

LATIN AMERICAN SOCIO-RELIGIOUS STUDIES PROGRAM -  
PROGRAMA LATINOAMERICANO DE ESTUDIOS SOCIORRELIGIOSOS  
(PROLADES)

**ENCYCLOPEDIA OF RELIGIOUS GROUPS IN  
LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN:  
RELIGION IN SAINT-BARTHÉLEMY**

By Clifton L. Holland, Director of PROLADES

Last revised on 10 December 2013

**PROLADES**

Apartado 1524-2050, San Pedro, Costa Rica  
Telephone (506) 2283-8300; FAX (506) 2234-7682

Internet: <http://www.prolades.com/>

E-Mail: [prolades@ice.co.cr](mailto:prolades@ice.co.cr)



## Religion in Saint-Barthélemy

### Country Summary

The **Territorial Collectivity of Saint-Barthélemy** (*Collectivité territoriale de Saint-Barthélemy*) is an overseas territory of France. The name is often abbreviated to *Saint-Barth* in French, or **St. Barts** (also, **St. Barth's**) in English. The collectivity is one of four territories among the Leeward Islands in the northeastern Caribbean that comprise the French West Indies, along with Guadeloupe (200 km southeast), Martinique and Saint-Martin. St. Barts lies c. 35 km southeast of Sint Maarten/Saint-Martin and north of St Kitts. Puerto Rico lies 240 km to the west in the Lesser Antilles.

Historical population										
1766	1785	1812	1885	1961	1967	1974	1982	1990	1999	2007
327	950	5,482	2,600	2,176	2,351	2,491	3,059	5,038	6,852	8,450
Official figures from French and Swedish censuses.										

St. Barts, a volcanic island fully encircled by shallow reefs, has an area of 21 km<sup>2</sup> and had a population of 8,823 in 2008 (see table above for earlier years). Its capital is Gustavia, which also contains the main harbor to the island. It is the only Caribbean island that was a Swedish colony for any significant period of time; Guadeloupe was under Swedish rule only briefly at the end of the Napoleonic Wars. Symbolism from the Swedish national arms, the Three Crowns, still appears in the island's coat of arms. The language, cuisine and culture, however, are distinctly French. The island is a popular tourist destination during the winter holiday season, especially the rich and famous during the Christmas and New Year period.

Morne Vitet, 286 meters in height, is the highest peak in the island. There are a few sheep pens that were built with stone walls on the slopes of the mountain. A hill road leads to the Grand Cul-de-Sac from where scenic views of the entire coast line can be seen. Hills and valleys of varying topography cover the rest of the island. Two other hills near the island's east end are of nearly the same elevation, at 262 and 250 meters above sea level respectively.

Small villages are located in the rolling hills of the interior. Gustavia, the capital of the island, is located in a natural harbor that has witnessed many historical transitions. The oldest settlement that has survived is the village of Lorient (or L'Orient). Lorient's sister village on the French mainland is the city of Lorient on the southern coast of Brittany. The island's population is distributed among 40 *quartiers*, roughly corresponding to settlements. They are grouped into two parts: Leeward (*Sous le Vent*) and Windward (*Au Vent*).

The full-time residents are French citizens who work at the various establishments on the island. Most of them are descendants of the first settlers: Breton, Norman, Poitevin, Saintonge and Angevin lineage. French is the native tongue of the population, even though the Norman dialect is still spoken by some. English is understood in hotels and restaurants, although a small population of Anglophones has been resident in Gustavia for many years. The St. Barts French patois is spoken by some 500–700 people in the leeward portion of the island and is superficially related to Quebec French, whereas Creole French is limited to the windward

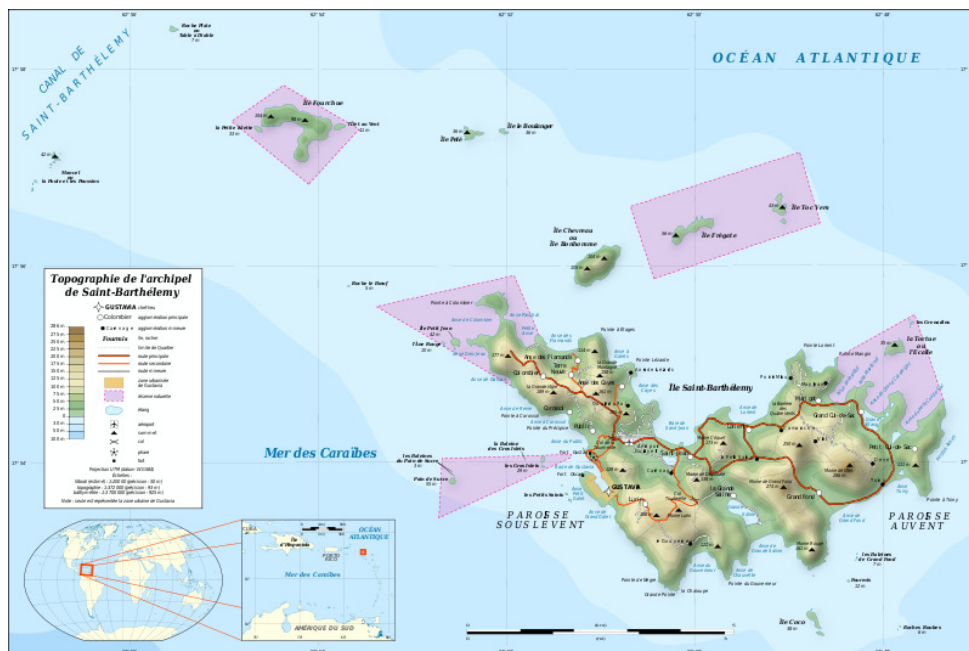
side. Unlike other populations in the Caribbean, language preference between the Creole and Patois is geographically determined, and not racially.

Among the notable structures in the town are the three forts built by the Swedes for defense purposes. One of these forts, known as Fort Oscar (formerly Gustav Adolph), overlooks the sea on the far side of La Pointe. However, the ruins have been replaced by a modern military building that now houses the local *gendarmerie*. The other fort, known as Fort Karl, now has a very few ruins. The third fort built by the Swedes is Fort Gustav, the remains of which are strewn around the weather station and Light House. This fort, built in 1787, is located on a hill slope where the ruins of ramparts, guardhouse, munitions depot and wood-burning oven, etc., can still be seen today.

## Overview of Social, Economic and Political Development

The ancient history of the Saint Barts dates to about 1000 BCE when the Ciboney people attempted to settle there but left due to the lack of water for drinking or for agriculture. It was much later, around 100 CE, that Arawak Indians began living on the island. However, they were pushed out by the Caribs around 800 CE. Modern archaeological discoveries of pottery and crude tools are related to the Carib period on the island.

During Christopher Columbus' second voyage to the Americas in 1493, he discovered the Lesser Antilles chain of islands, including Ouanalao, a small, scrubby island frequently visited by Carib Indians. Columbus named this tiny island in honor of his brother, Bartholoméo. The island proved of no interest to early colonists in the newly discovered territories of the Americas who sought gold and other riches.



Several different ethnic groups, the Amerindian Caribs, Arawaks and Tanios, tried to defend their small territories, but faced with the European colonists their battle was eventually lost. Modern weapons used by the Europeans were superior to the Amerindian's primitive war clubs and small hatchets made from conch shells.

The first European colonization of the island began in 1623 by settlers from Dieppe (a commune in the Seine-Maritime department on the northern coast of France (facing the English Channel) when Pierre Belain d'Esnameux, a private operator, established a company known as *Compagnie de Saint-Cristophe*. With financial support from King Louis XIII's chief minister, Armand Jean du Plessis (aka *Cardinal-Duc de Richelieu et de Fronsac*), d'Esnameux established French hegemony in the Caribbean islands, including St. Barts. For this purpose, the company brought over farmers from the French provinces of Normandy and Brittany.

St. Barts was formally claimed by France in 1648 when Monsieur Longvilliers de Poincy decided to recolonize the island. He sent Sir Jacques Gente with 40 or 50 men to establish a settlement. This small colony grew with the addition of some residents from Saint Kitts, most notably Lord Bonhomme. However, in 1656, the Caribs rebelled against the European settlers and killed some of them, and Saint Barthélemy was abandoned. In 1659, after peace was restored, Monsieur de Poincy once again sent a group of 30 men. By 1664, the colony had grown to a population of 100.

In 1665, when the *Compagnie de Saint-Cristophe* found it difficult to survive in the island's arid conditions, they sold it to the Sovereign Military Hospitaller Order of Saint John of Jerusalem of Rhodes and of Malta, also known as the Sovereign Military Order of Malta (SMOM), Order of Malta or Knights of Malta, which is a Roman Catholic lay religious order, traditionally of military, chivalrous and noble nature. The Maltese eight-pointed cross is found on the island's the coat of arms. In 1666, all of the inhabitants were sent to Saint Kitts against their wishes in an attempt to establish a new Irish colony. However, this attempt was a failure after the former inhabitants of Saint Barth quickly returned to claim their lands.

By 1674, the island was under the rule of the French crown and under the jurisdiction of the Colony of Guadeloupe. Corsairs, thieves and pirates made Saint Barth's their refuge, and in 1744 British forces plundered the island. Some of the island's residents fled to islands in the southern Caribbean. There was another brief takeover by the British in 1758. However, Saint Barthélemy remained a French possession and settlers returned by 1764, at which time Monsieur Descoudrelle was in command. His administration proved to be effective and the quality of life of the population improved.

However, in 1784, a curious arrangement took place between France's King Louis XVI and Sweden's King Gustav III that would forever change the destiny of this little island: France traded the island to Sweden in exchange for establishing a trade warehouse in Gothenburg, Sweden.

On 7 March 1785, the island was official ceded to Sweden, which resulted in an era of progress and prosperity after the Swedes declared Gustavia a free port. This made it convenient for Europeans to trade goods, including contraband material. Around the small, sheltered port, the town of Gustavia began to take shape with paved streets and three forts for protection: Fort Gustav, Fort Karl and Fort Oscar, named after Swedish kings. The town's buildings were constructed of wood and stone, as can still be seen today at the former town hall, the Swedish bell tower, the Brigantine, the Sub-Prefecture, and the museum/library in the former Wall House. The port was named Gustavia after the Swedish king and was developed as a duty-free port.

By 1800, the population had grown to 6,000 people. Thereafter, several years of war perturbed the island as well as a series of natural catastrophes: repeated periods of drought,

hurricanes, torrential rains and the terrible fire of 1852, which destroyed the southern sector of Gustavia. King Oscar II finally decided to give the island back to France because of his dissatisfaction that the island produced more problems than prosperity.

On 16 March 1878, after a popular referendum, the nationality of the island was once again French, and Saint Barthélemy experienced a period of relative calm that was interrupted occasionally by hurricanes, periods of drought, sickness, social problems, invasions by the British fleet, and slave revolts. The inhabitants survived by harvesting and trading salt, family agriculture, fishing, weaving straw into useful items, itinerant commerce, and raising and breeding animals.

Despite these efforts, the local economy was unable to provide a decent quality of life for the population. The men left to look for work on neighboring islands. Whole families immigrated to the U.S. Virgin Islands, in particular to Saint Thomas. Yet progress began to creep onto the island, and in spite of the misery created by the effects of World War II and the lack of water, life began to improve. Communal cisterns were built in each neighborhood, the first schools were established, and the first roads were built through the hills and into the countryside.

In 1945, aviator Remy de Haënen opened Saint Barth to the rest of the world by landing the first airplane on the savanna in Saint Jean. At the same time, the Port of Gustavia experienced increased activity.

By 1960, school children no longer had to leave the island to go to school elsewhere at the age of 11 on schooners because a junior high school opened in Gustavia, which meant that they could remain with their families another four or five years before leaving for schooling elsewhere. The quality of life on the island began to improve as more “creature comforts” began to appear.

By the 1980s, life on the island had evolved for the better in almost every way. Tourism had become important for the island’s economy. The quality of public education improved, sports became quite popular and changed the habits of the population, an electric power plant was built to produce electricity and wires carried the power to all corners of the island. The airport expanded several times and other important projects modernized the island as well. Environmental protection became an important issue as the population grew from 2,351 residents in 1967 to nearly 8,700 in 2008.

African slavery was practiced in St. Barts under the "*Ordinance concerning the Police of Slaves and free Colored People*" of 1787. The last legally owned slaves in the Swedish colony of St. Barts were granted their freedom by the State on 9 October 1847. Since the island was not a plantation area, the freed slaves suffered economic hardships due to a lack of employment opportunities. A devastating hurricane hit the island in October 1852 and this was followed by a fire. Sweden gave the island back to France in 1878. The Swedish period left its mark in the names of many of the streets and the town Gustavia (in honor of King Gustav III), and the presence of Sweden's national arms, the *Tre Kronor* in the island's coat of arms. Other heraldry include the Maltese cross, the Fleur-de-lis, the mural crown and two pelicans.

On 19 March 1946, the people of the island became French citizens with full rights. The island was placed together with Saint-Martin and Guadeloupe and Martinique, and given legal status as a Department of France. The population of St. Barts was relatively impoverished.

Since economic support was not forthcoming from France, the island developed a special relationship with U.S. Virgin Islands. Many men from St. Barts took jobs on St. Thomas in order to support their families. The island received electricity in 1961.

Until 2007, administratively, the whole island of St. Barts was a French commune (*commune de Saint-Barthélemy*) part of Guadeloupe, which is an overseas *région* and overseas *département* of France, and therefore part of the European Union. In 2003, the population voted through referendum in favor of secession from Guadeloupe in order to form a separate overseas collectivity (COM) of France. On 7 February 2007, the French Parliament passed a bill granting COM status to both St. Barts and (separately) to the neighboring Saint-Martin. The new status took effect on 15 July 2007, when the first territorial council was elected, according to the law. The island has a president (elected every 5 years), a unicameral Territorial Council of 19 members who are elected by popular vote and serve for five-year terms, and an executive council of 7 members. Elections to these councils were last held on 1, 8 and 15 July 2007 with the next election due in July 2012.

Saint Barthélemy was formerly a town within the department of Guadeloupe. The advent of organic law n° 2007-223 and °2007-224 dated February 21, 2007 allowed the island to vote for the new status of an Overseas Collectivity, in keeping with article 74 of the French Constitution. On July 15, 2007, the new Overseas Collectivity of Saint Barthélemy was officially inaugurated with the election of its Territorial Council, and its president Mr. Bruno Magras.

One senator is representing the island in the French Senate, election was held on 21 September 2008 with the next election due in September 2014. St. Barts remains part of the European Union (EU): the island's inhabitants are French citizens with EU status holding EU passports. France is responsible for the defense of the island and as such has stationed a security force on the island comprising six policemen and 13 *gendarmes* (a military force charged with police duties among civilian populations), who are posted on two-year terms of service.

The present head of the State is the President of France, who is represented by a prefect appointed by the French president on the advice of the French Ministry of Interior. The island's national anthem, representing a collectivity of France, is "La Marseillaise."

Agricultural production on the island is difficult given the dry and rocky terrain, but the early settlers managed to produce vegetables, cotton, pineapples, salt, bananas and also fishing. Sweet potato is also grown in small patches. The islanders developed commerce through the port of Gustavia. Duty-free port attractions, retail trade, high-end tourism (mostly from North America) and its luxury hotels and villas have increased the island's prosperity, reflected in the high standard of living of its citizens. The official currency of St. Barts is the Euro. INSEE estimated that the total GDP of St. Barts amounted to 179 million Eurasia in 1999 (US\$255 million at the October 2007 exchange rate). In that same year the GDP per capita of St. Barts was 26,000 Euros (US\$37,000 at the October 2007 exchange rates), which was 10 percent higher than the average GDP per capita of metropolitan France.

Tourism began in the 1960s, developed in the 1970s, and led to considerable international popularity beginning in the 1980s. Today, the island is known for its exclusivity and posh tourism. International investment and the wealth generated by wealthy tourists explain the high standard of living on the island. St. Barts is considered a playground of the rich and

famous, especially as a winter haven, and is known for its beaches, gourmet dining and high-end designers. Most of the food is imported by airplane or boat from the U.S. or France.

The island's tourism industry, though expensive, attracts 70,000 visitors every year to its luxury hotels and villas and another 130,000 people arrive by luxury boats. It also attracts a labor force from Brazil and Portugal to meet the industry needs. As a result, there is a boom in house building activity catering to the tourists and also to the permanent residents of the island, with prices as high as €61,200,000 for a beachfront villa. St. Barts has about 25 hotels, most of them with 15 rooms or fewer; the largest has 58 rooms. Hotels are classified in the traditional French manner: 3 Star, 4 Star and 4 Star Luxe. Most of the places of accommodation are in the form of private villas, of which there are an estimated 400 available to rent on the island.

The height of tourism is New Year's Eve, with celebrities and the wealthy converging on the island in yachts up to 550 feet in length for the occasion. Hotels for the New Year's celebration are sold out well in advance.

### **Overview of Religious Development**

Whether Roman Catholic, Anglican or Evangelical, the population of Saint Barthélemy is very attached to its religious traditions or its small prayer groups. There are certain ceremonies or family events that unite the churches in an ecumenical service.

**Roman Catholicism** has the largest number of adherents on the island, with two churches: Our Lady of the Assumption in Gustavia (*Notre Dame de l'Assomption in Gustavia*) and Our Lady of the Assumption in Lorient (*Notre Dame de l'Assomption in Lorient*).

The Catholic Church in Gustavia is also known as the Ancient Presbytery of the Catholic Church of Gustavia (*l'Ancien presbytère de l'église catholique de Gustavia*). The building was constructed in 1822 as a replacement for an older church of the same name in Lorient. The church in Gustavia has a bell tower that is separated from the main building and still rings loud and clear.

There are two Roman Catholic elementary schools on the island: St. Mary's School (Ecole Sainte Marie) in Colombier and St. Joseph's School (Ecole Saint Joseph) in Lorient. Also, there is a little community chapel in Colombier, opened long ago by Father de Bruyn and frequented by the faithful from nearby neighborhoods.

During Swedish rule (1784-1878), education was cantonized. French-Catholic schooling was provided to residents in the agricultural areas, while those in the capital area received a Anglican Protestant English-language education.

**The Anglican Church of Gustavia** (*l'Église Anglicane de Gustavia*), built in 1885 with stones brought from the island of St. Eustatius, is an important religious building. It is located on one of the town's most elegant roads, called the Rue du Centenaire. It has a bell tower and a rock wall encircles the church property.

**The Evangelical Church of St. Barthélemy** (*l' Eglise Evangélique de Saint-Barth*) was officially founded by Apostle Iris Romney on 15 May 1995, but it was known as the church



of prayer meetings in homes since 1993. That is why it is also called the “House of Prayer Come and See.” This church is Pentecostal.

### **Other Religions – unknown**

Compiled and edited by Clifton L. Holland

Last edited on 10 December 2013

### **Sources**

Anderson, Justice C. *An Evangelical Saga: Baptists and Their Precursors in Latin America*. Longwood FL: Xulon Press, 2005.

Barrett, Sr., Leonard E. *The Rastafarians*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1997 (first published in 1988).

Brierly, Peter. *World Churches Handbook*. London, England: Christian Research, 1997.

Dryfoot, Arthur Charles. *The Shaping of the West Indian Church, 1492-1962*. Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1999; published jointly with The Press University of the West Indies in Jamaica.

The Evangelical Church of St. Barthélemy website: <http://evangilestbarth.com/>

Fernández Olmos, Margarite y Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert, editores. *Sacred Possessions: Vodou, Santería, Obeah and the Caribbean*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1997.

Holland, Clifton L., editor. *World Christianity: Central America and the Caribbean*. Monrovia, CA: MARC-World Vision International, 1981.

Horowitz, Michael M., editor. *Peoples and Cultures of the Caribbean: An Anthropological Reader*. Garden City, NY: The Natural History Press, 1971.

Kettani, Houssain. “The Muslim Population in the Americas.” Proceedings of the 2009 International Conference on Social Sciences and Humanities, Singapore, 9-11 October, 2009, pp. xxx-xxx; available at: <http://www.pupr.edu/hkettani/papers/ICSSH2009Americas.pdf>

Maynard, G. Oliver. *A History of the Moravian Church: Eastern West Indies Province*. Port of Spain, Trinidad: Yuille’s Printerie, 1968.

Parker, J. Fred. *Mission to the World: A History of Missions in the Church of the Nazarene through 1985*. Nazarene Publishing House, Kansas City, MO, 1988.

Rogozinski, Jan. *A Brief History of the Caribbean, from the Arawak and Carib to the Present*. Revised Edition. New York City, NY: Plume Books – Penguin Group, 1999.

Taylor, Patrick, editor. *Nation Dance: Religion, Identity and Cultural Difference in the Caribbean*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001.

The Moravian Church Eastern West Indies Province website at:  
<http://www.moravianmission.org/partnerprovinces/westindies.phtml>

(about 3,555 words)