

Porquerolles

Provence, France



What's the secret? The ferry from Hyères chugs into the embrace of the pint-sized port and, simultaneously, your real life fades away. You're enfolded into the island world, a distillation of the French Riviera before it started playing to the crowds as 'The French Riviera'. Crammed into 13sq km are crags, creeks and dream beaches, sparse development and no cars. Forests are full of pines lacing the Mediterranean air. Later, there's the promise of John Dory and chilled rosé on a terrace on the village square.

Back from the port, the village is compact, with barely 300 full-time residents. Its square, once a parade ground for 19th-century colonial troops, is now softened into Provençal shape with oleander, bougainvillea, fruit stalls and bars. Hire a bike. You'll leave village and visitors behind, pedal the tracks out past vines and olive groves and up through forest to the rougher, ragged south side. You'll breast the

100-metre cliff above l'Indienne creek, a concentration of the best of Med land- and seascapes: rocks, grey-green vegetation, distinct blues of sea and sky and the purest sun spangling the sea, creating paths of light sufficient for saviours to stroll upon.

The softer northern edge cedes to beaches such as Notre Dame, its white sand curving from headland to headland. Behind is the aromatic woodland; out front, a sea so limpid, you'll twiddle your toes for longer than necessary. Nowhere is there any building, nor much in the way of people: the 45-minute walk, or 15-minute pedal, thins out pleasure-seekers. Nearer the village at Courtade Beach, Attitude Paddle offers opportunities to kayak, stand-up paddle or otherwise wear yourself out (hyeres-tourisme.com). The island will also let you dive, sail or, heaven help us, jet-ski (lindien.fr) — though you may find your hands full enough simply roaming through the wild and elemental beauty. That said, you'll need a side-visit to the Villa Carmignac, a brilliant contemporary art gallery shading seamlessly into the landscape (fondationcarmignac.com; £13).

Now repair to the Mas du Langoustier — Porquerolles' loveliest hotel comes on like a Provençal country house on the island's western edge. Tariffs include dinner at the fine-dining restaurant (langoustier.com; doubles from £157pp, half-board). Too steep? Aim instead for the three-star Villa Sainte Anne in the village, which also has a decent restaurant (sainteanne.com; doubles from £90, room only; mains about £21).

Travel's tip: Hiring an electric bike takes the slog out of slopes. They cost about £35 for a full day, £27 for a half-day, though the longer the rental, the lower the day-rate (porquerollesavelo.com).

Get me there: Flybe flies from Southampton to Toulon-Hyères from £35 one way. Take the shuttle bus into Hyères, then a No. 67 bus for the 50-minute, £1.25 trip down the Giens Peninsula to Tour Fondue (reseaumistral.com). From there, the ferry will whisk you to Porquerolles in about 20 minutes (tlv-tvm.com; £18 return).
Anthony Peregrine

Gavdos

Crete, Greece



At the southernmost part of Europe lies a forgotten isle inhabited by a few hippies who came over in the '60s and a cultish contingency of scientists from Chernobyl. That leaves plenty of room at the handful of tavernas and peachy swathes of sand for the rest of us — try Agios Ioannis or choose from countless other utterly empty bays.

Get me there: BA flies from Heathrow to Chania in Crete from £113 return. Take a bus (1hr 40min; £6) to catch the ferry from Hora Sfakion (anandyk.gr; £10; 2hr). Allow plenty of time to make your flight back as ferries are often cancelled. Sofia's Rooms (sofiaroomsgavdos.com) has doubles from £50, B&B.

Laura Goulden

Formentera

Balearic Islands, Spain



Never heard of Formentera? Think of it this way: Ibiza is the all-night party, Formentera the chill-out lounge. On this tiny speck, there's no dress code, no door policy. Most passengers on the ferry (30min) will be barefoot, before they potter off to hire a bike and seek out a beach. Illetes is the star (Maldives-clear water and stonking sunsets); Cala Saona suits families; nudists favour Calo des Mort. Eat grilled kid in the garden of Can Carlos (cancarlos.com; mains about £24), then home. Here, everyone's in bed by midnight.

Get me there: EasyJet flies to Ibiza from six UK airports, from £33 one way. Take a short taxi to Ibiza Town port then the catamaran (trasmapi.com; £48 return). Gecko Beach Club (gecko.beachclub.com) has doubles from £174, B&B.
Katie Bowman