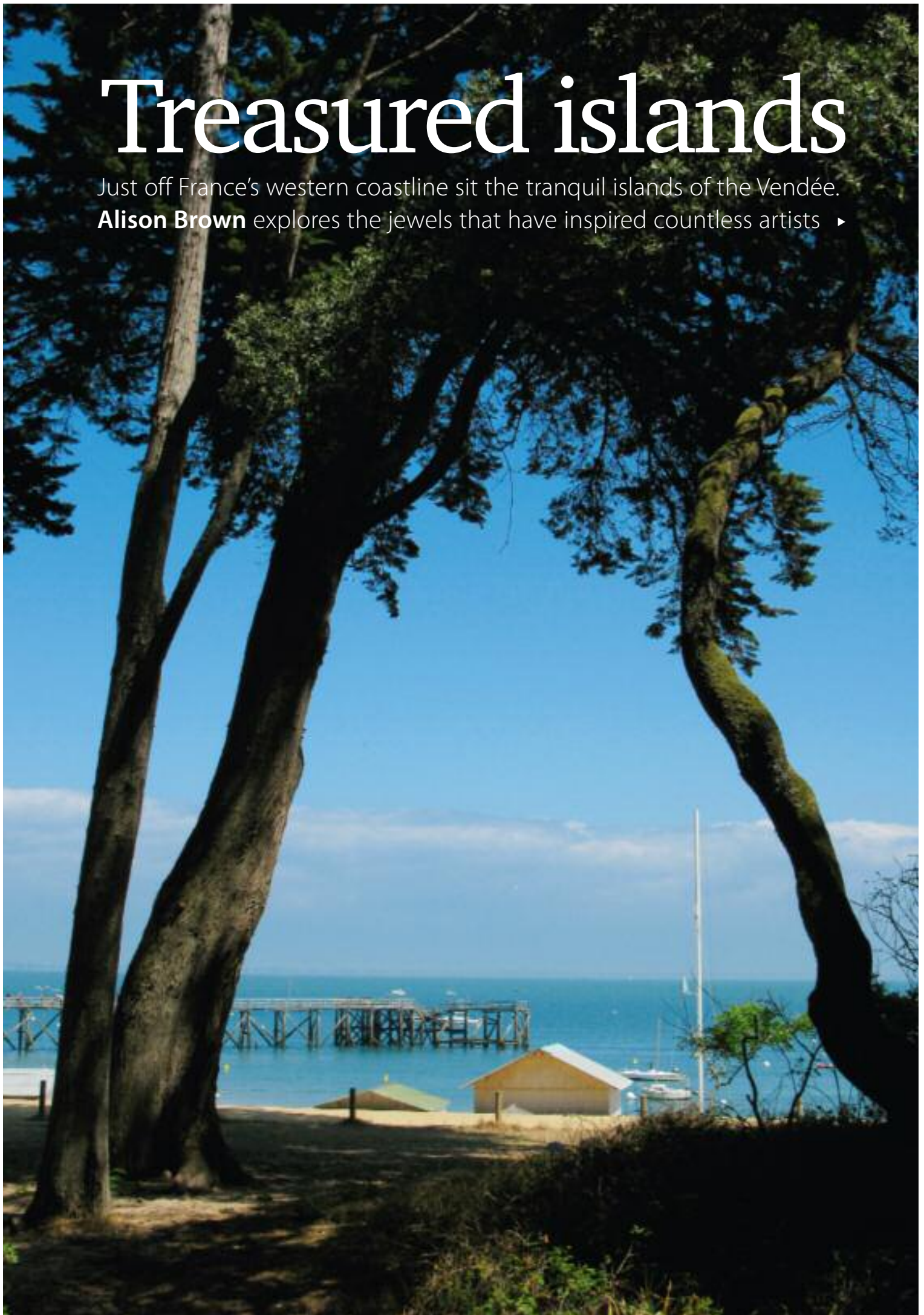


Treasured islands

Just off France's western coastline sit the tranquil islands of the Vendée. **Alison Brown** explores the jewels that have inspired countless artists ▶



The tide was out, but as I drove across the cobbled Passage du Gois which connects the Île de Noirmoutier to the mainland, it was still disconcerting to think that the road would be completely covered by water at high tide. On either side of the *route*, there were people meandering along on horseback and groups of school children languidly digging in the wet sand. There was no apparent rush or fear of the tide sweeping back across the 4.5 kilometre-long road, so I took my time and enjoyed the novelty of driving on what would soon be the seabed. Once I reached the island, the terrain only rose slightly before stretching out flat before me again.

Located in the Bay of Biscay, off the western coast of France, the Île de Noirmoutier is one of two islands that belong to the Vendée *département*. Often referred to as the Île aux Mimosas because of its mild microclimate which sees mimosa trees flower in winter, Noirmoutier is home to exotic vegetation usually associated with the Mediterranean. The island's varying landscape boasts sandy beaches, dunes, salt marshes and thick forests of maritime pines, green oaks and strawberry trees.

This area has been inhabited since prehistoric times and there are two historic sites on the island; the 11th-century Église Saint-Philibert, built on the foundations of an ancient Benedictine abbey, and the medieval Château de Noirmoutier, which now houses the island's history museum. The rest of the countryside is characterised by a scattering of windmills (23 in total across the island) and traditional Noirmoutier houses; simple white structures with tiled roofs and bright blue shutters.

I was travelling with my husband and together we continued across the island, passing through a series of low-lying fields and salt marshes, before the road eventually curved around into the port town of Noirmoutier-en-l'Île, the island's largest *commune*. After parking the car near the Mairie, we set off to explore the bustling high street, full of fishmongers and souvenir shops offering local delicacies; large bags of *fleur de sel* and *bonnotte* potatoes.

Leaving the village, we walked out along the Jetée Jacobsen into the Marais du Mullembourg, an ornithological reserve in the marshland which is home to a variety of birds, including egrets, turtle doves, shelducks and black-winged stilts. Adjacent to the pier is an area known as the graveyard of ships, where abandoned boats now serve as perches for the birds.

It's easy to see why artists have always been drawn to the Île de Noirmoutier; Renoir in particular

It was noticeably warmer here than it had been on the mainland and the sunlight seemed to reflect off the water and whitewashed buildings. It's easy to see why artists have always been drawn to this place. Renoir in particular favoured Noirmoutier for its bright colours and light. A local resident explained that the phenomenon was caused by light bouncing off the moisture, which continuously evaporated from the salt pans, leaving an incandescent mist in the air.

We followed the coast along to the Bois de la Chaise, a dark forest which seemed rather out of place in this tropical locale. The forest backs on to the white sands of the Plage des Dames, a picturesque cove with colourful beach huts, a lighthouse and a pier. On the edge of the forest picnickers took shelter from the midday sun while still enjoying the view of the open sea. The beach takes its name from the upper-class ladies who frequented the spot in the 19th century, when Noirmoutier first became a popular seaside destination. The more affluent holidaymakers built the large Belle Époque houses and villas that can be seen throughout the forest.

Just west of the forest, the scenery levels out again into the sprawling fields of the *plaine agricole*. Here the rich soil, nourished by seaweed and salt water, produces the world famous *bonnotte* potatoes, which can cost as much as €500 per kilo. Locals are very proud of their potatoes, but they take equal pride in the quality of their seafood and salt.

Salt marshes occupy the majority of the terrain ►

OPENING PAGE:
Overlooking the
Plage des
Dames BELOW:
Noirmoutier
beach FACING
PAGE CLOCK-
WISE FROM TOP
RIGHT: Château
de Noirmoutier
and L'Église
Saint-Philibert;
L'Île d'Yeu;
Noirmoutier
salt pans; A
stranded boat
near the Jetée
Jacobsen







RIGHT: Port Joinville's bustling harbour

and driving through the maze of salt pans proved fascinating. The light reflecting off the saline pools gave the whole place a hazy feel and the open plain seemed endless. Occasionally we came across a donkey grazing on the roadside or workers raking the salt into neat, gleaming piles. After we had enjoyed the refreshing tang of salty air, we headed back to the mainland via the Pont de Noirmoutier. Slightly less thrilling than the Passage du Gois, the bridge was built in the 1970s to allow passage to and from the island at high tide.

Vibrant port

The next morning we caught the early ferry from nearby Fromentine to the Île d'Yeu, the smaller of the Vendée's islands. Located ten kilometres from the mainland and to the south of the Île de Noirmoutier, the Île d'Yeu is only accessible by boat or helicopter. After a 45-minute boat ride, we reached the island's main hub, Port-Joinville. Expecting to find a sleepy little island village, we were pleasantly surprised to find a vibrant port, lined with shops, restaurants and busy cafés.

We had been told that the island, which only measures 23 square kilometres, is best explored on bike, so after disembarking the ferry, we went in search of some wheels. There were several rental companies to choose from along the harbour. I had just settled on a lovely bike at one of the shops, when my husband came running up to me with all the wild-eyed excitement of a kid in a toyshop. He had set his sights on an open-topped jeep and before I knew it, we were speeding along on our way to the tune of the Indiana Jones theme (thanks to some off-key humming from him). Perhaps the sporty car added to our sense of adventure, but I definitely had the feeling we were on the trail of hidden treasure. This place didn't look anything like the France I knew.

Following the main road around the island we left the pretty harbour and passed through cypress woods and tiny hamlets, where we found the same whitewashed houses with bright blue shutters that we had seen the day before in Noirmoutier; the kind of houses I'd previously only associated with a Greek island. For such a small area there is an incredible range of landscapes, from sandy beaches and coves to

wild, barren moors and dramatic cliffs. There are 254 species of birds on the island, including small penguins and puffins.

Known as the Côte Sauvage, the southern half of the island is covered in lush, tropical vegetation. Here the wild landscape is carefully protected from any new construction and the only sign of civilization is the Vieux Château, an isolated building on the coast which is accessible only by bike or on foot. Abandoning our jeep at the bottom of the road, we hiked out to the edge of the headland, where the medieval castle stands precariously on the cliff's edge. Built by Olivier IV to protect the island against invasion, the Vieux Château was eventually seized by the English pirate Robert Knolles, who occupied the island for more than 30 years.

Once back on the road, we followed signs to Port-de-la-Meule, the island's second fishing port, known for its bounty of crabs and lobsters. It's also a popular spot with diving enthusiasts who consider it to be one of the best places to dive in the Vendée. The charming



ABOVE: Vieux Château on the Côte Sauvage.

Fishermen started using the leftover paint from their boats on the shutters of their island homes

harbour was filled with the bright blue fishing boats often seen in this area. In times past, local fishermen supposedly started using the leftover paint from their boats on the picturesque shutters of their homes, creating another island tradition. Nearby, there is a

busy brasserie and standing alone on the sea cliff above the harbour, the small chapel of Notre-Dame-de-Bonne-Nouvelle is thought to date from the 11th century. At Easter, local fishermen make a pilgrimage here to give thanks for their safe return from the sea.

Cutting across the island back towards Port-Joinville, we made a quick stop at Fort de Pierre-Lévé. Once a State prison, it was here that Philippe Pétain was imprisoned for his collaboration with Nazis as head of the Vichy regime. Pétain died in prison and was buried on the island.

Sadly our day of island adventure was drawing to a close, with the last ferry for the mainland soon to set sail. We handed in the keys to our trusty jeep and took one last stroll along the waterfront before boarding the ferry. It was hard to believe that in less than an hour we'd be back in mainland France. 🇫🇷

FRANCOFILE

Plan an island escape off the coast of Vendée

HOW TO GET THERE

Alison Brown travelled to the Vendée with Brittany Ferries from Portsmouth to Saint-Malo. La Barre-de-Monts is a 3½-hour drive from the ferry port. Tel: 0871 244 0744 www.brittanyferries.com

Alison travelled from the mainland to Île-d'Yeu with Yeu Continent Port Fromentine 85550 La Barre de Monts Tel: (Fr) 2 51 49 59 88



www.compagnie-yeu-continent.fr

WHERE TO STAY

Hôtel Cap d'Ambre

29 Avenue de l'Estacade
85550 La Barre-de-Monts
Tel: (Fr) 2 51 68 52 05
www.hotel-capdambre.fr

Located on the mainland, just across from Noirmoutier and a short walk from the ferry port, this hotel is perfectly situated for touring both islands. The rooms are simple, but clean and modern. Rooms from €60

to €150. Breakfast from €8.

WHERE TO EAT

La Crêperie Blue

Quai Mairie
85350 Île d'Yeu
Tel: (Fr) 02 51 58 71 95
Situated on the idyllic harbour, this charming restaurant serves delicious savoury crêpes, with unusual fillings such as ratatouille and seasoned *steak haché*.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Île de Noirmoutier Tourist Office

Rue du Général Passaga
85330 Noirmoutier-en-l'Île
Tel: (Fr) 2 51 39 12 42
www.ile-noirmoutier.com

Île d'Yeu Tourist Office

Rue du Marché
85350 Île d'Yeu
Tel: (Fr) 2 51 58 32 58
www.ile-yeu.fr

Vendée Tourist Board

45 Boulevard des États-Unis
85006 La Roche-sur-Yon
Tel: (Fr) 2 51 47 88 20
www.vendee-tourisme.com