



with sun, sea and sand all on tap. Doug McKinlay picks out the cream of the outcrops

ILE DE RÉ, FRANCE

Joined by a vast, sweeping bridge to the mainland, the Ile de Ré is only a hop, skip and a jump from the lively port city of La Rochelle, western France, but it feels a million miles away from urban life. This is one of the favourite holiday retreats for Parisians who want to escape to the beach for anything from a weekend to a fortnight. And little wonder.

There's exquisite seafood, stunning beaches, gorgeous stone cottages, isolated salt marshes and dunes for bird watching. The island is a hub for oyster and salt production and is also famous for its wines and tasty potatoes. A local government order banning all development over two storeys high and insisting all new builds be constructed in the same style as the remainder

of the island has resulted in a place that manages to retain an unspoilt and quaint feel, despite its proximity to the mainland.

Houses are white, with shutters of duck egg blue or sea green. But the real joy of Ré is the fact that it is laced with more than 100km of well-signed cycle paths. With the highest point of the island being only 19m above sea level, it is perfect for easy-going rides from beach to beach – or to the colourful local markets that run throughout the summer.

THE DETAIL Hôtel de Toiras in Saint Martin de Ré is a handsome 16th-century merchant's house that has the port right on your doorstep, and 20 lavish rooms and suites. Doubles from £180. hotel-de-toiras.com »



ESCAPES

Discover the best places at that it isn't about being getaways on remote islands. Instead, it's about the relaxing and beach life.

Life's an ISLAND

There's something special about holidaying on an island – truly getting away from it all,

TRESCO, UK

Deserted white beaches, turquoise waters and exotic plants suggest the Caribbean, but on closer inspection this picture-postcard island is Treseo – the second largest of the Isles of Scilly. Positioned off the coast of Cornwall, it has the added bonus of not requiring a trip halfway around the world to get there. Just 3.3km long and 1.7km wide, it boasts a landscape ranging from peaty heathland in the north to the subtropical Abbey Garden in the south. It's an island seemingly suspended in time, harking back to a gentler period of bucket and spade British holidays that barely exists anymore.

While it may take its cues from the likes of *SunWays* and *Amazons*, *Treseo Island* and Enid Blyton's *The Famous*

Five – stories that tell of a simpler, slower existence – this is a major part of the attraction. There are no cars here, and no 'stranger danger' either – kids wander freely, fearing only a skinned knee or a bee sting. Doors remain unlocked so people converse merrily in the street. Treseo is a place where Bodendial mainlanders can shake off city living, and revel in the natural rhythm and sounds of the island. A week spent here is the perfection antidote to the stresses of modern life. **THE DETAIL** Flying Boat Cottages are New England-style self-catering beachfront cottages with private patios and views across to sister island Bryher. Seven nights' accommodation (sleeping six to eight people) from £2,315. treseo.co.uk

Photo by: Thomas Doherty



Clydebank and Roscoe Rossen bring the rocky, rocky in Treseo. In the photo above, Treseo, Saint Martin de Ré, a sea to large port.



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THE DETAIL Hôtel du Tour in Saint Martin de Ré is a handsome 16th-century merchant's house that has the port right on your doorstep, and 20 tasteful rooms and suites. Doubles from £180. hotel-du-tour.com



There's a working marina and a terrific market to explore at Ars-en-Ré, a village said to attract politicians, while the media folk holiday in La Couarde. As you cycle through the salt flats that open out into big-sky views north of Loix, you'll see the landmark black-and-white church tower. In Les Portes, browse the little boutiques, stop for a coffee at La Bazenne café-restaurant, and take a walk at La Patache, a wild and pretty little strand. From here back to St-Clément des Baleines, the west coast is lined with pine forests and sand dunes, and the long sandy beach of La Conche des Baleines unfurls, a fantastic place for bracing walks, sunset gazing and surfing.

Luxurious mix

The beach at Rivedoux, the first you pass after arriving from the mainland, is dedicated to kitesurfing. For safe family beaches, the south coast is best, between La Couarde and Ste-Marie de Ré. However the most reliable all-round beach fun is to be had at Le Bois Plage and Gollandières; Les Grenettes is the place to surf.

There are plenty of deluxe rentals around the island. SJ Villas has three new properties on its books, including the colourful and stylish La Maison des Prises, which sleeps up to 10 people; has a pool, terrace and gleaming, well-equipped kitchen.

Among all the hotels, chambres d'hôtes and villages de vacances (small resorts), not to mention the campsites, the Hôtel de Toiras in St-Martin is a high-end favourite among British visitors. It is plush and historic, yet cosy and small-scale, with 29 rooms – nine in its airy, more contemporary annexe, Villa Clarisse.

Occupying a merchant's house dating from the 19th century, the Toiras is family owned, with interiors designed by proprietor Olivia Le Calvez. The Pierre Loti suite, named after the globetrotting writer and naval officer, is a luxurious mix of French antiques and orientalist art. Rooms are themed on a writer, painter or historical figure with local connections, such as the 17th-century letter-writing aristocrat Madame de Sévigné and George Washington (who was descended from a Rhétais, apparently). The small team are brilliant at securing dinner reservations, arranging bicycle hire and suggesting horse-riding or birdwatching excursions. There's a pool, courtyard and secluded garden at Villa Clarisse, which is more languid and glamorous, set back from the harbourside.

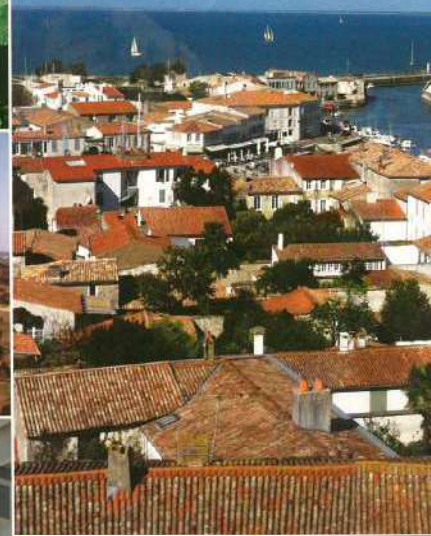
Superior seafood

If you came to Ile de Ré and never left St-Martin, with its handsome Vauban fortifications, commissioned by the unwelcome Louis XIV and now UNESCO-listed, you'd still be won over. It's walkable, thronged in summer, idyllic out of season, and has a dozen good restaurants and bistros. At the gastronomic end, the Toiras' own Table d'Olivia allows guests to select their own catch from the market. Les Embruns is lovely for top-drawer seafood; and the friendly owners ply diners with rum at the end of the evening. For fruits de mer or apéritifs, served on the terrace or in the pubby interior, the Bistrot du Marin is popular among yachting and locals. Skipper, a cheerful seafood brasserie with 200 seats overlooking the harbour, is a good choice for families; the seafood is excellent, and the staff are patient and helpful. A little removed from the hilly burly, L'Avant-Port is discreet, with a quieter terrace nearer the Bureau du Port and the Yacht Club HQ.

These days, the Parisian crowd is more international, and Bentleys are a common sight on the main roads but, whether you rent a house, stay in style at the Toiras or rely on the hospitality of that Parisian aunt, Ile de Ré has a way of making you feel part of something very small and special.



ILE DE RE IS UNCLUTTERED AND ACCESSIBLE, WITH A CHARMED MICROCLIMATE



FACT FILE

GETTING THERE

Standard-class return train fares from London to La Rochelle start at £109, ukvoyages-ncf.com. 0844 848 5848
Brittany Ferries and **P&O** both run regular crossings to and from the French Channel ports; brittanyferries.com, poferies.com
easyJet flies to La Rochelle from London Gatwick and **Ryanair** from London Stansted; easyjet.com, ryanair.com

GETTING AROUND

Hire a bicycle at **Yoo Too**, St-Martin-de-Ré, Le Bois Plage and La Flotte; cycles-yootoo.com

WHEN TO GO

High season from June to August, is very busy, especially on the eastern side of the island, but the weather is great and there are terrific fireworks on 14 July. April/May or September/October can be more relaxing and less expensive.

WHERE TO STAY

Hôtel de Toiras (pictured right) and **Villa Clarisse**, St-Martin-de-Ré, doubles from about £180; hotel-de-toiras.com, villa-clarisse.com

La Maison de Prise, La Couarde sur Mer, from £1,050pp per-week in high season, based on 10 sharing; quillco.co.uk

WHERE TO EAT

L'Avant-Port, St-Martin-de-Ré; lavantport.com

La Bazenne, Les Portes; +33 5 46 55 39 43

La Part des Anges, La Couarde sur Mer; +33 5 46 29 83 62

La Terrasse, La Couarde sur Mer; +33 5 46 20 86 53

Le Bistrot du Marin, St-Martin-de-Ré; +33 5 46 68 74 66

Les Embruns, St-Martin-de-Ré; +33 5 46 66 46 31

Skipper, St-Martin-de-Ré; leskipper.fr

FIND OUT MORE

holidays-ilede-re.co.uk

