



Villa les Ensemberts

Magnifique villa en front de mer à louer sur l'île de Ré - Luxurious Beachfront villa for Rent on Ile de Ré, France

January 2014 Newsletter

In this issue:

A well-kept secret

History

Bicyclettes and donkeys

Saint-Martin de Ré

The Musée Ernest Cognacq

September weather

BOOK NOW FOR 2014 !

Now is the time to plan for 2014 if you are wanting to travel in high season or if you have special needs. Book now and you'll get a better service.

Advance planning is best for rentals in July and August, typically the most popular months. And, I am noticing that even late June is starting to book up as well. This is particularly important if you are hoping to book two or more consecutive weeks and if you are looking for a large house (one sleeping 12 or more). I get enquiries as early as August the year before ! Early planning is helpful especially now that Ile de Ré has become such an exclusive place.

A WELL-KEPT SECRET

With mile after mile of broad, clean sandy beaches and an interior of pine forests and vineyards, crisscrossed by 50 miles of cycle paths, Ile de Ré has been kept something of a secret by the French. Since it was linked to mainland France by a road bridge in 1988, it has become a fashionable holiday destination but strict planning regulations have ensured its continued charm, with no high buildings, shutters still painted in the traditional island colours and hollyhocks growing wild in the narrow, cobbled streets, lined with white painted houses.

The best way to explore the island is on two wheels and it is so flat you will never need gears! Cyclists of all ages and abilities abound, pedalling from one idyllic beach to the next or from one sleepy, picturesque village to another, along pine shaded paths and through fields of vines, poppies and sunflowers.

Young girls wander down from the boulangerie wearing striped Breton T-shirts carrying baguettes under their arms. Parisian families enjoy lazy lunches in the garden of their country cottage around vast fruits de mer plateaux of crabs, clams and prawns washed down with rosé. Everyone meets down at the local waterside cafe for a pastis as the sun sets over fishing smacks bobbing in the harbour. You could be watching any Eric Rohmer film, but this isn't celluloid. This is real life on Ile de Ré.

Holiday weather can never be guaranteed anywhere, but the meteorological statistics are evidence enough of the island's microclimate. Ile de Ré has a staggering 2,600 hours of sunshine per year and, here, the sun's rays are pleasantly less harsh than on the Mediterranean. Even the off-peak

season sees visitors dining outside in the sunshine. The giant hollyhocks, the green shutters, the donkeys wearing cute pyjama trousers, the historic and cultural links with the past, the local people still fishing and collecting salt, the real yachtsmen in the little harbours, the staple diet of oysters and white wine - this is the Ile de Re travellers love, an ideal spot for a memorable holiday. It is no wonder the French have kept it a secret for so long ! The Parisian press have dubbed it the Atlantic St Tropez, but there's a surprising absence of paparazzi. Regular visitors like Princess Caroline of Monaco, Lionel Jospin or Vanessa Paradis can stroll down to buy their morning croissants and know the locals will not take any notice.

The typical Ile de Ré landscape

Ile de Ré means "isle of ferns" referring to the fenlands that separate each of the dozen tiny communities, and although the landscape doesn't take your breath away at first, the fun here is to get off the main road that runs right down the island and discover endless sandy beaches bordered by dunes and pine forests, miles of oyster parks, the criss-cross lines of ancient salt marshes, vineyards, vegetable gardens and fishing ports. And each village on the island is filled with "doll's house" cottages marked with Ré's trademark green shutters, red tile roofs and hollyhocks leaning against whitewashed walls.

The island changes as you travel west. There are fewer tourists and the landscapes become more agricultural, with fields of potatoes, asparagus and vineyards. The main road branches off to Loix where centuries-old salt marshes are still worked today, while towards Ars, both sides of the road are lined by oyster parks. When the tide is out, the beaches are alive with oyster farmers chugging across the sand in tractors or dragging tiny carts to harvest the day's crop. The village right at the end of the island, Les Portes, is probably the prettiest of all. It also has one of the best gourmet restaurants, Le Chasse Marée, where the chef serves tuna marinated in wasabi and locally-caught sole cooked in lemon and served with a tarte tatin of fennel and tomato.

Top



HISTORY

Sitting out on the Atlantic, Île de Ré has always been vulnerable to invasion, especially by the British, but has remained decidedly French in every way. In the 14th century, Charles V gave the people of the island special rights of trade and royal privileges in return for keeping guard over their stretch of coastline and helping repel invasion. Such privileges and tax breaks helped St-Martin become a thriving international port. The English and Dutch had a go at taking the town in the 17th century and failed miserably. The fortifications surrounding this elegant town and harbour, and its citadel, date back to that period.

Later, the citadel became a prison and the harbour a staging post for prison ships taking communards and common criminals away to French penal colonies, while the Revolution also cost the island its royal privileges. Nevertheless, it grew fat on wine, salt, oysters, fishing and agriculture, all of which thrived on the island's unique geography and healthy micro-climate; they say the place gets as much sun as Nice.

Now places like St-Martin and La Flotte thrive on tourism, the harbours surrounded by restaurants and elegant stores. But they do it very well. There are few big chain shops, everything is well looked after, prices are high but nothing exorbitant. Every village has a good park ((do not miss the children's fair at Le-Bois-Plage-en-Ré or in Parc de la Barbette in Saint-Martin), which becomes invaluable on slow days of cycling, exploration and beach combing.

It will be with real reluctance that you will pack up and load the car. Île de Ré is a deeply therapeutic place to be. The pace of life slows, the world is outdoors, never inside, and the tyranny of the car temporarily becomes something you can just reject...

BICYCLETTES

Île de Ré, with its network of dedicated cycle paths and flat topography, offers the ideal of a low level activity holiday a neat step up from the cycle track lifestyle of Center Parcs, with wine, oysters and beaches thrown in. Île de Ré is apparently to Parisians what the Hamptons are to upper-class New Yorkers, and French city dwellers are fond of buying up increasingly expensive second homes there. But the feeling here is far more democratic and less elitist than its American counterpart.

The island is totally geared up for the bicycle. Every village, park and beach has neat banks of bike racks. Most longer-term visitors park their cars in their hotel garage and leave them there: everyone on Ré gets around by pushbike. This is a genuinely environment-friendly "bicycle island".

Cycle shops are two a penny, for repairs, accessories or rentals. You may attach your bike to a neat folding trailer to carry your youngest, : there is room for a beachbag and a baguette. The less young can sit on a neat tag-along bike attached to the parent's bike that turns the two of you into a tandem. The island is only 30km long by 5km wide, but has 100km of cycle paths. Most are dedicated tracks, no cars allowed, making them safe for family biking, occasional joggers and the odd rollerblader. They take you along routes more picturesque than any of the main roads, winding through fields, salt pans and oyster farms. There are no hills and much of the island is below sea level. It also clears the island of a lot of the kind of traffic that chokes places like the Hamptons. Here the car comes to seem like an unnecessary affectation, something to forget about. The harbour village of La Flotte is an easy cycle ride away, as is the capital, St-Martin-de-Ré, where the cycle path takes you right through the stone gates of the town. Occasionally you may cheat, put the bikes into the car and set off for the far end of the island to the Phare des Baleines, an Edward Hopper-esque lighthouse. Many ships - and whales - used to come ashore at the easternmost point of the island. The beaches here are quieter; seductive for the more reclusive soul.

Ten smart routes to bicycle safety

- 1) Protect your head. Wear a helmet**
- 2) See and be seen**
- 3) Avoid biking at night**
- 4) Stay alert. Always keep a lookout for obstacles in your path**
- 5) Go right with the flow. The safe way is the right way. Always cycle to the right of the track**
- 6) Check for traffic. Always be aware of the traffic around you.**
- 7) Learn the rules of the road. Obey traffic laws**
- 8) Assure bicycle readiness. Make sure your bicycle is adjusted properly. Read your bicycle owner's manual**
- 9) Always check breaks before riding**
- 10) Don't flip over your bicycle. Wheels should be securely fastened.**

DONKEYS

There are also rides on the famous 'donkeys in pants' of St-Martin, elegantly clad in gingham pantaloons - a tradition dating back to when the animals in the fields were given protection from the mosquitoes that favoured their succulent limbs.

Top

SAINT-MARTIN DE RÉ

The capital of the island, and the most popular place to stay, is the port of St Martin-de-Ré. The quayside is lined with cafes and bars, and a favourite pastime is to grab a table outside the most celebrated, the Bistrot du Marin, order a dozen oysters and glass of white wine, then sit back and watch the fishing boats sailing in with the day's catch, the crowds thronging the colourful market, and the ritual evening drague of holidaymakers, who probably meet up here every summer.

THE MUSÉE ERNEST COGNACQ

The Musée Ernest Cognacq in Saint-Martin reopened in February 2007 : it has entirely been refurbished and is now open every day except Tuesdays : in it you will find all you need to know on the history of the island, the Vauban fortifications plus a thousand other activities for children and temporary exhibitions. It will tell you all on the deportation of the "bagnards" to distant colonies up until the early 20th century. A brand new wing has been added to the Renaissance building. The architecture of the museum with its new addition is in itself worth a visit.



SEPTEMBER WEATHER ON ILE DE RÉ

You will still find it very warm indeed - in fact very comfortable for all the cycling required!

From the villa, you may cycle to St Martin with its many shops, bars, restaurants etc and to La Flotte which is just a slightly smaller version, and right on the beach.

To be honest the cycle ride between the 2 towns is only 10mins and completely flat, so easy to ride with children thanks to the well-lit cycle paths in the evenings. It is a must in September!

Top

OUR PROPERTIES

In Paris
The Apartment

The studio

At Le Cannet, Cannes
The Villa

On Ile de Ré,
The Villa

Top