



Author's website:
www.poupettesmith.com

Crossroads

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CARIBBEAN CURRENTS

Ten Francs on a Forgotten Isle

Firefly anchors off Marie-Galante, where "fixed price" takes on new meaning.

By Poupette Smith

I peered at the ruins of the *habitation* (estate) whizzing past my window, as we careened along in a bus. Leo and I were on our way back to *Firefly*, which lay at anchor off a quiet beach on the outskirts of St.-Louis on Marie-Galante, about halfway down the long chain of the Lesser Antilles. It was sugar-harvesting time, and we had just emerged from a tour of the island's last-remaining fully operational sugar factory, where we'd stood for hours watching huge mounds of purple and green cane - all hand-cut by machete - being offloaded from tractor trailers and two-wheeled ox carts.



The drooling oxen - each led by a line attached to its nose ring - worked in pairs. Lumbering under the weight of a ton or two, the animals were led first to the weighing platform, next, to the sampling drill (where the cane's sugar content was measured), and, finally, to the unloading area.

I felt lucky to have Jacqueline as the driver of our *taxico* (a minivan used as a bus). Good-natured and chatty, she was so knowledgeable about oxen that Leo and I concluded that she - like our fisherman friend Jules and most of the isle's other inhabitants - had probably done a stint in the sugarcane business. Once a major employer, today the industry consists of just one factory and three rum distilleries, and struggles to survive.

Reaching our stop in St.-Louis, Jacqueline said, "*Dix francs, s'il vous plaît.*"

While Leo dug into his pocket and handed over a small, two-tone ten-franc coin, distinguishable by its nickel center and bronze outer rim, I couldn't resist asking Jacqueline a final question: "What happens to the beasts after they retire?"

"Most are slaughtered," she said. "Their unique sugarcane diet makes for especially tasty steaks."

As Jacqueline sped away, I thought about the rest of Marie-Galante's nonhuman population. While hiking and zooming around on our rented motorbike, Leo and I had noticed that the countryside was dotted with exceptionally good-natured animals that had an appetite for the island's sugary commodity: We saw cane-munching dogs, cats, pigs, and cattle. Those freely roaming creatures showed no signs of either hunger or fear. They neither begged for food nor cowered in submission; they simply sniffed inquisitively and trotted alongside us on our explorations. I entertained the fanciful notion that their unusually sweet behavior might also have something to do with their

sugarcane diet.

"Let's check the general store," said Leo, turning onto a side street and jolting me out of my reverie. "Maybe they'll have saved us a *bidon*."

Bidon is French for "can" or "canteen," but Leo was referring to something a little different - a solid, wide-neck plastic container that holds 20 liters and is fitted with a large, graspable, watertight screw top. Available in French overseas territories, like Marie-Galante, bidons are shipped from Europe, filled with pigs' tails pickled in brine. Once the delicacy has been sold, locals pounce on the empty bidons, which are readily transformed into cement molds or filled with charcoal, water, plants, fish, castor beans - anything, really. *Firefly's* old bidon - acquired some 12 years ago in French Guyana and now showing severe signs of sun damage - had served us admirably as everything from a buoyant suitcase and man-overboard flotation device to a washing machine, rain-catcher, and dinner-guest stool.

Entering the shop, we were pleased to find that one had been set aside.

"Is it my imagination," said Leo, paying for the bidon with another ten francs at the cash register, "or does everything on this island cost an even ten francs?"

Sure enough, when I searched my memory I remembered an inordinate amount of ten-franc items: There were the little mounds of market produce - carrots, beans, plantains, or papayas - grouped together in piles priced at ten francs each; and there were the ten-franc glasses of fresh guava or soursoop juice, not to mention the ten-franc cups of creamy homemade coconut ice cream scooped straight out of a wooden bucket and sold from the back of a *fourgonnette* (small van). Come to think of it, we had bought ten-franc loaves of whole-meal bread, four-packs of yogurt priced at ten francs, and ten-franc slices of fancy patisserie. Must be the coin's unmistakable appearance, I decided; that and how easy it is for merchants to work with multiples of ten.

Then, remembering the old Creole woman who sold sundries out of her home, I said to Leo, "What about the bananas on the stalk you got yesterday?"

He laughed. Honey, rum, spices, tropical flowers, vegetables, and fruit had dangled from the woman's ceiling and had been spread out on rickety tables and piled high on the floor. Leo recalled that when he'd pointed to a stalk of his favorite fruit and asked "How much?" the barefoot vendor had shuffled over and said, "Well, now, that depends on how much you want, doesn't it? You can have five francs worth, or ten francs, or maybe you'd prefer twenty francs worth?"

Marie-Galante rises from a shallow limestone shelf, and her gently rolling hills and lagoonlike turquoise waters contrast sharply with the high peaks and steep slopes of her volcanic neighbors. Reminiscent of the whole Caribbean in the '60s, the island is untouched by mass tourism and, as such, has retained its charming rural character. Fragrant tropical breezes are ushered in through open doors and windows, augmented by the occasional ceiling fan. Pristine beaches lie deserted and uncluttered by resorts. Locals tend to be industrious and proud, having not yet learned the savviness required when big money comes to town. The residents we spoke with valued their quiet backwater and wished to preserve it just as it was.

Although day-trippers ferry over from nearby Guadeloupe, Marie-Galante lies off the beaten track. It lacks an international airport and is too far to windward to lure most charter boats. Despite its lack of development, the island receives some of the money that France pours into its Overseas Departments. The result is a curious blend of tradition and progress: One sees solar panels and sophisticated wind generators beside huts and oxen, while at the sleepy wharf subsidized ferries tie up to docks held together by shiny stainless-steel bolts.

Armed with our ten-franc replacement bidon, Leo and I continued on our way, nodding and smiling at familiar faces that inspected us as eagerly as we inspected them. Except when heavily loaded down, we relished the one-mile walk that took us through town, then along a shady shoreline road, back to *Firefly's* dinghy. The day's heat had abated by the time we passed, and the streets were buzzing with activity.

And Now, the Ten-Franc Question...

Marie-Galante's eponym was:

- A. a French aristocrat
- B. a French king's mistress
- C. a French poodle
- D. none of the above

The correct answer, of course, is D.

Christopher Columbus himself named the island after the flagship of his first voyage to the New World. Better known as the *Santa Maria*, the boat's full name was *Santa Maria de Galante*. But she ran aground on Hispaniola (now divided between Haiti and the Dominican Republic) and never reached the shores of her namesake, which was the first island Columbus claimed during his second voyage, in 1493. When the French took over, Maria became Marie, the "de" became a hyphen, and the saint bit was mothballed.

Madame Gilbert, who was always engaged in something to do with food, was settled on a curbside corner, shelling peas (which, undoubtedly, would be taken to market and sold in ten-franc lots). Monsieur Robert, working by the side of the road, assembled his wire-mesh fish traps. The toothless woman we'd noticed gossiping on the steps of her house that morning hadn't budged from her vantage point and continued to snag passersby, even as she sorted castor beans - *karapat*, in Creole. Making castor oil is a slow process involving several steps, but on Marie-Galante the dark, viscous, unrefined liquid is prized as a cosmetic and as a purgative. (Who knows? Somewhere it's probably being poured into little bottles that will sell for ten francs apiece.)

We reached the road sign that had the word "St. -Louis" crossed by a diagonal line - indicating we were exiting town - and eventually came to our friend Jules's toy-size house. Jules is a handsome, hard-working fisherman in his 80s, who rises and sleeps with the sun. His little home sits wedged between the beach and the road, and when he is not out setting or retrieving his bamboo traps, he is busy making them on his front porch. He is one of only a few men on Marie-Galante who still practice this dying art.

Leo and I watched Jules as he sat on his little stool, trimming bamboo strips with a sharp knife. He used one thigh - covered with a long protective sheath made from a rubber inner tube - as his work surface. Bamboo poles lay scattered on the floor, and a partially woven trap rested nearby. Pausing for a moment to chat, he complained that young fishermen were lazy, preferring to use cheap and quickly assembled wire traps, despite the fact that when their locator lines broke, the intact traps remained on the ocean floor, and fish caught inside had no chance of escape.

"Such a waste," he explained. "Bamboo traps make more sense because the uncollected ones deteriorate with time, and the fish can eventually nibble through them."

After watching him work a bit longer, we bade Jules *bonsoir* and soon arrived at Aux Plaisirs des Marins ("The Seamen's Pleasures"), a family-run bar and restaurant in front of which *Firefly's* dinghy was hauled up on the beach.

"How 'bout sharing an ice-cold passionfruit juice," I suggested.

"I'm all out of money," said Leo, pulling his pockets inside out as proof. "Got any?"

"Sure," I offered. "Here, take my last ten francs."

This being Marie-Galante, it was just enough.

A licensed captain, Poupette Smith has contributed to Sail and Sailing, and has lived aboard Firefly for 13 years.

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