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The secret island idyll this capital city doesn't want you to know

A weekend at this tranquil escape, beloved by the French and undiscovered by tourists, is filled with plenty of cycling, fascinating history and frozen macarons.



The seafront at Ile de Re showing the facade of Hotel de Toiras.

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On the Île de Ré, a tiny island off the west coast of France, residents are only permitted to paint their shutters in 16 shades, ranging from sage green to ice blue. The streets are charmingly cobbled and wild hollyhocks bloom over fishermen's cottages. While cars are allowed, cycling is the favoured mode of transport, with affluent young families dressed in Breton stripes cycling along a lattice of sandy paths covering more than 100 kilometres.

It's the kind of quaint French town that international travellers love to overrun. Except that here, the holidaymakers drifting in each July and August are mostly French; even the most travelled of my Australian friends look at me blankly when I tell them where I'm headed.



George's restaurant at Hotel de Toiras.

Ré, as it's known, is a popular bolthole for well-heeled Parisians. Many keep second homes on the island, to the point where it's sometimes called the 21st arrondissement of Paris.

It also gets slugged as the French Hamptons or Martha's Vineyard, a high-end yet low-key antidote to the city. Accessible from the port city of La Rochelle via a stone bridge that curves over the Atlantic, this idyll stretches just 30 kilometres from top to toe, composed of 10 postcard-worthy villages, chic hotels, a dozen or so beaches, plus vineyards and oyster beds and their rich rewards.



Henri Matisse's, 'Luxe, Calme et Volupté', 1904. Alamy

"It is almost [like] *Luxe, Calme et Volupté*," a Île de Ré regular tells me. He's referring to Henri Matisse's 1904 oil painting of a shimmering beach picnic, based on a line from the Charles Baudelaire poem *L'Invitation au Voyage*. "There all is order and beauty. Luxury, peace and pleasure."

Arriving in the capital, Saint-Martin-de-Ré, I rent a bike from YooToo – it's electric because the staff insist I'll appreciate the extra juice in the blustery wind, even though the island is flat as a crêpe. I ride through the UNESCO-listed Vauban fortifications circling the town, and before long I'm whizzing along the coastline, the ocean on one side, grapevines on the other, and the scent of fennel and salt drifting in the air.



The streets of La Flotte in Île de Ré. **Alamy**

The landscapes morph into pine forests, then silvery salt marshes. In the Middle Ages, salt farming became a thriving industry on the island and even today, local *sauniers* harvest the white gold by hand. Every few kilometres, I pass roadside wagons stocked with bags of *fleur de sel* tied with a bow, and an honesty box to drop coins in.

I pedal southeast to the harbour town of La Flotte and stop at Rue de la Marche, a medieval-style market where vendors banter in French and I fill my basket with a warm baguette, fat saucisson and strawberries. Another couple of kilometres spent cycling through cornfields, and I'm at Cistercian Abbaye des Chateliers, the ruins of a 12th-century abbey rising from a field of poppies.



Abbey of Chateliers in a field of poppies. **Alamy**

For golden beaches, I head to the top of the island, where Plage de la Patache and Plage de Trousse-Chemise are untamed and unspoilt – and not an exorbitantly priced sun lounger in sight. While the French elite travel to the Riviera to see and be seen, they come here to do the opposite.

The busiest beaches lie on the south coast, an endless sweep of sand between Le Bois-Plage and La Couarde, backed by dunes sprouting with coastal brush. It feels almost otherworldly, as if you've stepped into an impressionist painting.

At a beachfront oyster shack I slurp half a dozen glossy *huîtres* with bread and butter, washed down with a glass of Provencal rosé, all for under €20 (\$35). I happen upon La Cabanajam near Saint-Martin by chance, but oyster huts like this are dotted up and down the coast, made to drift into rather than cross off a checklist.



The Gardens of Villa Clarisse.



Villa Clarisse has four rooms and five suites.

After a day on the saddle, Villa Clarisse, a nine-room hotel in a 17th-century townhouse, feels like coming home. Created by luxury hoteliers Didier and Olivia Le Calvez, it's a picture of exacting taste dressed in airy white-on-white and carefully picked antiques. You can soothe sore muscles with a massage at Le Spa Olivier Claire, or pour yourself a glass of Château Clarisse wine from the honesty bar on the manicured lawn. It's all exceptionally civilised.

Sister boutique, Hotel de Toiras – a former shipowner's home on the Saint-Martin quayfront down the road – is more ornate by design, but equally warm and intimate. Guests can flit between both properties' common areas and restaurants, including George's, the Toiras' culinary flagship.

I take a seat on the terrace, a platter piled with *fruits de mer* placed in front of me, and watch the bobbing boats and little shops selling straw baskets and vintage bric-a-brac, everything elegantly faded.

Crowds disperse as the golden light melts away and the queue lengthens at La Martinière ice cream shop, famous for its salted caramel gelato and frozen macarons.

“People come to the island wanting something different, something authentic,” hotel manager Maxence Ligneul tells me. “I’ve worked in Courchevel and the Côte d’Azur, and guests here have different requests. Bicycles instead of super yachts!”



Hôtel de Toiras's outdoor dining area.



Hotel de Toiras is housed in a former shipbuilder's mansion from the 17th century.

They also want sun, and the island claims to enjoy as many hours of sunshine as the south of France, although during my stay I experience bouts of rain and fresh Atlantic winds, as well as brighter summer afternoons.

“It’s cosy and magical here in winter, too,” adds Ligneul. “We have a Christmas tree and our guests can have in-room massages, stay in with a movie and hot chocolate by the fireplace, then have lobster pasta for dinner.”

Each of Hotel de Toiras’s 18 rooms and suites nod to a prominent figure of the region, from the 17th-century literary icon Madame de Sévigné to the Marquis de Toiras himself, who repelled an English invasion on Saint-Martin-de-Ré in 1627.



Snails served at George's restaurant.



The George Washington Suite.

My suite – spanning a stately 100 square metres with sumptuously papered walls and a turret fit for a marquis – is inspired by America’s Founding Father George Washington, whose great-great-great-grandfather Nicolas Martiau, a French nobleman, was born on the island.

The deep history makes you wonder if we’ve had the labelling all wrong; if the Hamptons should actually be known as “the Ile de Ré of America”.

Then again, something tells me that the happy holidaymakers of Ré are content to keep this little corner of the world – the luxury, the peace and the pleasure – all to themselves.

The writer was a guest of Hotel de Toiras and Villa Clarisse.

Need to know

- ◆ Getting there | The high-speed train from Paris to La Rochelle takes two-and-a-half hours, followed by a 30-minute cab ride to reach the Île de Ré. The bridge

linking the island and mainland was only built in 1988, meaning preserved landscapes and controlled urbanisation.

- ◆ **Cycling** | It takes about two hours to cycle the length of the island. In high summer, the bike paths aren't immune to traffic jams.
- ◆ **When to go** | For mild temperatures without the crowds, visit between April and June or September and October. In summer, the island's year-round population of 18,000 swells to more than 200,000.
- ◆ **Rates** | Villa Clarisse starts at €470 (\$725) a night for a premium double room. Hôtel de Toiras \$515 a night for a premium double room.

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