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

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RITTANY 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 ming and interesting swimpeoplewatching 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 some back 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

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 rosycheeked 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

taken on a Tuesday evening.

are the only ones eating.

some corridors.

not walkers.

HY 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

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

'No, no,' says my wife. 'She means workers,

Of course! This explains the notice: 'Dirty work

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

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

There are spores on the bathroom wall and

boots are not allowed in the restaurant.

fellow guests don't look like hikers.

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

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

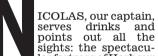
to the local market to browse stalls selling striped Breton tops and eat galette-saucisse (Brittany's version of a hot dog) at his nephew's bar. With an appetite

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.

BRAVO BRITANY!



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



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 ****



return. Seaview room at Castelbrac

(castel brac.com, 00 33 299 803000) from £294 B&B per night.

