

Laid-back Alderney: the most charming Channel Island

Sailing, walking and two chic hotel stays make this the ideal spring mini-break, says **Gail Simmons**

It's fair to say that the last thing I expected to see, as I strolled down a quiet road on a small island eight miles off the coast of Normandy, was the smart maroon and cream livery of two Northern line carriages, 1959 vintage, chugging merrily by. I was in Alderney for a short break and on my way to Braye Harbour to embark on a seabird safari boat trip, while those elegant London Underground carriages were taking visitors for a 12-minute ride on the Channel Islands' only working railway (£12; alderneyrailway.gg).

I shouldn't have been too surprised at this mid-20th-century time slip. I'd just left St Anne, Alderney's only town, where the cobbled streets were strung with summer season bunting, residents still leave their front doors unlocked and there's not a traffic jam in sight. It was like stepping back to a more innocent era.

Historically part of the Duchy of Normandy, Alderney is the northernmost and third largest of the Channel Islands. With a population of about 2,000 residing within its three square miles, it's the least densely populated of the three main islands, and is renowned for its bucolic scenery, relaxed ambience and mildly Gallic flavour. A boat safari, organised by the Alderney Wildlife Trust, was top of my agenda, as a chance for me to see this tiny island from the sea, and to discover the birdlife for which Alderney is remarkable (£30; alderneywildlife.org).

As the host of one of the last significant seabird populations in the English Channel, Alderney attracts colonies that flourish in these food-rich tidal waters. Puffins nest on the uninhabited islet of Burhou, while lesser black-backed gulls and storm petrels benefit from the absence of predators or human

disturbance in this archipelago.

From the deck of the Sula of Braye, the Alderney Wildlife Trust's workboat, I watched as gannets dive-bombed into the sea, fishing for their chicks who were growing fat and fluffy on Les Etacs, the huge jagged pillar sited some 350m off the coast of Alderney, where about 6,200 breeding pairs of gannets nest each spring and summer.

Nearby, shags, glossy and tufted, basked on exposed rocks and the head of a lone grey seal bobbed above the waves. Razor-bills — relatives of puffins — skimmed the surface.

The unofficial emblem of Alderney, the puffin is emblazoned on the planes of the local airline, Aurigny, which is the French name for the island. Alderney's other celebrated animals are the undeniably cute blonde hedgehogs — pale descendants, so the story goes, of escaped pets brought here after the war.

These enchanting mammals have lent their name to one of the finest boutique hotels in the Chan-

nel Islands, where I spent my first night.

Converted from two 18th-century townhouses in St Anne, the Blonde Hedgehog's nine unpretentiously luxurious bed-

rooms blend warm colour palettes, wood accents and botanical touches, reflecting the island's laid-back coastal vibe.

The hotel's creation was a happy accident. Its British founder, the entrepreneur and philanthropist Julie-Anne Uggla, landed here when her plane was diverted from Cornwall owing to bad weather. Quickly falling in love with the island, she kept coming back. On one visit, Uggla noticed a gap in the market — boutique accommodation with a home-from-home feel — and in 2019 the Blonde Hedgehog opened for business.

The hotel's director, Tracey Farquhar-Beck, another incomer, says it has tapped into the unique character of the island. "What's so special about Alderney is its simplicity," she told me over coffee one morning. "It's not about being fancy or exclusive, but recognising what the island has to offer and making the most of it."

Taking her words as a cue I left St Anne to explore the island on foot. At only ten miles in circumference, Alderney is small enough to walk around in one day — or half a day if you're feeling particularly energetic — while non-walkers can make it easier by hiring electric bikes (from £12; cycleandsurf.co.uk).

I walked in an anticlockwise direction from Braye Harbour, half a mile from St Anne on the island's northern coast and a proper working quay, smelling of fish and seaweed, with a distinctly British seaside quality.

My first stop was Fort Doyle, about half a mile along the coast path. It's the smallest of the island's Victorian strongholds, completed in 1854 and one of 18 forts and batteries built to defend Alderney from a (very) possible French invasion.

Sailing around the coast the previous day I'd become acutely aware of the island's multilayered military history, with Roman, Tudor, Victorian and, of course, Second World War fortifications. Now, I was confronted by this history in disarming close-up.

An hour later I reached Alderney's far west, where I encountered the most dramatic of the island's Victorian forts.

Accessed by a causeway at low tide,

Fort Clonque, crouched on a rocky outcrop, is now a Landmark Trust holiday property where up to 13 people can stay, and it is romantically cut off by the sea (four nights' self-catering for 13 from £1,092; landmarktrust.org.uk).

Roaming over bracken-covered hills where blackberries ripened, I rested on a bench dedicated to the artist and poet Oleg Prokofiev, son of the great Russian composer Sergei. Oleg was one of many notable figures to have washed up on Alderney's shores. Others include the Methodist preacher John Wesley, the Beatles producer George Martin, the cricket commentator John Arlott and the author Elisabeth Beresford, creator of the Wombles.

At Telegraph Tower, on the southwestern tip of the island, I stumbled upon another piece of Alderney's intricate jigsaw. It was built during the Napoleonic Wars of the early 19th century to aid communication between the islands, and the tower had just been refurbished when I arrived. From the top I peered through an ancient brass telescope towards the islands of Sark, Herm and Guernsey. The view was spectacular.

Close by is the site of Lager Sylt, the only SS-run Nazi concentration camp in the British Isles. It was constructed in 1942, two years after most of Alderney's inhabitants had been evacuated (three other camps on the island were forced-labour camps). Now, only the concrete gateposts remain, half-smothered in ivy. It is a truly haunting place, where the island's darkest years still make their presence felt.

High on these cliffs there was nothing between me and Newfoundland. Rotating south I next traipsed over headlands and through wooded valleys to Longis Bay, at three quarters of a mile the island's longest stretch of sand, pausing to explore the archaeological site known as the Nunnery, one of the best-preserved Roman military structures in the British Isles.

Beyond the black-and-white striped Mannez Lighthouse, on the eastern rim of the island, loomed the Odeon, a concrete giant range-finding tower and the most spooky of the German edifices. Inside it was cold and damp, and even on a warm July day I shivered.

Circling onto the northern coast, the trail skirted the pearl-white sands of Braye Bay, a sea of Mediterranean blue spreading beyond. Back at Braye Harbour, hot and weary, I rewarded myself with a cream tea

at the pleasingly old-fashioned Alderney Sailing Club, where gentlemen lounged in blazers and panama hats (alderneysailingclub.com).

From Braye it was a ten-minute climb back to St Anne — or La Ville, as the old street sign has it — where I headed to another B&B, the artistically designed Villa Mondrian.

Most of the street names here are in French, and for me, they epitomise this delightful little island. A soupçon of France, a dash of Britain, but utterly Alderney.



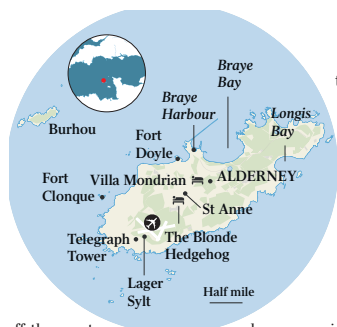
Gail Simmons was a guest of Visit Alderney (visitalderney.com);

[Aurigny \(aurigny.com\)](http://aurigny.com); [Blonde Hedgehog](http://blondehedgehog.com), which has B&B doubles from £170 (blondehedgehog.com); and [Villa Mondrian](http://villamondrian.com), which has B&B doubles from £100 (villamondrian.com). Fly to Alderney

“Braye Harbour is a proper working quay with a distinctly British seaside quality



A boat in Braye Harbour, Alderney



ALAMY, CATHERINE WOODHOUSE/GETTY IMAGES, CATHERINE DAVIS



Braye beach



A street scene in Alderney

