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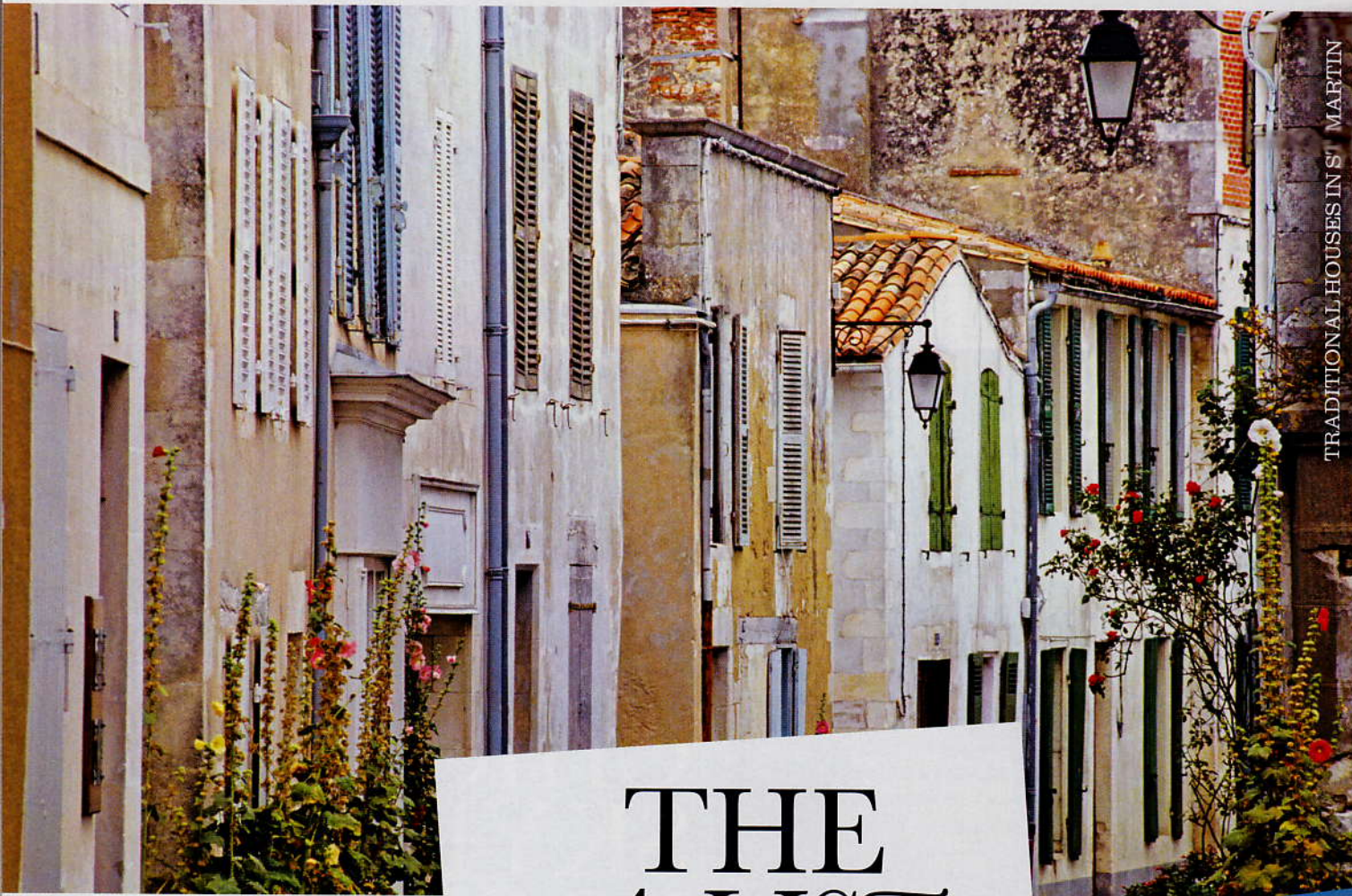
THE TRENDS ISSUE

THE KEY LOOKS

& how to wear them



MEET THE WOMAN WHO DRESSES THE A-LIST



THE A-LIST ISLE

Seeking INSPIRATION for her new novel, Louise Candlish discovered France's ILE DE RE

The sky is huge, the sun dances on the rippled water and the sailboats creak in the breeze. On the cobbled quayside, a carousel turns to the melody of *Somewhere Over the Rainbow* and a row of old-fashioned bicycles stand ready. Some have already set off – all travel here is by bike – and I'm pretty sure the man with the baguette sticking out of his basket is Johnny Depp...

Welcome to the Ile de Ré, a seaside idyll off the west coast of France. It's as if this long, skinny island (about 19 miles by three), with its whitewashed cottages, grazing donkeys and sandy beaches, has been lifted straight from the 'Au bord de la mer' chapter of our French schoolbooks. It's no wonder the natives – known as *Rhétais* – have worked so hard to keep it a secret. But now, thanks to cheap flights, fast trains and a crop of chic places to stay, we can all share it.

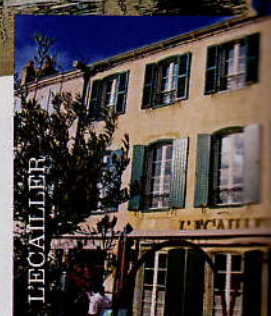
You'll need your glad rags, though. It may be the simple life, but it's not exactly 'down-home'. Think Carla Bruni off-duty and (almost) off-guard (anyone who's been to Panarea in Sicily will recognise the vibe). Designers such as Sonia Rykiel have houses here and visiting French A-listers (Vanessa Paradis and her husband, Johnny Depp, among them) don't attract so much as a passing glance from the locals. Foreign tourists are a different story, though; I devoted at least half my energies



THE HARBOUR



LA COURSIVE



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LA BALEINE BLEUE



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THE LIGHTHOUSE
AT SAINT-CLEMENT-
DES-BALEINES

to scouring the horizon for regulars Sophie Marceau and Princess Caroline of Monaco. (A tip: La Bazenne in Les Portes-en-Ré, on the north of the island, is the place to people-watch.)

I came across the island when searching for the perfect setting for my new novel, *The Second Husband*. It's the story of a scandalous love triangle between a mother, new husband and teenage daughter, and I needed somewhere for my illicit lovers to bolt to – somewhere remote and romantic. Since the husband of the title teaches French literature, France was the obvious choice. I'd read about the discreet charms of Ré and, from the moment I arrived – across the curved toll bridge from La Rochelle – I knew it was perfect.

The first place I found was the capital, Saint-Martin-de-Ré – or just St Martin – a picturesque fortified town of cobbled lanes, stone cottages and waterside cafes. I stayed at La Coursive guesthouse, in a vast converted hay loft which overlooks a magnificent garden. This was where my lovers would hide out from the world, I decided, though without the attentions of the glamorous Parisian proprietress who, since relocating to enjoy the civilised pace of life here, now spends mornings making *pain au chocolat* and *confitures* for her guests.

On a second visit, with one crucial scene still to write, I discovered the beautiful *Maison de Pêcheur*, a fisherman's cottage for rent right by the harbour. I'm sure I wasn't the first to have dreams of making its owner, Jenny, an offer she couldn't refuse for it. It's cosy enough for a casual break yet special enough for a honeymoon, and Jenny bakes each new guest the best chocolate torte I've ever tried. She also rents out the grander *Maison d'Aquitaine* town house, overlooking the 15th-century church. Both have lovely cobbled courtyards for alfresco dining.

Like everyone here, I explored the island on two wheels. There are more than 60 miles of cycle lanes, and serious cyclists kitted out like Tour de France pros spin past



WHERE TO STAY

Maison de Pêcheur (sleeps four) and *Maison d'Aquitaine* (sleeps six), St Martin. Full of local antiques and soft, pretty linens. From £525 per week for *Maison de Pêcheur*. Enq iledereholidayhomes.com
La Coursive, St Martin. Book *La Suite* and enjoy the roll-top bath and four-poster bed. Doubles from £72. Enq lacoursive.com
L'Hotel de Toiras, St Martin. Harbour-side luxury. Doubles from £130. Enq hotel-de-toiras.com



sedate couples and unsteady tourists. The path between St Martin and Loix is pure sun-on-your-face, wind-in-your-hair joy – you pedal along just a few feet from the Atlantic, before cutting inland through the salt pans to the peaceful lanes of Loix. There are 10 villages in all, and in every one your reward for cycling there is an excellent lunch (the very best is at L'Ecailler in La Flotte – truly sensational seafood) or *café crème* and homemade *glace* on a square by a pretty church. ➤

'Biking along the path between St Martin and Loix is PURE sun-on-your-face, wind-in-your-hair JOY'





HOTEL DE TOIRAS

WHERE TO EAT
L'Ecailler, 3 Quai de Sénac, La Flotte.
The locals' favourite.
 Enq (0033 5) 46 09 56 40.
Avant Port, 8 Quai Daniel Rivaille, St Martin.
Stunning port views.
 Enq (0033 5) 46 68 06 68

BARS & CLUBS
La Bazenne, 14 Place de la Liberté, Les Portes-en-Ré.
Where the A-list hang out.
 Enq labazenne.com.
La Baleine Bleue
Sur l'Ilot, St Martin. Relaxed, lounge-music ambience.
 Enq labaleinebleue.com



LES PORTES-EN-RÉ



AVANT PORT

WHERE TO SHOP
Blue Ink, Avenue Victor Bouthillier, St Martin. Local and international designers.
 Enq (0033 5) 46 09 03 73.
Le Moulin du Puits Salé, 3 Cours Bailly des Ecotais, St Martin. Local salts, olive oils, soaps and more.
 Enq le-moulin-du-puits-sale.com

CYCLE HIRE
Liberty Cycles, 55 Cours Pasteur, St Martin.
 Enq (0033 5) 46 00 29 76

HOW TO GET THERE
Air: Ryanair – London Stansted to La Rochelle, £120 return.
 Enq ryanair.com
Train: Eurostar London to Paris; SNCF Paris to La Rochelle, £130 return.
 Enq eurostar.com

'The WHOLE of the island is spread below you; the other side endless SILVER OCEAN'



HOTEL DE TOIRAS



BALEINE BLEUE



The air of preserved charm is no coincidence: there are firm rules for exterior decoration. Houses are whitewashed, and shutter colours strictly monitored – only about 10 shades are permitted, from palest grey to traditional dark green.

And then there's the shopping. I was diverted at first by the gorgeous print sundresses in the windows of the boutiques that line the lanes uphill from the quayside in St Martin (for Breton stripes and designer labels, head for Blue Ink on the harbour front), before discovering the real Ré specialty: homewares. I defy anyone to come back from St Martin without a collection of Artiga striped linen, at least one painted vintage watering can and a bagful of those gorgeous room diffusers by Collines de Provence.

At the end of my second visit, a final, epic cycling trip took me to the westernmost village of Saint-Clément-des-Baleine. As with all my research here, the location seemed to fall into my lap, or in this case rise up in front of my eyes, in the form of the famous 19th-century stone lighthouse. I'd been holding out for the most dramatic spot for the book's final confrontation between husband and wife – and here I knew I had it: over 50 metres in the air on the lighthouse observation deck. Up there it's raw and blowy, the whole of the island spread below you, flat as butter on toast; the other side endless silver ocean.

Obviously, I fell in love with the place; I can't imagine anyone not doing so. The only grumble was that the food and wine were so good (oysters, crêpes, *moules et frites* and many, many kirs) my clothes did get a bit snug. Stepping off the plane at Stansted and catching sight of myself in the mirrors, my sailor stripes and clam diggers were suddenly not such a good look. But it was a small price to pay for inspiration. ■

Louise Candlish's new novel, *The Second Husband* (Sphere, £6.99), is out on 3 July