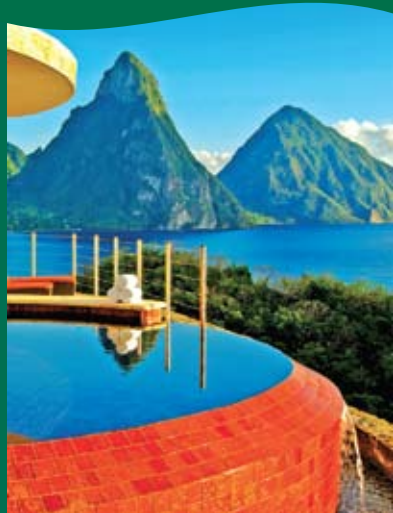


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RARE FINDS

ABOVE IT ALL

Hotel L'Esplanade, St. Martin

A BLUE SIGN POSTED ALONG A narrow street in the little town of Grand Case guides travelers to Hotel L'Esplanade: "On a hill above the rest." Indeed. With its breathtaking bird's-eye views, soaring ceilings and roomy lofts, this Mediterranean-style hilltop hotel charms its guests with a precious commodity: breathing space.

Each of the boutique hotel's 24 rooms has a private terrace — a few oversized loft rooms have two of them — overlooking the charming Creole village of Grand Case and the azure waters of its beach. They feature fully equipped kitchens and dining areas, and most have artful Balinese-style beds outfitted in white feather comforters and beaded Moroccan pillows.

With its renowned restaurant row and *lolos*, or barbecue stands, Grand

Case stands as the unofficial culinary capital of St. Martin (if not the entire Caribbean), and L'Esplanade patrons can relish being part of its busy food scene. As the sun sets, pop open a bottle of champagne, sit back in a striped beach chair on the terrace, count the yachts illuminated in the harbor and observe the diners browsing the restaurants on the main strip below.

During the day, amble down to the small, blue-tiled pool and take in the scenery from the comfort of your perch at the swim-up bar. Or follow the footpath down the hill and into town, where you can eat, go for a swim and gaze up toward the hotel perched above the rest. — Baz Dreisinger
Hotel L'Esplanade; Grand Case, St. Martin; 866-596-8365; lesplanade.com. From \$245 in low season (\$395 high).