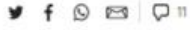


# The insider guide to Ile de Ré, playground to the Parisian upper crust

As the Tour de France whizzes by, see inside the opulent hotel at the centre of the action

By Eilidh Hargreaves

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Ile de Ré is an island paradise in the Atlantic | CREDIT: Getty

*Un Rhétais* (or Rétais) is someone from Ile de Ré, the small, chic-yet-wild Atlantic island in the south west of France - and I spent the best part of my youth trying to become one.

I zoomed around the gorgeously smooth cycle paths as a teen; as a young adult, I scooped ice creams for wide-eyed children who pressed their little noses excitedly against the glass counter; I even spent the best part of a year living and working on an oyster farm, in a large white house slap bang in the middle of blustery, sun-drenched oyster beds and salt marshes, bordered by unruly samphire, that stretched as far as the eye could see.

It's here Audrey Tautou buys market patisserie, politicians peek out from behind crisp copies of *Le Figaro* to sip their morning café and stars such as Shakira and Katy Perry pootle nonchalantly on quaint village bikes. On Tuesday, the Tour de France will whizz by as it finishes Stage 10 in Saint Martin de Ré - the main town.

Spectators could do a lot worse than checking into the effusively indulgent Hotel de Toiras, as I recently discovered. Situated in the heart of the action, on the old port in a restored 17th century merchants house, the hotel is classically designed, bringing a Versailles glamour to the island that suits les bobos (the bourgeois-bohemians that escape Paris to summer here) to a tee.



The rooms at l'Hotel de Toiras are individually designed

With statement archive wallpapers in gemstone colours and plush furnishings, each room is designed in a unique theme relating to French history. Mine was in homage to the 18th century explorer and Rhétais Nicolas Baudin - all refreshing avocado hues, it was hung with inquisitive paintings of different species of butterflies and plants. A balcony which looked down onto the Moroccan courtyard, bursting with foliage and flowers, brought the tropical vibe to life.



The breakfast tables

I had requested twin beds, but doubles and queens are also available. A glass-encased Italian shower split the room in two, with twin sinks, a huge mirror perfect for getting ready and a separate WC on the other side. A bounty of Clarins products were a wonderful treat that kept our skin quenched for active mornings on our bikes and lazy afternoons on the beach in the heat of the sun.



The living room at Toiras

Be sure to book (well in advance) into the hotel's tiny restaurant, La Table d'Olivia. Headed up by Executive Chef and previously Michelin-Star holder, Thibault Peyroche, the menu offers classic French flavours made with local produce. Indeed, Chef Peyroche invites guests to join him during his morning trip to the Saint-Martin market to choose fresh fruit and vegetables for the evening meal - and I can confirm the fish of the day was impeccable.



La Table d'Olivia

This restaurant looks out onto the Moroccan courtyard where breakfast is served. Perhaps my favourite part of the stay, breakfasts here are indulgent, with juices, teas and coffees served alongside fresh pastries (I ordered extra pains au chocolat), baguettes with local jam and fruit and yoghurt pots. I sat there long after the last sip of chocolat chaud, watching the leaves flicker in the lightest of breezes.

There is no spa at the hotel, but guests have complete access to the sublime, quiet Villa Clarisse (its sister property) which is just 300m away. There, you'll find further verdant gardens with Cypress trees and nooks to sit in, as well as a sparkling swimming pool surrounded by loungers where you can order teas, coffees and wines. From six until 10pm every day, there is an honesty bar stocked with the most divine pale Provençal rosé that is the cherry on top of the whole experience.



Bikes are available for hire through YooToo

Between one-and-five minutes' walk to every great bar and restaurant in Saint Martin, the location is particularly ideal. The mood in town is chilled out, but make no mistake - it is chic. Time to employ your finest low-key-but-expensive summer clothes - breezy linen shirts and dresses, with sandals. Heels have no place on these cobbled streets, where the pace of life is so easy that the only notion of time comes from the gooey Atlantic sunsets.

*Nightly rates at L'Hotel de Toiras start from €250 per night in a Deluxe Room (room-only) and it is open until 1st November 2020; [hotel-de-toiras.com](http://hotel-de-toiras.com)*

## **Insider tips for Saint Martin**

**Hire a bike from YooToo bikes, just off the port.** My cousin Andrew and I spent our childhood summers racing around the island's cycle paths, pretending we were leading the Tour de France and planning breakaways from the 'peloton' (my father and my uncle, who were happy to sit back and watch us sprint into the distance).

Back then, bike hire shops were manned by grumpy Frenchmen and there wasn't a helmet in sight - after too many bad experiences we just started bringing our own bikes. Fast forward to 2020 and one thing that's right in the world is YooToo bikes. A large, clean space owned by a delightful couple from Bretagne, the cycles are sparkling, ready to go and designed in the company's signature polkadot style.

Pick a Dutch bike for moseying between the villages or a 'superbike' (a powerful mountain bike) if you have a need for speed. YooToo has a partnership with Hotel de Toiras, meaning guests won't have to put a deposit down. [cycles-yootoo.com/](http://cycles-yootoo.com/)



L'Hotel de Tolras is on the port of Saint Martin - although you wouldn't know if from the quiet inside

Book a table at **La Baleine Bleue**. Call a week ahead and specifically request a terrace table facing the port. There, the sun will melt into the boat sails and you'll choose from a chalkboard menu of delectable dishes which mix French ingredients with Asian flavours.

There's maki and beef tataki to start; Magret de canard comes with shitake mushrooms and teriyaki sauce and the steak comes with a port and cranberry sauce and local grenailles potatoes for the main course. If you can muster room for desert, there's an indulgent dome-like creation which tastes like Ferrero Rocher and left the gentleman dining on the next table delighted. [baleinebleue.com/en/](http://baleinebleue.com/en/) Also see: [\*Le Bistrot du Marin\*](#); [\*La Sarrasine\*](#); [\*Le Bastion\*](#)



Saint Martin after sunset | CREDIT: Getty

Try ice cream from **La Martiniere**. I defy anyone to find ice cream more exquisite than at La Martiniere. Celebrating its 50th birthday this year (and what a year it's been) its 71 flavours are all made in house by artisans, and are not just available to devour there and then, but also in boxes for your freezer, if you're staying in a villa. The newest addition to its options is macarons, sandwiched together with ice cream in flavours such as lemon and chocolate. [la-martiniere.fr/](http://la-martiniere.fr/)

Toast champagne at sunset at **Le Bastion**. Back in my day, Le Bastion was a nightclub known for sticky floors, drunk teenagers and even a fatal accident. Thank goodness, then, that it has had the most stunning transformation.

Now more upmarket Mykonos beach restaurant than teen hideout, it couldn't be more elegant. Naturally, its new clientele is of age and irrefutably stylish. Perfect for the Covid-19 era, the restaurant section of the establishment is all spacious, clean white furnishings, and a wide open air space makes up distanced tables with sofas and chairs for drinks.

There is a bird's nest section upstairs, the perfect spot for watching the sunset with a glass of champagne in hand. [lebastionclub.com/](http://lebastionclub.com/)

**Take a day trip to Plage des Prises.** The only thing lacking in Saint Martin is a knock-your-socks-off beach - but there are many in close proximity and accessible by bike. Cycle from Saint Martin to La Couarde (a flat 6km which shouldn't take longer than half an hour) and lay your towels down at Plage des Prises.

Here, there is plenty of room to sunbathe or play pétanque on the beach, and you can now paddle board and windsurf nearby. Before you go home, try top notch takeaway pizzas and fine wine from A la Carabistoule ([+33 5 46 41 15 31](tel:+33546411531)), Créole flavours at Le Balaou ([+33 5 46 29 86 07](tel:+33546298607)) or seafood at La Cabine de Bain ([+33 5 46 29 84 26](tel:+33546298426)).

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