

Tiny French isle for bikes, oysters, history

By Leah Larkin
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

AIX, France — Islands are intriguing. These chunks of land surrounded by water are a curiosity, and much more. They inspire and captivate our imagination, offering a unique way of life, a different state of mind.

The minuscule Atlantic island of Aix off France's mid-coast is indeed a pearl. Step off the ferry from the mainland and enter another world — no cars, little commerce, one hotel. Aix has not been gussied up for tourists. It's authentic, with many of its buildings in need of a coat of paint. Its few shops seem to have changed little in decades. There are no fancy restaurants, no classy cafes, just a small number of simple eateries.

About 240 residents live on Aix, which is less than 2 miles long and not even a half-mile wide. Of the residents, only 100 remain year-round. In summer, between 4,000 and 5,000 tourists arrive each day to bike, walk, swim, fish, and soak in the beguiling island ambience. Most leave in the evening. The nights are silent, magic.

"I come here every chance I get. It's a little paradise," said Christine Lacaud, who lives in Rochefort, a city in the Poitou-Charentes region adjacent to the ferry departure point in Fouras.

Island resident and historian Pierre Antoine Berniard sums it up: "When you take the boat and arrive here, there's something different. . . . Kids can play everywhere. There are no cars to hurt them. It's really a privilege."

I spent a night at the Hotel Napoleon, a charming place with just 18 rooms and an excellent restaurant, Chez Josephine. Our group had come to admire the replica of the frigate Hermione, anchored off shore before its April departure for the United States, duplicating a sailing of 235 years ago. On that voyage, the ship ferried Marquis de Lafayette across the Atlantic to help General George Washington and the rebels in the fight for American independence.

The magnificent ship was just one attraction. We also biked. You can walk around the island in two to three hours, or take a horse-drawn carriage ride, but discovering Aix by bike seems most popular. There are several rental depots. Ride through lush forests, marshlands, along a rocky coast, past pristine beaches and hidden coves. It's tranquil, peaceful — and flat. Pedaling is fun and easy.

Stop for an oyster break. Aix's one weather-beaten oyster shack should be on a movie set. Oysters are shucked on the spot. Order a bottle of



PHOTOS BY LEAH LARKIN FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Clockwise from top: Aix's one hotel; cylinders in which oysters are grown; Aix's one oyster shack, where they are shucked to order; and Herve Gallet polishing a shell to show how the mother of pearl is created for his items.

white wine; sit outside surrounded by stacks of oyster-growing paraphernalia, bikes, and the sea. Oysters have never tasted better.

The island's mayor, Jean Claude Poisson, told me the island doctor (a year-round resident) does big business in summer thanks to oysters. Tourists comb the shore looking for the mollusks and cut their feet on the razor sharp rocks. The doctor is kept busy stitching their wounds.

A wealthy American, Eva Gebhard Gourgaud,



gets credit for Aix's revival in the 1920s. The island, first settled by monks in the Middle Ages, played an important role in France's military history throughout the 18th and 19th centuries. During the Napoleonic period, several thousand troops were lodged in forts and barracks on the island. Napoleon even requested reinforcements of Aix's fortifications after an island visit in 1808.

But by the beginning of the 20th century, the military presence was on the decline. The island was dying. A French journalist wrote a report on the island's imminent demise. Eva, wife of Baron Napoleon Gourgaud, a descendant of Napoleon's aide, read the article, visited, and fell in love with Aix. "She decided to buy everything," the historian Berniard said. She opened the island to culture and tourism.

A tourist favorite is the house where Napoleon surrendered to the British in 1815, and where he spent his last three days on French soil before being exiled to St. Helena in the South Atlantic.

The house, which has displays on the Napoleonic era, is open to visitors, as is the Mother of Pearl House, where proprietor Herve Gallet will tell you the fascinating story about the island and mother of pearl.

His parents moved to Aix in 1948, hoping to grow grapes and sell wine. That failed, so they started making objects from shells collected on the beach to sell to tourists. That enterprise took off, and they expanded to make products of mother of pearl. "There are 148,000 varieties of sea shells," Gallet said, "but only 16 can be used for mother of pearl." Mother of pearl was imported from India, Mexico, Polynesia, and elsewhere, since shells from Aix are not suitable.

Between 1720 and 1980, mother of pearl was a major industry in France, Gallet explained, with some 30,000 workers in the country producing buttons. On Aix, however, mother of pearl was used to make souvenirs and decorative items, not buttons. These are still made by Gallet. In his workshop he demonstrates the process of extracting and polishing mother of pearl from shells. His Mother of Pearl House is a type of museum where an audio guide and videos explain the biology and chemistry of sea shells. His shop offers an extensive range of mother of pearl products, from reasonably priced jewelry items to a mirror priced at 1,750 euros (about \$1,875). I bought two pairs of earrings — pearl souvenirs from a pearl of an island.

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Curb your spending by only using cash

►MUTHER
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Puerto Rico — and threw out last week because it was two years old.

"I absolutely spend more than I anticipate when I go on trips," Jones said. "When I travel, I tend to lose that perspective. It adds up."

It's almost too easy to justify vacation spending. The thrill of obtaining exotic goods can be irresistible. You may say to yourself, "I'm in Peru. When will I ever again have a chance to buy this Alpaca sweater?" Or, "I must have this flamenco dancer's fan" when you're in Madrid. Fast-forward a year and (surprise!) you realize you had no need for a flamenco dancer's paper fan.

Don't forget those gifts for co-workers, family members, and the neighbor feeding Mr. Pickles, your guinea pig.

"There's a larger pull to purchase while on vacation that's related to a positive mood and feeling of opti-



ANTON GVOZDIKOV/SHUTTERSTOCK (ABOVE), DMY TO/SHUTTERSTOCK (BELOW)

mism. The discipline of normal life is often what keeps people on budget," said Kit Yarrow, a consumer psychologist and author. "That's lifted while on vacation."

Don't feel bad if you're a victim of vacation regret spending. Yarrow said we're all guilty of it.

"I snoop in people's homes as part of my job," she said. "I've found piles of forgotten things purchased on vacation, everything from beaded necklaces in junk drawers to art work stashed in garages. I've heard tales of splurges which later weren't enjoyed but served as a painful reminder of extravagance."

That's what happened to Jeff Stein of Newton. On a trip to Toronto this year, he bought a pair of chairs on a whim.

"I thought they looked cool and the

US dollar is strong right now in Canada. It seemed smart," Stein said. "I got them back to Boston and realized that not only do I not need them, I don't really like them."

Those chairs ended up going to a lucky buyer on Craigslist who got a great deal.

Some travelers justify their indulgent purchases because they've procured a bargain on airfare, or work

Tourists (above) choose a Matryoshka at a gift shop on Moscow's Red Square. A souvenir elephant hand-carved in Africa.



long hours and think they deserve to treat themselves to a Bruce Lee commemorative plate found in a Hong Kong market.

No one wants to hear this, but there are ways to cut back on frivolous vacation purchases. The idea of reining in spending while trying to forget about your workaday existence is about as appealing as a pineapple garlic smoothie. But the trade-off is fewer tchotchkes cluttering your home office, more money in your pocket, and perhaps less guilt when you look in your closet.

You can start training before you leave home by familiarizing yourself with exchange rates and downloading a currency converter app in your smartphone. Too often foreign currency doesn't feel like currency. It's multi-hued, pretty, and covered with portraits of people you've never seen. It's practically funny money.

"It's a testament to how poor our mental arithmetic skills are," said Paco Underhill, an environmental psychologist and the author of "Why We Buy: The Science of Shopping." "Someone will look and say 'Oh, I don't quite know what this price is. If it's eight to the dollar, then what does 134 translate to?' People don't want to be bothered on vacation."

Financial planner Donna Skeels Cygan avoids overspending on

vacation by leaving her credit cards in the hotel safe and using cash instead. She'll budget herself a certain number of euros per day. If the cash gets low quickly, she'll know she's overspending.

Yarrow, the consumer expert who picks through people's belongings, suggests that you pause before you make a purchase.

"The trick is to put as many impediments between you and what you want to buy as possible," she said. "Bring someone with you and give them veto power, or at least the power to question your decision. Wait 20 minutes. Have the store owner hold the item and think about it. Try to picture how it will fit in your life when you get home. Pay in cash."

Had he followed the advice of these experts, perhaps Josh Gates, host of the Travel Channel's "Expedition Unknown," would have resisted spending \$29 on a poolside quesadilla in Aruba.

"Each hideous giraffe carving and seashell necklace is a tacky badge of honor, a stamp that says, 'I was here,'" Gates said. "It's not until later, once the adrenaline of travel has subsided, that we realize we have no need for an onyx chess set, novelty shot glasses, or that slightly erotic carving of a mermaid. Well, maybe not the mermaid. I'm quite fond of her."

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Passengers pipe up: Quit kicking my seat!

By Christopher Muther
GLOBE STAFF

What would you say is the most annoying airplane passenger behavior? Chances are you'll find it on a list of peeves released last week by Expedia. The company's third annual airline etiquette survey found the most irksome passenger behavior to be the maddening seat-kicking.

"Inside a packed plane at 30,000 feet, both good behavior and bad behavior are amplified," said John Morrey, vice president and general manager of Expedia. "Respecting our fellow passengers is a small but important gift we can all give each other."

In the survey of more than 1,000 passengers conducted at random airports over the summer, 61 percent of

Americans said those who kick the back of their seat like a hyperactive Rockette are the most infuriating. Coming in second at 59 percent are inattentive parents who exhibit little control over their children. After that, hygienically-challenged travelers — otherwise known as aromatic fliers waiting to get home to bathe — came in at 50 percent.

Rounding out the top 10 most annoying fellow passengers were loud talkers (50 percent), boozy fliers (45 percent), chatty seatmates (43 percent), carry-on baggage offenders (38 percent), passengers who jump the line to get off the plane (35 percent), and tied for least-but-still-plenty-annoying (32 percent), the seat recliner and inconsiderate types who hog overhead bins and store their baggage in



OKTAY ORTAKCIOGLU/GETTY IMAGES

the first available spot.

It seems that many passengers are still taking the childhood commandment "Don't talk to strangers" to heart. Three-quarters of Americans are OK with a little seatmate chat, but

66 percent say they dread sitting next to a verbose Veronica and don't want to make friends with the person sitting beside them. Only 16 percent said they fly hoping to converse with new people. A third of those surveyed said

A top-notch peeve combo: unsupervised child kicking another passenger's seat.

they would happily pay more to sit in a designated quiet section if an airline offered one.

Surprisingly, a third of respondents said they would like to see reclining seats banned.

Even with all that bothersome behavior, 75 percent of those surveyed said they found that most of their fellow passengers were considerate, 50 percent think air travel is fun and exciting, and 41 percent have helped a stranger with luggage. Perhaps the old United Airlines slogan of "Fly the Friendly Skies" still holds true — at least until the person next to you tries to have a conversation.

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