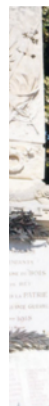


French LEAVE

With dedicated bike paths and pretty terrain, Île de Ré is the perfect place for a beginner-friendly cycling holiday, discovers Alicia Miller

Left or right?' my husband asked, pulling his bike to a halt at the sleepy intersection. Around us, poppy-studded fields rambled towards beachy seafront, the horizon punctuated by farmhouses selling locally harvested sea salt. There were no cars and no sounds, apart from the gentle rustle of breeze on grass. The late May sun slid out from behind a cloud and kissed our faces.





'Does it matter?' I responded, parking up beside him, taking the opportunity to rest after a half-hour of cycling along a gently undulating pathway. 'It's not like we'll get lost. We either hit a beautiful market, or an oyster bar for lunch, or a nice beach. Any way we go, it's a win.'

Hung off the French Atlantic coast above port city La Rochelle, connected to the mainland by a thread of bridge, Île de Ré is an 85sq km parcel that combines all the best bits of France. Markets bursting with cheese and patisserie; no-frills oyster shacks and salt pans; gorgeous beaches, and chic towns with high-end boutiques and romantic restaurants. There are stone cottages draped in wildflowers and pretty old churches, gourmet ice cream shops and unpretentious wineries.

It's all this that's drawn me here, and more. Between Île de Ré's immensely flat topography - its highest point is just 19 metres above sea level - 110km of dedicated cycling paths and pro-bike culture, it's also the *parfait* place for me to try my very first cycling holiday.

Finding my balance

Our week-long biking adventure had started two days prior, when my husband and I collected our wheels from the Beach Bikes shop in seaside Le-Bois-Plage-en-Ré, one of dozens of hire outlets across the

Above: capital Saint-Martin-de-Ré; below and right: pretty Le-Bois-Plage-en-Ré

island (beachbikes.fr). I'd never been much of a biker, but a safety briefing, a map and the reassurance of roadside support should a breakdown occur made me feel ready to tackle the quiet surrounding streets of the island's main resort town, set on the south coast.

Once we got past the first couple of avenues, lined in pretty cream-fronted holiday homes, it was like, well, riding a bike, and we were kids again; zooming past the sprawling market, home to fishmongers and butchers; next to the broad and sandy beach, one of the island's main draws for families; into the cobbled centre with its humble church. And, eventually, to our self-catering accommodation, Villa Adalaide, set moments from the coast.

We creaked open the door to a suntrap courtyard with sparkling pool, outdoor kitchen and dining area, and a wrap-around bungalow-style villa lined in windows. After parking our bikes in the garage, we stepped inside the house to find a friendly and stylish base oozing the magic of a seaside summertime: shell collections from beach walks; bedrooms with floaty linens; a grand fireplace stacked with logs. With plenty of space to sprawl, this would be the perfect base. Particularly if the cycling bit didn't work out, I quietly thought to myself as we uncorked a bottle of local wine and unpacked. If I really hated it, there's always this pool instead... >>



Capital appeal

Turns out, I needn't have worried. The next morning, when we set off on our bikes for the island capital of Saint-Martin-de-Ré, I almost immediately found my rhythm. With few cars in sight

– and a bike-only route for about 90% of our 7km flat cycle through town fringes, forest and meadow – it wasn't only easy but enjoyable too, with just the right amount of burn for my still-adjusting thighs.

Set on the north side of the island, Saint-Martin has an entirely different feel from resorty Le Bois.

The first clue came when the cycle path cast us through the city's 17th-century fortifications – now UNESCO-listed – and spit us into a more crammed centre of historic cobbled streets and wonky houses fringed in hollyhocks. We parked our bikes and strolled along the streets past chic boutiques selling designer sandals, beachwear and interiors to a buzzy old harbour, full of bars and restaurants.

Then, ready to rest our legs, we pulled up a seat at a waterside bar and ordered two Kir royales. We had no specific agenda and were in no hurry to begin the ride home.

Pushing north

By day four and with a few short journeys under our belt, we felt acclimatised enough to live in the saddle to tackle something longer: a ride up to the north-west reaches of the island, where the landscapes segue from golden fields and farmhouses to a glittering chequerboard of salt pans. As we



Swap the quiet coast for the buzzy port of Saint-Martin-de Ré (right), and pay a visit to the Phare des Baleines lighthouse (below right) on the western tip of the island

followed the roads up towards Ars-en-Ré, about 12km from our home base, there were fewer and fewer cars, and the route became littered with honesty shacks selling fine *fleur de sel* (sea salt) and oyster shacks shucking bivalves raised practically on the spot.

Finally giving in to our appetites – and our aching legs – we stopped for lunch at La Cabane du Feneau, sitting in a sun-kissed garden to devour platters of oysters alongside sweet langoustines, fat shrimp and other simply prepared seafood, all washed down with gluggable island-made white wine.

'This certainly justifies all the cycling,' said my husband, using a butter-smothered round of baguette to dab up the lemony, saline juices on his plate. Maybe bikers were on to something, I thought; this is the first holiday where I might return with a calorie deficit.

Taking it easy

After our lunchtime stop, we had carried on to explore the northerly reaches of the island, stopping to see the monochrome church bell tower of Ars-en-Ré, a quiet but stylish town full of lovely boutiques. We even reached Phare des Baleines, the lighthouse perched on the island's tip, where

nearby we further fuelled up with some decadent ice creams from La Martinière.

And so by day six of our week-long cycling break, we practically felt like Olympians Laura and Jason Kenny, hopping on to our bikes for a speedy ride to La Flotte once we had finished breakfast. The bustling town, set around a harbour, is known for its excellent daily market, and I filled my bike basket to the brim with fresh-baked breads, cheeses and a rainbow of bright locally grown veg, including the local version of Jersey Royal potatoes, perfectly in season.

We had spared no expense for our final self-catering dinner at Villa Adalaide and apparently no energy either, as when we returned home from the morning shop, we collapsed on to the suntrap outdoor sofas for a midday snooze.

We awoke a few hours later, deeply relaxed and refreshed, but without the time for the long afternoon cycle that we had planned. So instead, we decided to give our legs another kind of workout, with a wander along the beautiful beach at our home base in Le Bois.

We padded down to the water, where golden sands spread out in both directions, fringed by frothy surf. 'Left or right?' my husband asked, but he already knew what I would say.

freewheeling fun

Where to stay

VILLA ADALAIDE, LE-BOIS-PLAGE-EN-RÉ

This chic villa (below) is a great option, especially for families who want a nearby beach. Four bedrooms sleep up to eight people, and an open-plan dining area and kitchen spills on to a courtyard with heated pool and outdoor cooker.

✚ **Seven nights from £3,747;**
oliverstravels.com



HÔTEL DE TOIRAS, SAINT-MARTIN-DE-RÉ

This elegant hotel by the port has a Michelin-rated restaurant and rooms with regal atmosphere.

✚ **Double rooms from £234;**
hotel-de-toiras.com

Where to eat and drink

RÉ OSTRÉA, SAINT-MARTIN-DE-RÉ

Overlooking the coast, this oyster restaurant is popular for its super-fresh bivalves and bountiful pourings of wine.

L'HUÎTRE DORÉ, ARS-EN-RÉ A simple oyster bar with picnic benches on a grassy knoll. No frills, but delicious.

BEACH BAR, LE-BOIS-PLAGE-EN-RÉ

This spot on the sands attracts families for pizzas and Aperol spritzes.

Where to shop

LES ASSOIFFÉS, LE-BOIS-PLAGE-EN-RÉ A fabulous wine shop with unique French tipples.

OCTOPUS, ARS-EN-RÉ Contemporary gift shop selling books, children's toys and great coffees.

ESPRIT DU SEL, SAINT-MARTIN-DE-RÉ

This capital shop peddles all kinds of goodies featuring the island's sea salt, including caramels and flavoured seasoning mixes for cooking.

*WE FELT LIKE
OLYMPIANS
LAURA
AND JASON
KENNY'*

