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## **A restful retreat - Les Jardins d'Aliénor**

*The Ile d'Oléron can be at its best out of season – and the classy yet informal ambience at Les Jardins d'Aliénor makes it the perfect base for a relaxing autumn break by the sea*

In a tranquil side street leading off Château d'Oléron's central square lies the unassuming façade of Les Jardins d'Aliénor, one of Oléron island's most charming hotels and highly rated restaurants. Opposite, the trees and lawns of the Mairie's park set the tone of greenery juxtaposed with stone that is reflected in the hanging garden and water features of the Jardin d'Aliénor's hidden patio. Combining the intimacy of a Bed and Breakfast with the quality of a first class hotel service, the Jardins d'Aliénor is nevertheless characterised by a delightfully informal ambience.



"The concept of both the hotel and restaurant is to provide a restful place where couples can come for a romantic break," says Laëtitia Le Reun, 37-year-old co-owner of the business alongside her husband Marc, the chef. It has taken courage and a huge amount of work for the young couple to achieve their aim, given that the stone building dates from the construction of Château d'Oléron's citadel and needed a complete renovation when they bought it in January 2004.

It was Laëtitia's father, an inhabitant of Oléron, who noticed that the building and business were up for bankruptcy sale, and he lost no time in telling his daughter – who was then working as a management controller in the restaurant sector on the Champs-Elysees. Until 2002 it had been the former 'Hôtel de France', and before that a coaching inn, so it seemed an ideal location for Laëtitia and Marc to set up the restaurant they wanted to create on the island that Laëtitia's family has lived in for generations.

"We made an offer based on redecorating the existing hotel and turning it into a hotel-restaurant with nine bedrooms," says Laëtitia. "Our offer was accepted and we bought the building and the business. But then, to our horror, we discovered that each time we leant on a wall it collapsed." It took the couple six months to find extra funding – which came from family donations – and to create a new project that involved demolishing everything and starting from scratch. "We couldn't afford to pay craftsmen, so we did everything apart from the electricity and plastering ourselves. It was a really difficult year and I wouldn't like to

have to do it again!" Indeed, it took eight months of work – from 6am to midnight daily – to transform the 900-square-metre property into the attractive four-bedroomed hotel and restaurant that opened in April 2005. "We opened just the restaurant first, and as soon as the service was finished I would dash upstairs to continue tiling the bathrooms or applying 'chaux' to the bedroom walls," says Laëtitia, who admits enjoying manual work and has even made one of the bureaux in the bedrooms.

The decision to change from nine to four bedrooms has nothing to do with the workload this implied: the historical aspect of the building means any changes to the façade are tightly controlled by the Bâtiments de France organisation, and any hotel with more than four bedrooms must have a handicapped facility with direct access from the street. The administrative procedures necessary to find a compromise between the listed building and handicap legislation was taking too much time, so Laëtitia and Marc settled for the quick solution. "We'll go back to the access problem when we have more time," says Laëtitia.



Each of the en-suite bedrooms is named after a person involved in the building of Château d'Oléron's citadel, and a biography (in French) accompanies the room names inscribed on the doors. Thus 'Aliénor' refers to Aliénor d'Aquitaine – or Eleanor of Aquitaine – who stayed in the castle built by the Aquitaine dukes in the 11th century and who was responsible for many maritime laws; Pierre d'Argencourt was the person who had the citadel built on the ruins of the castle under Richelieu's orders; Chevalier de Clerville was the knight whom Colbert ordered to modernise the citadel; and Vauban was Louis 14th's military architect who further reinforced the citadel to protect the Charente river and Rochefort's artillery.

The nuptial suite, Chevalier de Clerville, is the largest room at 40 square metres, with raw wood panelling and natural stone walls. Notable features include the oeil-de-boeuf window on the eastern wall that is covered by a drape containing the form of an angel, so that when the

sun rises the angel is lit up and projected over the bed. The antique bath also adds to the romantic ambience in this room, and a sunny balcony overlooks the patio.

Pierre d'Argencourt also opens onto the balcony – which can be separated into two private areas – and, with its stylish grey overtones and Blanc d'Ivoire chandelier and lamps, has a gentle, relaxing atmosphere. The bathroom features intriguing polished glass mirror frames and wall lamps made by local craftsman Jean-Michel Petit at 'En Attendant Alixe' situated on Château d'Oléron's picturesque port; local company Mondo Carrelage is responsible not only for the tiling throughout the hotel, but also the turquoise pebble flooring in the Italian shower.

The same features can be found in Vauban, where reds dominate the bathroom and a raw 'chaux' wall complements the taupe paint elsewhere. Both Vauban and Aliénor rooms face the street and, at 25 square metres, are slightly smaller with no balcony access. Aliénor is the most masculine of the range, with a view over the Mairie's gardens, chocolate colouring and a wooden ceiling with a visible beam.



The desks, sofas and objets d'art that decorate the rooms have been carefully chosen from brocantes to give an eclectic style, mixing contemporary and antique and resulting in a classic, tranquil ambience throughout. Driftwood works of art featuring relaxing models add to this serene ambience in three of the rooms and are made by Charente Maritime artist Pierrette Dijonneau.

All the bedrooms are on the first floor, while the salon – dotted with mixed styles of sofas, coffee tables and interesting antique pieces – and restaurant take up the whole of the ground floor. A theme of forged ironwork runs through, from the door handles to the staircase banisters and salon/dining room separation, and taking in the frame of the antique Singer sewing machine. Comfort is uppermost in this room, with its bursting bookcases and chess games laid out on tables, while the spacious restaurant beyond reflects the bedrooms with its chic, classy appearance and stylish table decorations. The stone walls are hung with paintings from exhibiting artists, who change every month, and candlelight from the Cèdre Rouge artwork is balanced by the light from the glass panelling that opens onto the interior patio. "At the beginning we wanted to make a garden, but there is too much sun for plants to flourish," says Laëtitia, who settled for a water feature planted with bulrushes and irises, and a stunning hanging garden on the far wall. Created by Thierry Lecêtre of the Jardins de la Boirie near Saint-Pierre-d'Oléron, this wall holds 150 colourful plants including jasmine, sage, passionflower, marigolds and roses.

Marc is in charge of the restaurant, producing simple yet gastronomic meals with fresh, local products and associating two or three flavours. "I believe that chefs produce a style of cuisine

that resembles themselves," says Laëtitia, "and our cuisine is simple and unpretentious. It's the taste that counts above all." This is also true for the service Marc and Laëtitia, along with their team of apprentices, offer their visitors. "We adapt our level of service to our clients' expectations – some prefer to be left alone, while others expect us to handle their baggage, turn down their beds and close their shutters. It's never a problem for us. What's most important is that our guests feel good and enjoy their rest."

For the couple, however, there is no rest! Last winter they opened a boutique next door to the hotel, an extension of the facilities they offer their guests. Here, they provide a catering service whereby people can order the meals they have enjoyed in the restaurant, and a whole range of tableware, linen and furniture from names such as Blanc d'Ivoire, DecoPur, Damman and Villa Collection. "In response to our clients' requests, we are starting to stock spices and teas too," says Laëtitia, who visits the 'Maisons et Objets' fair in Paris twice a year to select her products and keep up with the latest fashions in the world of interior design.



It is very much the interior design and arranging side of her work that Laëtitia enjoys most, such as making her wine lists and choosing the whiskies as well as preparing the table decorations and writing the texts for the menus. "It's gratifying to see our guests enjoying themselves as a result of all our hard work," she says.

And as many clients come back regularly, it would seem that Laëtitia and Marc have found the key to providing a relaxing break – whether that is a few nights in the hotel or simply an evening in the restaurant – in a classy yet unostentatious environment.

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**Words by Teresa Hardy.**

**Les Jardins d'Aliénor**

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Both the hotel and restaurant are open all year. There are four bedrooms, from 25 to 40 square metres. Check website for latest prices.

In the restaurant, Marc produces simple, gastronomic dishes based on high quality products. It is open at lunchtime and in the evening – reservation is recommended – and is closed on Mondays from April to October and Tuesdays too from November to March. In July and August there is no lunchtime service