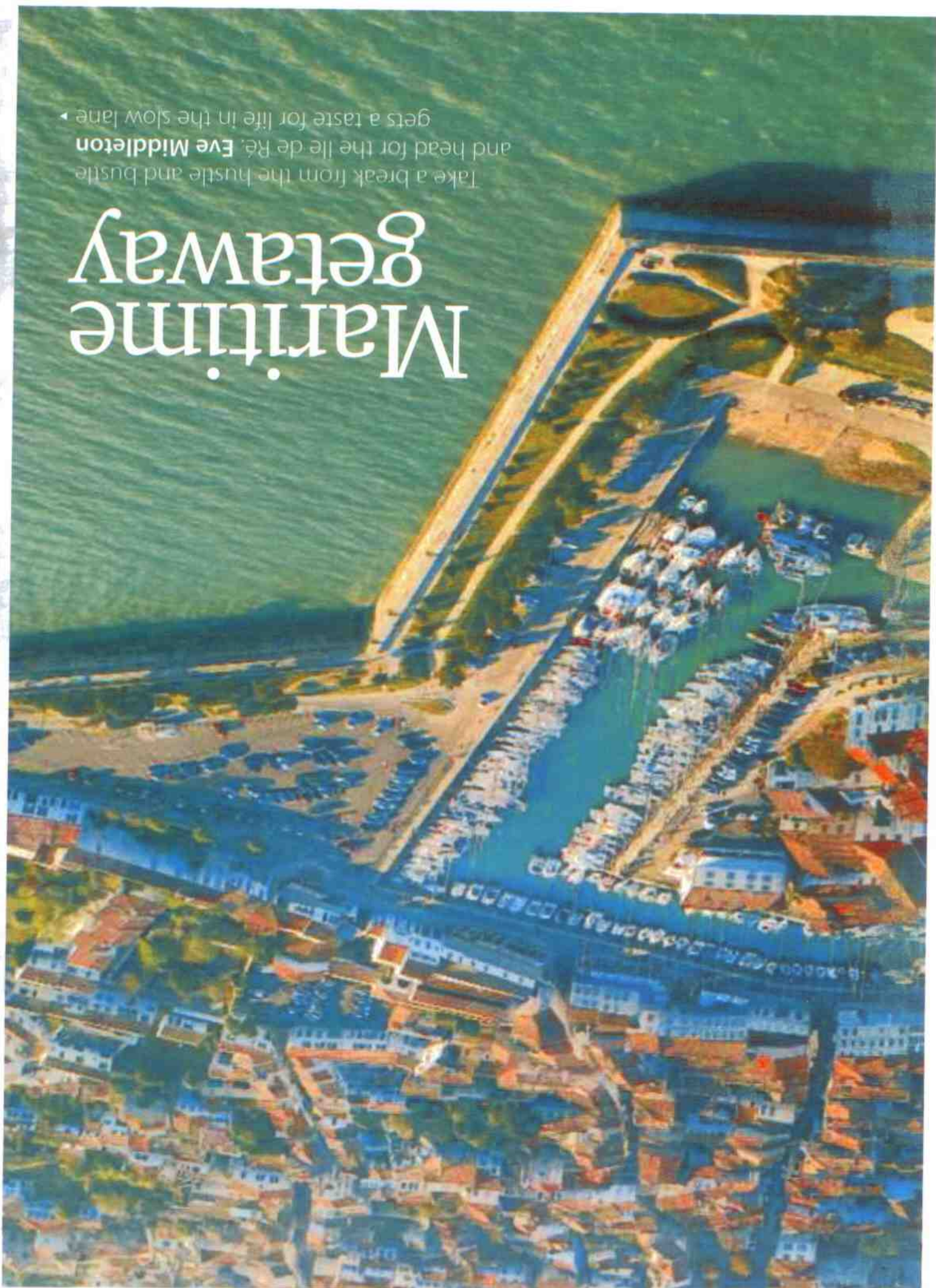
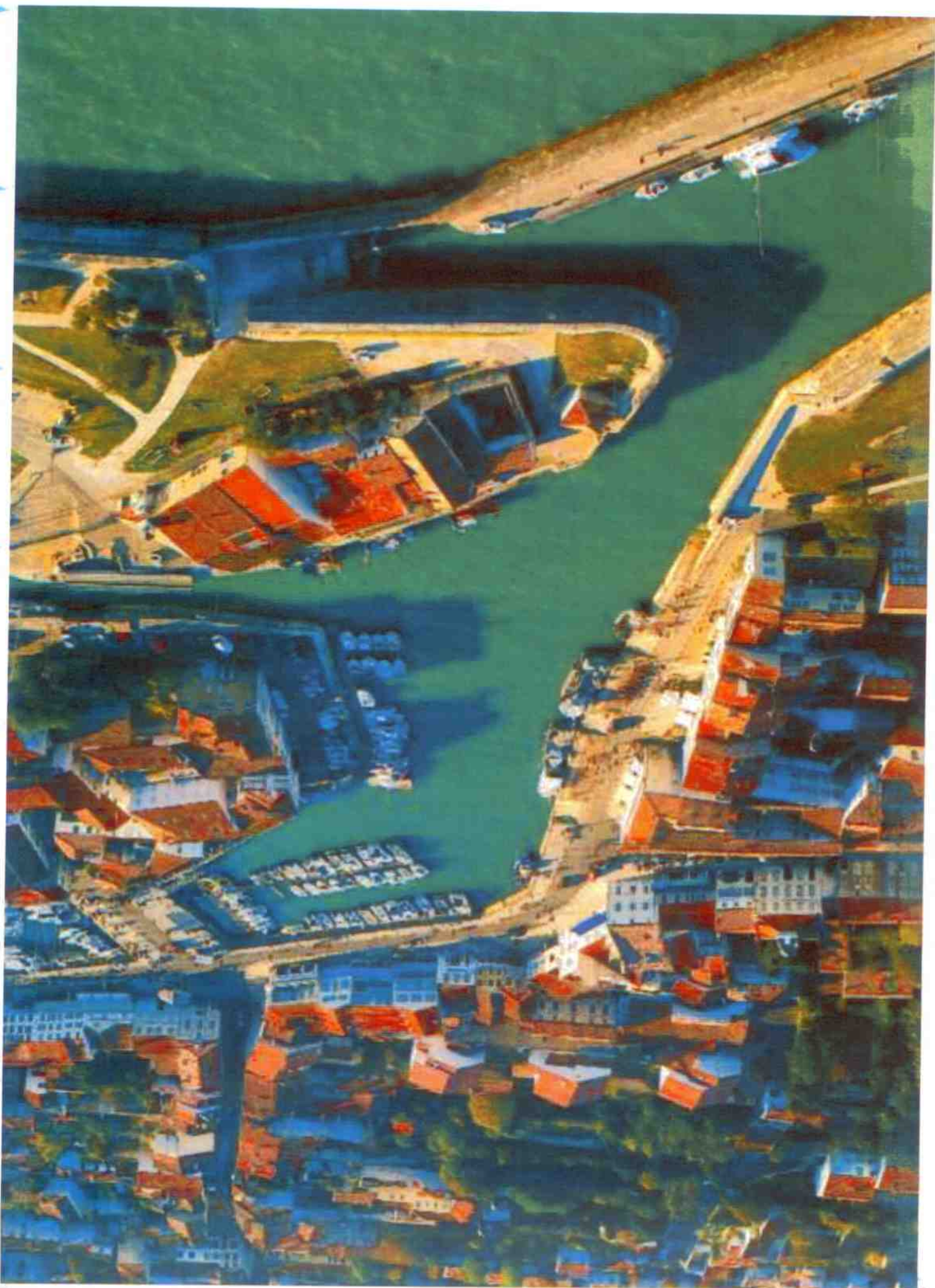


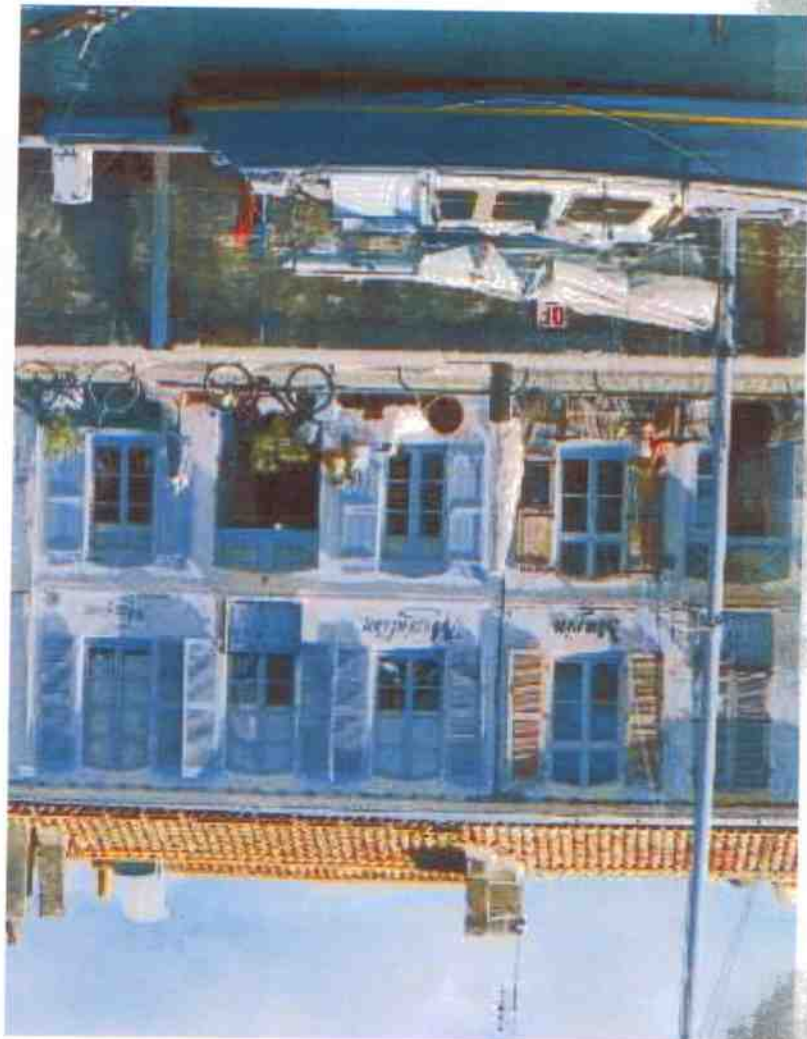
Take a break from the hustle and bustle
and head for the Ile de Ré: **Eve Middleton**
gets a taste for life in the slow lane ▶

Maritime getaway





There's a lot to be said for island living. While maintained lifestyles can often seem rushed and hurried, away from the hustle and bustle there's a slower pace to the everyday rhythm. The Ile de Ré off the Atlantic coast of the western Charente-Maritime *département* is a case in point; this 30-kilometre-long narrow strip of land sits just three kilometres out to sea from the historic port of La Rochelle. Here, inhabitants and visitors alike defer to a more relaxed tempo, opting to take to their bicycles for leisurely jaunts or trips to collect their morning baguette. Connected to its larger land-bound neighbour by an impressively elegant bridge arching over the grey-green seawater, the completely flat island is home to ten *communes* strung out from the southernmost Sainte-Marie-de-Ré towards Les-Portes-en-Ré at the northern tip of the headland. The Ile de Ré has garnered a strong reputation as a holiday destination – it's estimated that the 20,000-strong population rises tenfold over the summer months – so you might be forgiven for thinking that its solitary charm could be somewhat diminished. However, the preservation of the island's natural beauty stands testament to the careful balance and respect paid to its unique environment. Those keen to find out more can explore the island's *pisces cyclables*, an extensive network of more than 100 kilometres of cycle paths joining the main villages with smaller,



lesser-known corners. In the northwest of the island, the charming maritime village of Ars-en-Ré provides an ideal starting point for novices. With its winding cobbled walkways and tasteful whitewashed houses framed by worn green shutters, it holds a magical appeal that continues to draw visitors to its shores all year round. Leaving the village in a westerly direction on a rented bicycle,

Breathe in the tang of salty sea air as large swathes of the pine-filled forest unfurl as a backdrop

the smooth flat surface of the *pisces cyclables* gently rolled out in front of me as I breathed in the tang of the salty sea air. With large swathes of the pine-filled Forêt de la Combe à l'Eau

unfurling as a backdrop, a right-hand turn led me directly into the Lillieu des Niges bird sanctuary.

It was here that the few people sharing the *pisces cyclables* all but vanished. As a respite from the relaxed

ambles along the coastline, the reserve offers stunning views sweeping over this unique natural reserve on the island's salt flats. Created in 1980, its location on one of

the principal migratory axes of Europe welcomes hundreds of thousands of birds every year. Drawn

by the multitude of fauna living in the island's ecosystem, more than 300 different species have been

noted from as far afield as Africa, Siberia and Canada. Look carefully and you may see curlews and kingfishers

in winter, or even avocets and terns in spring. For those who need a little help with bird-spotting,

information panels line the walkways alongside observation points where binoculars have been

provided. Help is also on hand should the cycling prove challenging, with a bus system to take visitors back to

their destination and a series of geographical markers on the *pisces cyclables* for those in need of help.

The salt flats fulfil an important function beyond providing a base for the 40,000 birds that make their

home every year in the nature reserve. Located primarily in the north of the Ile de Ré and covering

around 20 per cent of the island's surface area, they are also the source of one of the main industries in the

form of salt-making. Referred to as the *marais salants*, their geometric forms glisten in the sunshine by the side

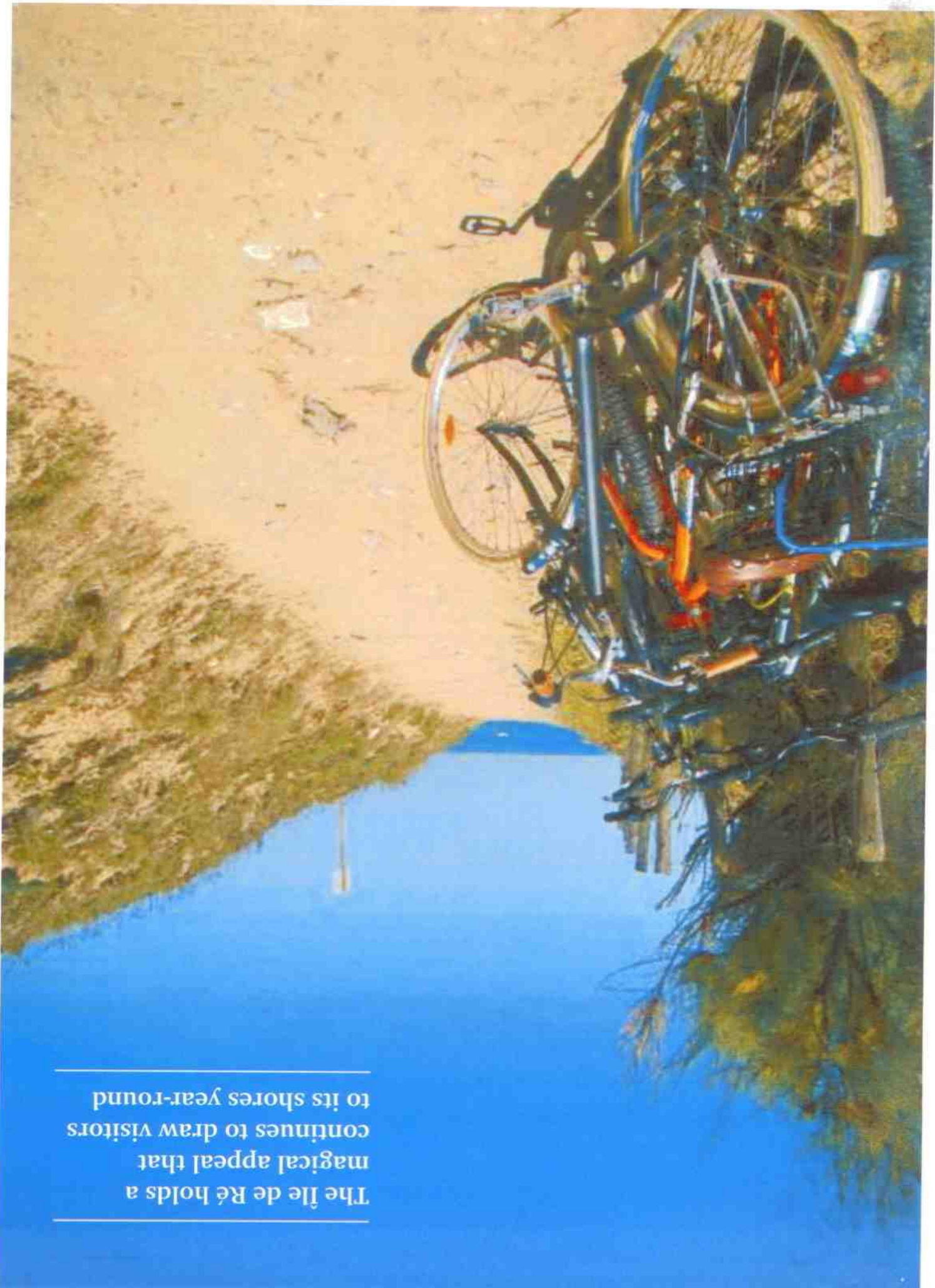
of the *pisces cyclables*, reflecting shades of slate-grey and muted mauve from the depths of their clay

foundations. When the *sauniers* (salt-makers) have harvested their crop, freshly drawn conical mounds of

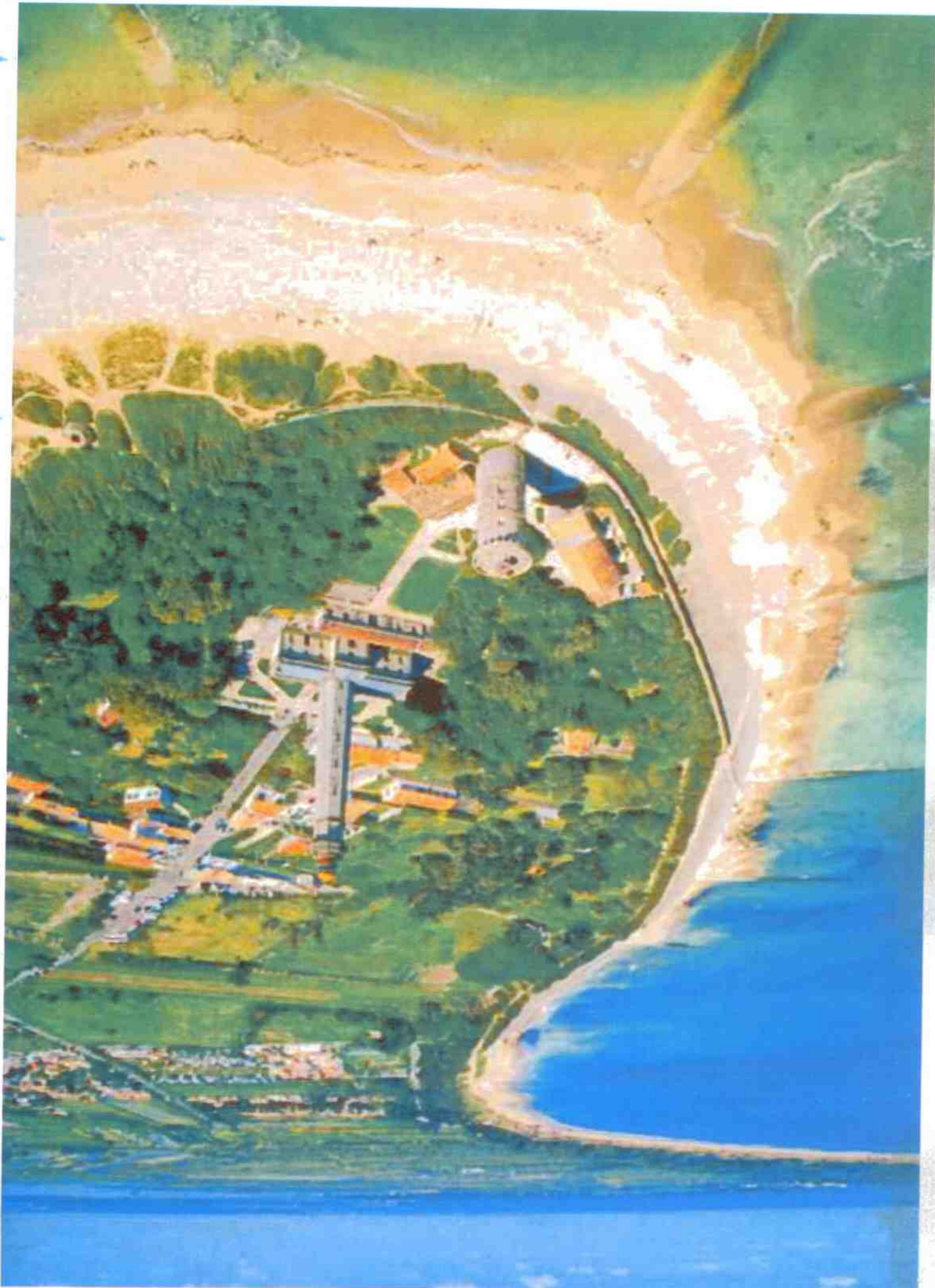
pristine white salt, known as *for blanc*, sit proudly by the edge of each *bassin* ready to be collected in baskets

and taken to the local markets.

OPENING PAGES: The harbour of Saint-Martin-de-Ré
LEFT: The sunny waterfront of Saint-Martin-de-Ré
RIGHT: A sandy pathway to an island beach



The Ile de Ré holds a magical appeal that continues to draw visitors to its shores year-round



For a more genetic expedition, the emphasis on the Ile de Ré's symbiotic relationship between man and nature can also be seen in the island's thalassotherapy treatments. The Thalacap centre in Ars-en-Ré draws on the natural benefits of its maritime environment, welcoming visitors for both day treatments and longer stays. By harnessing the natural properties of the sea, the centre offers treatments based around saltwater, seaweed and maritime mud baths. After a medical consultation, visitors are advised which treatments are best suited to their individual needs. Here, any earlier physical exertions from island adventures are easily soothed away. I found the *hydromodélage* bubbling bath of warm seawater and essential

Harnessing the sea

Ars-en-Ré also provides the perfect setting from which to explore the *marais salants* further, with a canoe tour in keeping with the island's relaxed pace. As I slid gently into the water in a plastic-hulled vessel the verges of the waterways loomed above me, soon opening up into a larger network of twists and turns that led through to the charming port village of Loix on the northern coast. Over the course of the island's turbulent history, the intricate system of moats and gullies was used as a place of refuge. The Duke of Buckingham famously defended the island's Huguenot residents in 1627 on orders from the King of England when they fell under siege from the Catholic Cardinal de Richelieu. Today the now peaceful waters offer a taste of island living in more ways than one, with the fresh green samphire growing wild on the banks of the waterways also making an appearance in local cuisine.

LEFT: An aerial view of the Phare des Baleines
ABOVE: The island prides itself on its fresh fish
FOLLOWING PAGE: Local donkeys

After a seafood platter lunch at Thalacap's À La Pointe de Grignon restaurant, I ventured further afield for an exploration of the island's history. As one of the key lighthouses on the island, the Phare des Baleines on the western tip is among the most visited points of interest on the Ile de Ré. Built in the mid-19th century following on from a primary lighthouse designed by Vauban in 1682, it looks out to the horizon across the Atlantic Ocean. Visitors can scale the 257 steps to the top of the gleaming red metallic apex housing the impressive halogen lamps which cast their beam 50 kilometres out to sea. If the 57-metre-high viewing platform makes you feel a little uneasy, the lighthouse also has its own museum just a few steps from the visitor centre at the base of the tower.

The Duke of Buckingham and the Cardinal de Richelieu's spectacular standoff is a key aspect of the island's history that can be seen in a visit to the fortified harbour of Saint-Martin-de-Ré in the centre of the island. Listed among Unesco's World Heritage sites, the harbour-side *commune* stands proudly at the centre of a star-shaped system of fortifications designed by the renowned 17th-century military architect Vauban. At the request of Louis XIV, more than 14 kilometres of fortified walls were erected from Vauban's designs, making this small island port one of the estimated 160 fortified locations that the royal architect worked on throughout his 50-year career.

A wander through the narrow *venelles* (cobble walkways) lining the fortified port gave me the chance to admire the architecture. The local produce is put to good use in the small boutiques on the winding streets ▶



ILE DE RÉ

FRANCOFILE

Plan a leisurely stay on the Ile de Ré

GETTING THERE

By train: Eve travelled from

London to La Rochelle via

Paris. Return rail fares

start at £109 in

standard class.

Tel: 888 382 RAIL

www.raileurope.com**By road:** The Ile de Ré is about

seven hours from the northern

ferry ports by car. A return

crossing for motorists on the

Pont de l'Ile de Ré from La

Rochelle costs €9 in low season

(12 September – 19 June) and

€16.50 in high season (20 June

– 11 September). Buses to the

Ile de Ré also run on a regular

basis direct from La Rochelle

train station, stopping at each

of the island's villages. One-

day return tickets are priced at

€7.40.

Tel: (Fr) 5 46 82 31 30

www.lesnouettes-transport.com**By air:** La Rochelle is the

nearest airport with flights

from the UK.

WHERE TO STAY

Thalacap Ile de Ré

Pointe de Gignon

17590 Ars-en-Ré

Tel: (Fr) 5 46 29 10 00

www.thalacap.fr

A three-star spa with

comfortable rooms

and restaurant

specialising in healthy cuisine.

Thalassotherapy packages for a

one-night stay start from €206.

WHERE TO EAT

La Martinière

17-19 Quai de la Poitevinière

17410 Saint-Martin-de-Ré

Tel: (Fr) 5 46 09 20 99

www.la-martiniere.fr

An inventive artisanal ice-

cream maker established by

the Cathala family in 1970. To

learn more, pay a visit to the

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