'THE FRENCH CARIBBEAN'

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What exactly do we mean by 'the French Caribbean' ?

Historically speaking, as discussed in my lectures, the French have a dramatic and complicated history in the Caribbean. Most of the Caribbean islands were colonized, occupied or annexed by France at one point. The many French names of capital cities on 'English' islands attest to this: Castries on St. Lucia, Basse-Terre on St. Kitts, and Roseau on Dominica are good examples. French cultural influences run deep on many of the islands and add at least some flavoring on almost all of them.

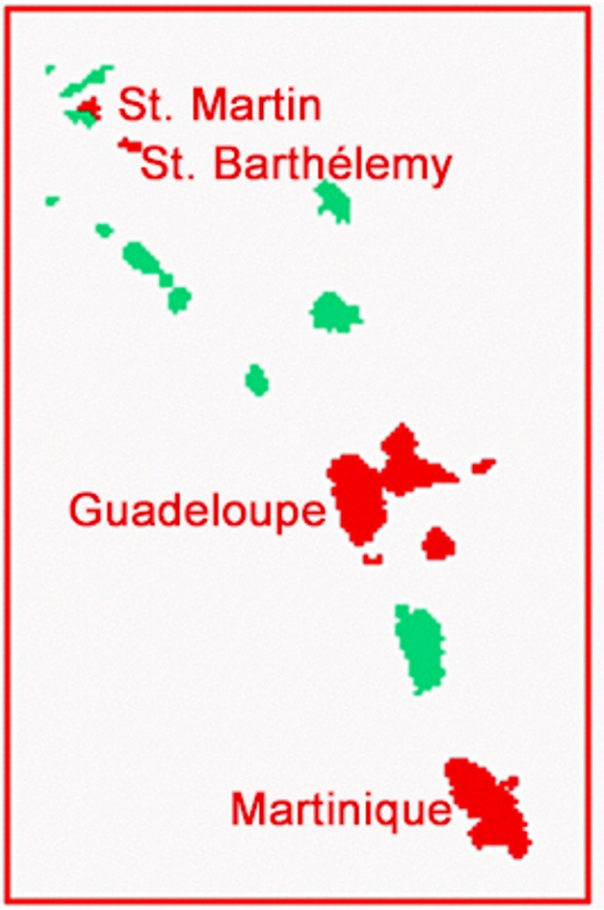
Haiti was the signature French colony of St. Domingue until it won a hard-fought war of independence in 1804 (the 2nd nation in the Americas to do so, after the USA). But the list below shows all of the islands that the French held for at least 10 years. Many were shorter and intermittent occupations, but they added up over time to significant French settlement and cultural influence. The Caribbean was a tumultuous region for over three centuries, with the major European powers vying for hegemony, including the French, British, Dutch, Spanish, Danish and Swedish (the capital city of Gustavia on St. Barthélemy is named after Sweden's King Gustav). The island of Tobago holds the record for sovereignty changes: it changed hands 33 times!

While all the islands on the list below were French for sustained periods, the islands highlighted in yellow are the only ones that remain French today. Thus historically speaking the 'French Caribbean' could be said to include all of the islands below. But with only those 4 highlighted in yellow remaining French, the most accurate contemporary definition of 'the French Caribbean' is the group of islands including Guadeloupe, Martinique, St. Barthélemy ('St. Barts'), and St. Martin (the northern 6/10 of the an island shared with Dutch St. Maarten).



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That said, the political situations of France's overseas possessions are quite variable. *France Outre-Mer*' (Overseas France') extends worldwide - France in fact has 12 time zones, the most of any country (trivia players take note). The status of its possessions has evolved over time and continues to evolve. It is complex and variable enough that it has been said that even French academics cannot fully understand or articulate the nuances, and legal scholars have yet to sort it all out. Nevertheless, there are 2 major categories as depicted below. The DEPARTMENTS (*départements)* are part of integral France, just like U.S. states are part of the USA. Martinique and Guadeloupe are thus analogous to Hawaii. Because they are an integral part of France, they are also part of the E.U. and use the Euro. They have full citizenship with all the rights and representation thereof, including voting rights in French national elections and EU Parliamentary elections. But department status, like U.S. statehood, means they are subject to French national law - with a loss of autonomy to some degree. France has 96 departments (including Corsica) in Europe, and 5 overseas departments as below.

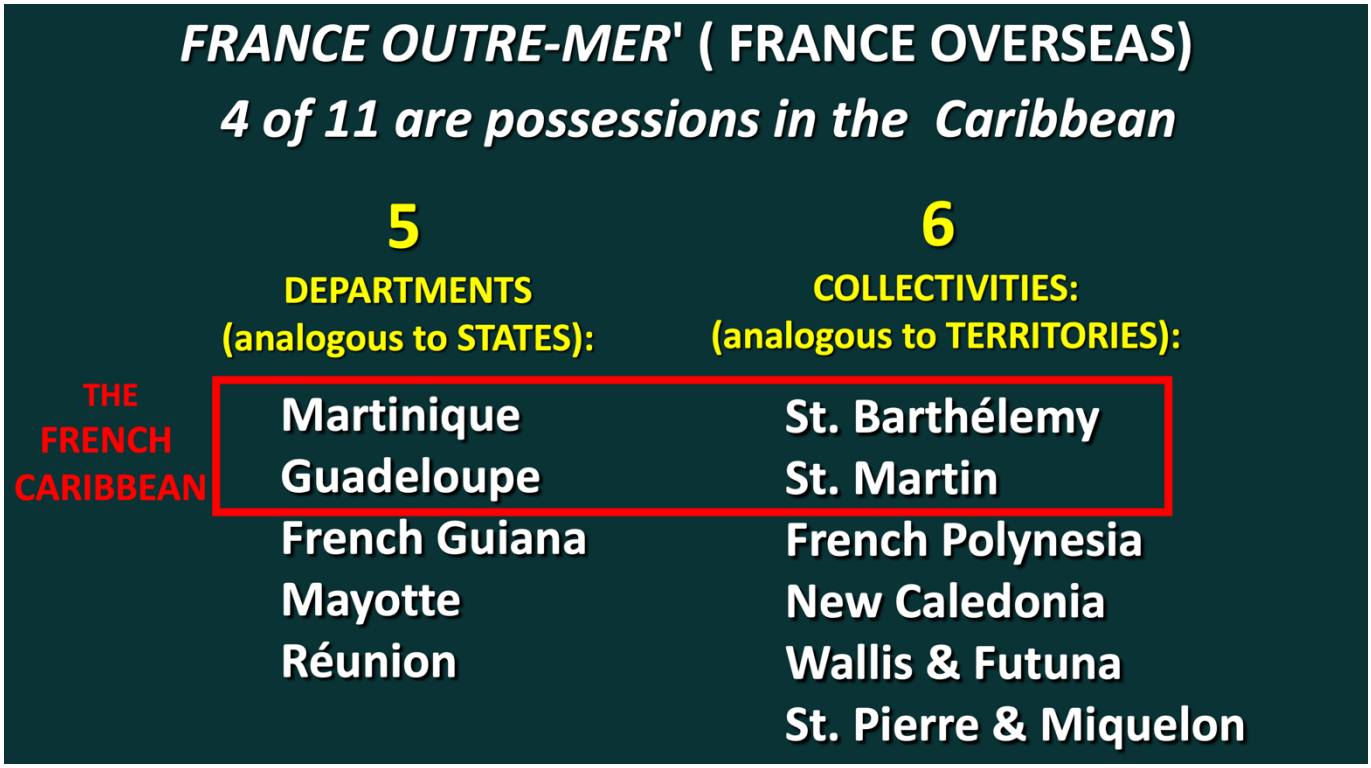
The 2nd category is overseas COLLECTIVITY. These are possessions that are not part of integral France. Not being formally integrated into France to the same degree, they have more autonomy in some respects. The 6 collectivities have varying degrees of autonomy, with French Polynesia followed closely by New Caledonia

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having the most autonomy. All are French citizens but none are voting EU members. French national voting rights vary: French Polynesia, New Caledonia, and Wallis & Futuna citizens can vote in French national elections, while those of St. Bart's, St. Martin, and St. Pierre & Miquelon (the last tiny vestige of once-vast French Canada) do not have direct voting rights. All the collectivities have representation in the French Assembly and Senate.

The politics regarding autonomy for the COLLECTIVITIES are varied and contentious, but issues of 'state's rights' can also be contentious for the DEPARTMENTS. That is why it is not uncommon to see political controversy or even unrest in both the DEPARTMENTS (example: civil unrest over French national policies in Guadeloupe and Martinique in recent years) and the COLLECTIVITIES (example: ongoing friction over extent of autonomy vs.

independence in French Polynesia and New Caledonia, and protests over the French government's social and economic policies in St. Martin). St. Barts, mostly a haven for the wealthy, seems to be pretty happy!



All in all the French historical presence in the Caribbean is deep and variegated, and the French legacy greatly enriches the islands today in cultural, culinary, musical, and linguistic aspects - especially in the islands of 'the French Caribbean' proper