

The picturesque harbour of Saint-Martin-de-Ré



*“Visitors flock here for the sprawling sandy beaches, miles of pristine walking and biking paths, wildlife reserves and postcard-perfect villages”*

**ILE DE RÉ: SLEEPY BEAUTY**

I couldn't dig out my sunglasses fast enough on the taxi ride over the two-mile bridge linking La Rochelle to the Île de Ré, as I was blinded by the dazzling light reflecting off an endless expanse of sea and sky on a brilliant April morning. Within an hour, I'd dropped off my bags and was happily planted on a sunny terrace a few steps from beautiful Saint-Martin-de-Ré's lively port, coaxing the succulent flesh from a prickly langoustine.

Abundant seafood, especially oysters gathered along the 18-mile island's northeastern coast, is just one of the Île de Ré's many enchantments. Wealthy Parisians snap up holiday homes here, but the island is hugely popular among families and day visitors, too – especially since the bridge to the mainland opened in 1988. So popular, that more than 3m visitors flock here each year, mostly for the island's sprawling sandy beaches, but also the miles of pristine walking and biking paths, protected landscapes, wildlife reserves and postcard-perfect villages dating back to medieval times.

In the morning, I hopped on my electric rental bike and followed the breezy coastal path to Ars-en-Ré, a Plus Beau Village de France, to explore the morning market. Among flowery India cottons and raffia bags, the first strawberries of spring



The Phare des Baleines on the Île de Ré

were set out in cardboard baskets. A mini baguette and a round of goat's cheese completed my picnic, and within 20 minutes I was settled in a wildflower-strewn field in the bird sanctuary among marshes and salt flats, where I spotted black-winged stilts, snowy egrets, swans and a pair of kestrels – just a few of more than 300 bird species that draw birders from around the world.

On my way to the Phare des Baleines, one of France's tallest lighthouses, I passed pine forests and beaches, tiny hamlets and miles of vineyards. A climb up the lighthouse's 257 steps for the best views on the island (the second best are from the bell tower of Saint-Martin-de-Ré's 14th-century church) earned me three scoops from the legendary La Martinière ice cream-makers, though choosing from their 47 flavours posed the biggest dilemma of the day.

“Pas mal,” the clerk said when I handed over my bike 15 minutes before

closing time – I'd clocked 70km in a mere seven hours – and couldn't wait for tomorrow to do it all again.

**WHEN TO GO** In summer and school holidays it is packed and best avoided. May, September and October are idyllic.

**WHERE TO STAY** On the Saint-Martin-de-Ré port, the 5-star **Hôtel de Toiras** offers gorgeous antique-filled rooms and a top-notch restaurant with a pretty port-facing terrace. A short walk from the port, **Villa Clarisse** offers modern suites, with a spa and pool in a lush garden courtyard.



From top: Hôtel de Toiras and Villa Clarisse are both excellent accommodation choices

**ÎLES DE LÉRINS: TREASURED ISLANDS**



Viewed from the heights of Le Suquet, Cannes' cobbled medieval old town, the Îles de Lérins glimmer like twin jewels in an azure sea. That's how I first discovered the archipelago, which over the years has become my favourite getaway on the Côte d'Azur. A 15- and 20-minute ferry ride from Cannes' old port, the islands are a mere hop and a world away from glitzy Cannes.

Less than a mile long and half a mile wide, vineyard-covered Île Saint-Honorat is home to 20 Cistercian monks, the island's only inhabitants since 410, when, according to legend, Saint Honorat drove away a menacing dragon. Nowadays, the monks live in a 19th-century monastery and spend their days tending their vines and making award-winning organic wines along with a range of rainbow-hued spirits distilled from local herbs and fruits. Though the monastery is private, visitors can climb the scenic ruin of an 11th-century fortress for eye-popping



Fort Royal on Sainte-Marguerite

views of Cannes, the Alpine range and the Cap d'Antibes, repose in one of the island's three chapels, and visit the monastery's Gothic church and gift shop, stocked with Saint-Honorat wines and other artisan products. To taste the monks' seven vintages, stop in at the Lérina boutique at the ferry landing. Saint-Salonius (€95), made from 100% Pinot noir, is served to the jury of the International Film Festival and regularly served at Paris state dinners. Refreshing Saint-Pierre is a floral 100% Chardonnay and the shop's best bargain at €26.

More than twice the size of Saint-Honorat, Sainte-Marguerite's miles of cool, wooded paths shaded by Aleppo pines and towering eucalyptus crisscross the island, leading to a small lake and bird sanctuary to the

IMAGES © FABRICE RAMBERT, JÉRÔME KELAGOPIAN, JENNIFER LADONNE



Clockwise from this image: Sainte-Marguerite; Saint-Honorat's monks make award-winning wines and spirits; the monastery



*“Miles of cool, wooded paths shaded by Aleppo pines and towering eucalyptus crisscross the island”*

southeast. In summer, day-trippers, scuba divers and boaters flock here for the island's shimmering turquoise waters, secluded beaches and scenic picnic spots.

At the west of the island, the 17th-century Fort Royal museum and military prison was the infamous home of the Man in the Iron Mask. At the Musée de la Mer, inside the fort, you can learn the island's long and fascinating history – from the Ligurians and Romans to medieval times – amidst the remains of a Roman vault, with displays of local shipwreck plunder.

**WHEN TO GO** If you don't mind the crowds, both on land and at sea, summer is a

lovely time to visit, but in spring and autumn you'll have the paths and beaches almost to yourself. September is ideal for swimming and snorkelling while the Mediterranean is still warm.

**WHERE TO STAY** On Saint-Honorat you can arrange a week-long contemplative retreat with the monks at the **Abbaye de Lérins**; you supply your own sheets and towels and meals are taken in the refectory in silence. There is no lodging on Sainte-Marguerite, but on the other side of the world in Cannes, the historic **Hôtel Barrière Le Majestic** and its star-studded **Le Fouquet** brasserie offer a luxe setting and fabulous views of the islands. **📍**



Indulge in all-out glamour and island views at Hôtel Barrière Le Majestic in Cannes