

A Lot of LUXURY in a little big island



Toyah Willcox and husband Robert Fripp take a winter break in Jersey. It's the first time she's been back since a childhood visit. The island seems to have grown up with her.



Spa Sirène, The Royal Yacht, St. Helier

I was seven years old when I took my very first plane on my very first trip abroad – to Jersey. Okay, I know that Jersey is perceived as being a part of Britain. But where in the Albion isles do you find turquoise seas and French shopping just 14 miles across the water on day trips?

Forty-three years later and one hour and 10 minutes from Birmingham Airport and I am back in Jersey, a lot older and wiser. It's all so easy – with no passport or baggage queues you simply walk off the plane, catch a bus or taxi or, like me, hire a car and drive a maximum of nine or 10 miles to find your port of call. Any further and you'd be in the sea.

We are staying at The Royal Yacht Hotel and Spa, overlooking the waterfront at St Helier... exactly where I stayed 43 years ago! But how things have changed. What I remember as a quaint quayside has grown into a big, busy state-of-the-art harbour, complete with multi-purpose leisure complex, that almost reaches out to the tiny island of Elizabeth Castle about half-a-mile offshore (you can walk out to it at low tide – a wonderful adventure).

I'm here towards the end of winter and the sun is out but the wind is bracing. The Royal Yacht – like its harbour location – has been restored and expanded. The effect is stunning. We are in a swish room with balcony overlooking gardens and the old harbour. Our entrance is by swipe card, and the room

has a TV in the bedroom and bathroom, a DVD player, fridge and not a Corby trouser press in sight.

Instead there's mood lighting, soft colours and designer furnishings. The room is instantly relaxing, comforting and cosy. It doesn't matter how cold it might be outside. And anyway, in the basement is Spa Sirène, a top-end spa offering an exotic cocktail of treatments from seaweed wraps to all-over body masks, after which you can take a dip in the swimming pool.

We're on a three-day break and I'm slightly concerned how we are going to fit everything in. There's so much to do. I'm a keen walker and I soon discover that the island is bigger than it seems. Jersey measures around nine miles by five, but it expands every day by a huge amount thanks to one of the largest tidal reaches in Europe. So at low tide you can end up walking a mile or so across the sands to find the sea.

Icho and Seymour Towers, for example, were put up 200 years ago to defend Jersey and are cut off daily by the sea. When the tide is out you can take a 2½-hour walk to them, but always with a guide, for you wouldn't want to get caught amongst the reefs and rocks when the Atlantic rushes back in. The experience is almost unearthly. In all my life I have never seen anything quite like the eerie landscape of spiky rocks and pools that unfolds with the retreating tide.

Jewellery shopping in St Helier



Elizabeth Marina, St Helier



If all this sounds too strenuous then take the easier option of a walk around the harbour, guessing how much the boats must be worth. Then beat a retreat to Jersey's cosmopolitan café, bar and restaurant culture.

We amble back to our hotel for a light lunch – and end up having one of the best meals we've ever had. Jersey does 'food' really well. In The Royal Yacht's Café Zephyr I had what I love to eat any time, anywhere – miso soup and sushi. I would never have associated it with Jersey, but it was wonderful. Hubby had a Mediterranean salad so tasty I ate half of that too.

Come pm it was time to explore the town. We set off in search of St Helier's traditional market and found a lot more. But first came the Victorian Central Market with stalls selling everything from fresh veg to jewellery, and a fabulous centrepiece – an intricate fountain

of painted maidens gushing water with fish swimming among coins thrown by visitors.

St Helier's streets aren't quite paved with gold, but the jewellery shops just kept coming – virtually every other shop sells the stuff. There are the usual chain stores too, and lots of smaller independent shops you don't see on many High Streets nowadays.

I return to the hotel laden with clothes, DVDs and dance wear (yes, I even found a dance shop called Centre Stage where I got my touring supply of dance tights!). And then it was spa time.

We'd booked a 'Husband and Wife' massage, with two tables in the same peaceful room and two masseurs who gave us stunning all-over deep massages lasting over an hour. They were the best we have ever had, and we returned to our room on cloud nine.

You're never short of places to eat in Jersey. That evening we catch a taxi to St Aubin, the pretty harbour across the bay from St Helier. It's full of waterfront restaurants and inns serving dishes ranging from New World fusion to fabulous local fish. And because it's popular with islanders and visitors alike it's a buzzy place to eat throughout the year.

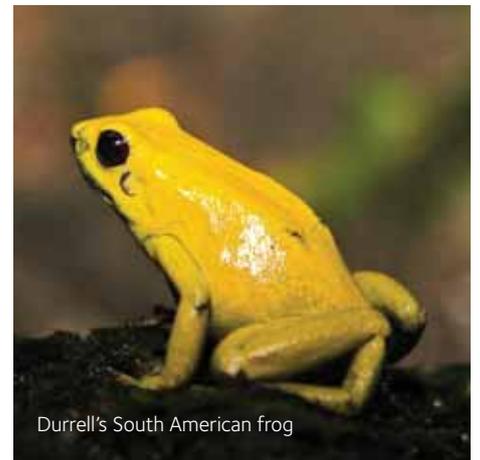
We start our next day with a wake-up walk along the beach then head back to the Jersey Museum and Maritime Museum, both on the waterfront and full of surprises. During World War Two, for example, the Germans occupied the island and ended up almost starving themselves and the inhabitants to death. In an earlier era the celebrated French author Victor Hugo was exiled here and later wrote *Les Misérables* in neighbouring Guernsey. I even learned a few rollicking sea shanties. Later, we head across the island to Victoria Village, home of the Eric Young Orchid



Eric Young Orchid Foundation

Foundation where a purpose-built nursery displays a wonderful array of jewel-like orchids. This horticulturist's dream was a calm antidote to my shopping frenzy of the day before. It's close to an island icon, the Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust. Dubbed the 'zoo that is not a zoo', its main purpose is the breeding and survival of endangered species worldwide. In addition to its global work, here in Jersey it makes great efforts to recreate habitats for a wide range of animals including gorillas, orang-utans, bears... and even the South American golden poison-dart frog.

'The Eric Young Orchid Foundation displays a wonderful array of jewel-like orchids.'



Durrell's South American frog



Harbour Gallery, St Aubin

Durrell is famous, but Jersey has lots of hidden gems too. Back in St Aubin we come across the delightful Harbour Gallery, an art and textile workshop run by two artists with a passion for all things visual – just like me. The creativity, ideas and standard of work are inspirational. Pat Robson, a co-founder, tells me that Jersey has a large population of artists who all contribute to the space. I was drawn in particular to the intricate beadwork of some of the neck collars on display. There were ideas here of the kind I have only seen in the V&A in London – quite simply, it's a 'must visit' if you enjoy art and fabrics.

Our last evening sees us back at The Royal Yacht dining at the sophisticated Restaurant Sirocco. Even though we only order three courses we get five. Each 'main' course is

punctuated by small, zesty appetizers like foie gras mousse and berry sorbet. The mains, thankfully, are not huge, but are beautifully presented and served with panache in a setting that serves as a perfect complement to the food.

My advice in Jersey is always to go for the fish. With 45 miles of coast, clear waters and a thriving local industry, you're guaranteed great seafood – which is exactly what we had with our red mullet and sea bass.

If you're a couple who love good food, great views, comfort and surprises, you'll like Jersey. It has changed a lot since I was last here. And I'm going to have to come back. Even though we had a busy time we only scratched the surface of this little, big island.



Restaurant Sirocco, The Royal Yacht



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