

BRAVO BRITTANY!

The sea might be chilly but everything else is warm and wholesome, says **OLIVIA FALCON**

BRITTANY has always been about simple pleasures — and Dinard, with its striped beach tents and Belle Epoque villas, is no exception. Blowy coastal walks, croissants and crustaceans, invigorating swimming and interesting people-watching are all guaranteed.

Last time I travelled here, I was nine. I still remember the stomach churning eight-hour ferry ride from Portsmouth to Saint Malo, which is probably why it's taken me 33 years to come back.

The good news is that these days, getting here is a doddle, thanks to a direct flight with Ryanair from Stansted.

Dinard airport is a tiny terminal in the middle of a field, with no crowds or queues and it's just a ten-minute drive from the centre of town.

My husband and I have brought our children, Grace, five, and Georgia Mae, four, and we are staying at the Castelbrac hotel, an elegant newcomer staggered down the side of a cliff.

It was previously a marine research centre used as a base by Arctic explorer Jean-Baptiste Charcot, forerunner to Jacques Cousteau.

We settle in with drinks in the jaunty bar, located in the old aquarium. It gives a nod to its nautical past with fish-scale motif cocktail tables and porthole windows. The crowd is windswept and rosy-cheeked from pottering around on kayaks and catamarans.

One excited guest tells me that Salma Hayek has been in for cocktails with her husband, fashion titan Francois-Henri Pinault. Our accommodation is

impressive. We have two ensuite bedrooms connected via a private corridor so our children can maraud without disturbing anyone else.

I'm loving the graphic coral print wallpaper and mosaic bathrooms, but worried about the cream carpet, which soon gets christened by an upended plate of spaghetti.

This is the ultimate litmus test of a hotel's tolerance for *les enfants terribles* and Castelbrac passes with flying colours: 'Pas de problem.'

Dominick, the twinkly-eyed general manager, takes guests to the local market to browse stalls selling striped Breton tops and eat *galette-saucisse* (Brittany's version of a hot dog) at his nephew's bar.

With an appetite for

adventure, we chase the tide across the causeway at Mont Saint-Michel, just in Normandy, eat Poseidon-sized platters of oysters in the village of Cancale and hop on the hotel's vintage launch for a sunset cruise.

NICOLAS, our captain, serves drinks and points out all the sights: the spectacular fortress of Harbour Island once owned by Alain Delon (he sold up when they told him he couldn't build a heliport) and a glimpse of rare *fou de bassan*, the birds whose long beaks inspired the design of Concorde.

When rain puts a dampener on beach life, we discover there's still fun to be had at the Saint-Malo Aquarium.

With its wraparound shark tanks and submarine rides, Grace thinks it makes London Aquarium look like a bit of a damp squib.

Afterwards we splash around in the hotel's cliff-side pool. There is also a hamman, which offers body scrubs and massages, ideal for warming up after a brisk Atlantic dip.

This small, friendly hotel is a tonic for all generations, so bring your brood or escape with your soulmate.



Holy island: Mont Saint-Michel, set in the bay where Brittany and Normandy merge, is fun for children to explore

Picture: 4CORNERS IMAGES/ALAMY

TRAVEL FACTS
 • RYANAIR (ryanair.com, 0871 246 0000) Stansted to Dinard from £25
 return. Seaview room at Castelbrac (castelbrac.com, 00 33 299 803000) from £294 B&B per night.



WHY do people tend to stay here? I ask a French intern working at The Bell near Epping in the hope of improving her English.

'We get a lot of walkers,' she says. I assume this is because of the proximity to Epping Forest, but it does not quite explain why most of the 79 rooms are taken on a Tuesday evening.

And it doesn't look like a walker's kind of place. This motel-style establishment on the busy B1393 serves Indian food in its Nirvana restaurant. Various TVs are attached to walls in the brightly lit bar; the decor is drab and my fellow guests don't look like hikers.

'No, no,' says my wife. 'She means workers, not walkers.'

Of course! This explains the notice: 'Dirty work boots are not allowed in the restaurant.'

And the stale air. It also explains why Best Western gave up on The Bell a couple of years ago. It is now owned by an Indian, who may or may not be related to a charming waiter called Benny, who serves us our curries. We are the only ones eating.

Our room is reached via the bowels of the building and then up some stairs and along some corridors.

There are spores on the bathroom wall and

AN INSPECTOR CALLS



the net curtains are filthy. The pillows are lifeless and we fail to see how a room such as this can be sold for £100. Even so, we sleep soundly because we're at the back of one of the extension buildings.

Benny is there in the morning and takes pity on me when I spot two big help yourself canisters — one for undrinkable coffee, the other for undrinkable tea.

'I'll make you a fresh cafetiere,' he says.

There is nothing at the buffet we want to eat — but Benny's coffee hits the spot. The French intern will have some stories to tell when she gets home.

The Bell Hotel
 High Road, Epping, Essex CM164DG
 Tel: 01992 573138, bellepping.co.uk
 Doubles from £65, room only

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