



## Seafood and solitude

Villa Clarisse, Île de Ré, France

**A**LONELY gull swings softly in the breeze, buoyed by the rings of *refos* that seem to be saturated within the cobbles of the winding streets. Outside the Villa Clarisse, a man of 70 years, skin scarred by ultraviolet, repaints shutters a dark green. Old women sit opposite, painting scenes they have known for thousands of days.

Clarisse is a quiet and calm guesthouse in keeping with the atmosphere of Saint-Martin-de-Ré, the heart of which it inhabits. It's long and narrow, with only nine rooms, and a lonely staff member keeps watch over the front desk and is only seen when asked for; otherwise, the place is your own, to come in and out of as you choose, quiet and soft and storied, and eminently comfortable.

The rooms are lightly decorated, with a mixture of furniture old and new. The overbearing threat of minimalism has been

swept aside and the bathrooms are worth the flight all by themselves. The garden, split into two sections, is formal yet inviting and the pool is a refreshing reward at the end of it.

The pace of life slows the moment you check in and the churn of London falls away

as you drop your bags to the floor—but I can't tell you if that's the reason the *rosé* tastes so good. *JF*

*Superior room, excluding breakfast, at Villa Clarisse, Saint-Martin-de-Ré, from €210 (00 33 5 46 68 43 00; www.villa-clarisse.com)*

### While you're there

- **Freddie Mercury once said 'get on your bikes and ride'. Do the same. Beach Bikes (a day rental is €11, [www.beachbikes.fr](http://www.beachbikes.fr)) is a five-minute walk away and the whole island is flat and consumable on two wheels**

- **Head out of town and cycle eastwards, gobbling oysters at the many seaside bars as you go. They're pulled out of the sea and onto your plate**

- **Le Bistrot du Marin is the restaurant to visit in Saint-Martin-de-Ré. There**

**are no menus, only chalkboards, and the fare is achingly fresh. Get there before 9pm to beat the swarms of locals**

- **Explore the divine churches that litter the island. The church in Saint-Martin has a tower you can climb, offering spectacular views, and the Cistercian Abbaye des Châtelliers in La Flotte is a 900-year-old ruin**

- **The oysters live on the north side of the island, so head south for softer sand. The beach at La Couarde-sur-Mer is the perfect mix of sun, sea and civilisation**