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THE SERENE LANDMASSES of Guadeloupe form what is known as a geological basin, creating some of the world's best diving conditions. Virtually all species of coral fish can be seen within this healthy marine landscape. Every form of diving is carried out here and all levels of ability encouraged, from novice to veteran. The sheer number of marine outfitters specializing in the diving experience is testament to the popularity of the sport throughout Guadeloupe.

Atlantic trade winds blowing off the African continent once brought the majority of European explorers directly into a Caribbean passage between the islands of **Dominica** and Guadeloupe. Columbus named these outcroppings after the Virgin Mary to whom he had prayed during his 1493 voyage and a Spanish monastery (Santa Maria de Guadalupe). Today, Guadeloupe presents a unique combination to visitors – an amazing display of flora and fauna without the violence, crime and cruise ship crowds some Caribbean islands suffer from.

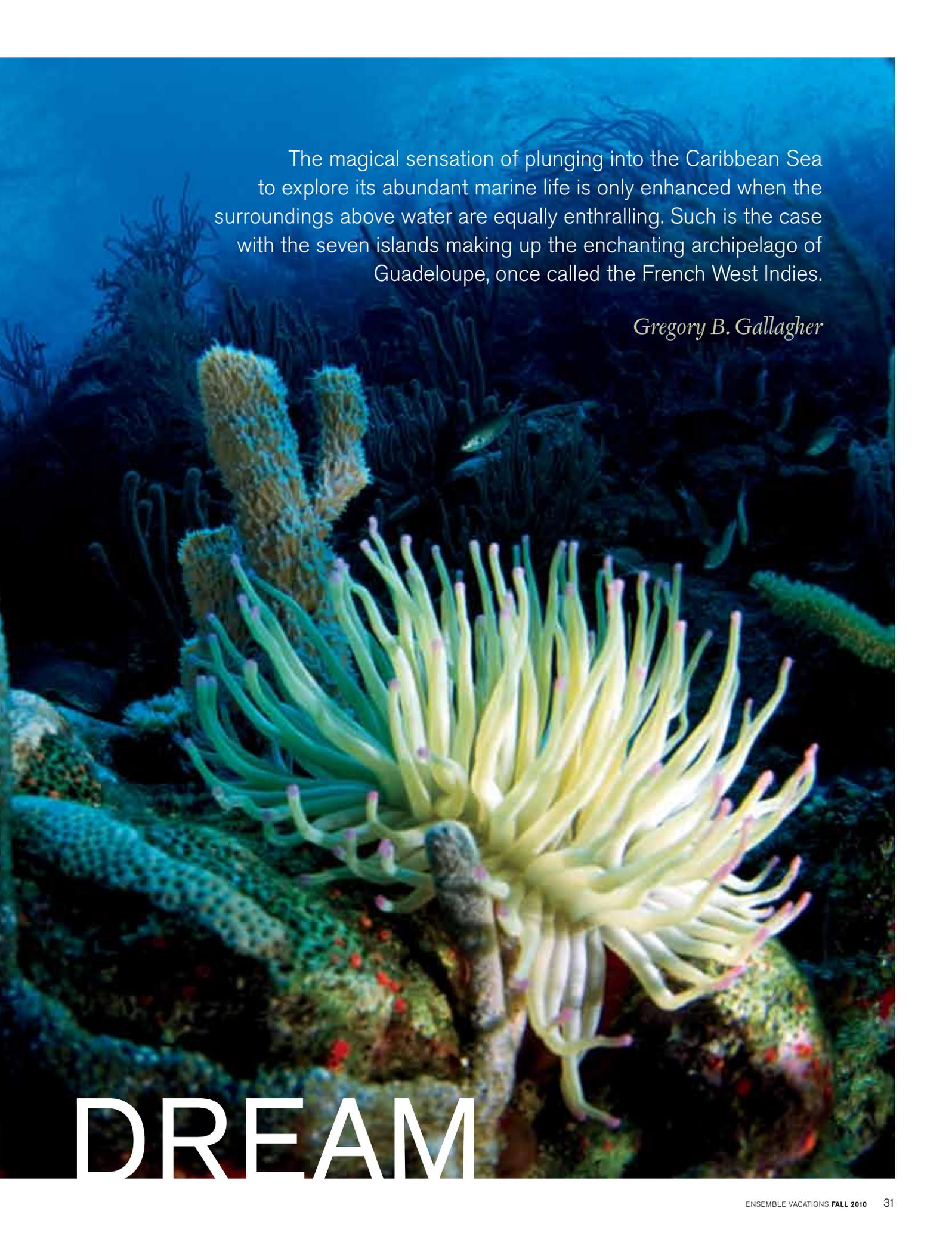
This friendly French-speaking territory consists of the large twin islands of **Basse-Terre** and **Grande-Terre**, shaped like the wings of a butterfly, and five 'dependent islands' which include **Marie-Galante**, **Les Saintes**, **La Désirade**, **St. Barthélemy** and the northern three-fifths of **Saint Martin**.

English and Creole are widely spoken here, and for those wishing to practise their French, this is one of the friendliest locales on the planet to experiment. The fun begins when you utter a simple "bonjour." The locals are quick to laugh, and before long visitors are able to obtain information, arrange services and forge easy friendships.

All international flights land on the island of Grande-Terre, the flatter and drier of the two main islands. After disembarking a flight at **Pôles Caraïbes Airport**, visitors experience a cultural baptism beginning with the lively singsong Creole patois spoken by locals and continuing with a tapestry of influences including African *gwo ka* street drummers, hip New York-style nightclubs in towns like **Le Gosier** and **Sainte-Anne** and European standards at resorts like **Club Med** or **Des Hôtels et des Îles**.



A DIVER'S



The magical sensation of plunging into the Caribbean Sea to explore its abundant marine life is only enhanced when the surroundings above water are equally enthralling. Such is the case with the seven islands making up the enchanting archipelago of Guadeloupe, once called the French West Indies.

Gregory B. Gallagher

DREAM

GRANDE-TERRE

If diving is your passion, go no farther than the northern tip of Grande-Terre, where you will find like-minded devotees. **Anse-Bertrand** is the beach community where many scuba enthusiasts gather, with dive schools and convivial accommodations offered at reasonable rates throughout the year. **Eden Plongée** (www.edenplongee.fr) has been providing a wide array of services to divers and their families for many years, and is recommended by the **Guadeloupe National Park**. A little farther up the coast are the dramatic 200-foot cliffs of **Pointe de la Grande Vigie**, from which you can see the nearby islands of **La Désirade** and **Montserrat**.

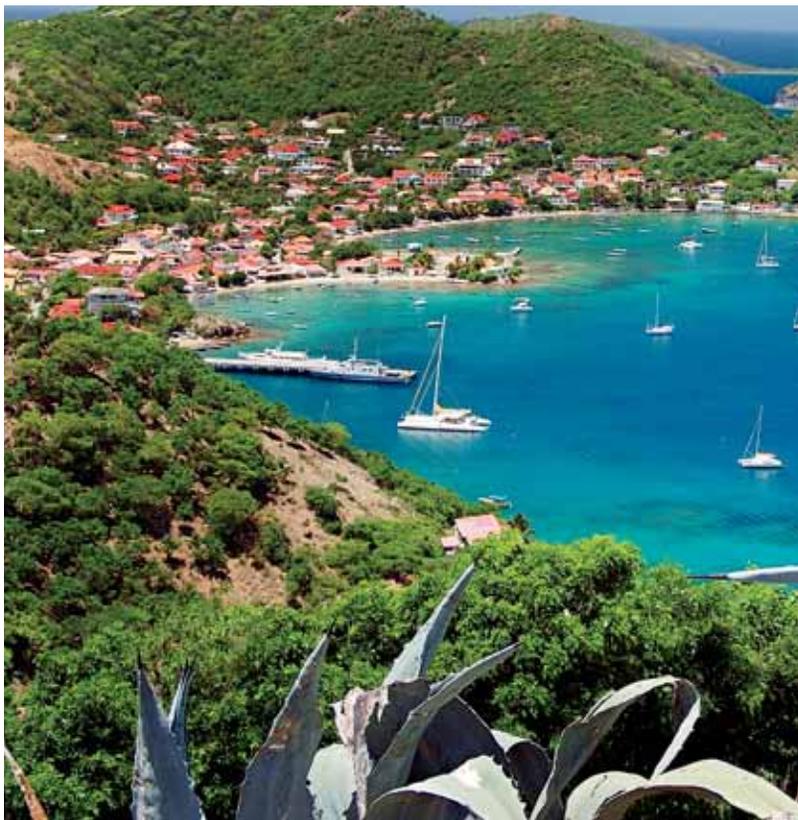
To prepare to explore this large island, book accommodations at **La Toubana Hotel and Spa** in **Sainte-Anne**. A hillside perch with its own beach, it is perfectly located with a panoramic view of the sea and 32 comfortable bungalows, plus a homestyle restaurant that allows for that deep level of Caribbean relaxation to take over one's body, mind and spirit.

BASSE-TERRE

Basse-Terre Island meanwhile, where the sleeping volcano **Soufrière** stands silently over **Pigeon Island**, is what legendary marine explorer Jacques Cousteau called "the most pristine underwater environment on the planet." As we celebrate the 100th anniversary of this underwater explorer's birth (www.oceaninspiration.net), it is worth noting he placed Guadeloupe among the world's top 10 diving destinations.

The western coast, known as **Côte-sous-le-vent**, is home to hidden marine treasures covering more than 30 continuous miles of coral environment, featuring a score of sunken warships and their resident marine life. The **Jacques Cousteau Marine Reserve**, which is a protected non-fishing zone and part of the Guadeloupe National Park, includes the tiny Pigeon Islets and the waters off **Malendure Beach**, where hot springs create a consistently warm (26°–28° C throughout the year) underwater feast for marine life and a magnet for snorkellers, scuba divers and even non-divers touring in glass-bottom boats.

The centre of activities is the **Centre international de plongée** (www.cip-guadeloupe.com) in the town of **Bouillante**, which offers equipment rentals, tours, night dives and even a school with PADI (Professional Association of Diving Instructors) International certification. If you continue up the west coast, the quaint seaside villages of **Pointe-Noire**, **Deshaises** and **Sainte-Rose** will ensure you return a second time to Guadeloupe. This entire coast is a diver's dream, but also a well-kept secret for those seeking an exotic retreat; for accompanying family members who are not divers, the country offers a full menu of other activities and sights.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP

Îles des Saintes;

Carbet Falls;

four-eye butterflyfish;

old truck in Basse-Terre.



DIVING ALTERNATIVES

Hiking, walking, or camping near the Soufrière volcano is arguably the most popular activity after diving. The road to the volcano begins north of **Saint-Claude**, accessed from the capital city of Basse-Terre along the southern coast road. The **Carbet River** begins atop the volcano, and along its descent produces **Carbet Falls**, truly one of Guadeloupe's gems. Remaining the same since Christopher Columbus revelled at its sight, these stunning falls are not to be missed.

The pathway network for hikers, hugging the highest areas of Guadeloupe's 'second island', and is nothing short of a marvel. You can go for a few hours or as long as seven days of overnight camping and hiking, with rustic cabins dotted along the way for travellers' use and areas to pitch a tent.

La Grivelière (www.vertevallee-guadeloupe.com) is an ecological attraction worth the effort to explore. A heritage coffee plantation and processing plant located inside the Guadeloupe National Park rainforest in **La Vallée de la Grande Rivière**, this spectacular rainforest facility demonstrates how to mix agrotourism, ecotourism and entrepreneurship into a successful tourist attraction. The onsite restaurant makes visitors feel immediately at home, with a full menu of fresh local cuisine and unique artisan goodies (don't miss the coffee digestif).

MARIE-GALANTE

A tantalizing mélange of European gastronomy mixes effectively with garden produce, Creole classics and a steady flow of fresh seafood to provide visitors with more than a few excellent culinary reasons to travel to Guadeloupe. After all, no matter what travellers do during their stay, at a certain point we all agree on one very important item: food. So, whether for divers actively pursuing underwater explorations or family members discovering the many attractions to be found on shore, the cuisine of this place matters.

Marie-Galante Island is a prime example. A 45-minute ferry ride from the main city of **Pointe-à-Pitre** delivers visitors to an easier, slower-paced community. After disembarking, check in with Madame Pierre Marie Joseph at **Chez JoJo's** restaurant. The décor is basic, but the Creole plate is memorable and inexpensive. Located on **Perle à Deshaies Beach** in the main town of Grand-Bourg, locals and visitors alike savour classic fresh seafood literally minutes after being harvested. Wash down the food with the local **Ti'Punch** and ask about diving with David at **Ti'Bulles** (www.tibulles-plongee.com).

LAST DIVE OF THE DAY

Whether you're a novice snorkeller, a veteran scuba diver or a landlubber, these islands of Guadeloupe are a dream vacation destination. Packaged with a boisterous mix of *gwo ka* music, *biguine* dance styles and other colourful Creole traditions, these captivating islands provide an opportunity for all tastes, budgets and philosophies to enjoy this stunning Caribbean location. So, dive in and enjoy what the locals call **Karukera**: Isle of Beautiful Waters. ▣