

LA MAÎTRESSE SAUVAGE

ISOLATED AMID TREACHEROUS SEAS, LES MINQUIERS IS A VAST REEF OF SAVAGE SUBMERGED ROCK IN A WILD REMOTE AREA. AND IF YOU'RE COMPLETELY NUTS, YOU CAN GET THERE BY SEA KAYAK. JANE JAMES PADDLES ROUND THE REEF



The most southerly building in the British Isles, you may think, would be the epitome of grandeur - a splendid swanky fortress or noble lighthouse. It is, in fact, a humble lavatory in a tin-roofed hut with no plumbing. But it has the best back garden in the world.

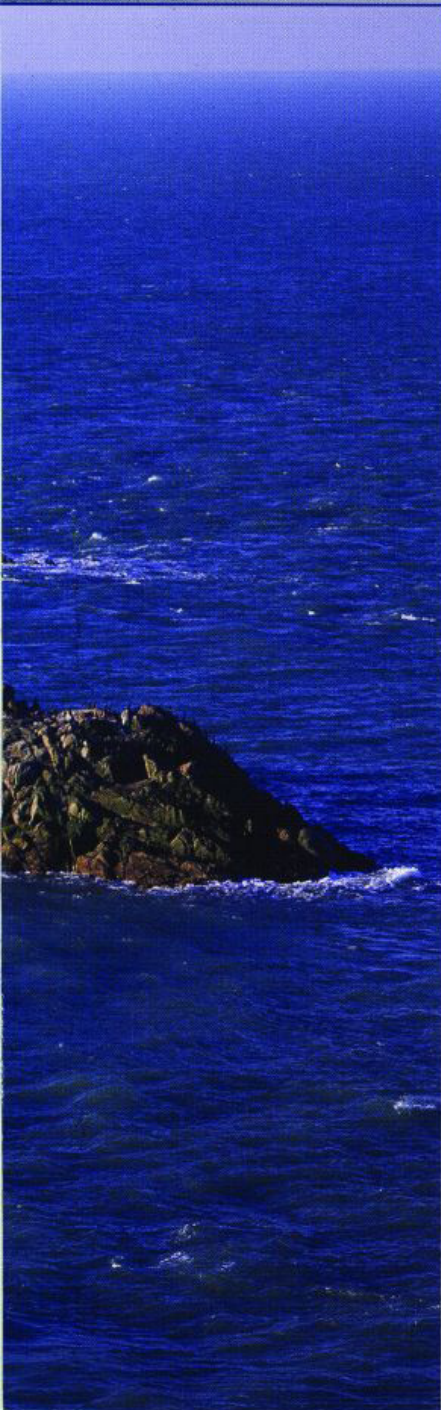
It's perched on the edge of La Maîtresse Ile, queen of the deserted Minquiers reef 12 miles south of St

Helier. At low tide it's a sweeping land of rocks and pools, shell strewn beaches and lagoons almost the size of Jersey. But at high tide Maîtresse Ile is a cute 100 x 50 yards small, surrounded by just nine 'heads' which break the surface. The next loo stop south is St Malo.

As well as its public privy, Maîtresse Ile bizarrely boasts a helipad and a

cluster of stone cottages used by quarrymen cutting granite to build Fort Regent 200 years ago, now weekend hideaways. The 1884 Etats de Jersey Impots house stands proud with a stern order 'no animals from abroad may be landed here' posted on the door. For without customs officers there would be no smugglers, and here there were smugglers, pirates and privateers a'plenty.





Spats with the French

In terms of real estate Les Minquiers, are somewhat lacking. But that hasn't stopped the bickering and battles over sovereignty and fishing rights throughout the centuries. The Battle of Waterloo in 1815 heralded a new era of peace between England and France but it didn't extend to Les Minquiers.

In 1929 French banker Monsieur Leroux claimed the reef for France and built a house. While Jersey fishermen hoisted the Union Jack, Monsieur and Madame Leroux cavorted round the reef in blue, white and red outfits masquerading as the Tricolour. Nine years later French artist Marin Marie sparked another mini international incident when he erected a cabin on Maîtresse Ile.

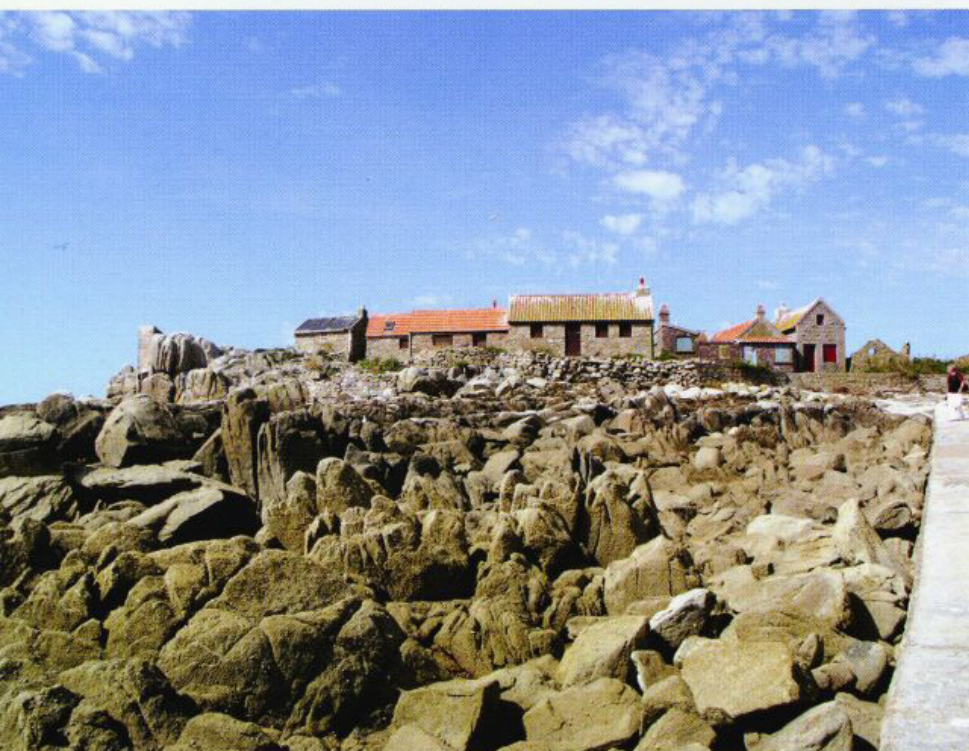
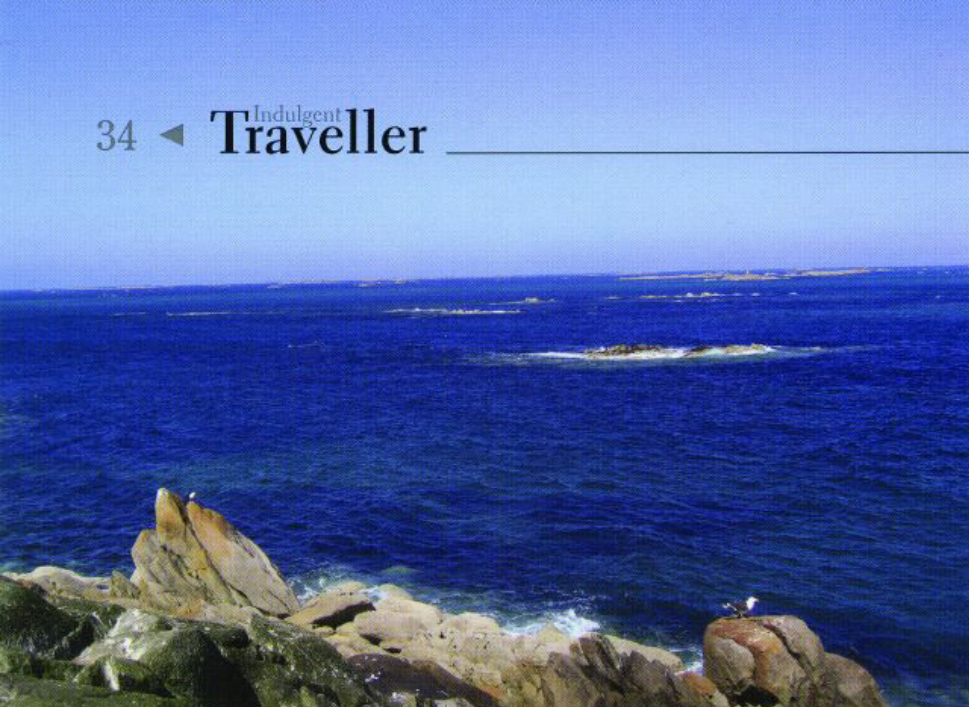
French interest increased with their plan to build a tidal power station from Cap Fréhel to the Minquiers, but in 1953 the International Court of Justice awarded the reef to Britain. Since then French writer Jean Raspail organised two Minquiers invasions in the name of Araucania-Patagonia in retaliation for Britain occupying the Falklands.

Sea Kayaking

We cheated. We hooked the sea kayaks onto a 12-man RIB in St Helier and, buffeted by the wind and swell, we bounced from wave to wave south at a speedy 25 knots. Around us gannets executed awesome aerobatics demonstrating their 60 mph diving technique, their thickened skulls acting like crash helmets. Now and again we were smacked by breathtaking blasts of water. But what the hell, the sun was out, we sported splash-tops and wetsuits and were off on an adventure.

Forty-five minutes later we arrived in the centre of nowhere, surrounded by rocks, shags, cormorants and a huge solitary seal. Surf broke over an emerging sandbar as we gingerly edged our way through the perilous Minkies archipelago to Maîtresse Ile.

This is the wild location of Hammond Innes's *Wreck of The Mary Deare*, where countless crews have drowned as their ships smashed on the rocks. As we ate our sandwiches on shore, the tide ebbed, small sandy beaches emerged and a strip of silver sand framed a blue lagoon.



Circumnavigating Maitresse Ile

Now we're under the orders of Derek Hairon, British Canoe Union Level 5 Coach, kayaker extraordinaire and director of Jersey Kayak Adventures. He's veteran of paddling expeditions in the Faroe Islands, Alaska, Nova Scotia and white water kayaking in Nepal. He's circumnavigated Ireland by kayak, so getting us safely round minuscule Maitresse Ile poses no problem.

On a calm day Derek would have led us through the entire 10-mile reef, paddling gently with the current. 'The water's warm, the scenery is fantastic and this is among the best kayaking in Europe,' he says. 'At low tide it's a mass of gullies, sandbars and channels - a phenomenal remote wilderness.'

I defy anyone to find a better way of exploring the reef. The kayaks are stable and easy to handle even for a novice. We paddle round rocky outcrops, through passages, fighting tidal currents, carried by waves whipped by the wind - nose to nose with nature. It's a magical, mystical afternoon.

As the fast running tide rises, the landscape disappears. At every blink the scene changes as the sea engulfs the land. As we leave, Maitresse Ile is flanked by a mere handful of rocks, a squadron of shags flies low over the water, and the wind is gusting force five.

Derek Hairon also runs trips in Jersey and France with a 42 ft mother-ship with comfortable facilities. Jersey Kayak Adventures, Ackaless, La Grande Route de la Cote, St Clement. Tel: 07797 853 033.

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