

For a few days of fresh air, cycling and good food, Ile de Ré takes some

My faith in France is restored

THE Ile de Ré is sometimes compared to the Hamptons. Parisians have the same sort of relationship with this little island blessed with its own micro-climate off the south-west Atlantic coast of France as New Yorkers have with their summer dormitory. So visit mid-week if you can, and before the high-season months of July and August. There are flights from Stansted to La Rochelle at scandalously low prices — in one direction the cost of my flight before tax was £2.49.

Fortunately, Ile de Ré, reached by a graceful bridge over untroubled water from just outside La Rochelle airport, is perfectly designed to deal with carbon-emissions guilt.

The flat, narrow, unspoiled island, which is about 30 kilometres long, is criss-crossed with cycle paths and walking tracks. Freewheeling between hedges of cow parsley alongside salt marshes, oyster farms, vines, new potatoes and the ocean, it is easy to blot out all knowledge of the existence of the internal combustion engine.

My sister Beth and I based ourselves at L'Hotel de Toiras in the picture-postcard-perfect port of the historic capital, Saint-Martin-de-Ré. Fortifications and ramparts are still in good order, a legacy of the period after the Hundred Years War and before the fall of Napoleon, when the English made many attempts to besiege what would have been a strategically invaluable base.

In 1625 the brave Marquis de Toiras, governor of the island, led a charge that repulsed 6,000 English troops under the command of the Duke of Buckingham.

The charming staff of the pretty, small hotel could not have been more welcoming or more helpful to two English women off the plane.

We loved our beautifully appointed rooms, mine dedicated to Madame de Sévigné, the 17th-century writer famous for chronicling her times in more than 1,500 letters — shamefully I didn't write even one — and Beth's, overlooking the interior garden, to the botanist Nicolas Baudin.

On the evening of our arrival we ate at the nearby restaurant Le Skipper, which proved the least gratifying meal of the little holiday — partly because a blackboard of plats du jour offering

FAY MASCHLER



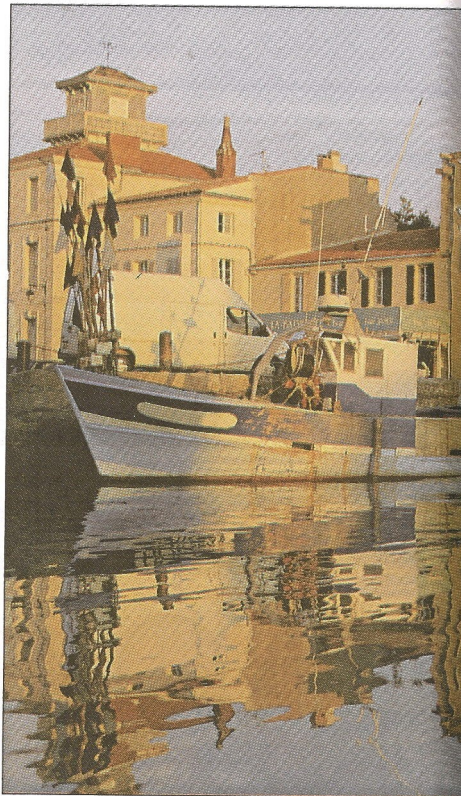
truly desirable items like local white asparagus and sole meunière was only put in our line of vision at the end of an adequate but unremarkable dinner. Also the bill was plonked down before it had been requested.

You know how the French are better than us at knotting sweaters casually around their shoulders? There was a lot of insouciant sweater-shrugging going on among the clientele.

The next day the hotel arranged rental of sit-up-and-beg bikes and we cycled to the village of Ars-en-Ré. Painfully reminded of how very long it was since I had sat for any length of time on a bicycle, the village seemed aptly named. Le Bistrot de Bernard began the restoration of my faith in eating out in France.

The sort of meal that used to be rhapsodised about when France seemed to the English to be synonymous with the best things in life, was brought alive by our lunch on the terrace overlooking by a Banksia rose sporting clots of yellow blossom.

Gentle, interested staff conducted the meal from canapés with our Kir to



petits four with the coffee at just the right pace. Star turns were sweet langoustines with white asparagus and black "caviar" and a large tranche of wild turbot with beurre blanc. Assorted fruits layered with lemony cream were impeccably fresh.

Le Chat Botté in Saint-Clement-des-Baleines (this last word refers to the fact that in Roman times hundreds of whales — baleines — were washed up on the shores) is a hotel mentioned in Herbert Ypma's Hip Hotels France.

The hotel and the separate restaurant where we went for dinner are different branches of the same family. Chef/proprietor Damien is passionate about the local produce and fact abundantly apparent in his salade gourmande.

Ile de Ré potatoes, at their best in June, are the only ones at their own appellation contrôlée status — and flavour — is akin of Jersey Royals. They accompany veal chop with morilles.

FIVE RESTAURANTS WORTH CYCLING TO

THE WATERWAY, 54 Formosa Street, W9 (020 7266 3557) £37. A scuzzy boozier converted into stylish colour-supplement pub complete with yards of decking. The Waterway is the ideal starting point for a nine-mile cycle ride along Regent's Canal from Little Venice to Limehouse Basin. The Londoner Sausage Sandwich and a jug of Pimm's will help you on your way.

WRIGHT BROTHERS OYSTER & PORTER HOUSE, 11 Stoney Street, SE1 (020 7403 9554) £35. Ben Wright and brother-in-law Robin Hancock were inspired to start their seafood supply business by a lunch of oysters plucked straight from the water in

Marennes-Oleron, south-west France. Their restaurant outlet in Borough Market can be reached by the Thames Path on the South Bank.

THE LOCK DINING BAR, Heron House, Hale Wharf, Ferry Lane, N17 (020 8885 2829) £34. Chef/co-owner Adebola Adeshina, who trained with Gordon Ramsay — and it shows — has his eye on the potential that the Olympics will bring. Keen cyclists could start training on the 26 miles of paths in nearby Lee Valley Park. Roast Sunday lunch, £10 for two courses.

WILLIE GUNN, 422 Garratt Lane, SW18 (020 8946 7773) £34. Before setting off on the well-marked Wandle

Trail, this easygoing, friendly operation is somewhere to take on fuel. The menu covers most bases, whether burger you want or Thai chicken curry.

PETERSHAM NURSERIES CAFE, behind Petersham House, 143 Petersham Road, Richmond (020 8605 3627) £55. So right-on are the credentials here that it is amazing how they are allowed anywhere near. Ride a through Richmond Park to minimise your footfall and keep a grip on your sense of the ridiculous when looking at prices that make the River Café see snip. Lunch only, Wed to Sun.

● Prices above estimate the cost of meal with wine for one.