

Discover...

ILE DE RE

With its charming villages, excellent food and beguiling coastline, this idyllic island is one of France's greatest pleasures

Few islands in Europe are more worthy of exploration than France's Ile de Ré. Nestled off the country's Atlantic coast a short distance from La Rochelle, and awash with old-fashioned charm, it offers miles of sandy beaches, a pretty landscape dotted with forests, vineyards and salt marshes, inventive gastronomy and a string of UNESCO-protected villages that have wowed French holidaymakers for decades. It is also blissfully flat, which encourages more relaxed forms of exploration on foot or by bicycle. Once the preserve of smart Parisians who flocked here for regular R and R, the Ile de Ré now offers improved transport links, including a bridge connecting the island to the mainland, which persuades visitors to travel from further afield. What was once France's best-kept secret is now something we can all enjoy. ▶

FEATURE EMMA J PAGE | PHOTOGRAPHS EMMA LEE



Inter Iles ferries, inter-iles.com, also journey to La Rochelle on the mainland, from €19.50 per person.

THE GREAT OUTDOORS

With more than 60 miles of wide cycle lanes across the island, you don't need to be an experienced cyclist to enjoy Ile de Ré on two wheels. Hire a basket bike, beach bike, tandem or tricycle from any of the bike shops dotted across the island, including Yoo Too in Saint-Martin, 0033 5 46 68 08 09, cycles-yootoo.com, which charges from €9.50 per day. Another great way to explore the coastline is on horseback; 4 Fers à l'air in Sainte-Marie, 0033 5 46 42 05 63, 4fersalair.com, organises rides from €18 per hour and can also tailor-make treks to your itinerary. Anglers can head out to sea with Le Nautile, 0033 6 67 54 84 12, for a day's private fishing just off the coast, from €65. For an additional fee, a local chef will transform your catch into a gourmet meal. ▶

THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP Widely regarded as one of France's prettiest villages, La Flotte has a lively port and 18th-century market square; an artists' cafe and tearoom in La Flotte; a stall in La Flotte's antiques and linens market; Saint-Martin's Ocean Hotel, an enchanting house front; whitewashed houses in Ars-en-Ré.



WHERE TO STAY

THE PLACE TO BE

VILLA CLARISSE, 5 Rue du Général Lapasset, 17410 Saint-Martin, 0033 5 46 68 43 00, villa-clarisse.com.

Discreetly located on a cobbled street a mere hop away from the port of Saint-Martin, this charming 18th-century town house features just nine bedrooms, each with white-washed walls, crisp linens and luxurious bathrooms. An olive-tree-studded courtyard with swimming pool provides a sunny sanctuary, perfect for unwinding in after a day exploring the island. Doubles, from €135 including breakfast.

OTHERS TO TRY

HOTEL DE TOIRAS, 1 quai Job Foran, 17410 Saint-Martin, 0033 5 46 35 40 32, hotel-de-toiras.com.

The elder sister of Villa Clarisse, this bustling hotel sits right on the port. Individually decorated bedrooms have views over the courtyard garden or across the harbour. Doubles, from €180 including breakfast.

LE CLOS SAINT-MARTIN, 87 Cours Pasteur, 17410 Saint-Martin, 0033 5 46 01 10 62, le-clos-saint-martin.com.

Nineteen chic bedrooms and 14 suites are artfully positioned around a generous courtyard, with a swimming pool and Clarins spa at its heart. Doubles, from €135.

LA BARONNIE, 17 & 21 rue Baron de Chantal, 17410 Saint-Martin, 0033 5 46 09 21 29, hotel-labaronnie.com.

Behind a small town house facade, a generous garden and a spa cabin make this affordable small hotel the perfect holiday hideaway. Doubles, from €130.

LE MÔLE, Avenue du Front de Mer, 17630 La Flotte, 0033 5 46 09 60 43, le-mole.com.

Specialising in rustic apartments, rooms and studios across the island, many with idyllic sea views, Le Môle offers stylish budget accommodation, from €69 per person per night for a room, or from €550 for a week's stay in an apartment.

GETTING THERE

WHEN TO GO The island's seasonal climate features warm, sunny days throughout spring and summer. Expect milder temperatures in autumn and winter.

FLIGHTS Ryanair, ryanair.com, flies direct to La Rochelle from London Stansted, from £37 for a single fare.

PACKAGES Kirker, 020 7593 1899, kirkerholidays.com, offers short tailor-made holidays to Ile de Ré, including return flights from London, private transfers and 4-star hotel stays, from £894 per person for three nights, based on two sharing.

FIND OUT MORE Visit the local tourism websites, holidays-iledere.co.uk and saint-martin-de-re.net. ■

CLOCKWISE, FROM TOP LEFT Fresh seafood at La Flotte's market; bicycles can be hired throughout the island; home accessories, lots of them vintage, abound in the island's many charming shops; local vineyards produce popular vintages; architecture is typically French; a rare sighting of a car; goat's cheeses, a local speciality.



THE GOOD LIFE

A favourable microclimate ensures that, despite its Atlantic location, the island receives as much sunlight as France's southern coast. Basking in the rays are pretty cobbled villages that offer clusters of whitewashed town houses with terracotta roofs and pastel-painted shutters. Saint-Martin, formerly the capital, is the centre of all the action, with magnificent fortified walls and an impressive harbour lined with restaurants, shops, cafés and hotels. The port's lively market brims daily with the morning's catch which includes seafood delicacies such as langoustines, mussels, squid and oysters (the region's *huîtres* are world-renowned). With good food and wine and plenty of outdoor activity, it is little wonder that the island's riches have been so hotly coveted over the centuries, as possession of its shores passed back and forth between the English and French. Marshal Toiras finally headed off foreign occupation at the hands of the Duke of Buckingham in 1627 and, since then, the heavily fortified port of Saint-Martin has been privy to a succession of far more friendly interlopers, as holidaymakers have come to appreciate the appeal of this unspoiled island.

VILLAGE HOPPING

Although cars and buses are in evidence, locals and visitors alike are much more at home travelling by bike. The harbour village of La Flotte is an easy cycle away from Saint-Martin. Featuring a charming 18th-century market square, sun-dappled shopping streets, a lively port and the historic Sainte-Catherine church, built in the Middle Ages, it is deservedly considered to be one of France's prettiest villages. Leave your bike at one of the many cycle racks here and feast on shrimp or traditional *moules marinières* at one of the harbour restaurants. Further afield, sleepy Loix – once an island itself before natural deposits merged it with Ré and Ars – is famed for its far-reaching stretches of salt marshes, which were first worked in the 12th century by the monks of the Saint-Michel-en-l'Herm Abbey. Learn more about these historic marshes, famed for producing Ile de Ré's distinctive hand-harvested Fleur de Sel, by visiting Loix's Ecomusée du Marais Salant, 0033 5 46 29 06 77, marais-salant.com. At the far-western tip of the island, one of the tallest lighthouses in France, the Phare des Baleines, commands breathtaking views of the island and is well worth the 257-step-climb to reach its summit. The less intrepid can while away an afternoon in Ars-en-Ré, another picturesque village distinguishable by the striking black and white church steeple at its heart.

ALONG THE COAST

With endless stretches of sandy shoreline, beach lovers are spoilt for choice. Try heading from Saint-Martin to nearby La Pergola beach for clear waters, fine white sands and uninterrupted views of the coast. Regular ferries make it easy to explore the adjacent Ile d'Aix, which is worth visiting for its pretty, forested village, as well as Napoleon's Fort Boyard. Croisières

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Ile de Ré offers spectacular walks in every weather; families will enjoy the island's relaxed feel; the carousel at Flotte harbour is open for business all year round; the 3km bridge linking Ile de Ré with the mainland at La Rochelle has boosted tourism; fresh *huîtres* (oysters), sold daily in Saint-Martin's food market.



EATING & DRINKING

The waters of the Atlantic are the daily source of many local delicacies in Saint-Martin. Try *crevettes roses* (small pink prawns) at **Le Skipper**, 27 quai de la Poithevinière, leskipper.fr, or head to **Le Bistrot du Marin**, 10 quai Nicolas Baudin, for steak frites. Nearby, **L'Hôtel de Toiras**, 1 quai Job Foran, hotel-de-toiras.com, named after the nobleman who defended the island from the British, offers gourmet dishes such as homemade ravioli and artichoke hearts. Round off your meal with ice cream at **La Martinière**, la-martiniere.fr, which has been delighting visitors since 1970 with flavours such as Sea-Salted Caramel and Cherry Camembert.

