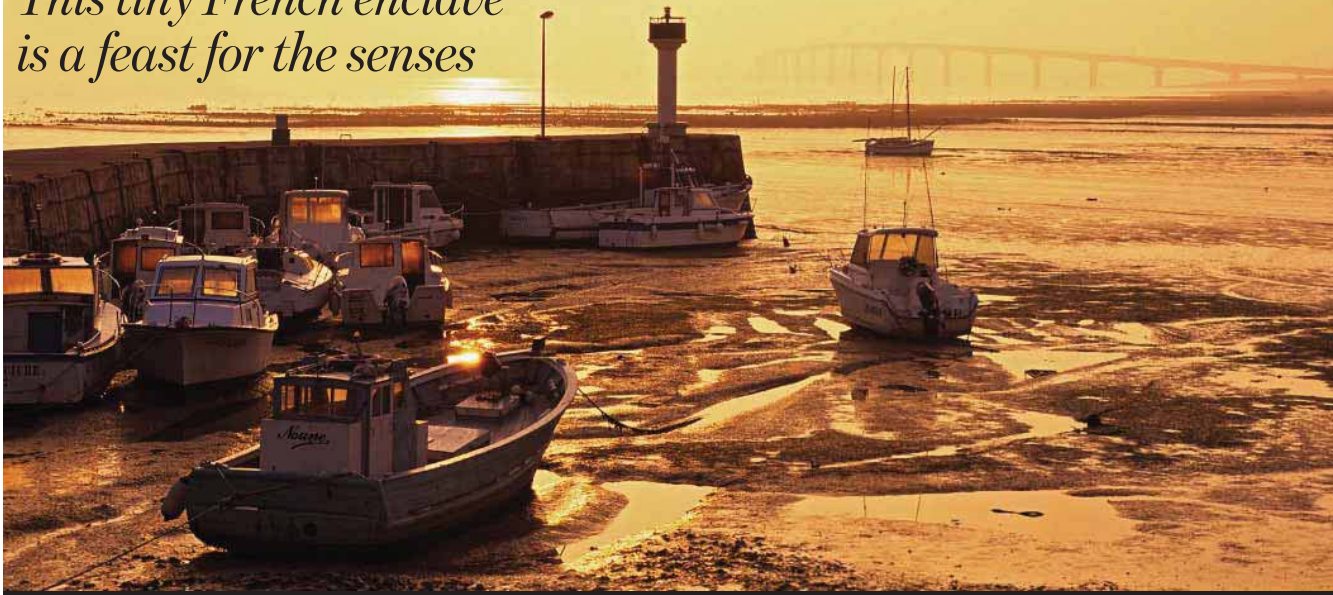


Île de Ré of light for all the family

*This tiny French enclave
is a feast for the senses*

La Rochelle:
Popular with
well-groomed
Parisians



BY ROBERT
HARDMAN

THIS must be the highest concentration of people on two wheels you're ever likely to see outside Amsterdam. There are cyclists everywhere: middle-aged couples on fold-up bikes; posers in Lycra on whip-pet-thin racing machines; hearty families on matching mountain bikes (heaven knows why — there isn't so much as a hillock, let alone a mountain, for miles).

And all of them are cheerfully overtaking me as I pant along on an ordinary bicycle pulling a trailer carrying two sleeping children and all the requisite clobber for a day at the seaside.

It's no ordinary seaside, either. Do you want a day of bucket and spade? Or do you want nature reserves and bird sanctuaries? Perhaps you would prefer a trek to a lonely lighthouse or some rejuvenating thalassotherapy?

For a sliver of land, just 20 miles long and three miles wide, the Île de Ré can sometimes

be an irksome bundle of choices.

Once a stepping-stone to France's penal colonies, this foot-shaped outcrop to the west of La Rochelle is now popular with a well-groomed Parisian crowd who vacillate between here and the south of France. Do you want the slightly more bracing Bay of Biscay or the sultry Med? Many, it seems, try the coast of what the French call Poitou-Charentes.

Comparisons only go so far. Observers have often said it has the feel of Long Island's Hamptons. People are always trying to liken this stretch of the Atlantic — think of it as nine o'clock on the map of France — to somewhere else for the simple reason that it is not like anywhere else.

It has marshlands as impressive as the Camargue, endless waterways and some of the prettiest walled villages in Europe. It also includes one of the most famous towns in the alcoholic world — Cognac.

We had heard a lot about the Île de Ré, but there was no room at the auberge — or any of the pretty clapboard gites — when we started making enquires.

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ON FURTHER inspection, it turned out to be an island with a stupendous bridge attached. Only the French would build a 2.9km bridge to reach a place that's less than half the area of Achill Island. So there's no need to stay on it; you can just pay a return toll of 18.

And so we stayed on the mainland, a couple of miles from La Rochelle and the bridge. Our base was the Domaine du Chateau, a blend of holiday styles — a modern apartment complex alongside a chateau in 30 acres of woodland.

Once the home of a grand Cognac-making clan, the chateau is now a boutique hotel with the chi-chi '123' restaurant attached (try the goat's cheese quenelles and the Cognac Baba).

We stayed in the apartments in an air-conditioned family flat overlooking the pool. It's a big coast in every sense. South of La Rochelle, we found the early-1900s accented resort town of Chatelaillon-Plage where the sea rolls in and out so far that when we arrived, at low tide, the Atlantic seemed to have wandered off to America. A perfect spot for two free-range children who have yet to master swimming.

There is plenty of sea in the deeper waters around the Île de Ré. It is 3km over the bridge but it has the feel of travelling to another land.

Suddenly, the big, bustling coast roads of western France turn into a lattice of narrow lanes through small villages and lush farmland.

There are surprisingly few cyclists on the road. They are all pedalling away along their own 80km network of cycle tracks that traverse the island.

Every now and then, bike and car routes meet, but the intersections are amicable. We decided to hire bikes in the pretty village of Le Bois-Plage for the simple reason that the bike shop was near a merry-go-round. It's

always worth remembering that hiring anything in Europe during the holiday season consumes the same amount of time as a decent meal, so it seemed wise to have some entertainment while I fuffed around with the paperwork.

Sure enough, renting two bikes with child seats and a trailer took an hour — plus a parking ticket on the car. But at 13 a day, you can't go wrong. And once we had hit the tracks and left Le Bois-Plage behind, it was exhilarating.

I'm not a keen cyclist, especially with a small plastic caravan on the back, but there is no sense of danger.

Nor are there any hills. And you can't get lost — you just follow the coast. And if you stray too far inland, you end up on the opposite coast.

To the north are marshlands and mud flats, to the south are broad sandy beaches and grassy dunes. Our favourite spot was just outside the village of La Couarde where we

rounded off a morning of sandcastles and rock pools with lunch at a beach shack called Taxi Brousse.

It's cash-only,

but does superb mussels on a shady deck and has a swimming pool just for customers.

Other highlights included a family day out in La Rochelle. It's a big port city but the centre is a wonderful labyrinth of cobbled streets and grand colonnades leading down to a ancient port.

It's full of great restaurants; try the cheaper outlets one street back from the quay on the atmospheric Rue St Jean du Perot.

For our daughters, aged three and one, the best bit of the entire holiday was the La Rochelle Aquarium, one of Europe's finest.

There are windows at every height, looking in on 70 tanks and 12,000 creatures in 3million litres of water.

The children were transfixed by a furious moray eel. I was gripped by the sharks. Every aquarium promises a shark, but it usually turns out to be a rather weedy specimen. Not here.

One travel tip: We decided to stop over in Normandy en route and discovered a fine seam of affordable, historic chateau-hotels within half an hour of the ferry port in Cherbourg.

After a week on the Costa Cognac, it is nice to break the journey and savour a glass or two of its most famous product before heading home.



Travel NEWS

■ CAMINO Ways has a special Valentine's deal — Camino Romantico. For 599pp (flights are extra) you get four nights' on a half-board basis (including wine) along the Camino de Santiago with the last two nights in an 18th Century heritage building-turned hotel in Santiago de Compostela itself. Champagne reception, airport transfers and a massage treatment are all thrown in — perfect after a few days of walking. The break is scheduled for February 14 to 18. See camino-ways.com or call 01 525 2886.



■ TAKE to the rails on America's east coast and experience the cities of Boston, Philadelphia, New York and Washington DC. For 1,259 you get flights from Dublin, nine nights on a room-only basis and train transport between each of the cities. For more information on this Great American Cities Rail Tour contact Tropical Sky at www.tropicalsky.ie or phone 01 664 9999. Departure dates until the end of March.



■ SEVEN nights in Austria around St Patrick's Day is just the thing if you're allergic to leprechauns. This Travel Department trip takes in Salzburg and Vienna and comes with a Sound of Music tour. Salzburg is the first stop – three nights B&B in a 4-star hotel – and it's here you walk in the foot-steps of Julie Andrews. Then on to Vienna for four nights in another 4-star hotel, plus a city tour. The seven-day trip, with Aer Lingus flights, costs €849. Call 01 637 1600 or see www.traveldepartment.ie

■ WE ARE well into skiing season and Topflight is holding a mid-season ski sale for three days only – next Monday to Thursday, February 4-6. France, Austria, Italy and Andorra all feature, and packages are available on charter flights from Dublin, Cork and Belfast up to Good Friday. With plrdges of 40 per cent off some holidays and packages from 269 for a week, you'll need to be quick at 9am on Monday when the sale opens. Call 01 240 1700 or visit topflight.ie

■ THERE are some attractive car hire rates just released for the month of February from the Rhino car hire people. In Portugal you can hire from 2.25 a day, while in Spain the rates start at just over 3. In Lanzarote (traditionally very expensive because of its popularity as a winter sun destination) it will set you back around 10 a day. More information about these rates, and those for other destinations, can be found on www.rhinocarhire.ie



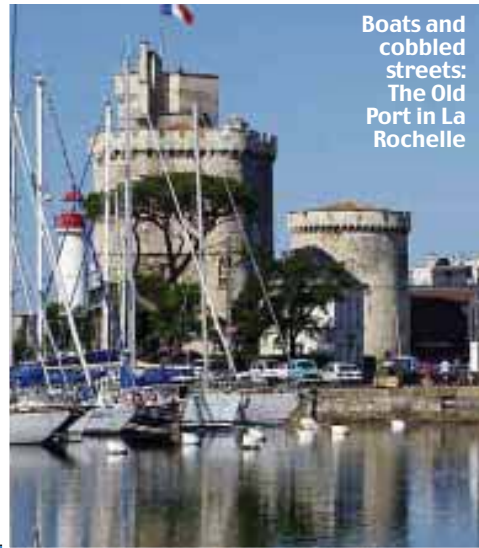
TRAVEL FACTS

DOMAINE du Chateau apartments cost from €48 per night for a two-person studio. Call 0033 5 46 07 48 68 or visit www.revalisever.com to book. Rosslare to Cherbourg fares cost €258 for two adults, two children and a car for a return by ferry. See irishferries.com for more details. Ryanair also operates direct flights to La Rochelle. See ryanair.com for more information. For further information, see poitou-charentes.com. For Normandy stopovers, see normandy-tourism.org.





Exotic sea creatures: The impressive La Rochelle Aquarium



Boats and cobbled streets: The Old Port in La Rochelle



Seafood served in Ars-en-Ré



Quaint: Quayside at the port of St Martin in Île de Ré



Cycling is popular in the Île de Ré

