

The Haute Bungalow

With her first hotel in the Caribbean, Jocelyne Sibuet, the Martha Stewart of France, has transported her brand of St. Tropez chic to St. Barth.

BY ANN ABEL



“**Y**ou have to deserve St. Barth.” That’s how Marie-Christine Albini, the general manager of the new Villa Marie Saint-Barth, describes the Caribbean island’s character. There’s no elitism intended, but a sense of knowingness pervades. Part of what makes the place so appealing is that it’s a haven for what’s known as the “gypset”—people of considerable good fortune who travel to spots where they can play for a few days as if they were just like anyone else. In order to visit St. Barth, you need a high limit on your credit card. In order to deserve St. Barth, you have to appreciate the low-key luxuries, the elemental simplicity and the quiet glamour of some of the world’s best small resorts, as well as the Michelin-caliber meals and the jeroboams of spouting champagne.

Villa Marie is everything that makes the

down-to-earth side of St. Barth so appealing. It’s the 11th intimate retreat from the highly regarded hotelier Jocelyne Sibuet—best known for the Alpine getaway Les Fermes de Marie—and her first hotel outside of Continental France.

It is for good reason that Sibuet is known as the Martha Stewart of France. While she honed her signature aesthetic in her native Alps, where she now has seven hotels, she had no trouble capturing the bohemian spirit of the French West Indies island. “I want people to wake up and know they’re in St. Barth,” she says of the hotel, which is set above the beach in Colombier and which she built with her ex-husband and business partner, Jean-Louis. “That’s very important. Other hotels here are more formal.”

Villa Marie is not. It feels remarkably relaxed for St. Barth. The cliché of visiting the private home of a well-traveled friend holds true here. An

A sandal in Bohemia: Jocelyne Sibuet’s Villa Marie maintains the casual elegance of the François Plantation on St. Barth, where it is set.



extremely well-traveled friend: Sibuet sourced the furnishings for the 21 bungalows and villas (which start at around \$525 a night) and beautiful public spaces everywhere from the prestigious Maison & Objet show in Paris to the souks of Tunisia and the markets of Java. Many of the headboards, whether rattan, wooden or fabric, are custom-made, and the gorgeous mother-of-pearl tables were commissioned in India.



Nouveau French country: Sibuet's aesthetic at Villa Marie includes furniture from Tunisia and Java.

Above all, the hotel is playful. The main motifs are pineapples and parrots—and there are two of the flying variety on the property, hanging out by the swimming pool. (Sibuet gave them a new home after a friend on the island who had owned the birds for years could no longer take care of them and knew that they wouldn't survive in the wild.)

The parrots are just two elements that animate Villa Marie, which opened last December. The place brims with history and life, in part because it occupies the site and some buildings of another small hotel and a restaurant that had been something of an island institution for 25 years.

"François Plantation has a soul," she says of the historic property. "It has a story. We wanted to keep those elements. I don't break things. I put a lot of attention into keeping the soul and spirit of the house and the story for the destination." She proudly notes that François Plantation fans who have returned since she took over like what she's done. (The excellent food is another good reason to come back.)

In her stylish sandals, gold-hoop earrings and breezy tunic, Sibuet could not have looked more at home than when we met for dinner at Villa Marie

earlier this year, yet her creative locus is the Alps. It was there that she and Jean-Louis renovated and opened their first hotel in 1981 and there that she took on the "crazy and ambitious project" to rebuild a mountain hamlet with pasture farms, which became her best-known showplace. Opened in 1989, Les Fermes de Marie was ahead of its time in selling what Sibuet calls "authenticity and luxury disguised in simplicity." Its nine chalets are outfitted with old beams and feature *mazots* recovered from

the surrounding pastures and country-style furnishings from secondhand shops around the world. All the shelter magazines took notice.

Sibuet, whose formal education was in aesthetics, had no idea that her sense of hospitality would turn her into a lifestyle brand. But after renovating and opening a half-dozen more hotels, she launched her own cosmetics brand, Fermes de Marie Beauty, based on the Alpine natural ingredients such as edelweiss that made that hotel's Pure Altitude beauty farm such a success. (Now all her hotels have Pure Altitude spas, and the cosmetics are sold under the same name.) She published a book, *A French Country Home*, in 2005, which cemented her reputation as the French Martha Stewart.

With all of that, and some 400 employees, the 58-year-old mogul has kept Maisons & Hôtels Sibuet a bona fide family business and brought her children into the management fold. While Jocelyne and Jean-Louis have been intimately involved in every aspect of the St. Barth hotel's design—he planted some 1,000 plants around the property himself—it was their daughter, Marie, who pushed for the family to establish a presence here.

Jocelyne hadn't visited the island for 25 years when she went scouting for locations, but she fell in love at second sight. "We really like the spirit of St. Barth," she says. "There's a special atmosphere."

There's certainly a special atmosphere in Villa Marie. It's the culmination of decades spent creating and curating—and the product of someone who takes pride in being an amateur. "I think when you're doing something you love," Sibuet says, "you do a good job. You begin at the first step. Then you get better." *



DRACULA SLEPT HERE

Granted, Castle La Paloma doesn't come with a Transylvania zip code, but this three-bedroom, four-bath Tudor estate in Los Angeles (now listed for \$3 million) was once home to actor Bela Lugosi, who played the title role in the 1931 movie *Dracula*. Although other celebrities have owned the Beachwood Canyon home—Kathy Bates and Jon Cryer among them—it's still known as the "Lugosi House." Would-be buyers beware: Many believe the actor's spirit still resides in his old haunt.



FINAL THOUGHT

* "My new motto is: *When you're through changing, you're through.*" —MARTHA STEWART