

FPN LOCATION

Island living

Off the coast of France there are hundreds of stunning islands, ranging from wild and windswept to mild and laidback. **Karen Tait** picks out her top 10 favourites



If you love the sea, what could be better than a home on an island? Despite there being hundreds of islands off the coast of France, popular with French holidaymakers and daytrippers, they're less well known to Brits.

Many are tiny, maybe just large enough for a lighthouse, often nature reserves. Others have an almost non-existent year-round population, home to tiny fishing communities, but the numbers rise tenfold and more in the summer months as tourists hit the islands' shores.

Island life is particularly seductive for those who yearn to escape the rat race, with their

relaxing beaches (only busy at the height of the season), laidback vibe, simple and traditional, often car-free, lifestyle, and unspoilt scenery.

The majority of French islands are located off the Atlantic coast, including those you're most likely to have heard of such as Île de Ré, Noirmoutier or Oléron. Off the Norman coast, the Îles Chausey is Europe's largest archipelago with 52 islands at high tide, but it is Brittany that has the highest concentration, with some 800 islands and islets dotted around its coast. The Gulf of Morbihan alone is home to 38 islets and two main islands, Île aux Moines and Île d'Arz, which benefit from a mild microclimate, enabling orange and lemon trees to grow.

The Îles du Ponant is an association of 15 islands – Chausey, Bréhat, Batz, Ouessant, Molène, Sein, Glénan, Groix, Belle-Île, Houat, Hoedic, Arz, Moines, Yeu and Aix – off the north and north-western coast of France. These islands must share three characteristics: a permanent population; the status of an official administrative local community (generally a *commune*); and no fixed link to the mainland, such as a bridge.

In the south of France, off the Mediterranean coast you'll find a handful of small 'holiday' islands, including Les Lérins, Frioul and the tiny Île de Bendor, bought in 1950 by Paul Ricard (of the famous pastis name) as a private island on which to entertain. The Îles d'Hyères in Var are the only ones with a significant year-round population.

Unlike many islands around the world, the French islands are not famous or glamorous. Although some are patronised by celebrities, these are the holiday homes they don't shout about. It's all very low-key and tasteful.

I'm going to concentrate here on our pick of the top 10 islands, all of which are large enough to provide potential for househunters although you should be prepared, of course, for a more limited choice than on the mainland.

Indeed, on the smaller or more scenic islands, property rarely changes hands. An option here would be to buy a property on the mainland close by, with easy access to your favourite isle whenever you want.

www.completefrance.com



Known as the Island of Flowers, Île de Bréhat has a mild climate and is popular with daytrippers

1 Île de Bréhat

Starting at the 'top' of France, in the English Channel, or *La Manche*, the Île de Bréhat is situated just off the Côtes-d'Armor coast of Brittany, accessed by ferry from the Pointe de l'Arcouest, north of Paimpol. With a population of around 400, Bréhat is just 3km² in size.

Although considered a single island, it is actually an archipelago composed of two main islands, separated only at high tide, and many smaller ones. Visible from Brittany's Côte de Granit Rose, it is famous for its pink granite rocks and Mediterranean vegetation, thanks to the mild microclimate caused by the warm Gulf Stream coming from the Atlantic. Known as the Island of Flowers, it has palm trees, eucalyptus, fig trees and mimosa, as well as more common species like hydrangeas.

Ferries arrive in the south of the island in Port Clos, with its elegant villas and gardens. Cars aren't allowed on the island, so the best way to explore is by bike or on foot – there are many coastal paths. There is a small handful of hotels and a campsite.

The island is popular with daytrippers visiting historic sites such as the Paon lighthouse, St-Michel chapel, Birlot windmill and Verreries artisan glassworks in the old Vauban fort, as well as beaches, the best of which is widely considered to be Guerzido.

2 Île de Batz

Also off the Brittany coast, but this time the Finistère department further west, the Île de Batz is the same size as Bréhat (3km²), reached by ferry from Roscoff, and with slightly more inhabitants at around 550.

At low tide it looks as if you could walk across the sand banks to Batz but this is extremely dangerous as the tide rises quickly. The island is known for its white sandy beaches and dunes, small harbours and exotic plants – like Bréhat, it has a mild climate. Market gardening is carried out on the island's 30 or so farms, which specialise in early vegetables, while the Jardin Georges Delaselle showcases over 2,000 exotic plant species. The car-free island has a magnificent 44m-high lighthouse, offering panoramic views.

3 Île d'Ouessant

At 20km off the Finistère coast (via ferry from Le Conquet), Ouessant is the farthest from the mainland of all the Breton islands, situated at France's most western point. A wild and rocky island some 15.6km² in size, it has a population of around 850 and is popular for pony trekking, hiking, cycling, and museum and lighthouse visits. Industry includes tourism, fishing and seaweed.

Ouessant is the only place in Brittany which has a separate name in English: Ushant. It is home to the Ouessant sheep, a breed that was widespread in northern Europe until Roman times but which now survives in only a few remote places, or as a heritage breed.

The archipelago of Ouessant and Molène is composed of seven islands and 10 islets, classified by UNESCO as a biosphere reserve. Molène, just 1.2km long and 800m wide, is very flat with sandy beaches.

The dangerous approaches to the islands are the subject of folklore – "He who sees Molène sees suffering, he who sees Ouessant sees his blood" – and the lighthouses protecting the reefs (Jument, Stiff, Créac'h) are renowned.



Ouessant is the further Breton island from the mainland

4 Île de Groix

Still in Brittany but now in the Atlantic, off the Morbihan coast, the Île de Groix is 15km² in size, reached by ferry from Lorient, and with a more significant year-round population of 2,300.

Groix has a few small towns, with high cliffs on its north coast, and sandy beaches and secluded coves on the south coast. A few hotels line the harbor at Port-Tudy but the heart of the island is just up the hill in Le Bourg, a small square of cafés and shops, with a church whose spire is topped with a sculpture of a tuna – at the start of the 20th century the island had one of the largest tuna fishing ports in France.

The island is easily explored by bike and offers marine activities, nature walks and fishing, although it is mainly known for its sandy beaches, especially Les Grands Sables.

The geology of Groix is distinct from that of the mainland, containing over 60 minerals, and the east and south coasts form a mineral nature reserve.

5 Belle-Île-en-Mer

Belle-Île is the largest of Brittany's islands (84km²), 15km off the Morbihan coast by ferry from Quiberon and Lorient, with a population of 5,000.

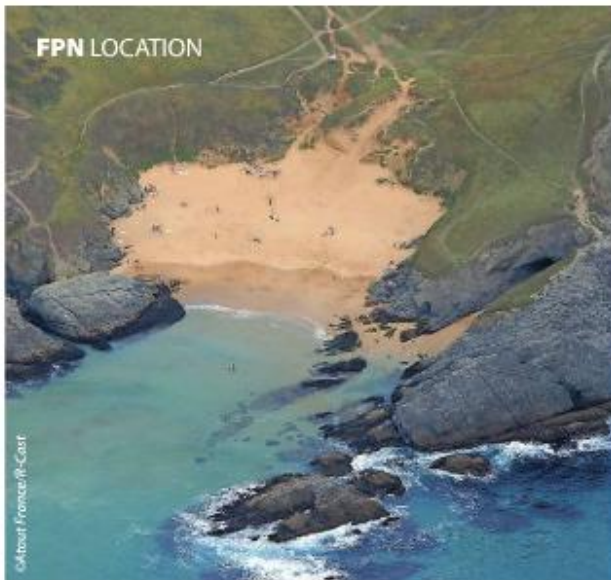
The island offers spectacular beaches and cliffs, quaint towns, pastel-coloured houses, peaceful countryside and plenty of hotels, restaurants, museums and activities. Belle-Île hosts the largest opera festival in western France (Lyrique en Mer: Festival de Belle-Île). The mild climate supports an array of Mediterranean plants.

As with the other Breton islands, it is best explored on foot or by bike (bicycle hire is available on most of the islands). A 95km circuit runs around the coastline.

Although popular with tourists in the summer, there is plenty of space to escape the crowds. As well as being a family hotspot, younger travellers head for the campsites. It's also a favoured location for holiday homes.



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|--------------|----------------|
| 1. Bréhat | 6. Noirmoutier |
| 2. Batz | 7. Yeu |
| 3. Ouessant | 8. Ré |
| 4. Groix | 9. Oléron |
| 5. Belle-Île | 10. Hyères |



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The largest of Brittany's islands, Belle-Île is aptly named, with beautiful countryside and stunning beaches, as well as the impressive Vauban citadel at Le Palais

The island's beauty has always inspired artists, including Matisse and Monet, who painted many of his works here, as well as authors such as Flaubert and Dumas. It was also a favourite destination of the late President, François Mitterrand.

In years gone by the island was of strategic importance (it was occupied for two years by the English), which can be seen by the dramatic Vauban citadel that dominates its main port, Le Palais. The citadel now houses a museum and temporary exhibitions.

On the north coast, Sauzon is known for its colourful houses, beautiful harbour, spectacular rock formations, Grotte de l'Apothicaire cave and lighthouse.

The lighthouse at Bangor is said to be one of the most impressive in France, sitting 84m above the sea. It is on the 'côte sauvage' side of the island, with dramatic scenery such as the 'aiguilles' (needles) of Port Coton. Locmaria is a small maritime village, home to the white Notre Dame de Bois Tord chapel.

The archipelago of Belle-Île includes the two

smaller islets of Houat and Hoëdic (the latter is a no-car destination), offering sandy beaches and whitewashed fishermen's houses.

6 île de Noirmoutier

Moving south down the Atlantic coast into the Vendée department in Pays de la Loire, Noirmoutier is 49km² in size, with a population of 9,600. Unlike the Breton islands, Noirmoutier has been connected to the mainland by a road bridge since 1971. Some people don't even consider Noirmoutier as an island as it is accessible by land for a few hours each day when the water recedes from Le Gois, a cobblestoned causeway.

The effect of bridge access can be seen in the housing developments along the marshy stretches between the bridge and the town, with campsites strung along the sunny beaches. Restaurants abound, including around the 12th-century castle. Many of the houses on Noirmoutier have been in the same families for generations.

The island divides into the *communes* of



This second-floor, two-bedroom apartment in the heart of Le Palais, Belle-Île, is on the market for €345,000 (www.southhomes.com)

Barbâtre, l'Épine, la Guérinière and Noirmoutier-en-l'Île. The latter gave its name to the island and is known for its fine sea salt or *fleur de sel* - 'white gold'. Parts of the island have been reclaimed from the sea. Noirmoutier is also known for La Bonnotte potatoes, which are the most expensive in the world.

The inside line

Jacqueline Davies, a property finder who specialises in the islands of Noirmoutier and Ré, explains how the islands vary

The islands, each with their own unique charm, offer an escape to a different world. The bridge to Ile de Ré was only completed in 1988 so there is still a sense of time having stood still.

Island homes are usually bought by people looking to escape a hectic working life. They offer an oasis of calm and a different pace of life. There's something really special about knowing you're separated from the world.

Ile de Ré is currently the most sought-after island, both for holidays and property. As a result the property market moves very quickly, with the best homes selling at a rapid pace.

Chic and stylish, it appeals to people seeking a café culture lifestyle and cycling. It's definitely an island to people watch and be seen.

Noirmoutier is an unspoilt paradise, bursting with colour. Terracotta roofs, blue shutters and geraniums everywhere. It has more appeal to nature-lovers having pine-backed beaches, fishing villages and quaint harbourside restaurants. Properties are sold either through local agents or privately. Period properties don't often come up for sale, frequently being passed down through families.

Property prices vary on the islands. A 24m² studio on St-Martin will set you back around €200,000 with a three-bed modern house elsewhere costing €600,000. On Noirmoutier

prices are much lower with houses starting from €250,000. Many clients purchase homes here as an investment. Houses can fetch rental returns from €1,500-5,000 per week.

Finding properties on the islands is about being in the right place at the right time. The market is quite specialised. I have usually found properties for my clients by word of mouth or a tip-off from an agent late at night as they take on a new home.

My advice would be to use a property finder who will thoroughly check the market and make the visits on your behalf.

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7 Ile d'Yeu

Also off the Vendée coast, reached by ferry from Fromentine and from St Gilles Croix de Vie, the Ile d'Yeu is 23km² in size with a population of around 5,000. The island is home to low, whitewashed houses, complemented by hydrangeas, and dramatic rocky cliffs, tiny inlets and occasional stretches of sand, with a series of coastal footpaths.

There are two main harbours, Port-Joinville and La Meule, with the usual bike rentals, tourist shops, hotels and campsites. They are known for tuna and lobster fishing, and fishermen offload their catches in front of the portside cafés. The island also has a castle, several churches, and a concentration of megalithic dolmens and menhirs.

Since the 19th century, Ile d'Yeu has attracted many artists, including Jean Rigaud, official painter to the French Navy, who owned a house here, and Jean Dufy who produced about 20 paintings of the island during several summer stays there in the 1920s.

8 Ile de Ré

Off the Charente-Maritime, Poitou-Charentes, coast, this large island (85km²) is connected to La Rochelle on the mainland by a 2.9km-long bridge, completed in 1988. Ile de Ré is one of France's most highly populated islands (18,000) and is probably the best known by British holidaymakers and househunters, thanks in part to Ryanair flights to La Rochelle.

The population can increase to as much as 220,000 in summer but thankfully there is enough space for it not to feel too crowded.

Ile de Ré includes two cantons, St-Martin-de-Ré eastwards and Ars-en-Ré westwards, and divides into 10 communes: Rivedoux-la-Plage, La Flotte, Ste-Marie-de-Ré, St-Martin-de-Ré, Le Bois-Plage-en-Ré, La Couarde-sur-Mer, Loix, Ars-en-Ré, St-Clément-des-Baleines and Les



With six en-suite bedrooms and wonderful views, this villa near St-Martin-de-Ré (top) is priced at €2.95m, while the charming five-bedroom house (above) near Ste-Marie-de-Ré is for sale at €893,000 (www.latitudes.co.uk)



St-Martin is the unofficial capital of the Ile de Ré

Portes-en-Ré. The towns are characterised by their low, whitewashed houses and colourful hollyhocks growing through the cobblestones.

Although still a laidback island, the vibe on Ile de Ré is quite different to other islands, as it attracts rich Parisians on holiday along with many of France's captains of industry, government ministers and celebrities. Lionel Jospin, Prime Minister of France from 1997 to 2002, retired here after his withdrawal from political life. Les Portes, the furthest village from the bridge, has developed a reputation as an exclusive retreat.

St-Martin-de-Ré, the island's unofficial capital, features a stunning Vauban citadel, a starlike configuration of ramparts designed to protect the local population (16,000 in 1685). (I read somewhere that Vauban's walls kept the English out for years, but he didn't forecast Ryanair...). The old town was added to the World Heritage Site list in 2008, along with 11 other Vauban fortifications across France. La Flotte is another beautiful medieval port.

The island enjoys approximately the same amount of annual sunshine hours as the Mediterranean coast but with a light breeze

and a cooler water temperature. The gently sloping, sandy beaches are popular with holidaymakers, especially families, as are the many campsites, hotels and restaurants. There are also daily markets, supermarkets and modern amenities, with activities like golf, horse-riding, sailing and tennis all on hand.

Known as a biking island, it is easily traversed with almost 100km of well-marked paths through pine forests, dunes, fields and salt marshes where fleur de sel is harvested.

During Roman times, Ile de Ré was an archipelago of three small islands but the space between them was gradually filled by a combination of human activity (salt fields gained from the sea) and siltage.

In 1154 the island became part of England when Eleanor of Aquitaine married Henry III. It reverted to France in 1243 before becoming English again from 1360 to the 1370s. In 1627 an English force attacked the island to relieve the Siege of La Rochelle but after three months of combat it was forced to withdraw in defeat.

Vauban fortified St-Martin in 1681 as part of a belt of forts and citadels protecting the military harbour of Rochefort. It was later

used as a depot for convicts on their way to the penal settlements of New Caledonia and French Guiana.

During World War II, the beaches here and on Île d'Oléron were fortified by German forces to block a possible seaward invasion; bunkers can still be seen. Several scenes of the 1962 movie *The Longest Day* were filmed on the beaches.

Seafood is, of course, a speciality, in particular oysters. Fishermen, upon returning from the sea, sell a small quantity of their catch on the quays, so the tale goes, to enable them to buy a drink.

Nearby Fort Boyard, an ancient maritime fort, has been made famous by the French television game show of the same name.

9 Ile d'Oléron

The largest French island (174km²) after Corsica, with a population of 22,000, Oléron has been connected to the mainland by a road bridge since 1966 (toll-free since 1991). Some 3km in length, it was the longest bridge in France when it was built; it now sits in third place after St-Nazaire and Ile de Ré bridges.

The fertile and well-cultivated island enjoys a mild climate with sufficient but not excessive rainfall. It is a popular holiday hotspot with great beaches, horse-riding, old buildings, hotels, campsites and restaurants specialising in seafood, especially the local oysters. Boat trips operate from the town of Boyardville to the nearby Île d'Aix and past Fort Boyard.

The island divides into eight *communes*: St-George's church, La Brée-les-Bains, Le Château-d'Oléron, Dolus-d'Oléron, Le Grand-Village-Plage, St-Denis-d'Oléron, St-Georges-d'Oléron, St-Pierre-d'Oléron and St-Trojan-les-Bains.

In around 1152 to 1160 Eleanor of Aquitaine introduced the *Rôles d'Oléron*, the first formal statement of 'maritime' or 'admiralty' laws in north-west Europe. In 1306, Edward I of England granted the island to his son, Edward II, as part of the duchy of Aquitaine.

10 Iles d'Hyères

Crossing to the Mediterranean coast of France, to the Var department in Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur, we come to the Îles d'Hyères, reached by ferry from the port of Giens.

Situated opposite the town of Hyères, there are three islands: Porquerolles (12.5km², population 200), Port Cros (7km², population 80) and Levant (9km², population 100).



Porquerolles is the largest of the Îles d'Hyères, the other two being Levant and Port Cros

Porquerolles, an extension of the Giens peninsula, is the most westerly of the islands. It has small hills, and a south coast lined with cliffs, while the north coast is home to the port and beaches. The island's village was established in 1820. In 1912 the entire island was bought by Francois Joseph Fournier as a wedding present for his wife. He also planted

200 hectares of vines, producing a wine that was among the first to be classified as *vin des Côtes de Provence*.

In 1971 the state bought 80% of the island to preserve it from development. Much of the island is now part of the Port-Cros national park and nature conservation area.

The island of Port-Cros was donated to the French government with the promise that a national park would be created on the island, which was duly established in 1963. It is the most mountainous of the islands, noted for its rare flora and as a bird refuge.

About 90% of Levant island is off limits to the public, reserved as a military missile test centre. Monks lived on the island in the 15th century – the monastery ruins still exist – and from 1861 to 1878 the island was a penitentiary for young offenders and orphans.

In 1931, doctors Gaston and André Durville established Héliopolis, Europe's first village dedicated to naturism, on the island. It has a small school, town hall, police station, food shop and a few clothing shops offering varieties of 'le minimum', the local dress code. There are a number of hotels, B&Bs and restaurants, all catering for naturists, along with beaches where nudity is obligatory.

Island househunting

- Bear in mind that there will be a more limited choice of properties than on the mainland, especially on smaller islands
- Properties may not even come onto the open market – building a good relationship with local agents and property finders can help
- As with coastal property, houses on the islands, particularly Ré and the Îles d'Hyères, can be very expensive, even more so than on the mainland
- On househunting trips, if you plan to stay overnight it is advisable to book early as accommodation can be limited
- When buying an island property, consider access – including moving any furniture into your new home



This four-bed house on Porquerolles (above left) is for sale at, €2-2.5m, while on Levant, this four-bed villa facing Port-Cros is €1-1.5m (www.agencecleregard.com)

Case study 1

What's it like owning a home on a French island? Richard Berney explains why the Île de Ré is the perfect place for him and his wife Patsy



We had travelled a lot in France, and it's such a big country that we always felt there were new places to go, new sights to see, but on an island we found that we felt more contained and settled.

Also, on an island you are surrounded by coastline to explore and the Île de Ré has a lot of good beaches to choose from.

The maritime aspect really captures our imagination, especially when it comes to birdlife. The island is on the migration path for birds heading from Africa to Northern Europe and in November we might see up to 800 Brent geese skidding to a halt on the marshes. I've even spotted a rare Egyptian Ibis on the nature reserve.

Life on Île de Ré is on a distinctly human scale and the towns reflect this. Cycles are the usual method of transport and again this creates a peaceful, more human pace of life, with everyone exchanging friendly greetings. Our children love the fact that they can take their bikes and go anywhere on the island in a day.

The island is just the right size to offer everything you need, so while on mainland France we were always wanting to shoot off to explore the next place, here we are absolutely content to stay put. When we cross that bridge, that's it. We rarely have any reason or desire to go to 'Le Continent'.

Les Bernaches is ID 152215 at www.frenchconnections.co.uk