

C'est parfait! The chic French

Off the Vendée coast, Île d'Yeu has bags of charm and history and a stylish new hotel, says **Jenny Coad**

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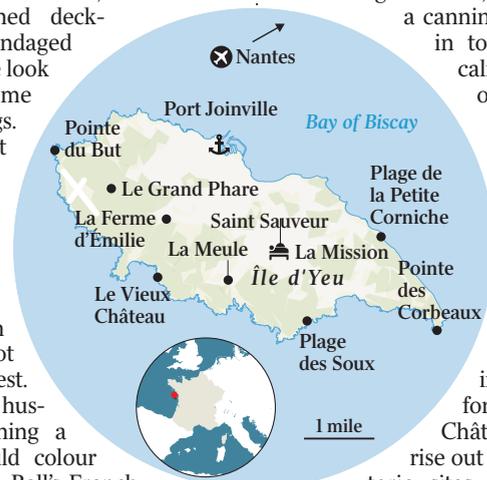
Ten miles off the Vendée coast of western France, Île d'Yeu demands a little extra effort. For starters it's in the Bay of Biscay and when we board the boat for the 45-minute journey from the port of Fromentine, the heavily suntanned deckhand with bandaged fingers takes one look at us and hands me a stack of sick bags.

It's true that after a 4am start and a flight that involved an un-scheduled stop in Bordeaux because the pilot couldn't land in Nantes, we are not looking our best. But despite my husband, Rob, turning a shade that would colour match Farrow & Ball's French Gray, we manage not to disgrace ourselves on the bouncy crossing. "It's wibbly wobbly like jelly on a plate, Mummy," shrieks our three-year-old daughter, Lyra, somewhat understating things.

Our fellow passengers are sturdy, twinkly French people of a certain age, sensibly dressed in form-fitting water-proofs. There is nonetheless a sense of relief when we dock at Port Joinville. With its blue-shuttered and white-painted buildings lining the front, I'm not sure a harbour town has ever looked more appealing.

This was the island's commercial centre — coastal shipping then fishing were big business, and there is still a canning factory (the last in town. We're on the calmer northeast coast of the 23 sq km island, which is 10km from west (Pointe du But) to east (Pointe des Corbeaux). The south coast is uninhabitable, with coves carved by frothing seas and an imposing medieval fortress, Le Vieux Château, that seems to rise out of the rock. Prehistoric sites, including dolmen dating to 4,000BC, show people settled on the island in the very distant past.

Like on the Île de Ré, about 124 miles south, the population of Yeu swells in summer from 5,000 to 25,000 but the island feels less developed, less glitzy than its southerly neighbour, with more of a sense of ordinary life going on in the background.



island alternative to Île de Ré



The restaurant at La Mission



Cycling through Saint Sauveur

We are staying in the middle, in a new hotel, La Mission, in the village of Saint Sauveur, which was once the island's capital. Opened last summer, it's the first outpost outside of Paris for the boutique group Les Hôteliers Impertinents, and it's seriously chic. Michel Delloye and Jacques-Olivier Larant, the owners and childhood friends, spent summers on the Île d'Yeu and they have managed the transformation of what was a 19th-century garrison canton then a primary school with style and care. They've made a point of employing locals and keeping the hotel open almost year-round so islanders can enjoy the bars and restaurant off season too.

What was the girls' primary school is now a series of 22 rooms in one-storey white buildings — in keeping with the architecture of the island — arrayed around a giant plane tree. The former boys' school is now a rum bar (plus breezy rooftop spot), restaurant and heated pool with "Ye" tiled into the bottom and a small adjoining spa. The white parasols are fringed with red and the rooms are all smart rattan and jaunty textiles.

Our family room has a cheery, thick-piled zigzag yellow rug, Matisse-inspired embroidered cushions by A&N and a mustard checked throw. Were the furnishings for sale, I'd gladly buy the lot. There are cute white bunk beds built into the wall for Lyra and a cot on the mezzanine level next to our giant bed for our baby, Jasper. It's

still blowy outside but, as we make our way to the restaurant for supper (and strong gin and tonics), there are bursts of lovely clear island light. We begin to feel away from it all.

I'd like to say that our meal is a detangling experience but you know what dinners with young children are like. Messy (and we are seated over a distressingly smart rug). Noisy (even if it's not tears). Shortlived (despite the kindly provided colour-in menu). Some of our fellow diners turn around to look.

But we are all (especially the baby) captivated by the interior with its giant jellyfish-like pendant lights and ikat-covered ceiling. And Jasper so endears himself to the maitre d', she even allows him to grab her silk shirt. Horreur! The walls are deep red, there's a blue and white tiled fireplace and shelves of ceramics. The chips are salty, the fish perfectly cooked but there is no lingering for dessert — that giant bed is calling.

Breakfast is more of a success because we are first through the door and have the buffet of breads, brioche, two types of butter and homemade salted caramel spread to ourselves. Yes, there's fruit and yoghurt and eggs, but is there anything better than French bread and butter?

It's expensive to bring a car onto Yeu so holidaymakers usually cycle and La Mission has electric bikes with all manner of options for ferrying children. First, though, a foray into Saint Sauveur. It's properly charming with white houses with

orange, burgundy and blue shutters, a Romanesque church with frescoes, Renaults parked next to walls with roses rambling all over the place. Trumpet lilies are in bloom, and there's a bakery which provides us with sandwiches, quiches and prune tart, a local speciality. At the barcum-tabac they are doing a busy trade in espressos and tiny glasses of white wine. While buying postcards Lyra and I meet a family from Paris who are relocating to the island for two years. What an adventure.

Babies and baskets loaded, we set off. Even though it's relatively flat, we are grateful for the electric oomph (especially when the children fall asleep on the back). It's a brilliant way to get around and see the island, which is lovely in early June with fragrant banks of honeysuckle and flowering gorse in the hedgerows and verges scattered with orange poppies. Jasper, though, is more interested in a thorough investigation of the screw securing his bike seat.

Our first stop is La Ferme d'Émilie, owned by Émilie and Pierre Sage. They run an organic 60-hectare farm (farming is having something of a renaissance on the island) a 20-minute cycle from La Mission. A restaurant using its produce and a shop selling it (including homemade ice cream, verben jelly and slippers lined with wool from their flock of Sologne sheep) is new for this summer. It's a lovely, airy space and Lyra confirms the strawberries are very good indeed. Pierre, who used to work in the oil industry, tells us he is happier since the life-changing career move into farming that he made 18 years ago, but more tired. We can only sympathise.

It is an attractive ride on sandy bike paths from here to the ruined Le Vieux Château, which even in the sunshine strikes me as a chilly, foreboding outpost — though I guess that was the idea. It's open for guided tours only but we are still able to cross the drawbridge and peek through the door to see the large cannon. On the horizon to the north, we can see one of the island's five lighthouses, Le Grand Phare, rebuilt in 1951 having been bombed in 1944. It can be climbed but not, we decide, with a preschooler. From here we pedal further south to La Meule, with its tiny harbour lined with fishing huts (Bar de la Meule overlooks the harbour and comes recommended) and overlooked by a tiny chapel built in the 11th century.

Then it's on to the attractive cove Plage des Soux. The sea is rough but it's sheltered enough for Rob to brave the water while Jasper chomps down fistfuls of sand and Lyra climbs the rocks. A group of young Frenchmen arrive with their guitars to provide a gap year vibe. It reminds me of Scottish island beaches — bracing but beautiful.

On the northeast coast the sandy stretches, some backed by piney forests, are bigger and ideal for shell collecting. We score a very good haul on Plage de la Petite Corniche at low tide when people are out and about shore fishing. But sometimes it's tempting to just keep cycling while the children are captive and (mostly) quiet.

After too short a stay, we have a boat to catch. Our return journey is by a bigger vessel (less heave-ho, more gentle roll) on calmer seas and the mood on deck is almost festive with people drinking beer and not a sick bag in sight. Yes, you work a little harder for a holiday on Île d'Yeu, but you won't regret it.

More chic island stays

Le Grand Large, Oléron

Also off the west coast of France and south of Île de Ré is Oléron. It's all about the water here, with a surf scene on the west coast and the chance to kayak at sea or through the wetlands, home to more than 150 species of birds. Fort Boyard (of Melinda Messenger's TV show fame) lies off its east coast, while on its west is the Le Corbusier-inspired hotel Le Grand Large, right, which sits amid sand dunes and has an ocean-facing restaurant and new rooftop, made for sunset soirées and this year hosting a champagne bar.

Details Room-only doubles from £203 (le-grand-large.fr). Fly to La Rochelle

Villa Clarisse, Île de Ré

You're in the heart of chichi Île de Ré in Saint Martin de Ré. The port town, on the west coast, has a yacht-filled harbour, shops galore, the biggest choice of ice cream imaginable in La Martinière (though avoid the oyster flavour), free-ranging donkeys and a rich history. Elegant Villa Clarisse, in an 18th-century mansion, has four rooms and five suites, all awash with light and lifted by patterned textiles. There's a heated pool, a spa and an honesty bar.

Details Room-only doubles from £328 (villa-clarisse.com). Fly to La Rochelle

Castel Clara Thalasso & Spa, Belle Île en Mer

Wild coastline, goose barnacle appetisers and blissful beaches — the largest of the Breton islands, Belle Île en Mer, has plenty to recommend it. It's a 50-minute ferry from Quiberon on the Brittany coast and a free transfer from Le Palais port to its grande dame hotel, Castel Clara Thalasso & Spa, right.

Presiding over pretty Port Goulphar, the hotel swimming pool overlooks the boats bobbing below and its restaurant, Cotton Mill, has a panoramic terrace and barbecue dishes. Belle Île en Mer was also home to the French actress Sarah Bernhardt and her house, Les Poulaines, in a former fort, is open to visitors.

Details B&B doubles from £198 (castel-clara.com). Fly to Nantes

Jenny Coad

Need to know

Jenny Coad was a guest of La Mission, which has B&B doubles from £181 (lamissionyeu.com); Yeu Continent ferries (yeu-continent.fr); Vendée Tourism (in-vendee.com); and Atlantic Loire Valley Tourism (atlantic-loire-valley.com). Fly to Nantes