

# Undeveloped, untamed, unforgettable

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In the 35 years he has been doing this, “three or four” licensed fishermen (out of a group of only 47) have lost their lives. Tanguy has had three accidents in the last two years, including one that ripped a hole in his calf muscle and left him dangling upside down from a cliff with his foot pinned in the rocks.

Despite the danger, he couldn't imagine doing anything else. “We're in nature,” he says, gesturing around him. “Doing this, we feel free. Everything is beautiful.”

Along the Côte Sauvage and all around Belle-Île, there are no Jet Skis buzzing the beaches, no boardwalk to see and be seen on. This is not the place to come for a wild weekend with the gang.

“This is the anti-Saint Tropez,” says Serge Albagnac, who has been preserving and promoting Belle-Île for 50 years.

“I came for a girl when I was 18, but by the time I moved here, we were done,” he says, smiling at a far-off memory. Now, he's the president of the island's tourism bureau, conscious of the mix of locals, tourists, and nature needed to keep Belle-Île thriving.

Historically the area was a strategic military and fishing location until both industries eventually dried up and went elsewhere. Now, the majority of employment on the island revolves around visitors.

“A local might deplore the idea of the importance of the tourists who come here [particularly in the late July through August vacation season], but, very simply, the island is a mix of populations,” Albagnac says.

And if there were no tourism? “It would be catastrophic,” he says. “Fishing and farming couldn't hold — everyone depends on it.”

Albagnac is also very aware of the number of French seaside towns that have been swamped by development. “Concrete,” he muses, “isn't very pretty.”

Much of the coast is now off-limits to development, preserving hundreds of miles of walking paths and seaside wilderness. There's an abundance of old convertibles — especially Citroën 2CVs and Méharis — which, despite their age, are still the cars best-suited for the island.

As I explore Belle-Île on foot and by bicycle, the absence of concrete is a blessing. There's a purity, particularly of light and smell, that jostles memories and invokes calm, leaving little wonder why Monet, Matisse, and scores of other Impressionists began setting up camp here in the late 1800s.

Riding my bike late one afternoon, I crest a hill and, surrounded by fields and hay bales with the sea in the distance and the sun setting beyond it, everything else drops away. For a brief, blissful instant, life is as it should be.

It gets better: I'm on my way to dinner.

“About 75 percent of what we use here is local,” says chef Pacôme Epron at La Table de La Desirade. Most of the restaurant's fish, meat, and vegetables come from island producers. Other items, he forages for himself.

“To like it here, you've got to like nature,” Epron says. “Every afternoon, I'll go fishing or out picking wild produce. Right now, we're out picking mushrooms; we've got death trumpets and chanterelles, and soon we'll have cèpes. We've got 300 kinds of mushrooms here.”

Epron denies having a signature dish, preferring the mantra “que du frais, que du frais, que du frais!” (Only fresh!) and rolling with the seasons and product availability. It creates dishes that play with taste, texture, volume, and simplicity.

One of his best dishes combines layers of cockles and zucchini between thin layers of potato rosettes. It's all drizzled with a foie gras-infused meat jus. Purists might call the combination of meat and shellfish heresy, but the jus transforms the dish from delicate seafood to something almost carnal.

As opposed to the manicured mainland, which islanders refer to as “Le Continent” or just “the Other Side,” the overriding sense here is this link to the primal, the wild — not comfortable but comforting — that lures people and keeps them coming back.

“It gets in your blood. It's a virus,” says Didier Lemoine, who began coming to Belle-Île when his father got a job designing diving suits for Jacques Cousteau and his team here 50 years ago.

“I was 8 years old and told my



PHOTOS BY JOE RAY/FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Serge Albagnac, president of its tourism bureau, calls Belle-Île-en-Mer “the anti-Saint Tropez.” The building above facing the channel in the island's capital, Le Palais, is built into the earth.



father that I'd own a place here one day,” Lemoine says on the deck of his home in the hamlet of Nanscol, “and I started coming by myself when I was 15.”

Though Lemoine, who has lived around the world, held high-level jobs with the European Commission and is now on

development committees for new airports in Rennes and Nantes, his passion has always been for Belle-Île.

“As soon as I could, I always came back,” he says.

“There's history, gastronomy, flora and fauna, geology, architecture — what more could you

want?” he asks. “It comes little by little, but if you know how to observe, you love it. If we pay attention to nature, she's extremely generous.”

Back on the rocks with Tanguy, this generosity, this connection to land and sea, to the “sauvage” is as intense as the sun's

reflection off the water.

“Those who talk about beauty are the ones who miss it,” says Tanguy. “We don't talk about it because we live it.”

Joe Ray can be reached at [www.joe-ray.com](http://www.joe-ray.com).

## Monument to a time and a mind unmatched

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ably preserved views — the context about the man could be lacking. Much more needed to be told about the ideas and life of one of the most revolutionary, confounding, and indispensable men in history.

This week, however, the Monticello experience is to be born anew with the opening of a years-in-the-making visitors center and museum-like education hall. It is the most Jeffersonian of ideas, a 21st-century construct of the man's endless quest to refine and reimagine Monticello. The center can no longer be completely bypassed. Admission tickets are sold at the site, which includes a theater, exhibits, cafe, gift and book store, classrooms, and children's center.

“Simply visiting the house wasn't a broad enough experience. We wanted to engage and connect people with Jefferson's ideas,” said Susan R. Stein, Monticello's senior curator. The center is the latest part of Monticello's effort to expand its educational and scholarly reach, following the opening seven years ago of the Jefferson Library at the nearby International Center for Jefferson Studies.

A visit begins with a new 15-minute film, which opens with a panoramic look of the Blue Ridge Mountains before narrowing its focus to Jefferson's vision of liberty. The film does not shy away from the controversies that seem as vivid as ever about Jefferson, citing the “glaring contradiction” of the man who wrote that “all men are created equal” yet owned slaves throughout his adult life. Moreover, it says that many historians (including those at Monticello) believe that years after the death of his wife, Jeffer-



The new visitors center at Monticello offers glimpses into President Jefferson's life and times, including the exhibit “Boisterous Sea of Liberty” about that period.

son “was the father of the children of the slave Sally Hemings.”

The complex is a place of many doors through which one can enter the mind and world of Jefferson: the architect, farmer, slaveholder, father, scientist, philosopher, inventor, governor, secretary of state, and president, as well as what he considered his three greatest accomplishments: author of the Declaration of Independence and the Virginia statute for religious freedom, and founder of the University of Virginia.

The three-level, 42,000-square-foot center, designed with a mixture of brick, fieldstone, and cedar, is set unobtrusively on a forested slope, out of view of Monticello. One of its most illuminating exhibits is “An Essay in Architecture,” which tells how the house evolved from Jefferson's original vision of Monticello I, a classical eight-room building with a double layer of porticos, into today's familiar 21-room domed structure, which is Monticello II. A computerized video provides a portal into Jefferson's mind as he reimagines the first house and superimposes the architectural influences he picked up while serving as an envoy in Paris. Bricks come down and go up, walls are installed, the dome's superstructure is conceived and the house capped with its signature flourish. Elsewhere in the exhibit, one sees a copy of the small memorandum book, with Jefferson's writing so tiny that it

can only be read with a magnifying glass, in which he detailed his building plans.

Across the hall, a room filled with touch screens prompts visitors with a series of questions such as “Why wasn't slavery mentioned in the Declaration?” The answer is that a clause regarding slavery was struck to placate delegates who wanted the slave trade to continue. One who wonders why Jefferson was chosen to write the Declaration learns that John Adams declared Jefferson “can write 10 times better” than others.

Upstairs, in the main exhibit hall, a visitor can examine a detailed lineage of the Hemings slave family, including Sally, whose role in Jefferson's life has received new attention as a result of this year's National Book Award-winning volume by Annette Gordon-Reed, “The Hemingses of Monticello: An American Family.” Sally Hemings was the half-sister of Jefferson's wife, Martha, who died 10 years after they married.

Jefferson himself is put in a more personal context. There is a display of items that he regularly carried with him, including a pocket knife containing a corkscrew and tiny saw, and what appears to be a fancy box clock but is actually an odometer that was attached to the wheel of one of Jefferson's carriages and chimed every 10 miles. As any visitor to the house knows, Jefferson was one of the great gadgeteers of his

age, constructing doors that closed automatically and designing a great clock that worked on an elaborate system of ropes and weights. But these smaller gadgets had until now been largely out of view.

One of the more amusing displays is an animation that portrays Jefferson as a sort of founding geek, forever counting and

measuring things. The video, “A Passion for Ordered Knowledge,” also shows Jefferson weighing various animals, a routine that had a serious purpose: He wanted to rebut Europeans who believed that animals in America were smaller and weaker than those on the Continent. (To prove his point to one hard-headed French naturalist, Jefferson

asked New Hampshire's governor to send a moose skeleton and skin to Paris.)

A final exhibit, directed at children but also appealing to adults, allows visitors to lie in a replica of Jefferson's alcove bed, sit in his rotating chair, and practice writing with a double-penned polygraph, similar to the one with which Jefferson wrote some of his 19,000 letters. Then it is off to the house itself, on a bucolic half-mile walk or the shuttle bus. Either way, the approach reveals a remarkable prospect, the home on a hill that overlooks what Jefferson called his “sea view,” a forest stretching east for miles toward Richmond.

In urging his friend Cosway to visit his mountain, Jefferson wrote, “With what majesty do we there ride above the storms!” He was referring to the dramatic weather that rolled off the nearby Blue Ridge Mountains, but he might as well have been referring to the storm that he helped set in motion in 1776, and the revolutionary ideas behind it. Those ideas, too, now have their own home at Monticello.

Michael Kranish is a member of the Globe's Washington bureau and a former fellow at the International Center for Jefferson Studies. He is the author of “Flight From Monticello: Thomas Jefferson at War,” to be published next February by Oxford University Press. He can be reached at [kranish@globe.com](mailto:kranish@globe.com).