

DISPATCH

Brittany's Belle-Île for Summer

The hard-to-reach island off the coast of France has no traffic lights, resorts, or Michelin stars. And that is its allure. **BY DAVID MARGOLICK**



Accessible by ferry from Quiberon, in Brittany, Le Palais is Belle-Île's largest village, and its harbor the main point of entry.

Half a million people visit Belle-Île-en-Mer every year, notes mayor Frédéric Le Gars, and if you count the cruise ships making their pit stops at the largest island off the coast of Brittany, a grand total of 200 of them are American. And even that paltry sum is a bit inflated. Many of these Americans are imported for the music festival held every August. And still more aren't typical tourists. Randal Hoder of Stowe, Vermont, who summers here, married a Frenchwoman (in Belle-Île). Opera soprano Jazmin Black Grollemund met Le Gars's deputy while performing in the festival and married him soon after. **CONTINUED ▶**

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DOING BELLE-ÎLE

Belle-Île is best enjoyed by finding a lovely place to stay, savoring the wonderfully tasty and healthful local fare, and then finding a way to burn at least some of it off by heading to a few of its beaches —D.M.

ACCOMMODATIONS

Castel Clara (rooms from \$205; Goulphar, Bangor; 33-2/97-31-84-21) The island's premier hostelry. Come for the views, the seafood bar, and the famous thalassotherapy.

Citadelle Vauban (rooms from \$165; Le Palais; 33-2/97-31-84-17) Situated in a beautiful ancient fortress, the rooms have the size and feel of the barracks they once were.

La Désirade (rooms from \$110; Petit Cosquet, Bangor; 33-2/97-31-70-70) Quiet and intimate, with nicely appointed bungalows.

HOUSE RENTALS

Belle-Île-en-Mer Tourist Office (*belleileenmer.co.uk*) Lists nearly 200 homes.

RESTAURANTS AND SHOPS

Villa Simone (*Allée des Peupliers, Sauzon; 33-2/97-29-11-28*) A new and homey place serving

classic French cuisine and run by the family of the executive chef at L'Hermès in Paris.

Le Café de la Cale (*Quai Guerveur, Sauzon; 33-2/97-31-65-74*) Local seafood—mussels, oysters, sea bass—unpretentiously served in a Belle-Île fixture overlooking the harbor.

Le Petit Baigneur (*Rue Rampe des Glicines, Sauzon; 33-2/97-31-67-74*) More heaps of fruits de mer, on a charming side street.

Creperie Les Embruns (*Quai Joseph Naudin, Bangor; 33-2/97-31-64-78*) The best crepes on the island, aficionados say.

Le Fourn'Isle en Mer (*Rue Joseph le Brix, Le Palais; 33-2/97-31-82-07*) Try the baguette *campaillou*: crusty and delicious and dark.

La Ferme de Keroulep (*Locmaria; 33-2/97-31-76-28*) The farm shop keeps strange hours—generally from 5 P.M. to 8 P.M.—but the goats and what becomes of their milk speak for themselves.

La Ferme de Kerdavid (*Bangor; 33-2/97-31-72-78*) Enhancing the local croissants and baguettes may seem impossible, but the impeccably fresh butter from this farm does just that.

Éric Le Goué (*Parlevent, Bangor; 33-2/97-31-34-27*) More than any other farmer, Le Goué knows how to coax the tastiest fruit and vegetables from the salty soil.

Les Délices de Sauzon (*Quai Naudin, Sauzon; 33-6/21-24-79-39*) This small store is the local outlet for the exceptional jams made in nearby Quiberon.

MOPEDS AND BICYCLES

Au Cheval de Fer 1 Bis (*Quai Gambetta, Le Palais; 33-2/97-31-50-70*).

Locmaria Cycles (*Rue des Acadiens, Locmaria; 33-2/97-31-72-90*).

kled amid the island's still-copious farmlands and fields. The houses are built in the uniformly simple Breton style: white chalk (and occasionally stone) trimmed with the slate blue of Brittany or the playful shades of apricot or raspberry sorbet and mint-green *crème glacée*, surrounded in many cases by gardens of hydrangeas.

While Belle-Île's tiny landing strip accommodates private planes from the Continent, few come. Any paparazzo unfortunate enough to be assigned here might be tempted to jump off the austere and perilous cliffs of the Côte Sauvage, the rocky southwestern coastline immortalized by Claude Monet in the nearly 40 paintings he made here in the fall of 1886. Surveying what he called the "tangle of extraordinary coves, spikes, and needles" along or near the shore—the wisps of foam crashing off the rocks gave it the name Port Coton—he'd had to anchor his easel with cords and stones to protect it from the winds.

Apart from the music festival, which is perpetually strapped for funds, there's little cultural life here, whether in Le Palais, Sauzon, or the island's two other, much sleepier but charming municipalities, Locmaria and Bangor. One settles, instead, for more intimate pleasures: the aroma of fresh bread and raspberry jam at the Boulangerie de l'Epeautre, in Locmaria; the curry-like scent of wild fennel along the roadsides; the ubiquitous wild blackberries, which provide hikers with a constant source of confiture. To Elisabeth Thiry, who cooks at Belle-Île's most talked-about restaurant, Villa Simone, in Sauzon, there's the distinctive flavor of the island's lamb, nourished on its salty grasses.

Unless one is from Portland—Maine or Oregon, it doesn't much matter—the water off Belle-Île will seem a bit chilly, at least for the first few dips. The late Richard Cowan, an American opera singer who created the music festival, was once a high school swimmer, but in his last two decades on Belle-Île, he told me, he'd gone in only twice. (Anyone similarly reluctant might now want to reconsider: Water temperatures here, as everywhere else, have risen.) The seawater is clear and refreshing. The air is bright, fresh, even medicinal—high in iodine, the mayor insists.

If getting to Belle-Île can be difficult, attach-

ing to it can also take time. Ideally, one would start at a hotel or bed-and-breakfast, just to get a feel for the place. A point to begin might be Castel Clara, in Bangor, known locally as *l'hôtel de Mitterrand* because he favored the place and it's the only one on the island with four stars. (It also offers thalassotherapy, or treatment by seawater, which is both soothing and a bit superfluous on an island that offers, by one count, nearly 60 different beaches: big and small, ac-



A local fisherman looking for mussels at Pointe de Poulains, at the northernmost tip of the island

cessible and remote, rocky and sandy, tempestuous—some are for surfers—and serene, nude and clad, straight and gay, busy and almost entirely deserted, but all of them public. Even people who've been here 30 years keep finding new ones, or can't find the old ones.)

Then you can graduate to a house rental and settle into the local routines: hiking (it takes several days to cover the 51-mile path around the island) or cycling or moped riding or driving (there are rentals for all in Le Palais). And eating *fruits de mer* and Breton crepes. And taste testing the island's various *boulangeries*. My ritual quickly devolved to visiting the market each morning, then setting the breakfast table with my bounty, then going for a swim (amid the sailing students of the *école de voile*) along the beach at Les Grands Sables,

then sitting down for fresh fruit, croissants, artisanal bread with local butter and jams, soft-boiled local eggs, and pots of strong espresso.

Needless to say, the island, whose population shrinks to 5,249 in the off-season, has changed profoundly over the years. To see how much, visit the comically misnamed hamlet of Grand Village on the island's southwest side. Longtime resident Corinne Jamet Vierny showed me marvelous photographs of Belle-Île from the 1930s to the '60s taken by her late father, the French singer Pierre Jamet. They depict a community of fishermen and farmers and local personalities, the types Millet or Van Gogh might have painted. There's hardly a tourist in sight.

But the sardines have since swum on, and with them have gone most of those who caught or canned them. Still, even to veterans of the place, Belle-Île looks and feels unchanged. Because its many new houses must be annexed to existing villages, the growth has been well camouflaged. The only road with a line down the middle is the one that bisects the island. The rest are country lanes. Belle-Île still has no traffic lights, though it could use a few, especially with SUVs barging in now where all the Deux Chevaux—Citroën's famous 2CVs—once roamed. Litter and car horns are nonexistent.

Near the end of my stay, I returned for the closing night of the festival, which featured an operatic twin bill of *Pagliacci* and *Gianni Schicchi* at the Salle Arletty, named for the famous

French actress (*Les Enfants du Paradis*) who also had a house on the island. (It was she who, imprisoned briefly after World War II for a liaison with a Luftwaffe officer, is said to have proclaimed, "My heart is French, but my ass is international.") Though I'd been in Belle-Île but a few days, I already felt at home: The hall was dotted with the people I'd managed to meet. (Giscard d'Estaing was there, too, but the Bel-lois are respectful enough to leave their few celebrities alone.) The performances were splendid—the local *Pagliacci* even featured a bonus suicide, and judging from the rapturous applause that followed, I came to believe that the troubled festival would surely return the following summer (it did) and for many a summer to come. And so, too—should my good luck hold—will I. ♦