

Jersey Sea Kayaking

Les Écréhous

a splash of colour

On a paddler's window sill lies a collection of stones. Beneath each stone on a tiny piece of paper a date and a few brief details of a trip to Les Écréhous. Their window sill is now overloaded with memories. There must be something very special about a place that draws sea kayakers back again and again...

By Derek Hairon

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ABOUT JERSEY

Jersey has some of the highest tide ranges in Europe (up to 12.5m) and with it the chance to see a mass of different sea kayaking environments. Though only 45 square (118 sq km) the island offers a huge range of activities and experiences to suit all interests. The island is well served by air from many UK airports and ferries operate from Poole and Portsmouth.

FURTHER INFO

There is a surprising number of things to do and a huge range of accommodation.

Further information on Jersey can be obtained from Jersey Tourism, www.jersey.com

Five nautical miles north east of Jersey across a fast moving tide stream a splash of colour breaks the ocean blue horizon, a cluster of tiny buildings clinging onto a rocky reef: Les Écréhous. For many local sea kayakers this is their classic paddle.

Traditionally fishermen sailed to Les Écréhous from the small harbour of Rozel. Today a few houses cluster around the small harbour, a couple of restaurants, pub and not to forget the Hungry Man harbour café which is a great place to feed hungry paddlers with bacon and egg rolls and lots of cake. Just don't wait too long in the queue because many a sea kayaker has discovered that even a 30-minute delay can turn a pleasant crossing into an eddy hopping exercise against 5-knot tide streams. Save the egg roll and cake until your return to Jersey.

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Jersey man's character

For the amateur geologists many granite walls around Rozel include Les Écréhous stone. Given the abundance of quarries on Jersey, the quarrying of granite from the reef must have required a considerable amount of effort and danger for little return given the poorer quality of the Les Écréhous stone. However, this ignores a key feature of the traditional Jersey man's character. Though Les Écréhous granite was of poor quality, it had one big advantage: it was free!

Once afloat the need to aim well to the west of Les Écréhous often feels strange, but given the strong cross-tides in Le Ruau channel, it soon makes good sense. If you leave Rozel around low water, there is a good chance you might spot a pod of dolphins about a mile off Nez du Guet. Jersey is fortunate to have over 100 dolphin resident all year off the east coast of the island.

Beyond Les Écréhous lies the Normandy coastline (14nm from Jersey) and on a clear day buildings are visible. It can be disconcerting to watch the transits on buildings and rocks appearing to be on rollers as they slide sideways due to the cross tide stream. This is when having a compass course helps.

Look up and you may see Gannets en route to their feeding grounds. Almost all will have flown 35nm from Alderney which is home to one of the largest gannetries in the British Isles. Tracking devices have revealed these huge birds may fly over 340km in search of food in 72 hours!

Near Les Écréhous the water gets shallow and the tide stream increases so it's not a good idea to start aiming directly at La Marmotière too early. As you approach, the brightly painted huts nestling around this tiny rocky outcrop become clearer.



Gannets

As you paddle further away from land you might encounter a westerly swell. If paddlers are unused to paddling offshore, it is common to find your average speed drops as people begin to feel more exposed and insignificant. Here there is no coastline to handrail around, just the expanse of ocean. Though lying north east of Jersey, Les Écréhous can be an exposed place. If, even on a calm day, you see swell breaking onto the western reefs, you can expect to encounter swell. Once ashore the regular paddler may point out storm damage to the fishermen's cabins and even where entire buildings were destroyed during storms.

On a sunny August weekend the lagoon may already be filling with visiting yachts and boats. Nearby is the islet of La Maître Île which during the bird nesting season is uninhabited. The smell from the Cormorants puts most people off from landing.



Previous inhabitants

In the 12th century the priory of Saint Mary was established by Cistercian monks on La Maître Île. It is likely that the monks who founded the priory selected this wild and lonely location with a little land and water to graze and grow crops because it allowed them to observe their key beliefs of manual labour and strict observance. At this time Les Écréhous may have been a larger islet made of loess – a fine wind born dust – which was easily washed away in the storms which hit Europe in the middle ages. Outside of the bird nesting season the ruins of the priory can be explored.

Smugglers

In the 19th century it was not just fishing which generated an income around Les Écréhous. The reef was also the centre of a highly lucrative smuggling business between France and Jersey in both peace time and war. There is even reports of an Elizabeth Remon owning a hut on La Maître Île where 'grog' was brewed and sold to thirsty fishermen, seaweed gatherers and smugglers. Life on the reef must have been hard as writers describe fishermen sleeping on beds of dried seaweed.

The Boots the chemists connection

In the early 20th century, La Maître Île was leased to Lord and Lady Trent (Jessie and Florence Boot), the founders of the Boots retail chain. Florence was a Jersey woman who Jessie met while convalescing in Jersey. For the Boots and their friends, a visit to their cottage on Les Écréhous was a civilised affair. On one occasion a butler dressed in white uniform was in attendance to serve meals.

Low water fishing was their main pastime and breakfasts might consist of lobster and champagne. One group of visiting workmen were reluctant to leave the reef saying to the Boots, "The Grand Hotel couldn't touch your cooking." Today sea kayakers who are prepared to paddle amongst the reefs at low tide stand a good chance of catching a lobster or two but don't expect the locals to tell you where the best holes are. Wild oysters are more plentiful.

Crystal waters

Kayak around the reef at half tide and the area is a mass of channels and lagoons. Here the sand really is a beautiful white colour and the waters are crystal clear. For many this feels like paddling in the Caribbean while you glide over an aquarium of marine life living in the

lagoons. Time the tides correctly and it is possible to explore the entire reef at low tide. It's even likely to spot a few Grey seal. Today Les Écréhous is an internationally recognised Ramsar wetlands site and while access is mostly unrestricted, a respect for the marine and wild life is advised especially in areas ashore where Terns nest.

French invasion

The Tern nesting site at Le Blanique Île suffered considerably when a demonstration over fishing rights in the Channel islands was organised by French fishermen. Though sometimes viewed as a storm in a teacup, by 1994 relations with French fishermen over fishing areas had become tense and the 155-year old Granville Bay fishing agreement was in tatters. Designed to cope with the now extinct oyster fishing industry the law was obsolete and out of date. French and Channel Island fishermen were in dispute over fishing grounds at a time when catches were declining and legal routes were bogged down in a quagmire.

French fishermen resorted to direct action both at home and in the Channel Islands. In 1993 St Peter Port was blockaded, two Guernsey fisheries officers were hijacked while boarding a French boat and taken to France and 50 fishermen landed on Les Écréhous and hoisted the Tricolour and Normandy flags.

When in 1994 reports of a large demonstration to reclaim Les Écréhous were received, Jersey's emergency council met. Concern increased when it was learned that the demonstrators comprised of Norman separatists, extreme right wingers, a group wanting the restoration of the French monarchy, a Catholic priest intent on saying the Latin mass and a group of fishermen.

On 9th July 150 French demonstrators were met by 30 police officers, the St Martin's honorary police and an even larger contingent of journalists. Events became heated with demands to raise the French flag on the main flag pole. British compromise and diplomacy ensued and the protesters were permitted to hoist their flags on Le Blanique Île while a Latin mass took place on La Taille bank. At 12:00 there was a sudden change of mood; protesters sat down and the demonstration turned into a large picnic. National pride was restored and the fishermen's concerns were noted in Paris. Finally, in 2000 a new fishing law was ratified. All was eventually settled amicably but the Tern's nesting site took many years to recover from the invasion.

Remains of the hut that belonged to Lord and Lady Trent of Boots the Chemists



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“The Grand Hotel couldn't touch your cooking.”



A night in the Customs hut

If staying overnight, don't expect to find a nice grassy camp site. You'll also need to bring your own water and food and it's a good idea to be prepared in case the weather deteriorates and you become storm bound. Expect to sleep on the shingle bank or if La Marmotière is quiet you might be able to bivouac in 'The Royal Square' beside the Impots (Customs) hut where the rocks make good tent pegs. If you are better organised it is sometimes possible to hire in advance the Impots hut from Jersey Customs for the night. Take a moment to read the Impots hut log book which records the French invasion from a policeman's perspective and also the names of local sea kayakers who have stayed overnight in the cabin. The building is small and at a push can sleep more than the

advertised four people. One entry records 10 sea kayakers spending a no doubt noisy, smelly and intimate night.

Wake up early and watch sun rise over Normandy. The bench beside the flagpole is perhaps the favourite breakfast spot with a view looking back to Jersey and a huge panorama. Enjoy the silence of a very special and remote place.

For many sea kayakers, once visited, Les Écréhous is a place to remember and revisit. Return with pebbles to place on your windowsill to remind you of a very special place. Experiences often feel better when made under your own power and skills.

Right: Time for a beer

