

# Alderney: The fun of the fort

Fiona Duncan feared that an Alderney fortress, reached via a drawbridge and cut off at high tide, would be restrictive. In fact, it felt like freedom.

By Fiona Duncan

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"OK, who's got that Alderney Feeling?"



Fort Clonque is a principal attraction of the island

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We are a group of 12 adults and children (well, they were children once) lolling about in the old-fashioned sitting room of an offshore fort, reached by a long causeway and entered by a drawbridge. Outside, the rain is lashing and the wind is howling, sea foam cascades onto the rocks and the tide has just come in, completely severing the fort and its occupants from the mainland.

Everyone noisily agrees that indeed, they do have that Alderney Feeling, then dive back into various games of

Snatch, Racing Demon and Monopoly.

You can keep your villas in the south of France and your time shares in Tenerife. We've got that Alderney Feeling, even in the rain, especially cut off by the tide, extra specially during Alderney Week when the tiny island bursts into celebration, and there's nowhere we'd rather be on a family-and-friends holiday.

The "Alderney Feeling" phrase isn't mine. It's what the inhabitants call the "unique, contagious phenomenon" of life on the third largest of the Channel Islands. It may be minuscule (three and a half miles long, one and a half miles wide, just over 2,000 inhabitants); it may be far flung (30 miles from Jersey, eight from France); its landscape may not be particularly picturesque, save its stunning coastline; it's certainly not sophisticated and undoubtedly sleepy most of the year round, yet it has magic and that magic works fast.

You either get it or you don't. People like our friends Sarah and Paul, and offspring Alice and Emilie, have got it year in, year out – in Sarah's case since she was five when her parents built one of the first holiday houses on the island.

It overlooks the bleached, soft sand curve of Braye Beach and though it once stood almost alone and is now surrounded by other houses, Sarah says that essentially little has changed on the island in the many years she has been coming here.

Forty per cent of the population is Alderney-born. Though restrictions on outsiders buying property here are less stringent than on the other Channel Islands, the building of new homes is restricted.

Our party is staying not at Braye Beach, or in the pretty hilltop town St Anne's, but in Fort Clonque, a Landmark Trust property. Undoubtedly stern and forbidding, it is also, because it had to be fitted to the great rocks around which it is built, open and picturesque, ingeniously contrived on many levels, separated by stretches of grass, samphire and mesembryanthemum.

With show-stopping views of the two teeming, white-coated gannetries of Les Etacs, it makes a thrilling place to stay. What's more, the mattresses on the iron bedsteads are comfortable and the hot water plentiful; the supermarket and wine merchant deliver our purchases; and the brick-vaulted kitchen is a pleasure in which to cook, with every sparkling saucepan, properly sharpened knife and mod-con you could want.

Fort Clonque is a principal attraction of the island, the most remarkable of a surprising ring of mid 19th-century fortifications, constructed when it was thought that the advent of steam would make the Channel Islands an essential advanced naval base against capture by the French.

The Victorian fortifications, including the famously long breakwater built to shelter the British fleet, were never required, at least not until the Nazis found them in 1940 and vigorously refortified them, adding a slew of concrete bunkers and gun emplacements that are still there today.

At the approach of the Germans, Alderney was evacuated in one hour. When the people returned in 1945, their native patois had been lost forever.

When did the Alderney Feeling first steal upon us? Was it when we remembered that we didn't have to fasten our seat belts or wear helmets on motorbikes and that we could smoke anywhere we wanted, courtesy of the island's autonomous government? Or was it when we waved and chatted across the fence to our newly arrived friends as they walked from the tiny yellow plane into the tiny shack-like airport?

We had thought a spell on the "Fortress Island" might be restrictive; in fact it felt like freedom. And it felt like the

good old days: shops close for two hours at lunch and on Wednesday afternoons; the island bus is a brown and cream Sixties classic; there's a box of knitting to keep you occupied at the airport; bicycles for hire, a steam train and a round-island boat trip.

August's Alderney Week only enhances the feeling of caring but carefree safety and innocence that this island engenders, kicking off with a cavalcade and including highlights such as the Sandcastle, Man-Powered Flight and Odd Spot Competitions (find the object that doesn't belong in shop windows: triumphantly won by god-daughter Jo). Not to mention daft raft racing, dinghy scrambling, find-the-bench and fiercely competitive rubber duck racing in the Inner Harbour.

The older members of our party certainly didn't expect to go to a rave in a disused quarry, but the Alderney Feeling has strange powers of persuasion, especially after a supper of excellent local lobsters. All-night "quarry" and "bunker" parties are an island secret. This one has a Woodstock theme, and if the music is more disco than Sixties (none of the teens had heard of Woodstock) the fancy dress on show is a laugh.

Next morning, collecting the Sunday papers in St Anne's, we give three teenage all-nighters, still dressed as hippies and still bouncy, a lift.

"We've been having breakfast in a café, but we want to go back to the quarry," they tell us. "We've just heard it's caught fire." Indeed it had, mildly, and a fire engine is there.

"Oh, it's so exciting," they exclaim. "Nothing like this has ever happened on Alderney before."

Further consequences of the quarry party are felt at dinner that night, as we try to cut into fishcakes that are still frozen. "I'm so sorry," says Rita, the restaurant's formidable owner. "I'm afraid that my entire kitchen staff were dancing till dawn last night. Basically, they're still asleep."

Once or twice during our stay we are confined to barracks. On most days though, the clouds part, the sun shines and the sea sparkles. We play tennis and swim. We queue up at the Braye Chippy and invade the sun deck at the stylish Braye Beach hotel.

We watch dive-bombing gannets on a feeding frenzy from the rooftop terrace of our fort, then take a boat trip to their colonies on Les Etacs and Ortac for a closer look, plus the seal colony off the uninhabited island of Burhou (where you can stay the night in a hut).

We hold a jolly drinks party in old London Tube carriages pulled by the steam engine as it trundles along to Mannez quarry. Often we take to our bicycles for stiff uphill and sensational downhill rides to the exceptional and almost empty beaches of Corblets, Arch and Saye. It astonishes us that such lovely stretches of sand are so quiet.

Though the island's population is said to double in summer, it certainly doesn't feel that way: the expense of flying here and the lack of cheaper ferry services must keep many at bay.

Our week whizzes past, full of activity and laughter, culminating in the climax to Alderney Week, the Torchlight Procession. Everyone on the island turns out to carry a flame torch through the town to the open space at the top, the Butes. Each torch is then thrown on to a vast bonfire and the night explodes in fireworks.

But it's a different night that our party of lifelong friends, with many shared holidays behind us, will remember above all the others. As we barbecue among the rocks on the sea shore outside our fort, Union Jack proudly flying from the battlements, we watch the sinking sun set fire to the west, immediately followed by the full moon rising

majestically in the east, and we all agree that nowhere has been more perfect or memorable than here.

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Aurigny (01481 822886; [www.aurigny.com](http://www.aurigny.com)) (<http://www.aurigny.com>) operates daily direct flights from Southampton from £131.

### Staying there

For information and prices on Fort Clonque and other historic properties available for holiday rental, contact Landmark Trust (01628 825925; [www.landmarktrust.org.uk](http://www.landmarktrust.org.uk)) (<http://www.landmarktrust.org.uk>) For a full list of accommodation on Alderney, and general information, [www.visitalderney.com](http://www.visitalderney.com) (<http://www.visitalderney.com>).

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