

WHERE TO STAY



ST MARTIN
ILE DE RÉ

ROMANTIC HIDEAWAY

DOMAINE DE LA BARONNIE

LOCATION Quietly situated in a side street a few minutes' walk from St Martin's harbour.

CHARACTER A noble mansion, built in the 1700s on the site of the château of the medieval barons of Ré. Louis XIV bought it for Marie Antoinette but she never lived here. Having been painstakingly restored, it was opened 15 years ago. Original features

remain, including wood panelling and creaking, uneven floors. The soft blue-grey colours blend with the period furniture, Pierre Frey fabrics and bric-a-brac gathered from flea markets around France. Within there is a lovely courtyard, right, and large, peaceful garden.

ROOMS The 16 pleasing, old-fashioned bedrooms will take guests back a century or two. La Tour des Amis, a romantic, cosy bedroom in the tower, is reached by a tiny winding staircase and has views on three sides, offering a glimpse of the harbour and the sea beyond.

FOOD Buffet-style breakfast only: fresh orange juice, croissants and boiled eggs taken in the sunny flagstone breakfast room.

WE LIKE An enchanting oasis away from the bustle of the port. The warm, welcoming hosts, beautiful building and interior combine to make this a special place.

NOT SO KEEN Breakfast could have been more exciting; the modest buffet was dotted about the room. We would have particularly liked our own coffee pot rather than a communal Thermos.

ESSENTIALS 0033 5 4609 2129; www.domainedela-baronnie.com. Doubles from €160 (£145).



Inner calm: the courtyard, right, of Domaine de la Baronnie



WHY ST MARTIN?

St Martin, the capital of Ile de Ré, France, is a perfectly preserved and picturesque fishing port, but with restaurants and boutiques to rival those of St Tropez. The island (21 miles long) was only connected to mainland France by a bridge 21 years ago, and remains unspoilt; oysters, wine and salt are still the main exports. Abandon your car. The island is flat and criss-crossed by bicycle trails through villages, vineyards and salt marshes. Along the coastal paths are "cabins" to stop for *dégustation* of oysters and wine. If that's not enough to tempt you, there are miles of sandy beaches. Be sure to buy ice cream on the quayside from the La Martinière.