

Mad Pilot's Societé “Dropping in”

By Kent Lewis

on
St. Barths will
keep you on
your toes.

The fear, the fun and the promise of topless supermodels that come with getting “certificated” to land your airplane on the island of St. Barths tops the list of flying adventures and pushes that incomparable first solo into a distant second place.

The approach to landing begins as a power-off freefall beginning about seven miles out over the Caribbean Ocean and climaxes as your landing gear skims four feet over circling cars negotiating a round-about atop a hill that towers over the runway's threshold. Once landed on the tiny airstrip, the turn-around at the end is cut into a magnificent beach where half-naked observers smiled at you, photograph you, and frequently offer you a thumbs-up, welcoming you to the very elite club of pilots who have survived a landing at one of the world's trickiest places to fly into.

St. Barths (St. Barthelemy) is the French-Caribbean winter playground of the richest and the most famous and the most infamous. It's a place where 200-foot yachts, decorated with both helipads and onboard submarines, get parked around the corner to make room for the more interesting boats. Any gossip magazine worth its salt has pictures snapped in St. Barths of rocker or actress couples holding hands in the sand, topless supermodels frolicking in the waves and CEOs entertaining their “nieces” aboard mega-yachts.



“You’ll find your instructor sitting in a blue shipping container in the back of the rental car lot.”

“Dropping in” on St. Barths in a private plane requires two-part preparation. The first part is making a date with a French instructor qualified to “sign you off” (as both insane and fully capable of landing solo in St. Barths). The second part of preparation is learning the four French phrases guaranteed to win over your new instructor: Bonjour, Merci, Mon Dieu! and Je veux ma mamman!, which means: Hello, Thank you, Oh my God! and I want my mommy!, respectively.

With the French memorized, you’ll start your adventure in St. Martin, a half-French and half-Dutch island overrun by American tourists in search of a Vegas-like perpetual Spring Break, a duty-free (real) Rolex or both. To get there in your own plane, head southeast to Puerto Rico, turn due east, then follow the pink line to TFFG. If you’re renting a plane

for this event, fly commercially to Princess Julianna Airport (SXM) and then find a ride to Grand Case Airport on the other side of the island. You’ll find your instructor sitting in a blue shipping container in the back of the rental car lot. I’ve seen, on occasion, signs on that container, which read “Grand Case Flying Club.” Knock even if you don’t find a sign, for the Caribbean trade winds (and the occasional hurricane) wreak havoc on anything that hasn’t grown roots. When the door opens, it becomes immediately apparent that the guy shaking your hand is sizing you up like James Bond judging a martini. This is where your preparation pays off. Say bonjour to the guy. He’s not allowed to smile before you say bonjour because, face it, you’re American. Only after you say bonjour does the French FAR/AIM manual permit a French flight instructor to smile at an American. As for his

prejudgment of you, forgive him because his only concern is to determine whether or not he wants to risk his life holding your hand through seven to 10 death-defying approaches for about \$40 an hour.

It starts like this.... He’ll interrogate you for 10 minutes in the privacy of the blue shipping container until he has determined whether the two of you are likely to survive the afternoon. If so, then he’ll humble you for another 20 minutes with horror stories about pilots meeting their fate on this approach until he is confident you will do exactly what he says and when he says it. “Do not take ziss lightly – ziss is ZanBar and many, many people die in ZanBar.” Once that look of “What am I getting myself into?” finally wipes the smile from your face, Monsieur Instructor invites you to sit down as he pulls out a St. Barths VFR approach



Newly renovated in 2004, St. Barths’ runway is only 2,170 feet long with an approach plagued by varying degrees of turbulence and a 150-foot hill at its threshold. Pilots brave enough to attempt the landing will get the thrill of their life.



As these pictures show, negotiating the descent onto St. Barths’ tiny runway can get a bit complicated. There’s a heavily traveled road that runs through the flight path, with a bevy of tourists constantly taking pictures of this most unusual sight.

chart. (One of the two approaches may as well have been written by Mark Twain because the wind in the Caribbean howls in only one direction - cyclones and convective wind shear aside).

Next, you two will sneak out a back door onto the tarmac, bypassing immigration, customs, police, landing fees, flight plans and all things sacred. He’ll climb into the right seat of the plane, flip two switches and call Grand Case tower (in French) to tell Tower what you’re up to. The voice will come back with an altimeter reading and wind speed (usually 14 gusting to 56) plus the results from last night’s poker game and a request for the phone number of someone’s ex-wife.

“What was that?” you ask.

“Oh, dunt vurry. Zee tower ear haz not otoritee.”

“The tower has no authority?” you ponder, but you don’t ask. Hey, it’s French and your French stinks, so you let it go.

You run up, take the runway whenever you choose (because the guy in the tower can’t stop you), backtrack on runway 10, whip a U-turn, push your throttle to the firewall and start to roll. You rotate and then adjust a few things as you begin your climb to 1,500 feet over the pale blue water.

Ten minutes later, the instructor points out “Fourshue,” a rock at your 10 o’clock that marks the initial VFR approach fix for St. Barths. Abeam the rock, he calls St. Barths to tell another “otoritee-impotent” controller you’re inbound, after which your instructor tells you to “slow it down.” You back off about 50% on the power.

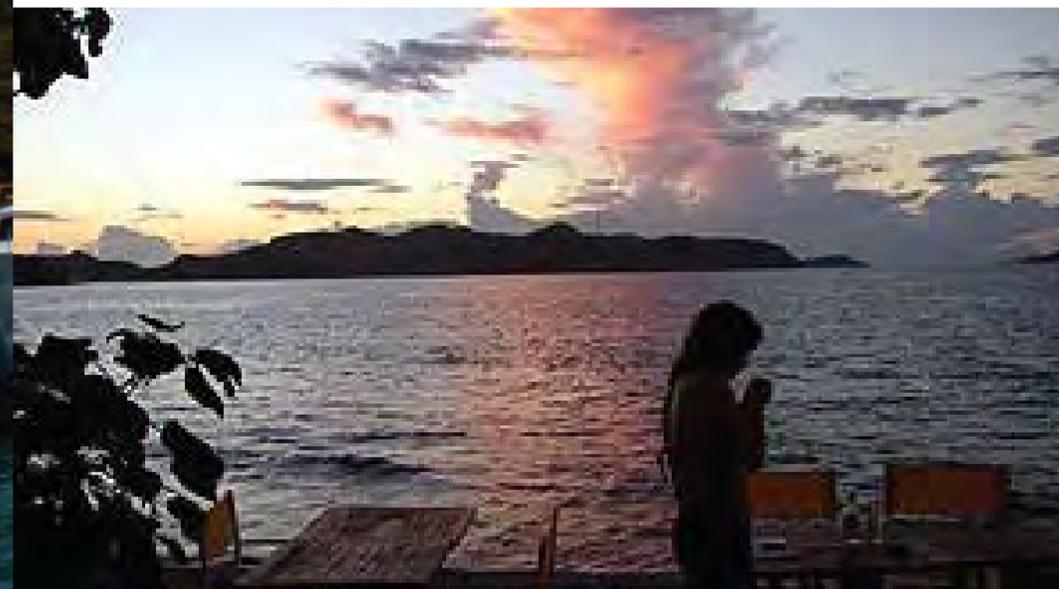
He says, “No. Slow it down. Down, down, down, down! Gear down, full flaps, DOWN!” He then points to another rock about two minutes ahead and still seven miles offshore and says, “That rock there is Sugarloaf (“Pain du Sucre” on the chart). Turn left there.”

Two minutes later you bang a left and listen as the instructor calls “ZanBar” (you’re wondering what happened to the “aint” in Saint and “ts” in Barts). Immediately, your concern for French phonetics gives way to your anticipation of the stall warning.

“Okay, point her down,” demands the Frenchman. With your nose down, the island comes into view. “You can see the runway?” asks your new hero. You look down and see the last 2/3 of a runway. The first third of



There's no better way to tour the small island of St. Barths than on a boat. Several companies rent out vessels to tourists, complete with a crew and an itinerary that lets you enjoy everything St. Barths has to offer.



Landing safely on the eight-square-mile island of St. Barths can be a bit nerve-wracking. But the reward of St. Barths' romantic setting sun is worth its weight in gold.



the runway is obscured by what you were told was a "little hill," but now recognize as the only 75-foot mountain on the face of our blue planet. "Think of the approach as the sight on a rifle," he says. "Keep the landing point on the runway in the groove between the mountains on each side and above the little hill in the middle. Do you understand?"

Yeah, you think. I understand: As long as I can keep the landing point nested in the "gunsight" during a power-off freefall, maintaining two knots over my stall speed in my plane's least responsive configuration, I might not hit one of those hills or ball my plane up in the hot tub of some Russian arms dealer's mega-yacht.

Once inbound from Sugarloaf, you are considered to be on final. Nothing stands between you and an island of tipsy topless supermodels (of both sexes) except for an Everest of a mountain obscuring a Band-Aid of a runway, both of which have taken the lives of pilots far more experienced than you. At this point, you'll start to reconsider your options: the obvious tradeoff between guaranteeing your survival and observing one of Earth's rarest species – drunk topless supermodels. Naturally, you press on.

After negotiating 1,350 feet of descent with the runway framed in "Gunsight Mountain," things get more complicated. As the instructor

reaches between his legs to grab a bottle of water (you were praying for a defibrillator), he smiles sadistically and casually mutters, "Don't hit the cars." Cars? "Oui, zee cars. Zee cars on zee top of zee hill." Mon Dieu! Cars! Somebody (French) decided to put a roundabout atop the aforementioned "little hill," which your landing gear was expected to clear by 15 feet – tops. You do some quick math: 15 feet of clearance minus six feet for an SUV, you're down to nine feet of clearance over the zooming cars! Je veux ma mamman!

With only two knots of airspeed between you and stalling (it's very unfashionable in St. Barths to land upside down), you soon realize that you not only have to pull up to avoid the cars, but also a gaggle of tourists loitering atop the roundabout! What the @\$% ? Of course, flocks of amateur photographers are gathered in communal disbelief, poised to take your picture because, to them, you seem as stupid for trying to land as they seem for standing just a couple feet below your propeller in the last seconds of your freefall. To save yourself manslaughter charges, you voluntarily give up your two-knot margin by giving the yoke a quick pull, barely overflying the cars and morons, then push hard on the yoke to point your airplane straight down at the most beautiful runway in the world.

The hard part is over, but you're not done yet. The new problem is that when you point your plane straight down, it gains speed – and, therefore, it doesn't want to land. But you're patient and experienced, so you get your gear about three feet above the runway and level it off and wait. As the beach grows closer, you wait. And wait. It, then, dawns upon you that your instructor failed to tell you that your little runway has a downhill grade! So you wait some more. Eventually, the plane settles and lands. Despite your fear of having to ask a supermodel to help pull your plane from the sand ahead, you lightly tap your brakes so that any tire-squealing won't draw attention in such a cool place.

At this point, you've sweat through your shirt, your pants, your sunglasses and your upholstery, but you don't really care. With about 50 feet of runway to go, your plane is under control and you reach for your window and crack it open. As you pull into the turnaround at runway's end, you look out to find more (and smarter) photographers taking your picture and waving. I would be lying if I promised you that there will be six-foot-tall, half-naked supermodels walking on the beach the moment you hit the roundabout. But I can honestly promise you that everybody on that beach is tipsy by 10 a.m.

ARRIVE IN STYLE

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Taxiing toward the tower, you remember the evenings you came home with your chest puffed up and proclaimed, “Honey, I did my first solo today!” and “Honey, I passed my checkride!” In your adrenaline-maniac state, you realize they just bumped to the second and third most memorable days of your flying career. It’s a great day. You turn to the man sitting next to you with whom you’ve shared one of the greatest thrills of your life, smile, extend your hand and say Merci.

As you’re wondering how anything could ever make you feel more alive than your one landing in St. Barths, your instructor says, “Now vee doo eet six more times togeder and den you do two times alone.” And so you do. 



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Activities galore await visitors on the Isle de St. Barthelemy. Located in the northeastern corner of the Caribbean Sea, this charming isle offers 14 gleaming white-sand beaches, a protected marine reserve and tiny seaside villages with lots of Mediterranean character.

FLYING TO ST. MARTIN & ST. BARTHS

From Miami to Puerto Rico to St. Martin is 1,200 miles.

Grand Case Airport (CEE/TFFG), St Martin, Guadeloupe

Airport 011.590.590.87.5121
La Samanna Resort 011.590.590.87.5121

St Barthelemy Airport (SBH/TFFG), Guadeloupe

Airport 011.590.590.87.3233
Tropical Hotel 011.590.590.27.6487



Maps provided by Voyager Flight Planning Software