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hey're frogs," she tells me, "but people get them confused all the time." Frogs that sound like crickets? Now I know I've truly entered another world. The drive up to *Plein Soleil* should have been my first indication of this. The restaurant, like the hotel that shares its name, is perched high in the hills above the town of François. The clutch sticks and the tires spin on rain-soaked gravel and dirt as we drive uphill in the dark, squinting through the windows for signs indicating we're nearing our destination. But there are none. There is only our car, the creaking of the frogs, and nowhere to go but up. Finally, at the peak of the hill, the *Hôtel Plein Soleil* appears: an intimate compound of private villas and pathways, with the restaurant nestled on the right. Our waiter greets us with a warm *bonsoir* and an invitation, in English, to follow him to our table. But I can't help lingering behind in the front of the restaurant. It's as if someone actually lived here and made this airy space into his salon, decorating with family heirlooms and art picked up over a lifetime of world travels. The elegant velvet settees say

HAUTE CUISINE IN THE HILLS OF FRANÇOIS

MARTINIQUE MUST HAVE SOME POWERHOUSE LOCAL CRICKETS, I DECIDE AS I WALK INTO THE RESTAURANT PLEIN SOLEIL. ALL AROUND ME THERE ARE UNSEEN CREATURES CHIRPING AND ALMOST COOING, AS IF THE SOUNDS OF A BACKYARD SUMMER NIGHT WERE AMPLIFIED AND WIRED FOR SURROUND SOUND. BUT MY DINING COMPANION, A NATIVE OF THIS FRENCH-CARIBBEAN ISLAND, GIGGLES WHEN I MENTION IT.

By Jessica Quandt

› Plein Soleil seen here is but one of Martinique's fine tables

Paris, the oil portrait of a turbaned man echoes India, and the verdant palm frond, in a giant pottery vase, is a reminder that the French Caribbean is where all these cultures meet. Around the corner, a dining room opens out onto the dark hills, where the frogs are providing the only soundtrack necessary. There are tiny white lights everywhere, draped across the beach-white woodwork and in the delicate leafless trees around a koi pond. A thousand glowing reflections shimmer in the water, and suddenly the whole restaurant looks filled with stars. With a bottle of Loire



Valley white on ice beside the table, we feast on bowls of creamy lobster bisque with star anise, cassava-crusted scallops and duck cannelloni, plates of delicate gnocchi and fresh greens over sweet potato puree, a chocolate moelleux cake topped with a dark-chocolate-coated sphere that bursts with passion fruit sorbet when I bite into it. Chef Nathanael Ducteil may be very young, but he knows what he's doing. Combining tropical flavors with haute cuisine techniques, he rewards those adventurous enough to find this place with a meal worthy of their efforts. After dinner, we slowly coast back down the hill to town, the sound of frogs softening in the distance. Maybe it's the wine, or the lingering taste of chocolate on my tongue, but suddenly the once-treacherous drive seems downright divine, even from my passenger seat. Dipping back down into the real world feels easier when you know what's waiting up among the clouds.

ADRESSES

Enchanting dining on Martinique

➤ **LE DOMAIN SAINT AUBIN**, a truly splendid colonial manor
Petite Rivière Salée, B.P.52 – 97220 Trinité
Tel: (596) 596 69 34 77 – reservation@ledomainsaintaubin.com

➤ **LE BELEM**, located in a 5-star Relais et Châteaux hotel
Le Cap Est – 97240 François – Tel: (596) 596 54 80 80
booking@capest.com – www.capest.com

➤ **FLEUR DE SEL**, modern Créole and French fusion
27, avenue de l'Impératrice Joséphine – 97229 Les Trois Ilets
Tel: (596) 596 68 42 11 / Fax: (596) 596 68 42 13

➤ **LA SUITE VILLA**, funky cosmopolitan cuisine with a Creole touch
Route du Fort d'Alet Anse Mitan – 97229 Trois-Ilets – FWI
Tel: (596) 596 59 88 00 / Fax: (596) 596 63 46 50 – lulu@la-suite-villa.com

➤ **LE BREDAS**, nestled in the lush tropical interior
Entrée Presqu'île - Rivière Blanche – 97212 Saint-Joseph
Tel: (596) 596 57 65 52 – jean-charles.bredas@wanadoo.fr

➤ **LE PETIBONUM**, right on the beach!
La Coin – 97221 Le Carbet – Tel: (596) 596 78 04 34
petibonum@wanadoo.fr – www.petibonum.net

➤ **LE PLEIN SOLEIL**
Pointe Thalemont – 97240 Le François
Tel : (596) 596 38 07 77 / Fax: (596) 596 65 58 13
info@hotelpleinsoleil.fr – www.hotelpleinsoleil.fr/