



HOTEL

La Baronnie

It is hard to fault Ile de Ré, an island on France's Atlantic coast that is picturesque, peaceful and unpretentious - and easy to get to from the UK. The barons of Ile de Ré capitulated to the king of France in 1400, surrendering their capital (Saint-Martin-de-Ré) and its castle. La Baronnie, an eighteenth-century mansion, was built on the castle's foundations, and Louis XVI later bought it for Marie-Antoinette. Current owner Florence Pallardy has imbued the place with unstuffy French classicism. Pierre Frey fabrics, antique armoires and Louis XV chairs fill the 22 dreamy boudoirs, though La Baronnie is very much for families, too, with bunk beds and Tintin prints in some of the rooms. Monsieur Pallardy can be found tending the gardens, which are dotted with cottages for couples and a private cabin with pool, sauna and Jacuzzi. The hotel serves a simple breakfast and the quayside, brimming with restaurants and Gallic charm, is a minute's wander away. *Rooms from €187 a night, B&B; hotel-labaronnie.com*

inside track

ILE DE RE

STEPHANIE DRAX RECOMMENDS THE BEST PLACES TO STAY, EAT, SHOP AND EXPLORE ON THE ATLANTIC-COAST ISLAND



DON'T MISS

The market in the northern coastal village of La Flotte, open every morning, is almost a pastiche: a cobbled courtyard lined with quaint wooden stalls heaving with fresh produce and artisanal products, including Ile de Ré herbed salts. Close by (on rue Charles Biret) is **Sushi Folie** (above), a favourite with locals, which serves excellent sushi and sake in a shabby chic space. Along the coast from La Flotte is another trendy hang-out, **La Cible**, a revamped beach shack on Avenue de la Plage. It runs the gamut from morning coffee and croissants to sunset cocktails and dancing.



RESTAURANT

La Baleine Bleue

Like its namesake, the blue whale, this restaurant is a dominating presence - an Ile de Ré institution ever since it opened in 1989. Located on an islet in the port of Saint-Martin-de-Ré, it boasted a proper sommelier and silver cutlery; the bar raged until the small hours and locals had never seen the like. The owner, Philippe Bodart, a roguish seafarer with a slew of celebrity friends, was known as 'King of the Night'. Then, 15 years ago, Philippe turned down the music and focused on the food, with a menu that relies heavily on local fish. Start with a glass of *pineau* - a French fortified wine made with grape juice and Cognac - then tuck into a tartare of langoustine with jus of veal and shellfish, or a foie gras with smoked sea bream. Lobster, sole and the daily catch all vie for main courses. Finish with the Brie de Meaux with truffle or the chocolate ice cream cake with grilled cacao nibs. If you get the chance, corner Philippe for tales of his nautical adventures. *A three-course meal for two costs about €120; baleinebleue.com*

AREAS TO EXPLORE

This island is as flat as a crêpe and everyone - old or young, fit or hefty - explores it by bicycle (left). Rental shops are abundant. Cycle the 14 kilometres from Saint-Martin-de-Ré to Ars-en-Ré and you will be rewarded en route with cabins serving local oysters (below) and wine. In Ars, you can explore the boutiques (**La Ronde des Jeux** on rue du Havre sells traditional wooden toys for children) and feast on reasonably priced shellfish (**Le Café de Commerce** on quai de la Pree). On your return journey, you will have the prevailing wind at your back, which will help you sail past salt marshes and back to Saint-Martin.

WAYS AND MEANS

Four airlines fly to La Rochelle from the UK: Easyjet (easyjet.com; from £27.24 one way), Ryanair (ryanair.com; from £14.99), Flybe (flybe.com; from £34.99) and Jet2 (jet2.com; from £45). A taxi transfer from La Rochelle to Saint-Martin-de-Ré takes 20 minutes and costs from €35 □



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