

A (Still) Preserved French Paradise

By Kevin Bonnaud

Porquerolles, the largest of the golden islands, is a short 10-minute boat ride to the Giens Peninsula. The journey guarantees an exotic break thanks to luxurious vegetation, white sandy beaches, military forts and a charming village where time seems to have stood still despite tourism. The 12.5 km² island welcomes up to 10,000 visitors a day in summer.



Kevin Bonnaud is hiEurope's France correspondent. Every month he reports on new and unknown places for you to discover.



It's almost 6pm in Porquerolles. The iconic Place d'Armes is slowly becoming crowded. Tourists are forming lines to buy ice-creams. Cyclists are making their way among pedestrians. Boaters are rushing into grocery stores to buy food. Restaurants are setting tables. It's a daily rush hour that is fascinating to watch. Meanwhile, locals gather to play an old version of petanque known as Jeu Provençal.

It's all a typical Provence scene caught many times by Michel Metaireau, a painter who has lived on the island since 1978. "Players are part of the island's identity along with fishermen. You can see them every morning on the wharf cleaning nets, sorting fish to sell at the auction. The authentic side of the island is alive, though the village can look like a funfair in the summer," Metaireau told hiEurope.

The artist used to crisscross the almost car-free island with his easel to find good spots. "No matter where you are on the island, you feel the proximity of the sea because of its scents," the artist adds. Biking is the best way to discover those treasures.

Biking between Beaches, Forts and Vineyards

As you leave the village, look at the ochre-colored houses and bougainvillea climbing on the facades. Stop by the Perzinsky winery, one of the three Porquerolles vineyards, where you will be able to taste AOC wines. The Plage d'Argent beach, famous for its crystal-clear shallow waters and white quartz sand, is just 2 km from here.



Continue towards the western tip of the island. The path becomes narrower, rockier and steeply but offers unique wild sceneries. An isthmus separates the two coastlines with a beach on each side and an untamed vegetation made up of tree heaths, arbutus and cistus. The beach on the southern shore has dark red blackish sand. "That's a result of slags discharged by a soda factory in the 19th century," says Gilles Garnier, a ranger working on the island. Back then, soda was used to produce Marseille soap. The former plant is now a 4-star hotel restaurant, named Le Mas du Langoustier, owned by the descendants of Francois Joseph Fournier. This engineer and adventurer made a fortune out of gold mines in Mexico, bought Porquerolles in 1911 and gave it to his wife as a wedding gift. You can see the property from the pyramidal newly renovated red fort overlooking the beach. The military construction, one of the dozen defensive fortresses on the island, was built under cardinal Richelieu and Louis XIII. From Fort St Agathe, constructed above the village in the early 16th century, you see dense forests of eucalyptus and pine trees,

turquoise waters, and a long strip of white sand. That's La Courtade beach where you can rent a canoe. Notre Dame, which was ranked Europe's number 1 beach in 2015, is right behind it. (Cross the beach to reach the house from the movie *Pierrot Le Fou*, a 1965 iconic movie starring Jean-Paul Belmondo).

Wildlife Spotting on the Cliffs

What is so striking is to see how well preserved the island has been. That's because the descendants of the Fournier family sold 80% of the island to the French state through Port-Cros National Park in 1971. Fishing and mooring are limited. The island also acts as a first shelter for migrant birds. Nature watchers can go for a hike on the southern coastline to observe Cory's shearwaters and Peregrine Falcons, the world's fastest hawks. "These endemic species, whose number has grown in recent years, nest on the cliffs. You can hear shearwaters with their hoarse groans every night," Gilles Garnier told hiEurope.

As you head back to the village, you cross the interior plains containing an impressive collection of mulberries, olive and fig trees. "All species of trees that grow across France were planted here," Gilles Garnier adds.

The south steep coast offers spectacular viewpoints on calanques, their blue and emerald green waters, and rock and pine trees sculpted by the wind. Whether you like watching birds, admire a coastal landscape, taste wines, visit a fortress or watching people while sipping a fresh drink, you may feel the temptation to stay longer on this paradise island.

