village where a gwo ka (big drum) group drummed, sang and danced through the night as rum was liberally poured from the refreshment table. The traditional drum music dates back to the slave era and is such a fundamental part of Guadeloupean identity that it's been added to the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity by Unesco. It was impossible to stand still when confronted with music this uplifting.

Which was a relief. I can't lie – it was something of a slog to reach this Caribbean archipelago, made of five main inhabited islands; Basse-Terre, Grande-Terre, Marie-Galante, Les Saintes and La Desirade.

Flights run direct from Paris Orly (taking just under nine hours with Air France, Air Caraïbes or Corsair), but my route had seen me first fly from Heathrow to Charles De Gaulle, making my total journey time around 17 hours. Crossing Paris is not an ideal scenario, but perhaps combining an overnight stay in the city would bring a completely new element to a Caribbean adventure.

Flying from the UK and connecting in Antigua is also a solution.