

Great Outdoors

The Mild West. France's westernmost islands offer tranquil escape



AFTER AN HOUR'S SAIL FROM THE TOWN OF Le Conquet, off the westernmost tip of Brittany, one arrives at Ushant island (Ouessant in French) with the sensation of having reached the final outpost of France. A seal plays among the boats, and the tiny handful of visitors disperses to rental bikes and coastal treks.

A climb to the top of the nearby 18th century lighthouse of the port of Stiff—the beacon is the oldest of five around the island—affords a panoramic view of this rugged 15-sq-km landmass and neighboring islands that together constitute a UNESCO biosphere reserve. Along the northwest coast, up to breathtaking Pern Point, the sea is pierced by sharp granite peaks and waves batter the shore. The southern side, on the other hand, is characterized by grassy hillsides, grazing sheep and tranquil coves. Coastal plant life abounds: rock samphire, greater sea spurrey, rare ferns like the primitive quillwort, and multiple strange and beautiful lichens unseen on the continent. Inland, when

gorse and bell heather flower in unison, the island is a blaze of yellow, pink and violet.

Even more isolated is Molène, the island (and namesake archipelago) just 11 km to the east, with its charming village of narrow streets and houses bedecked with hydrangea. The beautiful 4-km island hike can be done in an hour, but Molène is best enjoyed slowly. You can snorkel over vast seaweed beds—the largest underwater forests in Europe—discover secluded islets by tour boat, or take a kayak to observe colonies of dolphins, gray seals, nesting Atlantic puffins and some 400 other bird species that frequent this area.

Managing the impact of tourism in such a fragile environment poses a real challenge

Managing the impact of tourism in such a fragile environment poses a real challenge. Luckily, there are residents like Soizic Cuisnier, who, together with her husband David and daughter Chloé, runs an organic potato-and-sheep farm on the tiny Ile de Quéménès. The property is also France's most far-flung B&B, open seven months of the year. The Cuisniers generate all their own electricity with solar and wind power, recycle water, harvest seaweed for sale on the mainland and limit access to half of the island so that bird species may live undisturbed. "Of course David and I need to make a living," says Cuisnier, "but in such a way that our activities help preserve this island's patrimony, both man-made and natural."

Accommodation for two starts at \$490 for two nights' room and full board, pickup and drop-off from Molène, a farm tour, use of binoculars and fishing rods, and a knowledgeable guide to help you explore the bird life of Quéménès. For bookings, visit www.iledequemenes.fr. —JEFFREY T. IVERSON