

History, heritage and a spot of banter

JAMES RUDDY heads for the Channel Islands to enjoy a feast for the eyes and the soul

A BOAT bobbing off Guernsey in an aquamarine sea beneath fluffy white clouds was framed by soaring cliffs and a huge plate of succulent crab sandwiches sitting on a stone wall in the foreground.

This was the kind of holiday masterpiece that the Channel Islands seem to offer at many a turn down their narrow country lanes.

It came as a surprise to find dozens of similar pristine bays, rolling green meadows, stirring history, fine food and people bursting with the kind of banter that would be the envy of the most genial of Dublin taxi drivers.

Indeed, countless British and Irish tourists poured in during the 1970s and, once again, in the 1980s when the nine-series Bergerac TV crime blockbuster drew viewers to the enviable lifestyle and bucolic surroundings (despite the regular fictional murders).

A similar invasion is hoped for next year when the series reboot launches with Kildare-born Damien Molony in the starring role on the free-to-air channel U&DRAMA and the free streaming service, U.

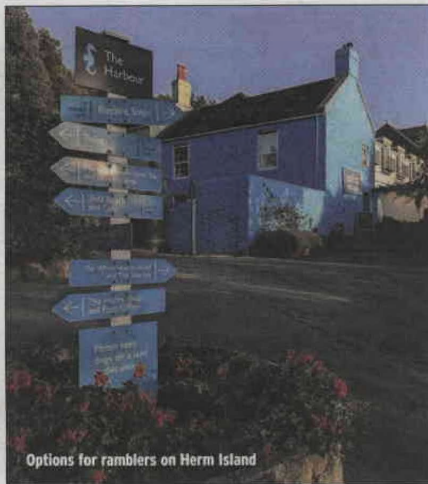
I spent a few days island-hopping and was absorbed by the quaintness and the breadth of activities available in three very different places in these British Crown dependencies. Here goes:

Jersey

BIGGEST and most bustling of the Channel Islands, the capital, St Helier, was just a 75-minute Blue Islands flight from Birmingham and was mostly filled with family groups and grey-haired men and women (like me), as opposed to the pink-topped hen parties and rowdy stag groups that were frantically downing early morning booze in the departure lounge's Wetherspoons and, no doubt, heading further south on cheap flights to the sun.

Ruled and fought over by the British and the French during different periods, modern-day Jersey welcomes friendly invaders these days in the shape of British, Irish and French retirees with its favourable inheritance and capital gains tax regimes.

Less friendly invaders in World War II left the place dotted with numerous bunkers dating back to the Nazi occupation – a hard and heroic time for the islanders



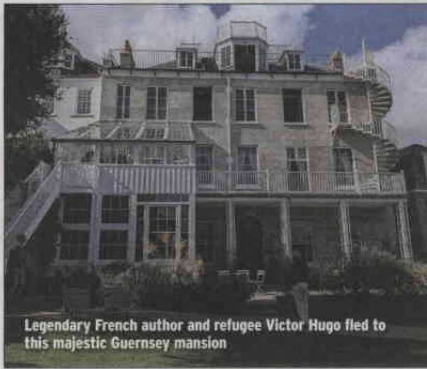
Options for ramblers on Herm Island

and told in several museums and guided tours, including the labyrinth of tunnels dug by slave labour to protect the Germans from Allied air raids.

In a couple of days, I discovered such diversions as downing the gin and rum at the Channel Islands Liquor Co before taking a stirring and joint-stretching Vinyasa beach yoga session at St Ouen's Bay and then a calming beach walk in early evening along the wide sands of St Brelade's Bay.

I stayed at L'Horizon Beach Hotel and Spa, which has a hint of the Mediterranean yet boasts an unmistakably British vibe. Built in 1850 by George Hicks, a colonel in the Bengal Army, the stylish interior is calm and elegant, with a very relaxing sea view terrace.

I rounded off my day at Enoteca, in St Aubin's village,



Legendary French author and refugee Victor Hugo fled to this majestic Guernsey mansion

where Italian-born head chef Marcella and his wife Kate dish up authentic pasta, fish, vegetarian and meat dishes alongside their own natural wines.

Another recommended food-stop is the Petchu Restaurant and Wine Bar in a grade one former Liberty Wharf in St Helier, where the wood-fired open kitchen produces sumptuous fish, meat and delightful crab dishes. And just to crash the diet completely, I popped into the El Tico Beach Cantina, Jersey's original beach café, dating from 1948, which was packed with locals and visiting surfers enjoying the Sunday morning chilled vibe whilst sharing the very hearty grub.

If that wasn't enough of Jersey delights, next day I was up early for an invigorating session at the Sauna Society wood-burning hut followed by a dip in the nearby sea, a

refreshing 16C, at the mouth of St Catherine's Breakwater.

If time had allowed, I could have shopped along St Helier's pedestrian precincts (M&S and the tax-cut designer stores are a favourite with nearby French visitors), downed a couple of pints of Randalls beer at the Boat House in St Aubin and sampled a rich ice cream at Rhona's at The Beach in Gorey.

Guernsey

A short flight from its 'Big Sister', the island is just six miles by three and immediately instils that rural Ireland 'feel' of rolling green meadows, deep blue seas, twisting lanes, soaring cliffs, pretty villages and a great deal of mischief.

After checking in at the comfortable Fermain Valley Hotel, I was soon walking down the hill to the sheltered cove for a cool dip followed by the beach café's 'doorstep' fresh crab sandwiches.

The very relaxing and friendly hotel is on the island's glorious south-east coast and surrounded by acres of luscious grounds, with a clifftop location and the twinkling bay below that had me up early next morning for another refreshing swim as the sun rose in orange streaks.

A short cab ride (they're all short here) took me into the capital, the cobbled and historic of St Peter Port, to look round the elegant and slightly wacky mansion of Victor Hugo, where he spent years in exile and wrote such masterpieces as *Les Misérables* and *Toilers of the Sea*.

Over a couple of days, I absorbed the tranquillity of an island which has – like Jersey – superb beaches for families, plenty of WW2 history to visit, great coastal walks, nature-watching boat tours, fine food and even Guernsey jam and cream scones followed by that deep yellow local ice-cream-todie-for at the Portelet Beach Kiosk.

Yet, it was the people who also left their mark on me. From the taxi drivers with their whiplash jokes and local gossip to the fairy rings and folklore superstitions that still live on from medieval times (how about trying to cure a sore throat by wrapping an old sweaty sock around your neck as you sleep? Truly quirky.



Huge crab sandwiches at Guernsey's Fermain Beach Cafe

Herm

A stirring 20-minute ferry boat ride from St Peter Port took me to one of the smallest public islands in the archipelago with just 60 permanent residents, no cars or bicycles and just a brisk one and half miles long and half a mile wide.

This tiny blob of green paradise in a white-capped blue sea is like an immersion tank of tranquillity centred on the majestic White House Hotel, where the key guest lounge activity appeared to be slumbering over books and newspapers before heading out on one of the several cliff and beach walks.

As a contrast, I was quickly immersed in a strenuous guided swim (wetsuit, life-jacket etc) round the coast through oodles of edible sea spaghetti to a silver mine dug by a 19th century Cornish engineer's crew. Little silver seems to have been found

there – in fact all I came across was a steel ammunition box with a few indecipherable scribbles inside. Weird but fun.

A further adrenaline-boost – amid tranquil walks and another swim or two – was the beer and cider festival evening at the lively Mermaid Tavern, where the fish, chips and mushy peas were a must accompanied by a cloudy IPA or two.

On one walk I met an elegantly-dressed elderly woman who had been coming to Herm for 40 years, first as a young wife, then a mother and now a widow. She told me that she had noticed many changes, adding mysteriously: "The safety of visitors has certainly improved."

Safety? As I took the ferry back to Guernsey and the Aurigny flight from there to Birmingham, I wondered if he might have been hinting at a new case for detective Bergerac.

Surely not!

Factfile

Getting there:

Flights: main operators are Easyjet, www.easyjet.com; Aurigny www.aurigny.com and Blue Islands: www.blueislands.com

Ferries depart from Poole and Portsmouth with Condor Ferries: <https://www.condorferries.co.uk/Jersey>
More info: <https://www.jersey.com/>
Accommodation: L'Horizon Beach Hotel & Spa. Double rooms from £300 per night B&B www.handpickedhotels.co.uk/lhorizon

Guernsey

www.visitguernsey.com
Accommodation: Fermain Valley Hotel: www.handpickedhotels.co.uk/fermainvalley

Herm

Return ferry from Guernsey starts at £17 per person: www.traveltrident.com
Accommodation: double rooms at The White House Hotel start at £155, based on two people sharing a standard cottage room on a bed and breakfast basis: www.herm.com/where-to-stay/white-house-hotel