

## Travel Direct flights to La Rochelle add to appeal of Ile de Re

# Live the good life, French style

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**W**HEN Roger Vadim descended on the Côte d'Azur in the late 50s to direct Brigitte Bardot in a film that thrust her into the public spotlight, it changed her life forever and transformed what had been a sleepy row of villages into an international platform and party hot spot for the rich and famous.

Visitors in search of the good life still flock there, but the more discerning tourist in love with the real face of France, heads to an island off the west coast, which not only matches the Riviera for sun, but outclasses it in just about everything else in terms of joie de vivre, charm and laid-back sophistication, to such an extent, it's hard to leave behind.

The Île de Ré is something of a jewel, shimmering with translucent light that dazzles and captivates. French tourists adore it, Americans liken it to the Hamptons and visitors from the UK can't get enough of it - if you're English that is.

We've been slow off the mark north of the border but that has gradually changed since Jet2.com's direct flights started operating last year from Edinburgh to La Rochelle and as more of us discover, this idyllic spot is nothing short of picture-book perfect, numbers are bound to grow.

Located in the Poitou-Charentes region and linked to the mainland by a toll bridge, the island is made up of ten villages

each one quite unique and charming in its own offer



**EASY DOES IT:** The harbour at St Martin, below left, Olivia Mathe and right, her Hotel de Toiras

to suit young and old alike.

Families with young children looking for a safe haven with a relaxed tempo will love Le Bois Plage - a bucket and spade kind of hideaway with a nostalgic appeal and gentle way of life that immediately locks you in its spell, and has you fantasising about moving there permanently.

Winding, cobbled lanes lead to tidy little squares dotted with pavement bistros and white-washed houses, while coastal paths open out unexpectedly to reveal a stretch of blond sand and a razor blue blanket of Atlantic Ocean glistening in the sun.

As stress-free zones go, this is a winner, so if your idea of bliss is relaxing on a sun lounger, doing very little, pack a picnic and make a day of it. There's a beach club with loads of activities to keep the kids occupied and trained staff on hand to give mum and dad a bit of a break or per-

haps, if they're up to it, try their hand at sea kayaking or windsurfing with a qualified instructor.

It's easy to get around the island and the best and most relaxing way to do it is by bike. Everything is geared up for two wheels, and you'll find bikes for hire - and that includes trailers for babies and toddlers - just about everywhere.

Locals and visitors make full use of the 60 miles of safe cycle paths that follow routes past vineyards, salt marshes and oyster beds and as the landscape is flat, cycling on Ré is far from taxing.

Life doesn't move quite in the same manana time scale in St Martin, but the stylish capital somehow manages to capture a rhythm of life that almost moves in synch with the flow and ebb of the tide.

It's an intoxicating blend of historic and modern, vibrant and mellow and oozes the kind of class money can't buy.

Narrow streets lined with ter-

aced houses shadowed by columns of hollyhocks overlook boutiques selling everything from voile window screens to hand-made jewellery and pottery, while the quayside is home to seafood restaurants and patisseries and the all important market, jam-packed with mouth-watering local produce that make us so envious of our Gallic amis.

Olivia Mathé promotes this wonderful larder in quite a unique way to her guests at the Hôtel de Toiras, a beautiful pale, weathered 17th century stone property overlooking the harbour.

If you'd like to create a menu specifically tailored to your taste, let the staff know in the morning, giving details of your likes and dislikes and that evening, after the finest ingredients have been sourced, you'll be presented with an exquisite dinner, prepared by an inspired chef, which will be a talking point of your holiday long after you've returned home.

We had our very own culinary adventure on the last night of our stay in the beautiful walled garden tucked into the rear of the building.

Plump roasted langoustines in a creamy broth, were followed by a succulent fillet of John Dory, drizzled with a silky vierge sauce and to finish, sweet roasted apricots and almonds, balanced with a delicate macaroon and pistachio ice cream that was truly sensational.

When the hotel opened its doors in 2004, Olivia's criterion was that guests should have a spellbinding experience and that's exactly what they get.

With a career in hospitality, latterly at the George V in Paris, this



vibrant young woman was well equipped to create her dream of transforming a disused townhouse into a luxurious haven of rooms and suites.

Her emphasis is on the personal touch and everything is a reflection of her style and grace, and although the interior is furnished with exquisite antiques and soft furnishings, it's not stuffy or ostentatious.

Instead, it's an oasis of calm, run by an exceptional team and as a result, is well on the way to being the first hotel in the region to be awarded five star status.

There's nothing in isolation that makes life on the Île de Ré so captivating, the truth is, it's a unique mix of everything you ever wanted but thought you'd never find, and given the chance, I would return in a heartbeat.

## Late deals and special offers

**MEDITERRANEAN CRUISE:** Picknucruise (0131-443 0766) has last cabins on a seven-night Thomson Destiny cruise flying direct from Edinburgh on 22 October and visiting Majorca, Nice, Monte Carlo, Florence/Pisa, Rome and Corsica. Now from £679p/p with free upgrade to outside cabin if booked before Monday.

**LANZAROTE:** Direct Holidays has seven nights from £375 per person [based on 3 sharing] at the three-star Punta Jabillo Apartments in Costa Tegui, from Edinburgh on 24 September

**RHODES:** Direct Holidays also has seven nights from £219 per person [based on 3 sharing] at the two-star Villa & Apartments Tsambika in Pefkos, self catering, from Edinburgh on 21 October. Call 0871-664 7764 or www.directholidays.co.uk

**PRAGUE:** Flexibletrips has two nights from £158 per person at the two-star Hotel Fortuna Luna B&B from Edinburgh on 28 December. Call 0844-879 8271 quote reference number 8818664 or log onto www.flexibletrips.com

**COSTA DEL SOL:** From £222 flying from Edinburgh on 12 September for five nights, with self-catering accommodation at the four-star Sol Timor Apartments in Torremolinos, return overseas transfers and taxes. Based on four sharing To book visit www.flyglobespan.com or call 0871-987 1689.

**CROATIA:** Departing Edinburgh from 23 September, this seven night holiday includes half-board accommodation at the two-star Adriatic Hotel in Dubrovnik, return overseas transfers and taxes. From £394 pp based on two sharing Visit www.flyglobespan.com or call 0871 987 1689.

**FRENCH RIVIERA:** A three-night B&B break includes at the three-star L'Oasis Hotel in Nice, return overseas transfers and taxes costs £259 pp based on two sharing, from Edinburgh on 11 September. Visit www.flyglobespan.com or call 0871-987 1689.

**PARIS:** Flight from Edinburgh and three nights at the three-star Citea Maisons Alfort costs £293pp on 22 September with www.ebookers.com

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### TRAVEL FACTS

Jet2.com Edinburgh to La Rochelle, visit [www.jet2.com](http://www.jet2.com) in advance for the best deals. Hôtel de Toiras offers nightly rates from 165 euros based on two people sharing a superior room with breakfast. Tel. 00 33 5 46 35 40 32 or visit [www.hotel-de-toiras.com](http://www.hotel-de-toiras.com) for further details.

For information on the Poitou-Charentes region and Île de Ré, visit [www.visit-poitou-charentes.com](http://www.visit-poitou-charentes.com) and [www.iledere.com](http://www.iledere.com).

